

Youth Engagement and Quality of Experience in Afterschool Programs

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Executive Summary

Research on middle school participants' engagement in afterschool programs shows that such programs often serve as developmental contexts for promoting "flow" experiences. Compared to when they are in other settings after school, participants in afterschool programs are more likely to experience high concentrated effort and intrinsic motivation, experiences consistent with Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow. Organized sports, arts enrichment, and academic enrichment activities were found to be particularly engaging program activities, in contrast to homework completion. The importance of high levels of engagement in promoting learning in afterschool programs leads to implications for practice and policy.

When students are engaged in activities that combine elements of both work and play, conditions are ideal to encounter the optimal psychological state that Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has called flow. Flow is a state of deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically enjoyable, such as when athletes are focused on their play, dancers are immersed in their performance, or scientists are engrossed in solving a new problem (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The state of flow is all-encompassing, with no psychic energy left for distractions. When experiencing flow, individuals perceive their performance to be pleasurable and successful; the activity becomes worth doing for its own sake, even if no further goal is reached (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). During this state, individuals function at their fullest capacity, and the experience becomes its own reward (DeCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975). Highly creative artists and scholars have reported the experience of flow when they were involved in their best work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Flow is inherently related to learning. According to the theory, achieving a state of flow is based on a symbiotic relationship between new challenges and the skills needed to meet those challenges. As in Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* (Rogoff, 1990), most learning occurs just one step beyond the skills a person has already mastered. Flow occurs when individuals stretch their abilities to meet an

obtainable challenge, so that their skills are neither overmatched nor underutilized. Because the state of flow is intrinsically rewarding, individuals tend to want to replicate it. Thus flow produces growth: As individuals attempt to master new challenges, they develop greater levels of skill; once they master a task, they seek out more complex challenges to match their new set of skills, so that the cycle of skill development is repeated (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). For teachers, coaches, and mentors, issuing an appropriate challenge is important, but so too is supporting a learner's skill development—for example, by providing scaffolding and feedback. Understanding and working with this challenge-skill dynamic to create opportunities for flow can be an important strategy to engage students and enhance learning.

For our research, we focused on school-based afterschool programs, conceptualizing engagement as being rooted in a state of flow. We wanted to know how students spent their time and experienced different motivational and emotional states when they were at an afterschool program compared to when they were elsewhere. We also wanted to know how the experiences of students attending afterschool programs compared to those of students who did not. After obtaining a general picture of the influence of afterschool programs on the motivational and emotional states of participants, we looked more deeply inside the programs themselves, identifying which activities and social arrangements were most fre-

quently reported. We then examined the specific influence of the most common activities and social arrangements on the engagement levels of participants. Before discussing our findings, we provide an overview of previous research to explain why we focused our own efforts on participant engagement in afterschool activities.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACT OF AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Organized afterschool programs help build talents and efficacy (Larson, 2000) and support social skills and relationships with peers and adults (Barber, Stone, Junt, & Eccles, 2005; Eccles & Gootman, 2002), all in a safe environment with adult supervision (Posner & Vandell, 1994). A recent meta-analysis reviewing evaluations of 73 afterschool programs (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007) found that afterschool programs enhance the personal and social development of youth. Specifically, according to the meta-analysis, students participating in afterschool programs exhibited enhanced self-confidence, self-esteem, school bonding, and behavioral adjustment. They also achieved higher grades and test scores. The meta-analysis further reported that the most effective programs used evidence-based training approaches and, therefore, shared certain common characteristics: Their activities were sequenced, active, focused, and explicit.

As the meta-analysis illustrates, a variety of factors contribute to positive outcomes; however, we are specifically interested in the *motivational* and *emotional* factors—factors that can be more difficult to pinpoint.

In fact, studies have shown that during sports, arts, games, and other active leisure activities, children become engaged in learning and report higher levels of involvement, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and initiative than in any other class of activities.

Enhancing student motivation would seem to be an obvious benefit of afterschool programs. Students who attend afterschool programs spend more time in structured academic and non-academic activities with peers and adults than those who do not (Posner & Vandell,

1994). Developing varied competencies, motivational attributions, and social relationships is particularly important during the middle school years (Eccles, 1999). Unfortunately, junior high and middle schools are not always the ideal environments for students to develop these skills (Eccles et al., 1993). Students, therefore, seek to fulfill their social and emotional goals outside of school.

A great deal of research has found that extracurricular activities—such as sports, art, music, community projects, and special-interest academic pursuits—help children and adolescents negotiate salient developmental tasks (Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005). Research correlates extracurricular activities with higher levels of self-esteem (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001) and more positive outlooks for the future (Jordan & Nettles, 2000). Because these activities tend to be supported by competent peers and adults, children involved in them develop social skills and a sense of belonging (Fredricks et al., 2002), as well as improved race relations (Holland & Andre, 1987). Afterschool programs that offer these types of extracurricular activities can therefore be seen as *motivational environments*: developmental contexts that promote positive motivation and social involvement.

In fact, studies have shown that during sports, arts, games, and other active leisure activities, children become engaged in learning and report higher levels of involvement, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and initiative than in any other class of activities, including productive activities such as school or employment, self-maintenance activities such as cleaning or grooming, or passive leisure activities such as watching television (Csikszentmihalyi & Kleiber, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). The specific competencies, interests, strengths, and friendships that develop during such activities appear to provide a foundation that affirms identity and encourages motivation in chosen pursuits (Barber et al., 2005; McIntosh, Metz, & Youniss, 2005). Recently, Larson and Browne (2007) suggested that school-based extracurricular activities supervised by adults, such as a school theatrical performance, can teach children and adolescents strategies for responding to, and taking ownership of, their emotions. Adolescents draw from the emotional culture of a particular setting; when program activities provide a predictable set of activities that encourage positive emotions, young people are more likely to learn and grow.

Not all accounts of extracurricular activities are positive, however. Some studies characterize them as

facilitating class-based exclusion, peer rejection, and anti-social behavior (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). A zero-sum model attributed to Coleman (1961) posits that time spent on one activity detracts from time spent on another. According to this model, extracurricular activities divert time from academic pursuits and subvert adult academic goals (Marsh, 1992).

DEBATE ON THE VALUE OF AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

Despite the meta-analysis of Durlak and Weissberg (2007), which determined that participation in afterschool programs was associated with improved school performance in terms of grades and achievement test scores (see also Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005; Miller, 2003), findings on this topic have been mixed and controversial. For example, a national evaluation of 21st Century Community Learning Centers, a major source of afterschool programming in the U.S., reported that 21st Century programs had little or no impact on academic performance and behaviors such as the completion of homework (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Poor program attendance was one possible reason. Though the evaluation has been sharply criticized as methodologically flawed (Jacobson, 2003; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005), the results have sparked a debate over the value of afterschool programs and their increasing emphasis on academic achievement following the No Child Left Behind Act (Archer, 2004). Because academics have become the primary if not exclusive focus of some afterschool programming, young people often regard programs as “more school after school” (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005, p. 410) rather than an opportunity to engage in intrinsically motivating activities. As a result, attendance can remain a challenge (Bartko, 2005).

The debate over the value of afterschool programs has primarily focused on such markers of program quality as support for autonomy, efficacy, skill-building, and supportive relationships (see Beck, 1999; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, et al., 2005). Successful programs are flexible (Pierce, Hamm, & Vandell, 1999) and engage children in activities and relationships with caring adults. This emphasis on program quality inevitably raises the question: What activities will best meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of children? Given the recent emphasis on academics, homework sessions and academic enrichment



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projects top the list of activities in need of further investigation. Despite the emphasis on program quality, however, few studies have looked specifically at time expenditures, levels of student engagement, and the subjective experiences of students during common afterschool program activities.

CONCEPTUALIZING ENGAGEMENT

One-time surveys say little about the immediate experience of children when they are engaged in activities. In addition, few studies have focused specifically on the perceptions and feelings of students participating in afterschool programs. In our studies, we used the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), which allowed us to assess levels of engagement and different mood states of the students as afterschool activities were taking place. While the researchers have identified several consequences of afterschool programs, none have addressed the question of why students choose, and continue to participate in, the specific activities in the programs—



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valuable information for understanding voluntary participation. An underlying assumption of our studies was that students choose activities that interest them, and that those who are highly engaged in an activity are more likely to continue their involvement with it (Bartko, 2005).

When school is in session, students report being bored, mainly because they feel unchallenged and uninspired in class (Larson & Richards, 1991). As motivational environments, afterschool programs are quite different from classrooms. When participating in afterschool programs, students are generally oriented toward the tasks they are undertaking and share a belief that success requires them to collaborate with their peers. Research has shown that such an orientation is associated positively with satisfaction and negatively with boredom (Duda & Ntourmanis, 2005). Afterschool programs are also thought to increase engagement in school by meeting needs that may not be met during the school day, for instance, by offering opportunities for attention from adults, positive interactions with peer groups, and activities designed to build self-esteem (Miller, 2003).

During afterschool program activities, students may experience heightened *concentration*, *interest*, and *enjoyment*—the emotional ingredients that characterize flow and foster learning (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi,

Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). A heightened state of *concentration* is most likely to occur when a person is working in an area that requires talent or skill (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). Concentration has been shown to be related to depth of cognitive processing and to academic performance (Corno & Mandinach, 1983; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). Such immersion in an activity is central to flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and to meaningful learning (Montessori, 1967). Environments that support autonomy generally increase *interest* and intrinsic motivation, whereas controlling environments decrease them (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986). When children are interested in an activity, they are more likely to identify with its goals and regard it as personally important (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Interest directs attention, stimulates the desire to continue to engage in an activity, and is related to school achievement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Hidi, 1990; Renninger & Wozniak, 1985; Schiefele, Krapp, & Winteler, 1992). *Enjoyment*, which includes feelings of fun and pleasure, is the most common reason children say they participate in extracurricular activities (Fredricks et al., 2002). Enjoyment also reflects the perceived competence, recognition, and social support that students routinely receive while involved in afterschool activities. Enjoyment is related to the demonstration of competencies, creative accomplishment, and school

performance (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Nakamura, 1988).

Larson (2000) characterized contexts for positive youth development as those in which children experience both high degrees of choice in their activities and high levels of concentration when engaged in them. Larson posited that this combination of motivational states is important for the development of initiative because it unites intrinsic motivation with concentrated effort, just as experiences of flow do. Extending Larson's research, we considered how likely young people were to experience four combinations of emotional sensations during afterschool hours:

- **High choice and high concentration**, which is ideal for fostering flow and initiative
- **High choice and low concentration**, which is most consistent with leisure and relaxation
- **Low choice and high concentration**, which is often reported during the school day in academic classes
- **Low choice and low concentration**, which occurs when individuals are disengaged or apathetic

A METHODOLOGY FOR STUDYING ENGAGEMENT IN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

We collected data from eight afterschool programs in two medium-sized cities and one small town in three Midwestern states. All of the programs were based in middle schools. Five programs were federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers; the remaining programs were funded by local school districts and city governments.

Studying emotions and engagement during the afterschool hours presents several challenges. Because activities take place in multiple locations, systematic observation is difficult. Teenagers also spend considerable amounts of time alone and unsupervised during the non-school hours, engaging in behaviors that may be strongly influenced by an observer. To address these challenges, we used the Experience Sampling Methodology (ESM). Youth were provided with log-books and pre-programmed wristwatches that signaled them at random moments during the afterschool hours. Each time they were signaled, the students recorded the time and their location, activity, social partners, and emotional states. By having students report on immediate experiences over the course of a week, the ESM solicited repeated "snapshots" of subjective experience, helping us avoid the issues of recall and estimation that are unavoidable byproducts of most surveys and interviews.

Our sample consisted of 191 middle school youth: 52 percent were male, 60 percent were children of color, and 47 percent reported an annual household income of less than \$40,000. Of these, 160 were *program youth* who reported participating in an afterschool program at least once during the study, and 31 were *nonprogram youth* who did not participate in any organized program. In our studies, all 191 young people wore watches that were programmed to beep 35 times during one week in the fall and 35 times during one week in the spring during the 2001–2002 school year. Signals occurred at random times after school and during evenings and weekends. The youth responded, on average, to 33 of the 35 signals in both the fall and the spring, for a total of 12,143 reports. Of these experiences, 4,846 occurred after school, between the time school was dismissed and 6 p.m. Program youth responded to a total of 4,089 signals after school, 1,030 while at a program and 3,059 while not at a program. Nonprogram youth responded to 759 signals after school, which by definition occurred when students were not at a program.

In addition to recording the time, location, activity, and their social partners, participants rated the cognitive, affective, and motivational qualities of their experiences each time they were signaled, on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 meaning "not at all" and 4 meaning "very much." These qualities were assigned to the following categories:

- *Choice*: "How much choice did you have about this activity?"
- *Importance*: "How important was this activity to you?"
- *Interest*: "Was it interesting?"
- *Challenge*: "Was it challenging?"
- *Enjoyment*: "Did you enjoy what you were doing?"
- *Concentration*: "How hard were you concentrating?"
- *Skills*: "Were you using your skills?"
- *Wish*: "Did you wish you were doing something else?"

We used those factors to create three composite variables:

- **Concentrated effort** included high ratings for challenge, skills, and concentration.
- **Intrinsic motivation** included high ratings for enjoyment, choice, and interest, as well as low ratings for wishing to be doing something else.
- **Importance** was a stand-alone item.

Respondents were also asked, “How were you feeling when you were signaled?” Students then rated the following moods: *lonely, happy, angry, stressed, excited, bored, scared, sad, relaxed, proud, and worried*. Three factors emerged from this set of items:

- **Positive affect:** proud, excited, happy, and relaxed
- **Negative affect:** scared, worried, sad, angry, and stressed
- **Apathy:** bored and lonely

In addition, a composite variable for *engagement* was created based on the theory of flow. Engagement was defined as the combination of enjoyment, interest, and concentration.

THE QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE IN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

In the first study we summarize in this article (Vandell, Shernoff, et al., 2005), we asked two questions. The first question was, Do students who attend afterschool programs engage in different activities and experience different motivational and emotional states when they are at the afterschool programs compared to when they are elsewhere after school? *Program youth* were defined as students who reported participating in an afterschool program for at least one wristwatch signal during afterschool hours. “Elsewhere” typically referred to the respondent’s own home, someone else’s home, an outdoor space, or a public building.

We found that there were significant differences in the use of time and the quality of experience when students were at the programs compared to when they were elsewhere after school, as shown in Table 1. While attending the programs, program youth reported spending a higher percentage of time in organized sports, academic and arts enrichment activities, and completing homework than when they were elsewhere. Students in other settings reported spending a good deal of time watching TV and eating or snacking after school. Students in programs rarely reported engaging in these activities. Students in other settings also reported being alone or in “self-care” a

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF TIME IN ACTIVITIES AT AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS AND ELSEWHERE DURING AFTERSCHOOL HOURS

	Program youth at program	Program youth elsewhere	Nonprogram youth elsewhere
Academic/arts enrichment	22%	8%	8%
Sports	27%	8%	9%
Community service	3%	0%	0%
Homework	15%	9%	10%
Snacks/meals	6%	8%	10%
TV	5%	19%	19%
Socializing with peers	8%	11%	8%
Alone	0%	12%	13%

Categories are not mutually exclusive; a student may watch TV and be alone. Not all activities and social groupings are represented.

TABLE 2. FEELING STATES AT AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS AND ELSEWHERE DURING THE AFTERSCHOOL HOURS

	Mean ratings on a 4-point scale ranging from 1, not at all, to 4, very much		
	Program youth at program	Program youth elsewhere	Nonprogram youth elsewhere
Intrinsic motivation	3.0	2.8	2.8
Concerted effort	2.6	1.8	2.0
Importance	3.0	2.5	2.6
Positive emotion	2.5	2.3	2.3
Negative emotions	1.3	1.3	1.3
Apathy	1.4	1.5	1.5

substantial percentage of the time. Not once did a student report being alone when at a program.

Moreover, students reported significantly higher intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, and positive states of mind while they were in afterschool programs than when they were elsewhere after school, as shown in Table 2. They also experienced their activities to be more important when they were at programs than when they were elsewhere.

In addition, program youth were almost twice as likely to experience high choice in combination with high concentration when they were at the afterschool program (40 percent of the time) than when they were elsewhere (21 percent). Program youth were also more likely to experience low choice and high concentration when at programs, a combination frequently reported during “homework help” sessions.

Students reported high choice and low concentration—a combination characteristic of leisure and relaxation—less frequently when they were at programs (34 percent of the time) than when they were elsewhere (52 percent). They reported low choice in combination with low concentration, a state of mind consistent with apathy, very rarely when they were at programs. In contrast, students reported this combination almost one-quarter of the time when they were elsewhere after school.



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In our second research question, we wondered how program youth spent their time and experienced activities when they were not at a program after school compared to how nonprogram youth did. If program youth used their time differently and experienced different emotional states when they were elsewhere after school compared to nonprogram youth, it would suggest that young people who attend programs may differ in fundamental ways from those who do not. If program youth did not use their time differently or experience different emotional states, the differences reported when program youth were at the program compared to when they were elsewhere would most likely be explained by the program context and not the predispositions of participants. This is exactly what we found. When not at the afterschool program, program youth engaged in activities at similar rates and had similar emotional states as did nonprogram youth during afterschool hours, as Table 1 illustrates. For example, nonprogram youth spent 9 percent of afterschool hours playing sports, 10 percent of their time completing homework, and 19 percent of their time watching TV, percentages that were not significantly different from those of program youth when not at programs. Nonprogram youth actually spent 10 percent of their time snacking or having meals, a greater percentage than program youth whether they were in programs or not. Differences in the use of time and quality of experience resulting from the influence of being in the program versus not being in a program were indeed much greater than any dispositional differences between program and nonprogram youth.

From these analyses, we concluded that school-based afterschool programs provide youth with sub-

stantially different activities than they would otherwise be exposed to during afterschool hours. While at programs, youth spent more time engaged in productive, skill-building activities that are both challenging and intrinsically motivating, the defining features of flow. When they were not at a program, they spent more time in passive and indulgent activi-

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ties. Overall, the young people reported increased engagement and more positive emotions during programs, and a greater sense of apathy when not in programs; see Table 2. These findings underscore the potential of afterschool programs to be positive developmental contexts for youth.

LOOKING INSIDE PROGRAMS: WHICH ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS ARE MOST ENGAGING?

In a second report (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007), we asked two more questions. First, what were the average levels of subjective experience—that is, the levels of intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, positive and negative mood states, and engage-



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ment—during the most common activities in after-school programs? The most frequently reported activity was organized sports, at 32 percent of the time, followed by arts enrichment activities (12 percent), socializing (11 percent), completing homework (8 percent), academic enrichment activities (5 percent), and sit-down games (4 percent). Second, what were the average levels of subjective experience with the most common social partners in the afterschool programs? The most frequently reported social partners were peers and adults, 53 percent of the time, followed by adults only (37 percent). Only 4 percent of the time did program youth report that they were with peers only.

We compared the quality of experience for each activity to the quality of experience participants reported when engaged in all other program activities taken together. Participants reported being the most engaged and intrinsically motivated during organized sports and arts enrichment activities. They reported that they exerted the most concentrated effort and experienced the least amount of apathy when playing

sports. They also cited sports as the most subjectively important activity. Concentrated effort and feelings of importance were significantly higher in arts enrichment programs than in other program activities. Sports and arts enrichment activities elicited the rare combination of high intrinsic motivation and high levels of concentration that characterizes flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and is critical for positive youth development (Larson, 2000). By engaging in activities that elicit both playfulness and seriousness, students experienced the deep concentration and intrinsic reward characteristic of efficient learning and continuing motivation. Sports appear to be engaging to students because they find the activity not only subjectively important, but also challenging: They are driven to play to the fullest extent of their skills and concentration. Arts enrichment activities are engaging because they facilitate spontaneity, creativity, and social unity (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2000; Folkestad, 2002).

Students reported high levels of positive affect not only during arts enrichment activities, but also during sit-down games and academic enrichment activities.

Academic enrichment refers to supervised activities such as hands-on science projects, discovery units, and computer education, but not homework. Unlike sports and the arts, which can occur spontaneously outside afterschool programs, academic enrichment activities almost exclusively occur in structured programs (Vandell, Shernoff, et al., 2005). During academic enrichment activities, students reported both higher positive affect and lower negative affect than when they were engaged in other activities.

In sharp contrast, participants reported the lowest intrinsic motivation, positive affect, and overall engagement during homework completion sessions. Perhaps when students were working on homework, they felt subject to the control and evaluation typical of classrooms, despite being physically in an afterschool program, while the choice and feedback offered by other program activities were absent. Completing homework can be beneficial both academically (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006) and developmentally (Bempechat, 2004); help with homework in supervised afterschool programs may be particularly important for students at risk for failure in school (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001). However, the contrast in the experience of completing homework compared to engaging in other academic enrichment activities is instructive. Unlike working on homework, which is generally a solitary activity, academic enrichment activities are similar to sports and the arts in that they support autonomy and facilitate group involvement with peers and adults.

Socializing yielded less positive experiences than most other program activities. Though students reported lower levels of negative affect while socializing, they also reported lower levels of engagement, concentrated effort, and importance. Apparently students socialize to stave off negative emotions, such as boredom and loneliness, but socializing alone does not produce heightened engagement—at least not in the afterschool programs we studied. The experience of playing sit-down games was also mixed. Participants reported significantly higher intrinsic motivation and concentrated effort, as well as lower negative affect, than in other activities, but they also indicated that games were less important than other program activities. This finding is not trivial: Youth are unlikely to continue building skills they do not consider to be important or meaningful, even if they are enjoyable in the moment.

With respect to social partners, students reported higher apathy and lower importance when they were

with adults only than with peers only, but they also reported higher intrinsic motivation when with adults than when with peers. More significantly, however, students reported being the most engaged and intrinsically motivated when they were with peers *and* adults, and the least engaged and intrinsically motivated when with peers only. Adult supervision and involvement combined with peer interaction may be an essential characteristic of activities that are both motivating and

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meaningful. In fact, the predominantly supervised and interactive structure of afterschool programs may help to explain why students reported significantly more positive experiences when they were at programs than when they were elsewhere.

SHAPING AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS TO EMPHASIZE ENGAGEMENT

Our analyses of the time youth spent in programs compared to elsewhere after school highlight the value of programs in the actual day-to-day experiences of youth. We found few significant differences in how program youth and nonprogram youth spent their time when they were not at a program. Both groups spent much of this time watching TV, eating, and socializing with peers. The experience of both groups was also similar: These activities left youth feeling apathetic and disengaged. Thus the afterschool program itself—and not self-selection on the part of afterschool participants—seems to be the reason that program youth were involved in more developmentally beneficial experiences than were nonprogram youth.

Afterschool programs offer adolescents positive and engaging experiences, which can, in turn, support their social, emotional, and cognitive development. Our findings suggest that researchers and policymakers should pay more attention to the potential role of organized sports, arts enrichment activities, and academic enrichment activities in shaping quality youth-driven afterschool programs. The social and emotional benefits of engagement in organized sports cannot be overemphasized. Participating in sports can help youth develop self-efficacy, confidence, and feelings of com-

petence by virtue of mastering complex physical and social skills (Broh, 2002; Henschen, Edwards, & Mathinos, 1982; Kirshnit, Ham, & Richards, 1989). Our findings suggest that the experiential pathway to such outcomes is the peak engagement and intrinsic motivation characteristic of flow.

Moreover, youth were physically active in over one-third of their experiences sampled during program time. When they were not at a program, they were much more likely to be watching TV and snacking. This suggests that afterschool programs may help prevent declines in physical activity and sports participation as youth grow older, serving as a protective factor against increasing obesity and other weight issues among U.S. children and adolescents (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005).

Our findings also suggest that programs may better serve their students by considering alternatives to a strong or exclusive emphasis on homework in response to mandates for improving achievement.

Policymakers must learn that organized sports and enrichment programs can enhance learning, promote interest in school, and build necessary skills.

Programs might also consider restructuring homework sessions to make them more like arts and academic enrichment activities. Providing only “more school after school” can reasonably be expected to undermine student engagement and decrease attendance. Offering intensive homework sessions to improve achievement may be especially misplaced at the middle school level. The relationship between the amount of homework given and the achievement of junior high school students is not linear. According to Cooper (1989), up to approximately one hour of homework a night improves achievement. After an hour, the correlation between homework time and achievement is sharply reduced, disappearing entirely beyond several hours per night. Middle school children may become satiated with homework after a certain point and therefore need constructive social, artistic, and athletic activities in order to continue to develop.

Activities, as the most visible aspect of an afterschool program, are often what initially attract students

to programs and keep them involved—or cause them to drop out. By embedding academic content in authentic enrichment and learning activities (Walker et al., 2005), programs can offer meaningful and engaging alternatives to “more school after school.” Researchers have documented a variety of engaging and effectively structured programs that intentionally combine developmental, academic, and long-term achievement goals; for example, see Beck, 1999; Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005; Mahoney, Lord, et al., 2005; Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Pittman, Irby, Yohalem, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004; Vandell & Shumow, 1999).

Policy Implications

Policymakers frequently regard extracurricular activities and afterschool programming as superfluous, if not a distraction. In times of fiscal constraint, such programs are often the first to be cut. Therefore, policymakers must learn that organized sports and enrichment programs can enhance learning, promote interest in school, and build necessary skills. Some of the most valued outcomes of sports, arts, and other enrichment activities are immediate sensations of appreciation, joy, interest, deep concentration, and overall engagement. Though such positive experiences enrich the lives of youth, they are not easily measured. Once we can measure engagement, however, such activities show their intrinsic justification: Activities that facilitate flow help young people develop the character and skills they need to meet their life goals.

Since low attendance in afterschool programs has been attributed to lack of interesting and enticing activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), improving attendance depends on identifying, and then offering, activities young people find appealing. Furthermore, replacing unstructured activities such as watching TV and unsupervised socializing with engaging afterschool activities can increase students' identification with school (Jordan, 1999; Marsh, 1992) and ultimately improve academic achievement (Cooper et al., 1999). Policymakers should therefore provide sufficient resources for afterschool programs to offer not only strictly academic activities, such as homework help, but also the non-academic activities, such as organized sports and arts enrichment, that ultimately may be more effective in helping children achieve academic goals.

The Value of Engagement

The fact that students reported feeling high levels of engagement in afterschool programs is particularly important in comparison to their lack of engagement in

school or in unstructured activities outside of school (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson, 2000). By offering a rich array of activities that promote engagement, after-school programs can enable youth to experience flow. Afterschool programs thereby provide young people with a new way of relating to the world: an orientation of being open to new experiences, of being interested in the world, of being deeply involved with activities and people, and, ultimately, of becoming lifelong learners. Rather than stopping with the immediate experience of a satisfying activity, this orientation carries into the future. Engagement is not a means to an end, but an end in itself—one whose value as a school outcome is as worthy of consideration as any other.

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