

Chapter 5 Supporting Families, Building Community and Developing Children and Youth: The Community School Programs

Some of the kids whom I met in that first year [1982] are people who have grown up to become the staff of the Center. The little boys who were in the second grade group are now men and the staff of the Center . . .

One of the teens we've really struggled with said to me the other day, 'I want to be like you when I grow up.' He always teases, so I said, 'sure.' He said 'No, I am serious. They're going to call me Willie Brockway.' The days before we had had a sort of intimate discussion about his family situation and what was really going on with him. I have always been very demanding with him, and he comes back because he wants those demands. So then he said, 'I mean it. I think I want to have a center for kids.' I think you build those hopes and possibilities, but you have to stay with them. Would I be thrilled if he accomplished it and took my role? Yes, indeed. . . I always say to the kids, 'You go on with your studies, you will always have a place here. You can do your high school internships here. You can do your college internships here. You can do whatever you want to do here and we'll promote that.' -- Julie Brockway, program director, "Life Lines" Community Arts Project at Middle School 136

Establishing a partnership with the Sunset Park schools was a critical component of the Directors' original plan for the Center. The agency's first community school program was opened in 1979, within a year of the Center's establishment. It is located at P.S. 1, a large public elementary school in School District 15.¹ A second community school program, opened in 1983, is located at P.S. 314 in School District 20, another of Sunset Park's five elementary schools. The Center's third program for students in grades 6-8 was opened in 1990. It is located at Sunset Park's only school for this age group, Middle

¹Another elementary school program was opened at P.S. 172 in 1980, but it was closed in 1985 to concentrate Center resources and open a full-time after-school program at P.S. 1, a larger school. Prior to that time neither program could remain open 5 days a week due to limited staff resources. School 136.

The three community school programs are a direct reflection of the Center for Family Life's philosophy of service and an integral part of its program operations. Approximately 2600 youths and almost 600 parents participate in one or more of the community school program activities each year. In this chapter we describe the various components of the Center's community school programs, drawing upon the perspectives of both participants and staff with regard to the program's benefits.

The Center's commitment to these programs derives from the knowledge that public schools, together with the family and community, have a critical influence on current and future youth functioning. (See, for example, Dryfoos 1990, 1994; Comer 1996.) Yet, schools are frequently defined as the private province of school personnel and function to isolate children from the multiple relationships with older youth and adults in the community that could support their healthy development. Hence, similar to the settlement houses of old, the community school programs are designed to serve as places where youth and adults of the community of different ages and from diverse ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds can come together to engage in a range of normalizing and mutually enriching activities. The overall goal of the programs is to support individual, family, and community development through processes of mutual engagement and activity.

The two elementary school programs at P.S. 1 and P.S. 314 offer a similar range of services. These include after-school childcare for elementary school children, tutoring, summer day camp, teen evening centers, parent councils, parent groups and workshops, and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. In addition, under a program entitled Youth to Work (formerly Project Youth), the Center provides comprehensive youth development services to the teenagers who serve as counselors-in-training (CITs) in the community-school programs at P.S. 1 and P.S. 314. The CITs volunteer to work with younger children in the Center's two after-school childcare programs and in its two summer camp programs. Youth to Work, formerly titled Project Youth, itself has three main components: mentoring by individual staff members; tutoring for those who need extra academic help; and family life and sex education groups.

Because of the ages of the youth involved, the community school program at Middle School 136 is somewhat different, building on a strategy of introducing group work and the arts into the classroom to improve student achievement creating cohesive units of teachers and youth.

The "Life Lines" Community Arts Project at Middle School 136 has five key components:

1) An in-school Arts Partnership with teachers and students that provides interdisciplinary learning projects aimed at integrating the arts, community services, and social group work into formal academic instruction;

2) A five-day a week after-school Arts Program and Summer Arts Camp that provide instruction in dance, acting, vocals/rhythm, visual arts, creative writing, photography, and computer skills, along with special events, exhibitions, and three annual original productions.

3) Traveling Theatre and Dance Troupes that are trained to conduct interactive workshops and performances on family and community issues for children, parents, senior citizens, and professionals in the New York area;

4) An Internship and Mentoring Program that offers volunteer work experiences, as well as individual academic and personal support, for high school and college students;

5) A Parent Participation and Leadership Program that includes a parent advisory council, parent-youth arts events and projects, family cultural outings, and volunteer support for annual productions.

In 1998 the Center was designated the lead arts agency for a grant to Middle School 136 from the Center for Arts Education, commonly known as the New York City Annenberg Challenge for Arts Education.

These community school programs were formerly under the overall direction of the Center's Project Director, Sister Geraldine, but each had a separate program director. They are now under the supervision of the Center's co-director, Julie Brockway, who also directs the Life Lines Community Arts Project. The three program directors are professional social workers who are long-term employees of the Center. They are assisted by 4.5 full-time equivalent social workers and 9 full-time and 7 part-time professionals in art, drama, dance, music, education, and sports. The community school programs also employ college students as unit leaders, assistant teachers, and performing arts specialists. In addition, many high school youth work as assistant unit leaders and summer camp counselors. The staff is supplemented during the summer months by approximately 200 teenagers who participate in the Center's Summer Youth Employment Program and work as counselors-in-training in the two summer camp programs.

The average daily attendance at the community school programs during the 1997-1998 school year was 815. The total annual budget for these programs for the same fiscal year was approximately \$1.2 million. This indicates an average annual cost of approximately \$1472 per daily participant, but actual costs are much higher for those receiving intensive service such as daily after-school childcare and lower for participants in activities that are offered less frequently and require less staff time, such as Teen Center. Program funding is derived primarily from contracts with the New York City Department of Youth and Community Services. These funds are supplemented by a grant from the Department of Employment for the Summer Youth Employment Program and matching funds from the New York State Department of Social Services and the New York City Administration for Children's Services (formerly CWA). In addition, approximately one third of the total is supported by private funds derived from foundation grants and contributions.

Key Community School Program Characteristics

Many of the characteristics identified as central to the nature of the Center's programs also emerged as critical to the success of the community school programs. These include the holistic nature of the services; the close coordination and integration of staff members; the continuity and long-term involvement of staff and clients in the program; dynamic professional leadership; a strong common conviction about program mission expressed by all of the staff members; emphasis on client and community empowerment; and flexibility in adapting to changing individual and community needs. However, there are additional characteristics that particularly contribute to the success of this program. These characteristics can be detected to varying degrees in each of the community school's multiple program activities.

Intergenerational Integration

One central theme is the heavy emphasis on age integration and parental and community involvement with youth in addressing the developmental needs of Sunset Park's children and teenagers. As the former director of the program at P.S.1, Tom Randall, commented:

This aims to be a community enterprise where we try to engage the kids who come to the after-school program, their parents, their older siblings, and other teenagers in the community, and we try to build in, through special events or special activities, ways in which they can interact so they will see themselves as members of an intergenerational community.

Developmental Focus

A second core characteristic is that program activities are designed to meet the developmental needs of children and youth. As described by John Kixmiller, program director, at P.S. 314 and Helene Onserud, director of Project Youth at P.S. 1, in a paper presented to a national group work conference: In order to have normal social development, children need to have a context in which they can play, as well as acquire and practice the skills that will allow them to gain mastery and feel competent in the accomplishment of various tasks. They need to do this in the company of a group of peers with whom they can identify, form relationships and interact freely. . . It makes sense, from the point of view of personality development, to ask adolescents in the early teen years to begin to contribute and to function as staff. It also makes sense from the perspective of the children that their role models be young people with whom they can identify in terms of their cultural, ethnic, and community background. Therefore, the school-age childcare program is staffed by young adults and older teens in the community who work part-time, and by younger volunteers. In this context their training and development as staff are viewed as part of age appropriate activities. A community center organized in this way supports the passages from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood and makes them highly visible to the whole community. (Kixmiller & Onserud 1993:13-15)

Use of Performing Arts

A third distinguishing characteristic of the community school programs is the extensive use of performing arts as a means of encouraging individual self-expression and meaningful group action. Julie Stein Brockway, director of the "Life Lines" Community Arts Project at Middle School 136 noted: *"My vision. . . has always been the use of arts to create community."* The other program directors and the staff frequently cite her leadership in developing a service model that emphasizes the use of group performing arts activities to build cooperation and self-esteem, teach new ways of learning, and provide fun for the youth participants. Group public performances at each of the schools also serve to engage large segments of the community. According to John Kixmiller, *"Performing arts is the integrative program activity because everybody does it. And when we do large events, there's always a performing arts component that everybody's involved in, so it ends up being one of the things that pulls everybody else in with it. . . Events are the greatest organizing tools that we have."*

The Counselor in Training (CIT) Program *(Luis and Elena Castro are seen participating in this program in A BROOKLYN FAMILY TALE)*

The initial vision for the community school programs was a combination of after-school childcare, Teen Center, and parent support services. However, the program administrators gradually recognized that they were offering little to early adolescents who were too old for the after-school program, but too young to be hired as staff or to take full advantage of Teen Center. The concept of the Counselor in Training (CIT) program evolved from this recognition of an unmet need. The program was initially very small, but has expanded rapidly at both P.S. 1 and P.S. 314.

Although most of the current CITs are youth who participated as children in the after-school program, this is not a requirement. To participate as a Counselor in Training, a youth must be 12-19 years old, willing to volunteer at least two afternoons a week, and be sponsored by one of the senior staff or unit leaders who is willing to supervise the CIT on an ongoing basis. Although it is common for leaders to sponsor several CITs who will help them in their work, there is still a waiting list of youths who want to become CITs.

Some CITs later become unit leaders or assistants. There is, however, no guarantee that this will happen because those hired in staff roles must be selected on a merit basis.

The CITs' principal responsibilities are to help supervise the children and to assist their sponsors in their primary tasks. For example, a CIT sponsored by the art director might help make props for an upcoming play. One working with the language arts director might help students write a short story. A CIT working with a unit leader might help a child rehearse for the play or read a story to a group of younger children. Often the CITs help to settle arguments or talk with youngsters who are upset about some incident. Thus, they serve both as apprentices to the older staff and role models for the younger children.

The CITs are all required to attend regular meetings in which they discuss work issues as well as problems of daily living. They are also invited to attend two weekend retreats held at an upstate camp. The retreats, held once in early fall and once in the late spring, are designed to provide training for the youth and emphasize teamwork, leadership, responsibility, and bonding. Since many CITs have never had an opportunity to stay in the country, they experience the overnight retreats as a major benefit of the program.

A key advantage that this program offers participants in addition to socialization and training opportunities is that those who are income-eligible are guaranteed work through the Summer Youth Employment Program in the summer camp program. In addition, each youth who attends the after-school program at least two days a week, has regular school attendance, and receives passing grades, receives \$40 a semester and a certificate at an awards ceremony held twice each year.

Perhaps the primary benefit this program offers, however, is ongoing contact with and role modeling from the adult staff. The CITs are bombarded daily with opportunities to succeed, guidance, praise, and unconditional regard. Also, they socialize frequently with staff members, whom they respect, and are made to feel they are part of a community that cares about what happens to them. One young adult staff member who was a former CIT, described having participated in Center activities since she was six, beginning with the after-school program. She reflected upon the staff and CITs being

. . . like big brothers and big sisters to me. I depended on them to help me if something was difficult and I depended on them if I had a problem with the other kids. So they were like the referees or something if we had a fight. I depended on them to get me through it. [Participating in the Center] shows me how much responsibility I can handle. It shows me that I can do much more things than just being a doctor if I wanted to, and it shows me that people enjoy each others' company, and it shows me that children have a hard time in their lives, and I'd like to do something to help them.

Another former CIT's sense of possibility is reflected in a description of "the single most important thing" that participation in the Counselor-in-Training program did:

Kept me in school. I wasn't going to drop out, but I was cutting a lot and I stopped. [If I hadn't been in the CIT program] I would have done bad at home, at school . . . The social workers, the people who work here . . . I learned from them, I learned from their mistakes. They got some wise people in the Center . . . I plan on finishing college.

Views of Counselors in Training (CITs) About Their Experiences

We conducted four focus group meetings (two with boys and two with girls) with CITs at P.S. 314 and P.S. 1 in the late spring of 1994. A member of the research team also observed a spring training weekend and had a number of informal conversations with the CITs during the weekend and while making earlier program observations at P.S. 314. Another conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 Center employees who had formerly been CITS. They discussed the impact of being a CIT on their own development and compared their experiences with those of friends who had not participated in Center for Family Life programs.

The CITs who participated in the focus groups ranged in age from 13-15. Most had been CITs for 1-3

years. A number had previously been enrolled in the after-school childcare program and said they essentially "*grew up*" in the program. Others had no contact with the Center prior to becoming CITs; they had all learned about the CIT role informally through contacts in the program and relatives or friends who were CITs. In discussing their entry into the CIT role, a number pointed with some pride to the fact that they had to be "picked" by one of the staff members, and that there is a waiting list for CIT slots. The youths all spoke readily about their experiences. A common theme was how much they had grown in this program. For example, "*When you were in the [after-school] group, you weren't expected to work. Just play activities and do homework. That's it. Now you have to watch out for the kids, help them with their homework, help them with their activities, and so on.*" Several noted that they found the CIT role very difficult to handle at first because it's so hard to manage the younger children. Over time they learned to ask for help when needed and began to understand how best to handle the children.

When asked to describe their responsibilities, the CITs were very clear about their primary obligations. For example, different teens responded similarly as follows:

*Help the kids. Keep them out of trouble.
Work with the kids. Talk to them if they got problems.
Teach them right from wrong . . . Be a role model . . .
Basically help them with their homework and assist them in things they can't do, like projects. It's like you're more of a friend than a CIT with them.
When I see kids crying, I'll go up to them and ask them what's wrong, and I'll talk to them, even if they're not in my group.
It's our responsibility to see that the kids have fun, have a good time at the center, and finish their work.*

The CITs were also very clear about their responsibilities to the larger program. Their comments in this regard indicate that they have been carefully socialized to understand the ways in which inappropriate behavior on their part could damage the program because they represent the program to the external world:

I have to have a lot of self-control. No cursing. You have to come in at a certain time. You have to show them you're capable of this job, taking care of kids. If the parents see you fooling around, they'll go to John.

You represent the program. You have to make a good impression. You can't go out there and say one thing, then do another.

Parents have to go to work and they can't take care of the kids. So they leave them here and they think the kids are safe. We're trying to keep kids safe and that's a big responsibility. Keep them safe, make sure nothing happens to them, that they get their homework done, and do good in school. That's a big responsibility.

In discussing what they like about the program and why they stay involved, the CITs identified a number of factors. One key theme was that the program allows them to go out and get away from the boredom at home while keeping them safe and away from trouble. They noted their own and their parents' fear about violence on the streets, use of drugs, teen pregnancy, and illicit activity and said that the program keeps them safe from these potential problems. To illustrate, two members of one of the boys' focus groups commented as follows:

My friends [who aren't CITs] are selling drugs. My friends who I associate with outside, they steal cars. Sometimes I'm tempted to go, but then I think about if I go, I'm going to get locked up - if I sell drugs and get caught. I don't want to do time. First, I think about my mother, and then I think about other things - and the Center tops that too!

For other people, since they got nothing to worry about, they don't care. The difference between them and us is we got responsibilities; we got a whole bunch of responsibilities

to do. Before we do something, we have to think about it twice. With them, they don't think twice. Whatever goes in their heads, they do it. That's the way I used to be. A friend of mine came up to me a few weeks ago. He was stealing a car and asked me to get in. I said no because if I went with him, my life would just go down the drain.

And the following dialogue took place among 7 girls in response to the question, "How would your life be different if you were no longer a CIT?"

Oh, my God.

It would be boring.

My mother wouldn't let me come outside.

I'd start doing bad things.

I'd be goofing off all the time because I live far away and I wouldn't see any of my friends.

I'd be on the streets doing bad things.

Before we started working here, we used to hang out until like three in the morning.

We used to hang out on the corners, in the park, in front of the school, starting trouble.

We used to be like that, but now we hang out here. And we go home or we meet on the outside.

When I was younger, I ain't got a friend so I used to hang out with older people. . . We used to smoke and drink. Stupid things to do.

The girls we hung out with, they got kids. I see them all the time.

Another central theme was the satisfaction the youths derive from the respect that the children and parents give them. A number noted that they enjoyed being role models and having the little ones look up to them, even if they don't know them individually. For example:

One of the good things is that the kids look up to us, so do the parents. Kids go home and brag about their CITs and counselors. It gives their parents a lot of trust in us.

The little kids respect all the CITs and the group leader. That's what I like about it. You're role models. You feel big.

It's like you walk in the street and you see them, [the children] say hello to you. They have a smile on their faces. It's like you're doing something good. You feel part of something.

Most of the teens who had been CITs for an extended period talked at length about the sense of loyalty they feel to the program. For example, one noted, "*It's like I'm attached to the Center . . . I feel like I'm a staff member. But really I'm only a CIT. I feel like I have to come. I feel like I'm getting paid. But really I'm not.*" Another said: "*I feel loyal. Some of the kids respect me. I feel like I'm one of the big guys now and part of the staff.*"

Similarly, some of the older staff and graduates interviewed in other contexts talked extensively about what a difference the program had made in their lives and how important they feel it is to go back for reunions with staff, observance of performances, and so forth. One graduate who is now a New York City policeman commented that he goes back frequently to "*get energized.*"

In contrast, those who were relatively new to the Center and the CIT role said that although they liked it, they did not feel any loyalty yet. Some said they were not used to working with kids and found that difficult. A couple of others noted that they did not get along with some of the senior staff. And one said: *"I think I have to work here a couple of more years to feel that [loyalty]. I like coming. I like coming, [but] I think if I weren't to come, things would be running the same."*

Asked to identify the good and the bad things about the program, the CITs focused primarily on the positives. In particular, they noted the value of the activities in the Teen Center, the trips, and the opportunity to make new friends and "*hang out*" together. The only negatives identified were that they sometimes get hot and tired in the after-school program and that some of the unit leaders were difficult to work with initially so they had changed to different units.

Other Material Presented in Chapter 5 But Not Excerpted Here

The authors present the sources of data incorporated into the study of the community school programs and the rationale for focusing on one of the three community school programs in the research; provide an in-depth report of findings related to the Community School Program at P.S. 314, including an overview of programs, the population served, service access and integration, organization and staffing, and participants' perceptions of the program. Detailed information is provided about the organization and activities of the school aged childcare and parent programs and the parent support services. Parents' views of these programs based upon data collected in focus groups and through a telephone survey are also reported and discussed. Other programs described include the Teen Center and Project Youth. Views of youth about their experiences in the Center programs, staff member's perceptions of the community school programs, and variables identified as contributing to the success of the community school programs are identified and examined.