

# More Than Attendance: The Importance of After-School Program Quality

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**Abstract** A central theme of the articles featured in this issue is the need to improve the quality of after-school programs. In this commentary, we discuss why student engagement, program characteristics and implementation, staff training, and citywide policy are key considerations in the effort to define and achieve high quality programs for youth.

**Keywords** Program quality · Program implementation · After-school · Staff training · Attendance

The past decade has witnessed an enormous explosion of interest in after-school programs. From the billion-dollar federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers, to California's Proposition 49 mega increase in after-school funding, to scaling up of local initiatives across the country, there is a push to make after-school programs part of the educational and youth services infrastructure. The rationale for the programs would appeal to any politician: keeping kids off the streets during the 3–6 P.M. high crime period; supporting working parents; enhancing school reform initiatives; providing mentors to young people; promoting prosocial norms; and enhancing democracy by providing youth with a voice in programs that matter to them.

More and more researchers have begun studying after-school programs. Qualitative studies have played a major role in elaborating the potential of these settings and

identifying processes that might be linked to outcomes across multiple levels of analysis (e.g., Deutsch 2008; Hirsch 2005; Larson et al. 2004; McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman 1994). These programs and this new field of research are consonant with long-standing interests in community psychology. For instance, there is the focus on interventions in community-based organizations. There is a wide range of stakeholders, from youth and parents to schools, national youth organizations, and policymakers. There is the focus on social settings, with attention to issues such as person-environment fit.

Perhaps what is most exciting has been the centrality of positive youth development to understanding the significance of these settings to young people. Positive youth development emphasizes the extent to which youth are thriving and is often referred to in capsule form as encompassing the “five Cs”: competence, confidence, character, connections, and caring (e.g., Benson, Mannes, Pittman, and Ferber 2004; Lerner 2004). This parallels the long-standing concern in community psychology with what has been variously referred to as positive mental health, wellness, and competence. Efforts in this area within community psychology have been incompletely realized given the difficulty in decoupling concepts of health from those of illness and the considerable infrastructure—funders, journals, programs and policies—that supports an emphasis on symptoms and disorders. By contrast, the positive youth development movement has its intellectual roots in and draws its strength from the contextualized study of development. A number of prominent developmental psychologists have been attracted to the study of after-school programs and, together with their intellectual kin, have helped to promote the growth of a broader new field, applied developmental science. Community psychology and applied developmental science can contribute

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in important ways to each other, and those synergies are being explored in work on after-school programs (e.g., Hirsch, DuBois, and Deutsch in press).

As the study of after-school programs expands, researchers with diverse interests, agendas, and methodologies have been drawn to the field. This is reflected in the papers in this special issue, which predominantly focus on quantitative approaches, and which utilize both developmental and implementation lenses. In this commentary, we focus on a subset of the papers in the issue (Cross et al.; Holleman, Sundius and Bruns; Pierce, Bolt and Vandell; Riggs et al.; Sheldon et al.; Shernoff); the others are discussed by Granger. We begin with the sole review article in our group, which raises some important challenges.

### Dosage is Not Enough

Roth, Malone, and Brooks-Gunn (2010) reviewed published studies to consider whether dimensions of participation in after-school programs are related to youth outcomes. Their review focuses on after-school centers for elementary and middle school students that offer an array of activities. Programs for high school students, which are currently the focus of much attention in the field, and programs that have a single focus (e.g., a dance program or a program targeting substance abuse prevention) are excluded. The majority of the studies they reviewed used attendance as the only indicator of youth participation. Often studies of after-school program participation simply dichotomize students into those who attend and those who do not attend to examine the effects of attendance on youth outcomes. This review addressed multiple dimensions of attendance, which included frequency (also known as dosage, i.e., number of sessions), duration (length of time in program, e.g., in months), and total exposure (both frequency and duration). We have some qualms about attendance data, which we have learned should be considered suspect unless assessed directly by external researchers. Nevertheless, their principal conclusion is striking: attendance is for the most part unrelated to outcomes. This poses a fundamental challenge to practitioners and researchers, as one would generally expect to find a significant positive relationship.

Further, it is often assumed that attendance is a measure of the program's quality—that young consumers “vote with their feet.” However, as discussed by several authors in this issue, children's attendance in after-school programs is not always voluntary. Program attendance can be influenced by many factors, such as parental need for childcare, which are not necessarily related to the quality of participants' experience in the programs. Whether one accepts the review's conclusion or not, it appears important to move

beyond a focus on attendance to consider a broad array of variables that tap program quality and youth engagement.

### Participation is More Than Attendance

Attendance is a necessary but not sufficient condition of participation. Participation is a multifaceted concept that connotes active involvement in a program (e.g., Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, and Zarrett 2009; Weiss, Little, and Bouffard 2005). This definition goes beyond attendance to include youth engagement in program activities. As highlighted by Roth et al. (2010), many studies have measured various dimensions of program attendance (such as duration, intensity, etc.), yet youth engagement is rarely assessed directly. Similar to the review by Roth and colleagues, studies in this issue have found that attendance alone does not predict youth outcomes. Further, these studies found that youth engagement is strongly related to program design and youth outcomes, and suggest that engagement could indicate the quality of youth's experience in these settings. Therefore, engagement is not only a component of program participation, but also an important feature to be considered when assessing program quality.

Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, and Connell (2010) reported an association between engagement and various measures of program quality, but not program attendance. In their study of five programs serving middle school students, the authors examined the relationships between measures of implementation quality, youth engagement, and youth self-ratings of enjoyment. Programs that were rated as having high quality staff and observed to have positive affective environments also had high levels of youth engagement. These same measures of program quality corresponded to higher self-reported enjoyment for youth in the programs. On the other hand, attendance, which varied widely from site to site, was not highly related to observations of other program features (e.g., staff turnover and training, affective environment), nor was it highly related to youth ratings of enjoyment.

In another study of middle school students, Shernoff (2010) used the experience sampling method to examine the relationships between program attendance, youth engagement, and positive youth outcomes. Overall, after-school program attendance was related to social outcomes, but this relationship was mediated by youth engagement. Increased attendance predicted youth self-reports of increased flow and engagement, which in turn were positively associated with social competence. Notably, even when youth's program attendance was not associated with outcomes, youth reports of flow and engagement did positively predict outcome. Youth ratings of positive affect

and engagement were also related to positive academic gains in reading and math regardless of youth attendance.

Taken together, these results suggest that attendance alone does not indicate program quality. Cross et al. (2010) found that attendance in after-school programs did not relate to youth enjoyment for middle school students, who may have more choice in attendance than younger children. Both Cross et al. and Shernoff (2010) found that engagement, not attendance, predicted youth outcomes and implementation quality. Overall, there is a need for continued research in the area of individual and program-level engagement, program implementation, and youth outcomes. Moreover, in the pursuit of designing quality programs, programs would be better served to look at the features and aspects of implementation that increase program participation and youth engagement rather than focusing predominantly on enrollment figures and youth attendance.

### Challenges of Defining Program Quality

Whereas program attendance is relatively easy to define and measure, program quality is an elusive concept, both difficult to describe and to assess. After-school research reflects a variety of approaches to the study of program quality, several of which are represented in the articles in this issue. For example, some researchers focus on overall quality, or the successful implementation of the program design in real-world settings (e.g., Cross et al. 2010; Sheldon, Arbreton, Hopkins, and Grossman 2010). Others focus specifically on the features of a program linked to participant outcomes (see Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman, and Davidson 2010; Pierce, Bolt, and Vandell 2010).

With regards to program features, a distinction must be made between core qualities that can be applied broadly to programs of various types and the specific features of individual programs that target specialized populations or outcomes. The oft-cited report from the National Research Council (NRC) (Eccles and Gootman 2002) is one example of the push to identify universal features that apply to a wide range of programs and participants. In the report, the committee outlined eight qualities hypothesized as key features of community programs to support youth development. Such an approach is valuable since it helps to establish guidelines or standards to inform the design of programs targeting a diverse participant population. However, as several of the authors in this issue have argued, the approach has considerable limitations given the unlikelihood that a specific feature will have the same impact among all youth.

An alternative approach is to identify specific program features important for subpopulations, for example, those

of a particular developmental stage, cultural background, or risk status. Findings in the articles by Riggs et al. (2010) and Pierce et al. (2010) help to illustrate the importance of aligning program qualities with the specific needs of the target population.

Riggs and colleagues (2010) directly tested the effectiveness of the NRC program qualities within a specific population: Latino urban adolescents. Importantly, the authors also examined whether an additional program characteristic, an emphasis on ethnic socialization, had a unique and positive influence on participants. Whereas program quality was related to participants' self-worth, only the program's emphasis on ethnic socialization was related to ethnic identity development, which is considered a key developmental process for minority youth. These results might not be surprising, but they are important in two major respects. First, they highlight the need to cater program qualities to the specific needs of the target population, in this case the need for Latino youth to experience a nurturing environment in which to explore their ethnic identity. Second, the results move us one step closer to a better understanding of the potential for after-school programs to serve as positive developmental contexts for Latinos, a group that has been consistently under-represented in such programs. The authors also reported results from a second study, which evaluated the effectiveness of a program for Latino rural elementary and middle school youth. Together, the two studies represent an effort to identify the unique needs of subpopulations within the Latino community (e.g., those related to developmental stage, geographic location, and risk status). However, there remains a persistent gap in the research literature with regards to Latino youth, and we need to see more work focused on after-school programming for Latinos.

Similar to Riggs et al. (2010), Pierce and colleagues (2010) tested the effectiveness of widely promoted program qualities within a specific population. Their findings highlight the importance of stage-environment fit (Eccles et al. 1993), or the alignment between participants' developmental needs and program design qualities. Specifically, in a longitudinal study of elementary school students, Pierce et al. found that diversity in program activities was not associated with positive outcomes until Grade 3, while a previous study had shown that activity diversity had a negative impact on outcomes for boys in Grade 1. The authors speculated that younger students required greater structure, but that as children grew older, they benefited from opportunities to explore a wider range of options. The findings suggest that programs designed for younger students might look very different than programs for older youth. Furthermore, programs targeting a wide age range might require creative strategies to address differing developmental needs of participants.

Just as program qualities ought to align with the needs of the target population, they must also support the specific goals and objectives of the program itself. As discussed in the preceding articles, the growing interest in after-school programs has fostered increasingly high expectations for their ability to benefit youth. For example, they are supposed to enhance academic achievement, support positive youth development, discourage risky behavior, and ensure participants' physical and psychological safety. Research to determine the relationship between program features and outcomes helps to inform the design of programs meant to achieve specific goals such as improving literacy (Sheldon et al. 2010) or fostering positive ethnic identity development (Riggs et al. 2010). A number of authors in this volume have investigated such relationships. However, we were struck by the general absence in several of the articles of clearly articulated theoretical frameworks through which such relationships can be more adequately understood. Further research is needed not only to identify the nuanced relationships between features and outcomes, but also to explain the mechanisms through which such relationships operate, which can better facilitate the design of more targeted and effective programs.

A final point about program quality: programs, no matter how expertly designed, are only as good as their implementation. As the articles by Sheldon et al. (2010) and Cross et al. (2010) demonstrate, program design is only half the battle. Making sure that important design features are actualized in the field is a crucial challenge for practitioners. Researchers need to account for implementation quality in order to explicate the relationship between program characteristics and outcomes.

### **Staff Training: Don't Make the Same Old Mistakes**

The paper by Sheldon and colleagues (2010) on staff training is probably the most immediately useful report in this issue for practitioners to guide the implementation of quality programs. Several decades ago, the Rand Corporation conducted a large-scale review of what works and what does not work to implement school reform successfully (Berman and McLaughlin 1978). One of their findings was that pre-implementation workshops and the use of packaged programs did not produce lasting change. Instead, it was important to provide ongoing consultation in implementing new programs. These findings were brought into community psychology when Seymour Sarason (1982) highlighted them in one of his best-known books, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*. Alas, as Sarason would often lament, the more things change, the more they stay the same: to this day, schools by and large still emphasize pre-implementation training.

Of greater relevance, and regret, in the present context is that after-school programs have by and large adopted the school model of emphasizing pre-implementation training and providing little ongoing implementation consultation. It is therefore not surprising to see a host of problems arise in the implementation of a structured program and that the quality of implementation leaves much to be desired (Hirsch 2005). So it was exciting to read how Sheldon et al. (2010) took an approach consistent with the Rand findings and developed a system of ongoing training sessions and regular observation and coaching of staff throughout their project year. The group appeared to adopt this approach through a process of trial-and-error rather than a review of the implementation literature, but the end point was the same.

Sheldon and colleagues (2010) report that their revised training scheme produced improvement in the quality of program implementation, but more empirical support is required to support this conclusion. Yes, implementation quality improved significantly in the second year of the program, when the revised training was implemented, compared to the first year, when the usual pre-implementation approach was utilized. But in any program one would expect instructor learning to take place so that they are more familiar with the procedures, can anticipate and plan for likely youth reactions, and so on, resulting in improved implementation over time. Qualitative research can help to shed light on some of these issues; ideally there would be random assignment of sites to alternative training strategies.

Nevertheless, the findings appear promising. Those who may be interested in adopting this approach to training should consider that it required both on-site and regional coordinators. Although this particular program focused on the development of literacy skills among elementary aged children, there does not appear to be any reason why the general training strategy could not be used in a variety of other types of after-school programs.

### **Policy Development and Priorities**

The paper by Holleman, Sundius, and Bruns (2010) considers the development of after-school programs in Baltimore using a citywide lens. This level of analysis complements more program and agency level analyses. Cities are very important players in the after-school arena and most large cities have ramped up their efforts in this domain over the past 10–15 years.

This account of Baltimore's experience would best be examined using a comparative case study approach. Although this was not the focus of the present paper, prior studies have addressed similar issues with respect to New

York (Friedman and Bleiberg 2002), Chicago (Ogletree, Bell, and Smith 2002), Boston (Davis and Farbman 2002), San Francisco (Eldredge, Piha, and Levin 2002), and San Diego (Ferrin and Amick 2002). From a comparative perspective, there are two noteworthy features of the Baltimore effort.

First, whereas in most cities the scaling up of after-school programs seems to have been largely a top-down initiative, in Baltimore a community activist appeared to have played a key role. It would be interesting to examine whether this alternative path led to discernible differences in strategy or program development. In this context, for example, we wondered whether the difficulty in engaging Baltimore public schools as meaningful partners reflected the apparent absence of mayoral leadership. In several other cities, mayors appeared to provide greater leadership to scaling up after-school programs (though one must be wary of possible public relations components to these reports).

Second, Baltimore relied on two intermediaries to provide support: the Family League of Baltimore City was charged with fund allocation, program management, and oversight, whereas The After-School Institute focused on quality improvement and professional development of after-school staff. In several other cities, these roles are integrated in a single intermediary. It would be useful to study the strengths and weaknesses of these competing models.

On a final note, over the years Baltimore's funding decisions seem to have been driven increasingly by attendance figures rather than program quality. This is an important tension at the policy and funding level everywhere, which subsequently impacts programs and youth. There are many after-school advocates within government and foundations whose most important priority by far is increasing enrollment as fast as possible. Scaling up the infrastructure is the prime directive. There is the assumption either that quality is already sufficient or that it can easily be strengthened later on. This gives many of us who have studied actual programs considerable misgiving, as there are lots of weak and ineffective programs out there. Part of the impetus behind the development of after-school programs has been the mediocrity of many of our schools. In scaling up after-school programming, and in many instances striving toward universal access by all students, we should take great care not to build another mediocre system. It will likely be the task of the evaluation and research community to be among the prime advocates for emphasizing quality of program design and implementation. Thus, we return again, albeit in slightly different form, to the initial focus of our commentary: attendance is not enough.

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