

## After-School Talks Back<sup>1</sup>

In S. Hill (Ed.), *Between school and fun: Perspectives on out-of-school time*.  
Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

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In a recent report Kirsch, Braun, Yamamoto, & Sum (2007) warn America of the gathering of a “perfect storm,” the confluence of three forces that they believe threatens the country’s economic well-being and its social compact. As the authors point out, each of these three forces alone is something to be reckoned with; but it’s the circumstance of their intermingling that should make us all tremble. First, the distribution of skill among both children and adults has been and remains widely disparate, breaking down along class and ethnic or racial lines. To give but one of the now familiar examples, graduation rates in the US have fallen from their peak of 77 percent in 1969 to 70 percent in 1995, where they have remained and even significantly worsened for persons of color. At the same time, vast shifts in the US and global economies have radically changed work places, job prospects, and skill requirements. While manufacturing jobs have shrunk to a mere ten percent of the total employment in the US, what has increased is the economic benefits of more skills and more education, with lifetime earnings being substantially higher for college graduates. The third force that promises to intersect with disparities in skills and our shifting economy is demographic change. Looking toward the next decades of this century, we will steadily grow older as a population as well as infinitely more diverse. Since many immigrants may not yet possess high school diplomas, employers fear that as current workers retire, there won’t be suitably qualified individuals to take their places. Of greatest concern to readers of this book, however, is the likely consequence that a remotely fair chance at anything approaching the American dream will be less and less available to tens of millions of our students and fellow citizens. Kirsch and colleagues couldn’t be starker in their predictions: they believe that we are at a crossroads as a nation; we can choose now, they write, to let people in the US continue to grow apart, or alternately, “we will invest in efforts to help us grow together.” (p. 26)

Admittedly, this is a sober beginning for a foreword to a hopeful book, and perhaps it seems a remote one too, its predictions of near-future economic downturns, even disasters, a far cry from a group of fifth-graders testing water samples in an after-school science project on Manhattan’s Lower East Side (Fancsali, this volume), or African American girls in Nashville “doing hair,” all the while happily writing, reading, and talking together during out-of-school time (Edwards, this volume). Yet, I suggest that such economic, demographic, and psychometric trend lines are intertwined, and tightly so, with current pressures that daily play themselves out in schools and after-school programs, including the lovely portraits offered in this edited volume. Conversely and even more importantly, today’s after-school movement, especially as exemplified by such programs as we see described in this book, itself has an important message to send back, a voice to add to the current conversation on how to improve the social futures of our children and our nation. Indeed, I would argue that the after-school movement should

“talk back” in bell hooks’ helpful sense of providing critical, at times resistant commentary, “daring to disagree” (p. 5), to disturb the universe by articulating those insights about learning that have been gleaned from a coalescing set of theories, literatures, and practices. These include those associated with youth development (see Hill’s introduction to this volume), the New Literacy Studies. (Street, 1995; Gee, 1996; cf. Hull & Schultz, 2001), and socio-cultural perspectives on learning (cf. Rogoff, 2003). Such a proactive stance of talking back is all the more important at the current moment, when as Kirsch and colleagues persuasively detail, we sense the gathering of a perfect storm.

Halpern (2004) notes that the nature of out-of-school programs in the US has varied historically, depending in large part on how the greater society has defined the challenges facing children and youth. At the turn of the century motivations chiefly included the frank desire to Americanize, to improve habits and morals, especially those of recent immigrants and the poor. The ideologies underpinning some of these Progressive-era programs can make one cringe, so flagrantly jingoistic and ethnocentric they sound to many twenty-first century ears. In the early 1990’s, when our current after-school movement gained substantive ground, it had its own Achilles heels. For example, commentators were apt to note the movement’s marginality when compared to the institution of schooling, its loose and motley collection of approaches, its poor to non-existent funding base, its over-reliance on volunteers and an itinerate and paraprofessional teaching staff. Yet, if the programs described in this book can be taken as a serious indication, the current after-school field has begun to mature, and startlingly so. Its new maturity includes an increasingly sophisticated reliance on generative theories and best teaching practices, and most remarkably, an ability to create productive spaces for learning that can often compliment and, better yet, sometimes exceed what can be found in those schools negatively impacted by curricular constraints and of course unequal resources. These strengths can be traced in part to the leadership and sponsorship of agencies such as the Robert Bowne Foundation, which has funded research and publication, and The After School Corporation, which has led through its orchestration, large-scale, of infrastructure and funding for after-school programs in New York City. In addition, there has been substantive parallel interest and support from some universities and academic communities in recent years, where scholars from a variety of disciplines have engaged in documenting, theorizing, and supporting out-of-school, alternative learning spaces (cf. Cole, 2006; Heath, 2000, 2001; Harkavy & Puckett, 1994; Vasquez, 2002). I believe that we should all stand wistful and admiring, to paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, before what has been accomplished, as we also peer somewhat anxiously toward a future in which the current world of after-school faces serious challenges to its still nascent identity.

The chapters in this book are in fact organized to reveal the ways in which the current after-school movement can keep its balance while straddling competing educational approaches and ideologies: on the one hand, standards-based reform and the policies associated with No Child Left Behind, which in practice have come to privilege accountability and high stakes testing; and on the other, practices and principles associated with the approach called “youth development,” which interests itself not in

academic achievement narrowly conceived, but in a broader conception of human development that includes social, artistic, civic, emotional, and intellectual growth. It is safe to say that many after-school programs, given the informal association of people, activities, and collaborators that they still generally represent, have not thoroughly examined or articulated their theoretical and policy-related underpinnings in such a precise way. Indeed, one of the achievements of Hill's edited volume is to propose and enact such an approach as a model for the field. To be sure, the possibility of a hybrid model for the after-school movement, one that can successfully serve two masters with integrity, becomes all the more important as pressures intensify to bring after-school programs under the structural umbrella of school-day programming, and indeed, to evaluate them according to their success in contributing to our government's primary goal of increasing academic achievement for all children as measured by standardized tests. The rub is that the ideologies and practices of after-school programs have long leaned towards the principles of youth development, even when those principles and their theoretical allegiances have not been explicitly articulated. To redirect all or most of their energies toward academic achievement, especially when such achievement is narrowly prescribed in terms of teaching methods and student outcomes, would be a wrenching shift for most of the after-school world. I suggest that it would ultimately be a harmful one for schools and school-based goals as well, and in fact, for all those who worry about the economic and social futures of our citizenry.

To read the chapters in Hill's edited volume is to notice that the descriptions seem first of all to exemplify good teaching such as might occur anywhere—not just after-school. We are presented with sound educational endeavors that respond sensitively and inventively to children's interests, needs, and predilections, but extend their knowledge, skills, and understanding into new domains. In some cases, the programs are conceived as ways to fill institutional gaps, providing occasions for learning that aren't always possible during a school day that is increasingly structured and scripted. McVarish (this volume), for instance, introduced us to "In Addition," an after-school program for elementary school students that is beautifully aligned with progressive recommendations for mathematics reform: an emphasis on collaboration and communities of learners, "real life" problem-based activities, and an attention to conceptual understanding as well as procedural knowledge. In another and better age, the same activities and participant structures as we see after-school through "In Addition" would take place during the school day.

Other after-school classes in Hill's book unabashedly offer programming that doesn't usually find a place in the traditional academic curriculum. For example, Khurana (this volume) describes one such program that centered on the creation of comics, teaching us how activities such as drawing, inking, writing and storyboarding, animated by participation in a popular cultural practice, provided the occasion for powerful identity work and skill-building on the part of urban teenagers. In such an after-school world, youth who do not flourish during school-based literacy activities can nonetheless experience the power of representing self, others, and community through the intersection of language and image—a skill set, by the way, increasingly recognized as the literacy of the future by theorists (Kress, 2003) and policy-makers (Partnership for

21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills, 2007) who are on the cutting edge. Interestingly, regardless of how explicitly the after-school programs in this volume connected themselves with a school-day curriculum, they nonetheless could be conceptualized as addressing many state academic standards, as each chapter demonstrates in some detail. This fact should give us heart, suggesting that youth are daily engaged, or could easily be, in productive learning and doing of the sort we value, whether or not this occurs as a function of a formal standards-based curriculum.

The ease with which it seems possible to connect after-school learning to school-based standards, as exemplified in this edited volume, should not, however, lull us into a fateful complacency. The move in US educational policy, now well afoot, to make after-school programming and out-of-school time a mere extension of the current school day, pressed into the service of academic achievement as determined almost exclusively through standardized tests, is not in my view a wise or defensible direction. In California, for example, after-school is now increasingly labeled “extended day” programming, while funding sources from the State, passed through from the federal government, increasingly prescribe the nature of what happens during after-school time, connecting it more and more directly to the school-day curriculum. More alarmingly still, with state and federal moneys available in California primarily through Proposition 49, a measure passed in 2002, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Center funding, comes the pressure to evaluate the effectiveness of after-school programs primarily through the collection of data that show an improvement in academic performance via school-day standardized test scores. Sometimes additional testing is even required after-school.

Never mind that persistent and long-standing academic achievements gaps have not appreciably narrowed through the doing of traditional school. Never mind that under-funded, time-strapped after-school programs are being asked to show a value added and to achieve results that the entire school day hasn’t been able to accomplish. Never mind that after-school programs are increasingly being evaluated largely on the basis of adding value to the goal of academic achievement, which draws them away from their historical strengths of ministering to the whole child, pulling them into an ever narrower focus on narrow notions of cognition. Never mind that funding taken away from the actual delivery of programs, and put toward the purpose of evaluations that will likely show few if any gains, is funding that after-school programs, already under-funded, can sorely afford to give up. Never mind that a veritable army of researchers and academics have long questioned, not the goals of No Child Left Behind, but the means used to achieve those goals, including testing children to death. The emperor is wearing no clothes, and it is long past time to say so.

I recently examined a reading test that was administered by a set of after-school programs with which I am affiliated in an effort to satisfy current conceptions of rigorous evaluation and satisfactory program performance. In some ways it is a sensible test, reasonably short and designed to be completed handily in the space of an hour or less, and as a multiple-choice test it is easily scored, and certainly very familiar to youth in its format and textual expectations. The items on the test, now released to the public, were originally developed by a professional testing service. If its post-test companion shows an

improvement in scores, then state administrators, university researchers, K-12 educators, and after-school program directors and teachers will each sigh with relief and dance with joy, for here will be evidence that the program works in terms of improving the extremely important competencies of school-based reading comprehension and vocabulary development. Keep in mind, however, that the schools where many of our after-school programs take place are ranked among the lowest scoring schools in the State of California in terms of the State's "academic performance index." Keep in mind, too, that the high schools have a devastatingly high drop-out rate, and that many youth have been disengaged from the pursuit of academics there for a distressingly long time. Keep in mind as well that the after-school programs use media production as their enrichment centerpiece, more specifically digital storytelling and digital music, and that when they are successful, they seem to be so because youth become deeply engaged in the opportunity to develop expertise around the creation of artifacts important in popular culture. It is certainly the case that youth acquire skills and knowledge through their participation in these media intensive after-schools, and that much of what they learn can be mapped onto state language arts standards. But it is not likely, I would wager, that the important things they have learned will position the eleventh graders, cognitively or dispositionally, to perform well on the after-school test: that is, to read a passage from Nathaniel Hawthorne about how Young Goodman Brown "came forth at sunset into the street at Salem village" to inform his wife that his trip into the forest "must needs be done 'twixt now and sunrise." What they learn will likely not position them to be able to correctly answer, or to be interested in correctly answering, a multiple choice question on the symbolic function of the forest during the American Colonial period.

Let me be clear that this is absolutely not to say that youth aren't capable of correctly answering, or couldn't acquire an appreciation of, or even should be assumed not to currently possess an interest in the themes of *Young Goodman Brown*. It is to say, with some alarm, that after-school programs serve as life-lines to many young people who are disengaged with traditional school or in grave danger of becoming so, and that to turn after-school into more standard school, especially through the imposition of participant structures, textual practices, and tests that are themselves superficially connected to the very important social practices, skills and knowledge, and identities that youth are acquiring through, for example, an innovative program on fashion design (Thompson, this volume), is to welcome the gathering of an ominous storm.

If, as I am arguing, after-school programs should be loosed from strictures merely to duplicate school and to be evaluated on that basis, then it is fair to ask what functions they might alternately serve and what kind of research might document their achievements. It is also important to ask why and how such programs might be seen as contributing to the solution of the pressing issues that Kirsch and colleagues (2007) outline. The youth development literature offers one set of useful perspectives on these questions, and the chapters in this book offer a fine set of actual examples. Mining those chapters for insights, and drawing as well on what I take to be central themes from socio-cultural theorizing and research about literacy and learning in and out of school, I will briefly point to two past achievements and two future directions.

One achievement has to do with identity and agency. The chapters in this volume demonstrate again and again, within the contexts of the particular out-of-school time instructional programs herein described, that young people can and do develop senses of themselves as potent actors in their worlds, as people with skills and expertise and dispositions who can exert control over their educational, social, and even economic futures. “I feel like I have a special talent,” exclaimed one young student full of her accomplishments in Fabulous Fashions (Thompson, this volume) and already envisioning a future career. “It was cool to test the water and the temperature,” explained a burgeoning scientist who was also a fifth-grade participant in an after-school Science Mentoring Project (Fancsali, this volume). “I think that I am more likely to speak about controversial things in class. More likely to help other people,” volunteered a teenager who’d participated in an urban debate league (Hall, this volume), and whose newly developed sense of civic responsibility impels action and involvement. Indeed, some of the authors write explicitly in their chapters about identity formation. Khurana (this volume), for example, recounts how young people participating in the creation of comics took full advantage of the opportunity to explore issues related to gender, race, class, and other identity categories through their creation of characters whose struggles and triumphs paralleled their own.

The term “identity” often conjures up notions of crisis, even *sturm und drang* especially where adolescents are concerned, or it strikes one as an impossibly abstract notion to get hold of, being vaguely associated with a sense of self or sets of changing affiliations. Yet, concepts of identity and agency have emerged as a central focus of research on activity and learning outside the classroom or apart from formal schooling, and identity is a leitmotif as well for a great deal of research and theorizing in the social sciences over the last twenty-five years. I would submit that a major accomplishment of many after-school programs is their success in fostering among their constituents positive, agentive senses of self in relation to school, subject matters, careers, and abilities. It is useful to conceptualize identity as including interpersonal, epistemic, and discursive aspects (Hull & Greeno, 2006; cf. Holland & colleagues, 1998). Interpersonally, a person’s identity includes her or his interactions with other people, including commitments and the ways in which the person is entitled, expected, and obligated to treat other people. Epistemically, a person’s identity includes her or his interactions with the subject-matter contents of activities, including the ways she or he is committed, entitled, expected, and obligated to have and seek knowledge, understanding, and the use of the contents of a subject-matter domain. Discursively, contexts of identity afford models of self and opportunities to enact and represent a self.

I suspect that the best after-school programs, like the best schools, privilege the construction of powerful identities, and that successful learning and doing results from participation in activities that students invest with their identities. Such investment may occur for different reasons and combinations of reasons: the involvement of role models and experts from the local community and beyond (Fancsali, Hall, Khurana, McVarish, Thompson, this volume); the opportunity to participate in valued cultural practices (Edwards, Khurana; Thompson); the support and participation of parents and other significant adults and peers (Fancsali, Hall, McVarish, Thompson); the chance to

envision a future or future career (Fancsali, Khurana, Thompson); opportunities to experience the acquisition of true expertise (Fancsali, Hall, Khurana, McVarish); the situating of skills development within activities that have a larger purpose (Edwards, Fancsali, Hall, Khurana, McVarish; the engagement of multiple modalities in learning (Edwards, Fancsali, Hall, Khurana, McVarish, Thompson). It is interesting to consider why some after-school programs may be likelier places for students to invest activities with their identities than are some schools. And it is crucial to consider how after-schools and schools can partner so as to take advantage of after-school's potential leadership in this regard. At this historical moment, most schools may appear best equipped to promote, test, and certify mastery, while some after-schools may seem more appropriate contexts for the development of interpersonal, epistemic, and discursal identities.

A second achievement of after-school programs, also aptly demonstrated in this volume, is the use of multiple modalities for learning and doing. It is noteworthy that in each of the programs described, children engaged in activities that drew on several senses and multiple modes of representation. Further, reading and language-based texts were often accompanied by, or sometimes even subordinate to, other symbolic systems—image, music, sound, movement. At the Fabulous Fashions after-school program, participants searched the Internet for articles and images; imagined and sketched possible designs; touched, manipulated, cut, and sewed fabric; and finally strutted and strolled down the fashion runway (Thompson, this volume). During an out-of-school reading and writing workshop that focused on “doing hair,” African American girls did indeed read aloud and write journals, but they also alternated roles as “hairstylists, clients, fashion critics, talkers, and listeners” (Edwards, this volume). At their Science Mentoring Project, children graphed air and water temperature, to be sure, but they also set traps for fish and performed a “plankton tow” (Fancsali, this volume). Movement is key in these programs as well—children move about and playfully romp, to be sure, but learn to animate their bodies as models, debaters, and scientists too. Perhaps the philosopher Sheets-Johnstone (1998; cf. Katz, 2007) is correct in arguing that “movement is at the root of our sense of agency and the generative source of our notions of space and time” (p. xv).

Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan (2002) reminds us, and these chapters illustrate, that “human beings . . . use a vast range of communicative modes” (p. 223). Finnegan describes humans’ communicative resources as encompassing “their powers of eye and ear and movement, their embodied interactions in and with the external environment, their capacities to interconnect along auditory, visual, tactile and perhaps olfactory modalities, and their ability to create and manipulate objects in the world” (p. 243). Finnegan argues, not that some people are good with some modes and not others—that there is a visual intelligence as opposed to a kinesthetic one, for example—but that a characteristic of human beings is employing the range. The importance of integrating learning and doing, and thereby allowing for a fuller play of communicative and representational modes, has of course long been a staple of progressive educational theory (e.g., Dewey, 1916). However, with crises of funding, achievement, and accountability, schools have increasingly lost the opportunity to educate through arts and athletics. And with the long dominance of written language as both the means and

product of schooling—some would say with our “logocentric bias”—it has not been customary for schools to value multiple modalities for self-expression, knowledge creation, and communication. Enter after-school, right on time, marching in step with new digital technologies that increasingly make multi-modality the *sine qua non* of communication (cf. Hull & Nelson, 2006).

Whether after-school programs will continue to lead in terms of being positive settings for identity formation and multi-modal learning of course depends on many things, but particularly whether funding come to be increasingly tied to the demonstration of improved academic performance during the school day. Toward that end, I suggest two new directions. First, it seems crucially important that after-school programs be able and be allowed to document what they contribute to children’s cognitive, affective, artistic, and social development, and concomitantly, that notions of research expand beyond program evaluation to include demonstrations of children’s learning. As realizations of what children need to know and be able to do expands beyond the fundamental and the basic (cf. Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills), and as schools and after-schools alike turn their efforts toward fostering attitudes, dispositions, skills, and knowledge that truly add value to individuals’ and societies’ futures in the new century, there will be a need as well to understand the role that after-schools can play in relation to schools and vice versa. This understanding will come through research that isn’t put in a straight-jacket through requirements that it use control groups, consist primarily of quantitative data, or be conducted by “third-party” or external evaluators. More positively put, it will assess learning, via a range of alternative methods both under development and yet to be imagined, it will engage program staff in contributing to the documentation of that learning, and it will chart the rocky terrain of institutional contexts. I expect, then, that future collections on after-school programs will include, not only descriptions of successful practices and conflict-free organizations, but will feature as well accounts of the particular struggles—political, economic, ideological, epistemological—that will be a permanent fixture on the school and after-school educational landscapes. In the current volume, McVarish allows us to glimpse that terrain when she describes how the In Addition Mathematics Program almost lost its clientele to a requirement, imposed by the school-day, for test preparation after-school, but crafted a solution by persuading and supporting parents to themselves assume greater responsibility for ensuring that children were ready to face and conquer their achievement tests. More accounts like this, more ethnographically textured and nuanced, will be paramount, as we confront and negotiate unhelpful policies and re-imagine and transform institutional relationships.

After-school programs are local phenomena, growing from the needs and strengths of local communities. But if anything characterizes our global world, it is the way in which we are interconnected. Appadurai (1996) describes how both texts and people are mobile, flowing across national borders and geographies through the migration of people and the flows of images and texts through media and the Internet. To be sure, ours is an age in which our interconnected world grows ever more salient, even as we become increasingly aware of our own identities as multiple, and increasingly required to participate in the imagined realities of others. The current movement to characterize 21<sup>st</sup> century skills importantly includes “global awareness” as core (cf. Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup>

Century Skills, 2007). It is interesting to consider, then, how after-school programs can contribute in this regard, prompting young people's developing senses of themselves in relation to others to include understandings of different cultures, traditions, languages, and ideologies, both those within the US and those outside it.

Historically in the U.S., the institution of the school has shown itself remarkably capable of assimilating and transforming innovation. In his examination of the expansion of the high school during the early 20th century and the move later on to retract its services in favor of a focus on the "basics," Tyack (1979) notes: "School systems then, as now, had a considerable capacity to respond to lay criticism by incorporating certain changes into the system and then transforming them into innocuous and smoothly running parts of the pedagogical machinery" (p. 52). On the other hand, at least in their most interesting and powerful incarnations, out-of-school programs originate to and can fill important gaps in school-based services, often in relation to particular skills, subject matters, activities, or educational philosophies, and almost always for excluded, neglected, or disenfranchised groups. I think of the Freedom Schools that flourished as a centerpiece of the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi during the 1960's as a short-lived but durable and inspiring reminder of such purposes. As Perlstein (1990) explains, these Freedom Schools "offered young black Mississippians an education that public schools would not supply, one that both provided intellectual stimulation and linked learning to participation in the movement to transform the South's segregated society" (p. 297). The question of the moment is whether the current after-school movement can be successful, in the face of rising economic and ideological pressures fueled by legislative mandates, in maintaining what can be most powerful about its role. History would not make us optimistic, but the accounts in this book renew our energy and our hope.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Mike Rose, Mark Nelson, and Charles Underwood, whose conversations helped to shape this foreword, and to the staff of the DUSTY after-school programs in Oakland, CA, whose continual good work continues to inspire.