collaboration between afterschool practitioners and in-school teachers

by AnnMarie Schamper

Throughout my high school and college years, I worked as an assistant group leader in an afterschool program in a New Jersey suburb. My work with the students consisted of helping them with their homework and organizing and leading games and art activities. In the six years I spent with the afterschool program, I never created a relationship with any of my students' teachers. Not once did I speak with them about students' strengths and weaknesses or find out what was going on in the classroom.

I never thought twice about the lack of communication between the afterschool staff and the students' teachers until I became a teacher myself. The school where I teach is located in a rough neighborhood in North Philadelphia, where most families live in government housing and depend on welfare. The school's students are 99 percent African American. For many of them, the school is a safe haven from the violence of the neighborhood. Regardless of the hardships my students go through every day, they are the most amazing children I have ever met.

During my first year of teaching, I connected with my students and their families but hardly talked with anyone outside my grade level, which is kindergarten. As I started my second year of teaching, I reached out to communicate with other professionals. I also became a part of the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Research Fellowship, a small group of afterschool professionals who were eager to learn more about their field and to

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use inquiry to improve their work. The first meeting was an eye-opening experience; I learned about amazing things that were going on in afterschool programs around Philadelphia. I still thought that afterschool programs offered only homework help and games. The Afterschool Matters fellows told me that afterschool programs help students relate what they are learning in school to real-life experiences, providing the students with hands-on learning opportunities and getting them involved in their communities. Hearing this, I started to wonder what the afterschool program in my school did.

Learning from Afterschool and In-school Colleagues

I began my inquiry by sitting down with the director of my school's afterschool program. This program is provided free of charge to about 100 K–5 students from my school. It offers literacy programs such as Youth Education for Tomorrow and the 100 Book Challenge. Students also participate in project-based learning (PBL), in which they gain valuable skills by focusing on a question or problem and solving it through a collaborative process of investigation. The director explained that she creates the PBL units—including such topics as healthy eating, community, and bullying—on her own, designing lessons and objectives that relate to state teaching standards. Every teacher keeps a running record of rubrics to assess students' progress. After looking through her gigantic binder of rubrics and student work for each unit, I realized that afterschool programming wasn't just homework help any more. I was awed by how much the director did to create enriching learning experiences.

The director and I found many similarities between what I was teaching my students during the day and what they were investigating after school. I began to wonder how in-school teachers and afterschool practitioners could effectively and efficiently collaborate in order to facilitate student learning. I decided to start by finding out what each group of educators knew about what happened in the other's environment.

I sent an open-ended survey to the K–5 teachers in my school and a similar survey to the K–5 afterschool practitioners. I found that both groups defined *collaboration* as work toward a common goal, and both saw the value in collaborating with their counterparts, though most in-school teachers hesitated because they felt they didn't have time for collaboration. Six of the seven teachers who responded to my survey thought, as I had, that the afterschool program consisted of homework help, games, and crafts. Only one teacher knew that the program did projects that supported students' learning in social studies, science, and literacy. When given a list of three ways that collaboration might affect outcomes, six teachers checked "student academic achievement," three checked "student behavior improvement," and six checked "improved staff communication."

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The afterschool practitioners, by contrast, were well aware that their program activities correlated with themes taught during the school day. Their survey responses indicated that they wanted to work collaboratively with in-school teachers to support one another in fostering youth achievement and reinforce student learning. All six afterschool practitioners who answered the survey checked all three of the positive outcomes of collaboration: academic improvement, behavior improvement, and improved staff communication.

I was reassured to find that both parties wanted collaboration, but I shared their concerns on the issue of time. As I was thinking about how in-school and afterschool teaching professionals could collaborate with one another in a manner that did not bring more work or encroach on their limited nonteaching time, I thought of my own relationship with my students' afterschool practitioner, Ms. B.

My Experience with School-Afterschool Collaboration

Ms. B not only teaches my students after school but also serves as the pre-K teaching assistant during the school day. During my first year of teaching, Ms. B and I became close. She would help me when I was struggling with a student's behavior or when I needed ideas on activities to do in my classroom. Still, I never discussed the afterschool program with her.

After I gained insight into the afterschool program, I realized that Ms. B and I could do much more together to benefit our students. One day when my students were at lunch, I sat down to talk to Ms. B about what she does with the kids after school. She told me that they were in the middle of a unit on community, in which she had read the students books on neighborhoods and community workers. As I flipped through her binder of rubrics and student writing and art, I could not help but think that the work my students were producing for her was similar to the work they did with me. We started talking about individual students' strengths and weaknesses in both academics and behavior. I told her what I saw in my students during the day and she shared what she saw after school.

Our conversations about our students continued over the weeks. Any time either of us had a problem or saw a skill that a student needed to work on, we would contact the other in a quick phone call or classroom visit. Two examples illustrate how we worked together to improve students' behavioral and academic outcomes.

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Ms. B and I were both having trouble with the behavior of a student I'll call Charles. Both during and after school, Charles was constantly calling out, getting out of his seat without permission, and screaming during independent work time. We needed to work together to get Charles' behavior under control because he was in danger of being kicked out of the afterschool program. After Ms. B and I discussed his issues, I sat down with Charles during lunch to write a behavioral contract. In response to my question, Charles told me that appropriate classroom behavior meant sitting in his seat, raising his hand, and using an indoor voice. His contract included these behaviors as well as rewards and consequences, both in my classroom and in Ms. B's. If Charles stayed true to the contract at least four days out of the week, he would get a treat on Friday, but if he broke the contact he would get lunch detention or sit out from fun afterschool activities such as parties and game time. After Charles signed the contract, I made copies for both me and Ms. B.

Every day, when Ms. B came to pick up the students for afterschool, I would give her a quick recap of how Charles' day had gone. If he stayed true to his contract, he could participate in the fun learning experiences Ms. B had planned. If not, he would have to miss the afterschool party or not sit with his friends during learning activities and games. The next morning, I would call Ms. B to see how Charles had done the previous afternoon. Thus Charles' behavior was being monitored not only during the school day but also after school.The first week we tried this strategy, Charles had four lunch detentions and missed out on a Friday pizza party in Ms. B's classroom. However, after a month he started to show positive behavioral changes. If Ms. B and I had not collaborated on his behavior issues, Charles could very well have been dismissed from the afterschool program. Instead, because we worked closely together to monitor, correct, and reward his behavior, Charles made positive changes in the way he acted both in and after school.

In a second example, Ms. B and I collaborated to improve the reading skills of another student, "Tyquan." As the end of the second marking period approached, I tested my students' independent reading levels. I was concerned that Tyquan was not going to stay on track with the rest of the class. He could not discriminate between a word and a letter, could read only 10 of the 30 high-frequency words I had taught, and could not blend sounds in order to read unfamiliar words. I knew that Ms. B could help.

I went to Ms. B's classroom on my lunch break to discuss Tyquan's struggles. Ms. B had also noticed that his reading skills were not at the level of other students and that he needed a lot of support when the students did their 100 Book Challenge. I gave her a stack of ten books I was working on with Tyquan and asked if he could read those books for the 100 Book Challenge. I also gave her a list of the high-frequency words the students had learned, asking if she would post them and go over them for further reinforcement. She took the books and the word list and assured me she would use them both to help Tyquan become a stronger reader.

When I later asked Tyquan if he was practicing his reading during the afterschool program, he showed me the books he was reading after school—the ones I had given Ms. B. A month later, I retested Tyquan to see if he had improved his reading skills. I found that he could

now discriminate between a word and a letter and was able to read five new high-frequency words. He had also improved on his ability to blend sounds into words. I was impressed by the gains he had made and was excited that he could continue to become an even stronger reader.

These two examples show how an in-school teacher and an afterschool practitioner can collaborate without taking on extra work. We voiced our concerns about students in quick phone calls and face-to-face conversations, each using the other to help solve a problem. Our collaboration benefited our students, who now see a connection between school and afterschool. They know that what they do in school correlates with and can affect what they do after school and vice versa. Ms. B and I enjoyed a trusting and supportive relationship as friends and educational professionals. This relationship helped to improve our students' academics, behavior, and social relationships without taking a great deal of our time or creating more work for either of us.

Making Collaboration Work

I'd love to see the kind of collaboration Ms. B and I experienced among many more school and afterschool teachers. A schoolwide effort with the support of the principal would likely provide the most benefit for students. Here are my ideas about how collaboration between school and afterschool teacher pairs could be fostered.

A schoolwide collaboration might begin with a short information session to educate the in-school teachers about what goes on after school and the afterschool practitioners about what happens in the classroom. Such a meeting might be lead by one in-school teacher and one afterschool practitioner. These educators and others might share ideas on how to collaborate without creating more work or taking more time.

I can't recommend highly enough the quick conversations, both in each other's classrooms and by phone, that fueled the collaboration between Ms. B and me. In addition, in-school teachers and afterschool practitioners could create a journal that they could pass back and forth to discuss their struggles and achievements with their students. They could use the journal to monitor student performance and behavior, share lesson plans and objectives, and set down student achievements and struggles by sharing test results and other data. This journal need not take much time or create work. Similarly, the two professionals could communicate via an assignment pad passed back and forth by a student. The teacher could note the students' homework, and either professional could write comments on students' behavior or need for help. These forms of communication would be very simple for both professionals.

Collaboration can work; we just need to be creative. We can work together to learn what works and what doesn't. Collaboration between in-school teachers and afterschool practitioners helps both sets of professionals, but the ultimate beneficiaries are the students.