

# “At Risk” and Taking Risks: After-School Development in Chicago Neighborhoods

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## Introduction

After-school organizations play a crucial role in educating and socializing inner-city youth, assembling their adult identities, contributing to their cultural and moral values, and equipping them with the practical and analytic skills to become successful participants in their communities as well as in national and global arenas. This study provides an ethnographic perspective on how after-school programs acculturate urban American youth. The goal of the research is to contribute to a map of successful and sustainable after-school opportunities in Chicago and to illuminate some of the social circumstances that affect youth participation across a range of social and economic groups.

“After-School” refers to the entire spectrum of formal and loosely organized programs, activities and environments that acculturate youth outside of school, usually between 3:00 and 8:00 P.M. After-school activities include playing sports, watching TV or using computers, painting and “hanging-out.” For some, after-school is a time to practice a musical instrument, get a job or participate in a national youth organization like Boys & Girls Clubs. For many young people this is the most unsupervised and unstructured part of their 24-hour day. Though some youth through compunction, peer influence, or sheer instinct use this time to seek guidance and mentoring from responsible adults, others are quite literally raised in the streets and stairwells of public housing, all too often in the absence of adequate supervision. Although enormous inequalities exist in the distribution and availability of after-school opportunities for urban youth, adolescents do exercise choice within a limited range of options. The decisions youth make about where to go and what to do after-school have critical consequences for their long-term development, the outcomes



of their educations, their pursuits in life and the tools with which they can implement short and long-term goals.

Because inner-city youth have a unique set of developmental expectations characterized by concerns about the potential for their involvement in gangs, drugs, violence and sexual exploitation, urban youth organizations often develop around a negative stereotype of teenagers being “at-risk.” One of the main foci of this research is to expose the productive possibilities that adhere in risk-taking (Ponton 1997; Heath 1998). Adolescents crave risk. If adolescents do not encounter the opportunity to take risks in an environment where failure can be managed and enlightening, they will surely find a similar opportunity in some milieu where failure has tragic and irreparable consequences.

The psychologically and socially transformative experiences of a young person's life often involve confrontation and risk taking. VanGennep (1960) was among the first anthropologists to observe that the biological and cultural thresholds of human life are marked, induced, articulated, and reproduced through transitional challenges or rites of passage. The opportunity for risk-taking provided in certain rites of passage is essential to the development and maturation of youth in virtually all cultures, and that of Chicago's inner city is no exception. The challenge to urban after-school organizations lies in resolving the tension that exists between providing opportunity for safe and fun recreation while simultaneously demanding that youth constantly exceed themselves to perform above and beyond their expectations, learning the skills necessary to survive and parlay their environment.

## Methodology

This study was conducted during the summer of 1998 in Chicago, Illinois under the direction of the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change at The Field Museum. Fieldwork began the second week of June and ended the third week of August. During this time, I conducted on-site interviews throughout Chicago neighborhoods with young people between the ages of 12 and 20 in an effort to understand the qualities of after-school organizations that youth identified as both popular and unpopular.

Following the work of Halpern (1991)<sup>2</sup> and Heath & Soep (1996, 1997),<sup>3</sup> this research focused on older, more densely populated and economically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods where material resources and formal support are scarce, and in which few opportunities for artistic or social expression exist for youth. In these traditionally under-represented areas I began looking for innovative organizations where youth participated outside of the home and school.

Between the home and the classroom, these interstitial organizations are primary sites where youth learn and fashion identities for themselves. A wide range of recreational, artistic and employment-oriented after-school organizations are decisive in establishing the attitudes of youth with respect to themselves and the world around them. My expectations were consistent with Heath's observation that "successful youth organizations provide links to the community and mainstream institutions, 'authentic curricula'

of the most fundamental kind—a learning, performing group in which it is safe to take risks, to stretch and to learn new roles and ways of using oral and written language" (1994: 280).

In my research, I therefore focus on organizations where youth demonstrate ability to enlist resources and strengthen relationships within a community, to attempt original and adaptive communication strategies, and to acquire a heightened capacity for manipulating symbols. While these qualities emerge in a variety of settings, nowhere do they cluster so consistently as in the arts.

Heath and Soep found that youth in art-based programs were more likely to challenge themselves in a variety of ways. Through the arts, youth were encouraged to (1) take risks (2) adopt a variety of roles and functions and (3) internalize a set of rules and responsibilities. I used these results to formulate a group of organizing issues, a set of anticipations and a methodology through which to interpret information from a plethora of nested and hierarchized sources.

An important data-collecting device in my project was the Chicago Youth Survey that was completed by twenty-five students, most of whom were youth surveyed at the Lowell School. The survey consisted of 22 open-ended questions, which I designed to assess which local activities teens were involved in, as well as what opportunities they would like to have in their neighborhoods. The survey asked these same questions in a variety of ways. The results of the survey were used to supplement the data collected from interviews and participant observation at the Lowell School and are discussed in the section beginning on page 49.

Fieldwork was divided into three phases. Photography, audio/voice recording, and field notes were taken at each phase of the fieldwork in order to test the efficacy of each as a data-collecting technique. The research consisted primarily of participant-observation, on-site interviews, and a written survey.

*Phase One:* I initiated fieldwork by doing a broad survey of youth programs and organizations that had previous connections to the Field Museum or close sources. During this first phase, I mapped out organizations in the Chicago area, observing where services clustered and thinned, and juxtaposed these against a variety of other maps: demographic grids, voting districts, and cultural and economic territories. I also contacted directors and volunteers at 28 community-based organizations in Chicago in order to find out from individuals "in the field" some of the

substantive issues and challenges in youth organizing and after-school programs. I stopped by neighborhood parishes, youth picnics and attended intervention-training sessions at the Board of Education in order to immerse myself in the local context. I followed a host of contacts and documented informant networks.

*Phase Two:* This phase began by visiting a number of youth organizations and sites where groups of youth were visible from the street, such as church barbecues, athletic or recreational gatherings, city parks, bus and “L” stops. At this same time, I conducted informal, on-site interviews with youth. Interviews typically began by asking an adolescent about the activity in which he/she was currently engaged. From these interviews I got a sense of the types of activities and organizations adolescents were involved in as well as the quality of their interest in a program and other factors mitigating their sustained participation. During Phase Two, I refined a list of organizations that served youth in the Chicago area.

*Phase Three:* From this list I chose three after-school organizations. During the final two weeks I spent time observing youth, distributing written surveys and conducting follow-up interviews with teens and educators at these three sites.

A critical factor in my selection of the locations was that youth in these environments are intently engaged in their respective activities and having fun. Work and play are regularly brought together in these environments. I also chose these sites because the group size in each case is small, with a narrow instructor to student ratio. Most significantly, each of these three organizations possesses an artistic component through which youth can take positive, imaginative risks alongside their peers. Youth learn more quickly and demonstrate a greater capacity for learning in environments where they are able to enter into leadership positions, to plan and negotiate activities and to assume responsibility for the outcome of a project or performance. These successful organizations are flexible and contingent. As one artist put it, “We are all responsible for what happens to us. I get everyone together, T takes care of the treasury, and J...well, J brought you in.” An ethos of entrepreneurship and cooperation infuses these organizations with rigorous and commonly assumed standards for participation. Learning in these sites is not boxed or prefigured but happens through inter-subjective inquiry, participant-instruction and “transformational learning.”<sup>4</sup>

One art instructor said that she is deliberately attempting “not to replicate the dehumanizing conditions in the Chicago Public Schools.” I understand these dehumanizing conditions to refer to the “assembly line” fashion in which many public schools manage large groups of kids. On several occasions I observed groups of twenty-five or thirty children in matching uniforms being herded towards a festival entrance or being told to sit and wait for the stragglers to be found. These environments are tremendously ineffective for conveying to youth, in a one-to-one manner, the formal expectations and developmental possibilities that form the structure of a sustainable after-school program. For this reason I chose sites where students communicated regularly and effectively with instructors. In many cases, students learned to teach one another.

Another factor in my decision to conduct research at these sites was that I had discovered them quite by chance. In all three instances I was told about the organization by a youth or youths that I encountered on the street. Serendipity became a research priority because I wanted organizations to leap out at me, to appear to me much as they might to a teenager. While these contact conditions can never be exactly replicated, certainly not across a range of neighborhoods, it was important that I find out from adolescents themselves, what and where opportunities existed for youth out of school. Because after-school means something different to each Chicago teenager (for some it is baseball, for others it is drug counseling), the three programs I selected represent a partial perspective: a unique slice of the life-world of Chicago teens after-school.

Risk-taking was the most salient, common feature in each of these three programs. While adopting roles and acknowledging rules were important activities at each of these sites, risk-taking was by far the most prominent and compelling activity. I began to interpret risk-taking as a desirable activity. I searched out activities that “put young on the edge,—‘out there’ in pursuits that themselves seem endangered and held in questionable esteem by the society at large” (Heath 1998: 15). Art-based activities typically encourage youth to experiment with alternative modes of speech and visual communication, to initiate and sustain meaningful relationships with people and projects, to pursue novel solutions to complex problems, to develop technical and aesthetic skills, and to contribute to a team effort through a pattern of sustained participation.

Youth at each of these organizations recognized critical stages in their development through a variety of orchestrated and accidental accomplishments. Having mastered a technique, a tool or a step, each teen prepared for the next challenge. The opportunity to perform for an audience for the first time, to make the step from snipping paper to shearing glass, to use a power drill or work the cash register, to design a uniform, the chance to make a lasting piece of art, to have an income, to build and buy your own bike—each became an opportunity to assert self-confidence, to actualize potential, and see the meaning of one's own life reflected in an activity.

## Rites of Passage The Crucial Dancers of Chi-Town (CDOC)

“It is possible to imagine that those groups of early men in which individuals were united by common ceremonies, and enjoyed satisfying rhythmic experiences, whether of visual pattern or dance, would have been more coherent or successful than their less ‘cultured’ neighbors.”

—Young, 1971; *An Introduction to the Study of Man*

The Crucial Dancers are a group of teenagers from Chicago's Southside united through the spontaneous rhythmic experience of house dance. They have been practicing together as a group for 6 months and have overcome a variety of social barriers to maintain their purpose and coherence. A Chicago police officer might mistake the Crucial Dancer's practice for “gang activity” because the new “anti-loitering ordinance”<sup>5</sup> makes congregations of youth in the park suspect and potentially illegal. The CDOC is composed entirely of male and female African American teens who rehearse in their street clothes. Because they often rehearse outdoors and in public they fit the definition of a

group that may be requested by law enforcement to disband. In spite of this and other logistical obstacles, the Crucial Dancers consistently attend practice.

House dance is popular on Chicago's Southside. The dance itself is a fusion of elements from break-dancing, hip-hop and R & B dance. Many of these youth have met at parties where house dancing is common or through friends at school. Dancers often come from widely separated geographic communities and must agree upon a meeting place. During the summer this area may be a park or an unused parking lot, but some groups must negotiate for use of space from the park district or a neighborhood school.

Their movements seemed to originate from somewhere deep within. Rarely have I seen such intense physical and emotional concentration as I saw on the faces of the Crucial Dancers. These teenagers met at neighborhood parties where house dancing is a popular recreational activity. But in order to hone their routine to performance quality, they must harden their bodies against fatigue and discipline their minds against distraction.

The social atmosphere of a Crucial Dancer practice is playful with an element of daring bravado as well. Some of the dancers are virtuosos of their art, able to improvise from a large repertoire, recombine steps, and choreograph a number of styles. However studied and focused, the dancers continue to enjoy themselves and to engage in conversation with one another. For most of these youth, dancing is their only opportunity for creative and expressive play. Dance practice is also a place to go and something to do besides going home after school. As I observed rehearsals, dancers took the opportunity to eat, make conversation and engage with the opposite sex in a gregarious and stress-free environment. The ebb and flow of participants throughout a practice



suggested a casual atmosphere and provided evidence that dancing was part of the social life of these teens as well as a way to develop their artistic abilities and awareness.

Logistical obstacles abound, however, and dancers must often conform to each other's ever-changing schedules. One time, I watched the nineteen-year-old dance captain drop off dancers at an afternoon rehearsal and make a U-turn to go pick up two or three more. The dancers at practice wasted no time, however, and began going through their routines while waiting for the others to show. Practices were usually scheduled between 4:00 P.M. and 6:00 P.M., a time period bracketed by outside obligations, but could be scheduled as late as 8:00 P.M. or on the weekends. One dancer was consistently late because he had to pick up a younger brother from day care. Oftentimes one of the teens needed to leave early to prepare dinner at home. Although these obligations provided scheduling conflicts at times, the fact that the dancers share responsibilities outside of the rehearsal or performance environment actually contributes to strengthening the group's coherence.

Several of the teens come from homes in which they face daily problems. Their opportunities for artistic expression or risk-taking at home are minimal. One dancer said that there were situations at home that she would rather not confront or perhaps could not confront. Every day after school she goes to dance practice for 3 hours before returning to her home in public housing where she rehearses with another newly formed group for 3 hours more. Her homework, she said, she did after everyone at home was asleep. She explained that dancing was not an escape so much as something to pour her energy into, a task that required her tireless devotion. Many of them, at the end of the afternoon, still had a half-hour transit home where other duties and chores awaited them. Each of them was reluctant to leave.

An important factor in the sustainability of the Crucial Dancers is that the organization is entirely youth-based. In addition to dancing, each member contributes to organizing performances, fundraising, designing and cleaning uniforms, recording music, scheduling rehearsals, keeping a budget, printing and selling tickets, recruiting and auditioning new members. The dancers form a trans-neighborhood network of friends outside and alongside the group itself that can be mobilized to accomplish these many practical tasks as well as offer assistance during crisis situations. As a result, many

of these teens come to rely on one another for basic practical and emotional assistance more often than they turn to their parents or other adults.

Though a typical practice lacks many of the ritualized moments intended to perform group cohesion such as the "huddle" or a "high-five," the dancers convey their social and emotional connection to the troupe in other subtler ways. Friends share food and transportation, exchange CD's, trade stories and help each other with homework. Toward the end of a long afternoon of practice I would see the dancers paired in couples, holding hands or leaning on another's shoulder. These relationships that extend outside of the group allow members to achieve solidarity through a variety of shared experiences.

A prominent feature of the group dynamic is peer critique. Soep has cited peer critique as a dominant form of discourse and an essential component of successful after-school programs. Soep observes that "through critique, youth exercise their abilities to perceive, articulate, judge, and justify within the context of getting serious work done" (Soep 1996: 46). The participants were both teachers and students for one another. During a rehearsal, dancers taught each other steps that they learned from other groups. As individual dancers executed a choreographed movement, the other members offered suggestions and corrections. Such exchange of critique fosters a trusting relationship between members of the group. Furthermore, it demands that members articulate criticism convincingly, constructively, and respectfully. Critique sometimes took the form of a tease or jest but more commonly suggestions or corrections were made in a serious tone.

Gradually, this dialogue engendered the kinds of mutual respect and recognition necessary for the group to govern itself. The dancers voted and participated in the life of the organization by adopting specific habits of communicating: both modes of speech as well as practices for teaching choreography and body language.

The Crucial Dancers are a spontaneous emergence—partially inspired through the desire to congregate with age mates, and equally through the desire for artistic and social expression. The dancers seem able to confer this quality of spontaneity on their audiences in parks, on stage, and in the

street to create a social event and to precipitate a community of onlookers and appreciative fans. Their performance at a parade in late August showed that they had stamina as well. The parade lasted for well over four hours along twenty blocks of MLK Drive, with the dancers stopping every fifty feet to explode into dance. Their ability to endure as a group depends critically upon their bringing together these two qualities of spontaneity and stamina. They must continue to bring that feeling of spontaneity to practices and performances and to learn perseverance from the experience of physical endurance, even after dancing seems mundane or their popularity wanes.

The cohesion of the group seems threatened in part because the dancers have friendships and relationships that extend beyond the group. Cohesion relies on the ability of those individuals to maintain outside relationships without allowing them to interfere with the efficiency of the group. This same fact could also operate in favor of the group. Though the lead dancers refer to their positions in the group as president and vice president, suggesting the democratic model that underlies group decision-making, the hierarchy is more solidly influenced by the social status of the individuals beyond the group. Impetus for participation originates in the friendships and develops by building on these relationships. In a cyclical fashion, the relationships are themselves strengthened through the shared experience of dance.

In the introductory quote to this section, Young alludes to such potential for a shared and expanded bodily language to create uniformity and cohesion in groups. Within the context of an urban center like Chicago, this bodily language of dance becomes a tool for communication between youth where other socio-linguistic strategies have failed. Dance creates opportunity to participate with peers in activities that are socially and culturally appropriate but often discouraged and discriminated against in the wider society.

## The Blackstone Bike Co-op

“The BBC is a community-based, non-profit bike shop offering youth ages 9-16 opportunities to earn their own bicycle through our learn-a-bike program. This program allows 9-16 year olds to earn a recycled bicycle of their own after completing a 25-hour class involving bike and traffic safety skills and basic bike maintenance. In addition to the learn-a-bike program, young people can work in the shop, learn good work habits and job readiness skills, bicycling and bicycle repair skills, computer literacy, team building, academic skills, fun and adventure.”

—BBCDirector

The Blackstone Bike Co-op was begun in the spring of 1994 as a project of the Chicago Resource Center. This Southside shop sits in an alley behind the steam plant, out-of-sight from the well-trafficked midway so that it is invisible from the street, separated by a sprawling lawn of weeds. The co-op shares a building with a furniture store, a garden co-op, and at least one artist, and is annexed to neighborhoods to the south and west. Apart from these isolated businesses there is a dearth of economic incentive for youth development. Most of the youth who pass through this shop come from adjacent neighborhoods where material resources are scarce and recreational outlets or employment opportunities are few.

The BBC is a recycling center for used and dilapidated bikes. Here the bikes are stripped down, sometimes scrapped for parts and refurbished. The young teens that work here must be imaginative and technically adept in order to match parts from various bikes and assemble them into a well-oiled machine using highly specialized tools. A Spartan workspace, and a limited supply of parts and tools make cooperation between youth workers especially important.

On Saturdays the alley that runs in front of the co-op is lined with bikes, two rows deep. Most have been newly recycled and are ready for sale. Several bikes in the back row, however, remain at various stages in their rehabilitation. M and J discuss which of the bikes should be finished first.

“Let’s finish this one tomorrow, and put these rims on the racer.” J said.

M hollered back, “Those rims are goin’ on my bike!”

Saturday is the busiest day of the week and customers are often ready to buy. Today M and J find themselves torn between their own projects and work that must be done in



order to make sales. "I haven't got enough of these, and D said they'd be more comin' next week." J persisted.

"D said they were for me, I worked last week for those."

M continued, "As soon as he got 'em in he put 'em back for me!" J and M were locked in a negotiation, not an argument, because J was really arguing the position of the business, the "greater good," against M's legitimate claim to compensation for his labor. In effect, M was being asked to put the interests of the business before his own and to make a personal sacrifice for the group. Such negotiations are common at times when parts are in short order. M eventually conceded, to my surprise, without third party mediation. As it turns out, the racer did not sell and the rims were returned to M at the end of the day. It was clear from the encounter that members of the group exercise coercion by invoking the primacy of the group and the co-op. This incident demonstrated a level of cohesion in the group sufficient to outweigh the benefits of seeking personal gain (even legitimate gain) at its expense.

On a separate occasion, I arrived and another student, T, was being reprimanded for being rude to a customer. T was being sent home but for some reason fuddled with his bike in the rain-soaked doorway. "Why are you being sent home?" I asked.

"They said I was rude to a customer. I wasn't rude to the customer. She was rude to me!" T responded, not looking at me. I stared into the street in the direction T peered.

"So why aren't you going home?" I asked, trying to provoke him.

"I can't go home!" he exclaimed, raising his eyebrows. "I ain't goin' home! This is work!" he paused. "I gotta lot o' work to do on my bike!" and suddenly he burst into action, twisting nuts and pumping the tires. At this point he was on the sidewalk in front of the shop—not inside the co-op, but still a place where much of the repair work goes on. I heard the supervisor inside telling another of the students, so that T could hear, how he had dismissed T for rudeness. Hearing this, T seemed truly engaged in his work. He tweaked the spokes with seriousness and adjusted the seat with rapt attention. I do not doubt that students were sent home on other occasions because T seemed to treat the threat as real.

A representative at a local non-profit youth organization said that one of the primary barriers to participation in after-school is that parents see their kids having fun and begin to view after-school as one more privilege to manipulate and regulate their child's behavior. During the weeks after report cards come home a citywide drop in attendance for after-school programs is common. While parents are willing to suspend a teen's participation at an after-school organization, they seem less willing to do so if the teenager is going to work. Quitting work is almost never an option that parents advocate. Because BBC is structured as a job rather than an activity revolving entirely around idle fun, parents and teens alike view it as an important use of time and energy. This value was clearly reflected in T's reaction to being reprimanded by his supervisor. While facing reproof in front of his peers was obviously a humiliating experience for T, it was both more desirable and more difficult for him to remain there. T still had the whole of a rainy afternoon in front of him, a day to pursue any one of a number of activities. But T would prefer to spend the day repairing bikes and feelings, trying to control the damage he had done this morning even if that meant acting subservient for a while. T's feelings had been hurt but he wanted to feel relevant in this setting; he desired to be needed there. His failure to participate could have had consequences at home but these were only in addition to the needs, expectations and responsibilities that T himself brings to work every day.

Youth who study and work at the bike co-op take on a variety of tasks including restocking, registering sales and learning to write receipts of sale, hardware and shop maintenance, taking out the garbage, etc. These youth also adopt a variety of roles, including that of salesman. In T's case, the

role of salesman was handled poorly according to shop standards. Another salesman would be elected from the student staff and T would fulfill some lesser role for the rest of the day. The opportunity to be a salesman arises frequently since students who invest a few days labor exclusively on one machine may have a special interest in commanding the highest price and detailing for the customer the many special upgrades. Because the salesmen are the very mechanics who wrested and rehabilitated these bikes, they speak about the individual strengths and weaknesses of the bikes with a great deal of knowledge and authority.

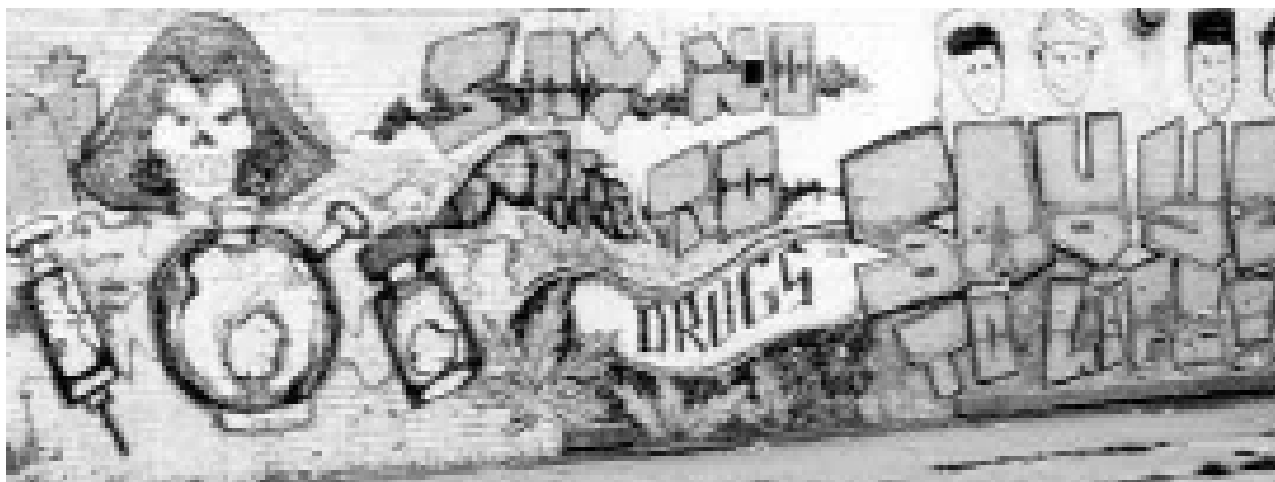
There are about twenty-five youth working at the BBC this summer. The working and learning environment encourages participation by males and females. Rehabilitating bikes is less a matter of strength than of careful planning, problem-solving and manual dexterity so females compete on an equal basis, often commandeering certain kinds of tasks that require patience and an eye for detail, such as truing a bent rim. When I visit, the students acknowledge me only slightly. Despite the modest tool benches and crowded workspace, a core of students work diligently on bikes held aloft like sculptures in welded floor stands.

Above the entrance to the back office, a list of rules tells students not to swear, to respect each other and their supervisors, to put tools back in their proper place, not to spit or hit. These rules form a de facto code of conduct that supervisors may refer to when a dispute erupts or there is a breach of the rules. The supervisors at the BBC are young and easy-going bicycle enthusiasts who alternate days, and often must attend to customers or their own work so the written rules provide structure, fairness and consistency in the way youth are held accountable.

Students at the BBC keep careful track of their hourly points and trade them in often. Some students are working towards the purchase of a recycled bike and others use their points for parts to upgrade bicycles they already own. While most jobs compensate teenagers with a weekly check, the BBC's method of labor exchange is far more effective at getting individuals to understand the meaning of their lives in what they do. The BBC's point system enables teens to think of their job not as means to an end but as a kind of end in itself. Whereas monetary compensation encourages youth to look outside of the workplace for material goods to complete the exchange process, teens at the BBC see the fulfillment of their efforts in the same products they repair for exchange. Because the students receive their compensation in the same terms as their product, they are never alienated from what they produce. Students also express a greater interest in the final outcome of the product when they have become avid consumers of those same goods.

Riding the bicycles is also a core activity at the BBC. After working for several hours, participants often take to the streets to test the limits of the new machines. While the BBC instructs each student in bike handling and safety, many of these teens have exceeded the rudimentary skills to become expert riders, demonstrating advanced stunt and racing abilities. A makeshift ramp in the alley gives riders a chance to compete against each other while the adjacent streets provide a perfect circuit for time trials. Participants recently performed at a local parade to show-off an array of bicycles and stunts in front of friends and others in the Southside community.

At the BBC youth construct many bikes to serve the specific practical needs of individuals in the neighborhood. One low riding three-wheeler, for example, has a grocery



cart welded to the bike's front, which one student used to collect aluminum cans from the neighborhood. Tall youth can find frames sufficiently long to accommodate their height and elderly consumers can choose from a line of custom models. A functional recycled bike, often with very new components and fully tuned, can be purchased for approximately \$75–\$100. Customers are encouraged to become members for an additional \$15. Members enjoy the privilege of using the BBC's tools and purchasing parts or bikes at a discounted rate so the BBC attracts a sizeable clientele.

The BBC continues to provide what other after-school programs cannot: the chance for youth to create a meaningful niche in a community, the opportunity for respectable employment in an environment where performing, risk-taking, peer critique and the acquisition of sophisticated technical skills are all aspects of a central and unifying artistic endeavor.

## The Lowell School

For 20 years Chicago Public Art Group and Youth Service Project have brought together Chicago artists and local youth to design and execute public works of art. These outdoor murals are painted or constructed on buildings in neighborhoods where public art has had a long and contentious tradition. This collaboration is designed to expose “at risk” kids to “risk-taking” by giving them a difficult and elaborate assignment. Under the direction of two local artists, nine teenagers were selected to design, build and install five large mosaic panels onto the exterior walls of the Lowell School, a Chicago Public School in a predominantly Hispanic northwest neighborhood.

While murals such as those of Diego Riviera have been accepted and admired by citizens and public officials alike, the production of gang art or “graffiti” is tightly controlled. It is illegal for gang artists to buy spray paint. Even when artists are able to obtain permission from a shop owner to paint a mural, public protest is reason enough to order in the Mayor Daley’s “graffiti blasters” to destroy the artwork.<sup>6</sup> The youth that work in these Chicago Public Art collaborations are aware of the conditions under which art is produced in their communities. They are also aware of the types of expression that are condoned in public art and those that are not.

The youth working at the Lowell School were selected for participation from teenagers seeking social services at Youth Service Project (YSP), a community-based organization and teen service provider. Teens approach YSP in search of a variety of support services including pregnancy, drug, rape, gang and family counseling. Youth may also come to YSP in search of after-school activities, but typically these teens are responding to domestic hardship. Unlike youth in other publicly funded art projects, the youth at the Lowell School have no previous training in art. Seeing these youth as potential resources, YSP and Chicago Public Art Group created a project that links youth to their community while fostering an awareness of their own capacity for accomplishment.

The program connected the domains of authentic, artistic production and community/youth service. Through exposure to the arts, youth were quickly immersed in a set of newly demonstrated technical and aesthetic concerns that had to be addressed within the context of creating public art. As they approached the task, their questions moved from the concrete to the abstract: How do I cut a circle from



a glass square using instruments only slightly more sophisticated than fingernail clippers? How do I arrange glass shards into form and ornament? How does the mural relate to the building? How does the mural relate to its audience?

The chance to design an art mural was offered to these youth as part of the solution to a problem that extended into their families, homes and personal lives. The two artistic

directors at the Lowell School have collaborated on outdoor murals before at various locations around Chicago. One director explained that the program is not geared towards kids who will pursue careers in art. It is, she said, more like job training in that it teaches kids how to focus and how to do a good job. The artistic component of the project requires kids to pay attention to nuance—for example, to determine whether a tile is cut at a 75 degree or 85 degree angle. Resisting the prejudice that arts are a “free-for-all,” or at best merely an instrument for developing math or reading skills, this project demonstrates concretely how the arts may powerfully influence youth’s perceptions of themselves and their relationship to their environment.

Unlike many art projects, the emphasis for this program is not on creativity in the traditional sense of the word, but on technical precision and developing aesthetic sensibility. In this way, creativity functions as problem solving not as license. The art mural was fabricated from colored cut-glass tiles, which are technically more difficult and complex than broken-tile. The use of a multi-colored multi-value palette also generated additional considerations of shade, light and shadow. Youth artists used nippers to shape the fine Mexican tiles. The students became gradually more confident, adept and precise with the tools and more skillful in their use of value and color.

Because the project had a group focus instead of the solipsistic effort required of a sculpture or self-portrait, the way the students expressed themselves through the artwork was less obvious and was accomplished primarily through their direct manipulation of the tools and the medium. Some of the symbolic content of the mural was supplied by the students and was planned in conjunction with the artists. By the third or fourth week, the student’s technical skills had increased dramatically. They surprised themselves when they compared their work to the paper squares they cut and pasted a few weeks earlier. As the students increased in proficiency they also noted the time passing less quickly. Some of the novelty had worn off and the 9:00 A.M.–4:00 P.M. workday had begun to seem long. One director said that one of the kids some years ago had exclaimed, “This is too stressful! I should have worked at McDonald’s!” Because the directors demand that students continue to refine their skills throughout a process that required thousands of tiles to be shaped, they were taught to find creative solutions to mundane problems.

This year’s group of students was paid minimum wage in return for their efforts and, for most of them, the fact that this was a “job” and not an “after-school program” was important. Several of the students worked at fast food restaurants after-school during the regular school year. Their older and younger siblings had summer employment. One of these students told me that the money she brought home from this job was important - in reality because she did not need to ask her mother for spending money and symbolically because nobody in her family had the option to not contribute. Students signed in and out. Students who arrived late could arrange to make up their hours, but could not do so inconspicuously. The directors respected the students’ rights to free time and demonstrated this by teaching them to respect their free time as well and by emphasizing the fact that they all share the same job.

The students consistently approached their work with seriousness even as they spoke and laughed while they worked. At one point it became necessary to fine students 0.25 each time they cursed or said a “palabra sucia.” But the majority of students were quiet and diligent, engaging the directors with an occasional question or comment.

Lunchtime was an opportunity to relax and share stories with one another. Students spoke about siblings and being grounded, jobs they held after-school elsewhere, and tricks they had played on their friends. Teasing was common at such roundtables, both between the students and the art teachers. The directors would often banter with a student to prod him/her into doing some chore like soaking the tiles. I was myself chastised for abandoning a project shortly after I had begun.

These opportunities to “embarrass with affection” were moments of critique. The students could genuinely express how they felt about another’s performance without sounding caustic. In the spirit of a “good tease” or “chiste” they could chastise one another for being slow, sloppy or for not cleaning-up, for being tardy and needing to make up lost time, for making a mistake that will cost one a great deal of time to correct, or to get the attention of a student that seems otherwise absorbed with problems on the street or at home. Other more formal forms of critique took place as well. The directors would address students’ deficiencies directly, correcting a tessellation or removing a fragment that had been done out of haste. But most commonly, teachers and students steered each other’s progress by asking questions and suggesting solutions.

With the skills they learned during the summer, students may go on to investigate other aspects of a newly acquired artistic interest. One student I spoke with said flatly that he never intended to do art again. Another explained that he had reworked his course schedule to take an extra semester of art. Because the students' ages range (from 14 to 20 years) and because the art project was an isolated opportunity, the probabilities differ that each would be presented with another similar opportunity. Even if such an opportunity does arise, it most likely will not for some period of time, creating a critical lag in individual participation and a gap in the stages of artistic progress and accomplishment. Before evaluating the long-term success of such a program, it would be necessary to understand more details of the YSP program and the outcomes of each student's participation in the art project.

## Survey Results

The Chicago Youth Survey was designed during the third phase of fieldwork and was intended primarily as a supplement to informal interviews and participant-observation. While a number of these anonymous surveys were distributed, the most comprehensive answers came from the group of adolescents at the Lowell School. The mosaic project created a common context or coherent framework for interpreting the results.

Because two of the students had difficulty reading and writing, a discussion leader at a group roundtable distributed the surveys to shift the emphasis of the questionnaire and to encourage the students to talk about their answers with each other. Also, the teenagers who answered these surveys are exceptional for the fact that each had made a conscious decision to seek help from Youth Service Project. Because each of these students experienced some kind of personal hardship or traumatic encounter, they represent a unique population. On the other hand, the types of problems for which they have sought help are increasingly common in the experiences of Chicago's youth.

The survey asked students about activities that they had participated in during the past as well as activities they would like to pursue. Students responded with a variety of answers, and distinct tastes and preferences emerged. Activities the students liked ranged from cheerleading to model building but the primary focus was on activities that involved spending time with friends or family members.

These "friend-centered" activities included shopping, playing basketball, going to movies or the park, and just "hanging-out." Students responded consistently that they would like to spend more time with certain family members and to have chances to be with their friends after-school. Family and neighborhood friends form the social environments that these students most commonly seek.

Another suggestion emerging from the survey was that students distinguish between categories of participation and different types of organizations. Students recognized three classes of after-school participation, each defined by a social context vis-a-vis their families and friends. The first category was "work" or "the job." Many students are expected to supplement their family's income or at least to generate their own spending money, and so a job becomes not merely a status symbol but a material relationship. For some students, this is the only category of after-school activity in which they are permitted to participate. Programs like MOWD (Lowell funding) make it possible for young people to earn money while they master a craft.

Because parents and older siblings are often consumed by the activity of managing a job and going to work every day, adolescents in working families relate to the idea of serious, sustained and compensated participation. While working families may be forced to find day care for their young children, they may not support their older children in an after-school program that does not reward the family for regularly sacrificing this family resource.

The second category includes after-school programs that may be associated with after-school activities for children. Students distinguish this category from the first by relating the activities in these programs to activities they might pursue during school. Visual art, music and athletics are common such activities. Many of these programs are essentially more of what they like to do in school: cheerleading, art, mechanics, and basketball. When students were asked how they would design an after-school program, they often responded that that would include activities that they had enjoyed both in and out of school. Few of these students had participated in any formal after-school programs provided through their school, and, in several cases, did not know of any youth organizations in their neighborhood.

The third category consists of things that the students simply like to do. This may be riding bikes, shopping or "hanging out" in the park. These activities were the most popular in the survey and, more often than concrete

activities, took the form of emotive propositions like “just having fun!”—an expression that for students consisted of cookouts with friends, all-night block parties, and playing hooky. Most of these activities seemed to be centered in the neighborhood. It seems like teens gravitate towards environments where they feel free to explore what they are becoming, where they are affirmed and where they are encouraged to take risks. One direction for future research should be to analyze these spontaneous activities for patterns of youth participation and to determine their role in the social development of inner-city adolescents.

The surveys hinted at two other types of activities that have not yet been mentioned. These are gangs and churches. The first receives much mass-mediated and overtly politicized attention. Anti-gang rhetoric is a popular rallying point for politicians and urban dwellers looking for scapegoats for larger, more systemic problems in their communities. Undeniably, street gangs offer a sense of belonging, the chance to claim status and an opportunity to make money to youth who lack positive direction. Many youth involved in Chicago gangs say that they got involved because they wanted to be part of a social group. Students referred to gangs and “gang-bangers” in the context of a question about what types of activities they would change in their neighborhoods. They responded that they would get rid of “the gangs and the shooting” but any hint of siblings, friends or their own participation was wholly absent. Without more research, I can only guess that at this stage their participation in gangs is minimal and furtive if at all.<sup>7</sup>

Youth participation in church-based activities was the most visible activity involving adolescents. Congregations of teens were seen in parks, at car washes, picnics, outdoor athletic events, carnivals, prayer meetings, parades, and concerts. Youth here were also among the most energetic and enthusiastic of all the youth encountered in the field. In most instances youth were participating with friends but without their parents. One group of adolescents was raising money for a “bring-your-parents” talent show to recruit parents and enlist adult support. The teenagers in these church groups express a great deal of physical and emotional solidarity and regularly extended me the invitation to participate.

Initial research suggests that there are important similarities between the ways youth participate in gangs and in churches. Both organizations extend to youth the opportu-

nity to acquire an identity alongside one’s peers, to recognize and claim a certain ideology, to participate in ritual, to be recognized and respected, and to develop a sense a purpose towards one’s life. Future research should endeavor to make explicit the linkages between these two very different, yet analogous social environments.

## Final Reflections and Further Research

After-school is a temporal and spatial environment that is potentially stimulating and productive. However, because “after-school” is defined as a locus outside of the control of the state and often the family, it is also depicted as a space that is full of danger and the possibility of corruption. As one public school official stated, “These are the hours between 3:00 and 11:00 P.M. and during summers when kids are not in school. These are also the hours between which 24 youth enrolled in CPS have been shot or killed since January, 1998 (the last six months).” In the minds of policy makers and education officials these statistics create a heightened incentive to monitor and regulate the activities of youth after school.

These statistics, combined with the painful experiences shared by members of the victims’ family and neighborhood can only harden the general opinion that kids who are not in school are preyed upon. The fear that looms over children and adolescents is palpable in moments when a student is late getting home, or an older brother shirks his duties at work, or is tardy to pick-up younger siblings from school. In the media, this fear is manipulated to mark-off geographical, economic, racial and social boundaries and to identify certain populations as inherently dangerous and “at risk.”

From the ways that youth refer to their experience, it is apparent that many have internalized this image of themselves as “at-risk” or being always one step out of harm’s way. When asked what he would be doing this summer if he had not gone to soccer camp, one youth said, “I dunno, maybe I would have liked to be with my friends more...but who knows, maybe I would have gotten shot.” When I asked him why he thought he might have been shot he laughed and replied, “I guess my friends are just crazy. I’d expect one of them to get hit (shot).”

While the designation “at-risk” may have been mobilized initially in order to reflect the many possible hazards lurking in the urban environment, it unfortunately has come to adhere in the identity of urban youths themselves. Another student said that she had suspected that she was chosen for a program for “at-risk” students when another girl, who had a reputation as a troublemaker, had been selected for the program as well. The girl’s parents objected to their daughter’s involvement because she was not “like” this other girl, and perhaps did not even associate with this girl while in school. The parents were reasonably upset that a stigmatizing stereotype of the dysfunctional inner-city family was brought to bear on their family and their child. In sending their daughter to a program for kids “at risk,” the parents felt as if they were taking on an alien and unwholesome identity, both as a family and as members of their community.

When parents and educators come to view the “at-risk” status of youth as something that can be located inside them and not their environment, then the likelihood increases that youth will accept this vision of themselves. Programs such as Comadres (MISE) and Youth Service Project (YSP) that use the term “at-risk” to designate their target populations take special precautions to prevent youth from thinking that this is what adults see as their most salient identifying feature. Other organizations must not only eschew the linguistic trappings of this negative stereotype but also need to directly confront the social inequalities it seeks to naturalize.

Such goals can be accomplished in a variety of ways. First, opportunities should be provided where youth are not merely educated and rewarded but compensated for their talents. Combining individual attention with a regular and reasonable paycheck communicates to teenagers in the most profound way that they are prized. This manner of compensation should reinforce the teenager’s participation in that particular organization and not just any job that pays. Serial employment should be discouraged. Organizations such as the Crucial Dancers who may someday seek compensation from audience donations or official sponsorship should make sure that control of their organization does not pass from their hands. Teenagers need the opportunity to have interesting and challenging activities without sacrificing their role as family income contributor. Ideally, as teenagers get older, they should not have to choose between

a stimulating organization and a boring job. In reality, after-school programs become something Chicago teens grow out of. Consequently the virtues of these organizations take on less and less significance for them.

Secondly, the laws that categorically prohibit free expression and the right of youth to peacefully assemble should be struck. Youth should be encouraged to produce art and to dance in parks, yet these are precisely the activities that certain anti-gang ordinances preclude.

Thirdly, organizations seeking sustained participation from youth should ask themselves the following sorts of questions: How does this organization participate in the life of the community? Does this organization exist in isolation or does it connect teens to their communities in meaningful ways? Does our organization perform for or draw support from the local community, multiple communities, and secondary or virtual communities? Successful organizations put youth in contact with people, other organizations, and broader social networks, creating the incentive for youth to take risks through pre-existing personal and institutional relations. This means seeing the urban landscape not only as full of potential dangers but ripe with resources and possibilities as well. Tapping confidence within an individual demands making that individual capable of creating opportunity from within his/her environment.

None of the abstract lessons imparted by “Just Say No!” will suffice. After-school organizations should encourage teenagers to see the potential for change in their neighborhoods and to see their role in challenging conventional notions and received wisdom about their environment. This requires giving teenagers “hands-on” experience with civic activism and social change. Organizations like Blocks Together and Public Allies have a history of teaching Chicago youth how to hold public officials accountable and to bring about local change and reparations. But more after-school programs should reflect back to teens the many extant opportunities for recreational, educational, economic and social reform.

I have undertaken the analysis of several types of youth organizations. The list of types of activities and organizations for Chicago youth is by no means exhaustive. A direction for future research should be to continue fleshing-out this map of youth resources and activities. Organizations

like the Chicago Youth Agency Partnership actually employ teens to go out into their communities to interview business owners and community organizations in an effort to map youth resources.

More research is needed to find out from Chicago area teenagers how they perceive individual after-school programs and components within these programs. Do teenagers typically select programs with a high degree of visibility or do they choose instead activities that are built around their peer group? This research has already tended toward an answer to this question, but more research is needed to determine the success of interstitial programs organized around networks of friends.

Another set of remaining questions cluster around Heath's rules, roles and risks. Heath found that art programs incorporated these three pedagogical qualities more often and more consistently than other after-school programs. This research found that many organizations such as The Blackstone Bike Co-op and The Crucial Dancers have incorporated these values in programs under the sign of "work" or "hanging out." Future research should seek to describe how the arts emerge in programs that are not offered explicitly as art-based.

Also, the crisp distinction between "in-school" and "out-of-school" that some researchers advance prevents us from seeing the ways that the lives of adolescents cross and re-cross this boundary daily. One youth member at the Robert Taylor Boys & Girls Club assisted college students from the University of Michigan to produce a documentary in her public elementary school. Rather than maintain this distinction, researchers should test its validity by asking students to talk about their experience both in and after school to determine where activities, preferences or networks of friends overlap. Future research should be mindful of the ways in which experience creates a unity for what may appear to be a disparate amalgam of activities and organizations. Adolescents create coherence in their lives through their participation in programs and any future research should make these patterns of participation and connections between "in-school" and "after-school" more explicit.

## Endnotes

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- 1 Ponton (1997: 273) writes, "Risk-taking is the major tool that adolescents use to shape their identities. Both directly and indirectly, risk-taking affects all aspects of development during this important period of life -physical, social, psychological, sexual and cultural".
- 2 Halpern (1991: 7) notes, "Institutional sources of nurturance, supervision, and socialization are thinning out in the inner city. Inner-city churches, for example can no longer generate the resources to provide educational, recreational, and social programs for children. Inner city schools appear to be deteriorating even as the communities around them deteriorate."
- 3 Heath & Soep (1997: 9) focused their research on after-school organizations that "operated in impoverished neighborhoods or counties with dwindling local employment opportunities, within zones of relatively higher crime than surrounding areas, alongside schools in need of stronger staff and greater material resources, and amid areas with minimal open spaces or organized recreational or aesthetic opportunities for children and youth."
- 4 Heath & McLaughlin (1994: 291)
- 5 This ordinance was ruled unconstitutional by the Illinois Supreme me Court. US Supreme Court upheld the Illinois Supreme Court decision. Daley redeployed a modified version of the ordinance in 1999 amidst protest from ACLU and other organizations including First Defense Legal Aid/Chicago Alliance for Neighborhood Safety and the Community Justice Initiative. The modifications include a stipulation that the ordinance will be deployed only in Chicago's "hot zones" or areas of the city that law enforcement and citizens agree there is a problem of gang loitering. Approximately 41,000 Chicago residents were detained under the first ordinance for criminal loitering.
- 6 See recent article of Englewood example & Heidelberg, Detroit example NPR 8/24/98
- 7 Halpern (1991: 9) observes, "Gangs provide one of the few coherent sources of support, structure, identity and opportunity available to inner-city children."

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