

Literature Review on Program Quality and Outcomes in Out of School/Afterschool and Youth Development

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Introduction

School age children and youth spend significantly more of their time outside school than in it, a fact which has brought out of school time (OST) programming into significant public attention as a possible tool to bring about meaningful change in the lives of children and youth. OST or afterschool (AS) has grown measurably over the last two decades to include more participants, more sites, and ever more variety in the types of programming offered. This review is designed to scan the field for evidence regarding both the elements comprising high-quality programming and the evidence that such programming has positive impacts on participants. The aspects of program quality that people have studied range from staff-participant relations to program structure, content or mission. Researchers examining the effects of OST programming on participants considered outcomes such as academic achievement, school engagement, social-emotional factors, behavioral factors, career success, and aspirational factors (e.g., goals for schooling or career). This review provides a comprehensive scan of the research and theory contributing to the field over the last 25 years and offers evidence of the effectiveness of OST programming and factors contributing to quality.

Outcomes and Effects of Afterschool Programming

General Effects of Afterschool Programming

A whole host of papers, books and reviews highlighting the variety of positive outcomes associated with participation in afterschool have been distributed or published over the last few decades. “A large body of research demonstrates that high-quality [Afterschool Programs (ASPs)] promote positive academic and social–emotional outcomes for youth” (e.g., Cappella, Hwang, Kieffer, & Yates, 2018; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Pierce, Bolt, & Vandell, 2010; Tebes et al., 2007.) In one of the most widely cited articles in the field of OST, Durlak, Weissberg and Pachan (2010) demonstrated a wide variety of positive effects of OST programs that target one or more personal or social skills of participants aged 5-18 and called for further research to better clarify the exact features of quality programs and the outcomes they produce:

A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to enhance the personal and social skills of children and adolescents indicated that, compared to controls, participants demonstrated significant increases in their self-perceptions and bonding to school, positive social behaviors, school grades and levels of academic achievement, and significant reductions in problem behaviors. The presence of four recommended practices associated with previously effective skill training (SAFE: sequenced, active, focused, and explicit) moderated several program outcomes. One important implication of current findings is that ASPs should contain components to foster the personal and social skills of youth because youth can benefit in multiple ways if these components are offered. The second implication is that further research is warranted on identifying program characteristics that can help us understand why some programs are more successful than others.

In the time since the above meta-analysis was published, many researchers have tackled the questions indicated, and both broadened and deepened our understanding of the effects of afterschool programming and the core components essential for program success. For example, in 2023 a meta-analysis presented updated summaries of what we know about the impacts and characteristics of afterschool programs (Christensen, Kremer, Poon & Rhodes). It stated that among marginalized youth (especially low-income or minority) afterschool programs have been shown to decrease risky behavior, encourage healthy development, bring about positive academic outcomes, promote retention and engagement, increase self-esteem and ethnic identity and improve social emotional skill. The author notes there are also plenty of studies showing mixed or negative results for afterschool programs (See below section “Findings of Mixed or No Effects of Afterschool Programs”). Factors that affect program outcomes include youth age, youth academic achievement (at start of program), pre-existing youth behavior patterns along with program focus (e.g. academic achievement), program contact time, location (e.g., urban vs. rural), and staff qualities and training. In this meta-analysis, the authors found a small but statistically significant positive effect of afterschool programs.

Among at-risk elementary aged children, Vandell, et al., (2022) found that participation in high quality afterschool programs alone or in combination with other extracurricular activities results in a variety of positive outcomes, including better teacher-reported academic achievement, mindset and behavior in addition to improved participant-rated behavior. There can be disparities between teacher-reported academic outcomes and those shown by standardized tests but it is significant that teachers reported improved academic outcomes because they are observing students on a regular basis. Carter (2022) argued that afterschool programs are most effective when run in partnership with the traditional school, which makes sense with Vandell, et al.’s (2022) findings. Carter states that programs need to stop thinking of curriculum as the solitary purview of schools and find ways to help improve academic and post-secondary outcomes by working in tandem with schools. However, outcomes go beyond academics, these authors state, to include social and emotional development.

Malone and Donahue (2017) bring together a whole host of evidence and information related to developing quality programs and providing youth access to programming in their book *The growing out-of-school time field: Past, present, and future*. They argue that afterschool is one of the most important tools we have to level the playing field in response to educational disparities.

Generally speaking, Hassell (2016) found that afterschool programs were especially effective for at-risk students in terms of their academic achievement and personal factors. Regular attendance at afterschool resulted in positive outcomes for these youth. Miller (2016) provided a helpful overview of the various positive effects of afterschool programs along with many of their key characteristics:

After-school programs (ASPs) are becoming more and more popular among children and their parents, with an abundance of children lacking access to ASPs.

Participation in ASPs has been proven to positively impact participants. The positive impacts of ASPs include higher grades, less behavioral problems, and healthy youth development. After-school programs that provide a structural environment, influential leaders, goals, and evaluation of the program are characteristically proven to be more successful than programs who do not have these characteristics. Funding of ASPs can come from various sources and can be classified into one of three sectors; private for-profit, non-profit, and public.

Pelcher and Rajan (2016) conducted a literature review on research conducted on afterschool programs (ASPs) over the previous ten years and found twenty-five publications that met their requirements. From these, they concluded thus:

Research shows that successful ASPs have led to students having more positive feelings and feelings of connectedness with school and school staff. Students in ASPs receive guidance from staff and other students on college applications and expectations, job opportunities, and other tasks. Studies document the positive shift in attitudes about school, positive academic outcomes, and enhanced feelings of school connectedness that result from participating in ASPs...Studies show that having school-based ASP staff members heightens students' learning experience by creating a link between after-school and the school day. As aforementioned, students may feel more connected to and trusting of their after-school community due to smaller teacher to student ratios. Having access to after-school staff during the school day can be beneficial in that they have an extra support system in place during the school day.

Research makes clear that ASPs can have significant impacts on adolescents if the right opportunities are provided in the right formats to meet the needs of participants. Finding these matches between programs and participants can prove challenging because of funding limitations, communication challenges and lack of qualified staff.

In reference to staff quality, Childers (2016) stated that program quality would be improved by having more teachers work at afterschool programs, thus improving the quality of afterschool staff. Another move for quality would be potentially limiting the size of programs in order to guarantee participant-staff interaction. Childers' definition of program quality is as follows: "quality in an ASP refers to how well the staff members interact, work, and develop relationships with the students." The better job the staff do at this work, the more likely students are to show academic improvement, stronger social emotional skills and more positive behavior, a variety of positive outcomes attributed to afterschool.

In an examination of a variety of broad outcomes (as reported by stakeholders), Paluta, Lower, Anderson-Butcher, Gibson and Iachini, (2016) considered the effects of program quality (as reported by stakeholders). They summarized their study as follows:

Although many youths participate in afterschool programs, the research is unclear about which aspects of afterschool program quality contribute most to positive outcomes. This article examines the relationship among quality and outcomes of 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CLCCs) afterschool programs, as perceived by 3,388 stakeholders from 337 21st CLCCs in one midwestern state. Perceptions were gathered using the Ohio Quality Assessment Rubric...Stakeholders perceived quality across multiple program areas, but the indicator most strongly correlated to outcomes was that of family engagement strategies, an area of relatively poor performance among participating sites. Perceptions of the quality of general youth development strategies and of facilities, space, and equipment were the most favorable among stakeholders. These factors held the weakest correlations with outcomes.

Overall, these results suggest that researchers and stakeholders may need to carefully examine the factors they are selecting for study and for emphasis in programs in order to reap the most benefits from programs. A potential concern about this research is that it did not measure outcomes of programs, but rather *perceptions* of stakeholders regarding program outcomes.

In 2014 the Afterschool Alliance produced a widely published literature review highlighting the variety of positive impacts of afterschool programs. The authors stated that “over the past 15 years, knowledge of the afterschool field has grown substantially. A large body of evidence exists that confirms quality afterschool programs help children become more engaged in school, reduce their likelihood of taking part in at-risk behaviors or acting out in school, and help raise their academic performance.” These authors further indicate the following:

A review of the literature on afterschool program evaluations finds that several positive outcomes are in fact associated with participation in quality afterschool programs [divided] into three categories: School engagement, including school day attendance and likelihood of staying in school; Behavior, including participation in at-risk behaviors, such as criminal activity, gang involvement, drug and alcohol use, or sexual activity [and] Academic performance, including test scores, grades, graduation rates and college enrollment.

This review has a great deal of helpful detail on program effectiveness over the first one and a half decades of this century.

A theoretical piece by Doran (2014) states the following regarding the role ASPs can play in reducing or eliminating the achievement gap between low-income students and their middle and high income peers:

Low-income students in the United States face a number of educational challenges that their middle and high income peers do not face, and often do not achieve to the same extent as middle or high income students. Little progress

has been made in the last few decades to eliminate this achievement gap. One model for eliminating this gap is to implement effective out of school time (OST) programs designed for low-income students. Many studies have shown that these programs can produce positive academic and socio-emotional/behavioral outcomes.

In a volume with 70 articles in it, all highlighting the positive impacts of OST as well as its potential, *Expanding Minds and Opportunities* (2013) demonstrates a variety of positive effects of ASPs and lays out a variety of factors of quality. Sub-categories of articles include A Focus on Student Success, Expanding Skills and Horizons, Recent Evidence of Impact and The Power of Community-School Partnerships in Expanding Learning, all of which speak to the power of OST. A summary of the work states the following: “Collectively, these writings present bold, persuasive evidence that by providing engaging, high quality afterschool and summer learning programs that rely on robust school-community partnerships, expanding learning can generate positive and significant effects on important outcomes related to learning and community/family engagement.”

Research also shows that structured afterschool programs (ASPs) provide ideal contexts for fostering engagement and positive youth development. Shernoff (2013) described his findings in the following way:

While attending the after-school programs, the participants reported higher intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, and positive mood states at the after-school programs than elsewhere after school. When in the after-school programs, students were the most engaged during sports and arts enrichment activities. Affect was significantly higher while doing academic enrichment activities compared to homework...Furthermore, the difference in quality of experience when in programs versus elsewhere was a significant predictor of a variety of academic and developmental outcomes including English and math grades.

These findings indicate the promise of afterschool for both academic and affective outcomes. The challenge remains how to consistently capitalize on this potential and expand those aspects of programs that really work.

In a study that examined a variety of outcomes including academic and affective, Pierce, Bolt and Vandell (2010) summarized their results as follows:

This longitudinal study examined associations between three after-school program quality features (positive staff-child relations, available activities, programming flexibility) and child developmental outcomes (reading and math grades, work habits, and social skills with peers) in Grade 2 and then Grade 3. Participants (n = 120 in Grade 2, n = 91 in Grade 3) attended after-school

programs more than 4 days per week, on average. Controlling for child and family background factors and children's prior functioning on the developmental outcomes, positive staff-child relations in the programs were positively associated with children's reading grades in both Grades 2 and 3, and math grades in Grade 2. Positive staff-child relations also were positively associated with social skills in Grade 2, for boys only. The availability of a diverse array of age-appropriate activities at the programs was positively associated with children's math grades and classroom work habits in Grade 3. Programming flexibility (child choice of activities) was not associated with child outcomes.

The participants were not paired with controls but the results still indicated the potential positive results of afterschool programs and highlighted the importance of good staff-child relations, which is in agreement with other study results. Variety of activities also predicted academic grades as well as classroom work habits, suggesting that diversity of activities may be an important factor in quality programming.

Academic Achievement Outcomes

Afterschool programs are often considered an important mechanism for improving academic achievement or shrinking academic achievement gaps. Researchers have undertaken many efforts to demonstrate the ways in which afterschool programs bring about these effects. However, Halpern (2006) argued that too much emphasis on academic achievement is detrimental to the afterschool field. He stated there are many aspects of development that programs can affect and we may be asking too much of programs in the area of bringing about academic achievement. Indeed, Granger (2008) questioned the role of afterschool programs. Is it their job to raise academic achievement or to provide enrichment in the afterschool hours that targets social emotional learning, for example? The author noted the relative limitations of afterschool programs in bringing about academic achievement and encouraged the reader to consider the broad range of areas in which afterschool can have an impact.

With those cautions in mind, the following is a brief review of the main positive research findings regarding OST and academic achievement from the last decade and a half.

Attebery (2022) set out to determine the effects of ASPs on elementary school students, particularly their standardized academic test scores. Attebery's summary is as follows:

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of afterschool programs on students' achievement in grades 3, 4, and 5 in a Title I school district. Specifically, this study aimed to examine whether students who receive afterschool support in reading and math benefited academically on the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) assessments. This study was designed to analyze scores to see if there is a difference on NWEA MAP assessments among students who received afterschool support in reading

and math. The participants for this study were third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students enrolled in an afterschool program for the 2016–2017, 2017–2018, and 2018–2019 school years.

The results of Attebery's (2022) study show significant increases in reading and math scores after participation in this afterschool program. This evidence is helpful because results have been somewhat mixed regarding academic outcomes of ASPs. However, this study did not include a randomized control group for comparison and the program was focused on academic activities. In another example of a study with positive academic results but no randomized control group, Thomas (2020) found that, for the programs and students studied, participation in the 21st Century Community Learning Center program resulted in improved scores on state standardized tests compared to students who did not participate. This was a quasi-experimental study so it did include some sort of comparison group to bolster the findings.

In a strong study examining a variety of academic outcomes of ASPs, Liu, Simpkins and Vandell (2021) were looking for longer-term pathways and outcomes. Longer-term studies such as this are unusual given the resources required to engage in such research and the instability of participation of youth enrolled in such studies. The summary of this study is as follows:

Findings from structural equation models indicated that adolescents who had higher activity intensity and activity quality in 6th grade participated in activities with higher intensity and quality in 9th grade. These 9th grade activities formed an indirect path linking 6th grade activities to high school academic performance, including grades and number of advanced classes. In addition, 6th grade activity quality promoted adolescents' work orientations in 9th grade, a key academic disposition that then predicted grades and number of advanced classes in high school. These findings suggest that organized afterschool activities in middle school may prepare adolescents for academic success in high school via their participation in activities in 9th grade as well a stronger work orientation in 9th grade.

Overall, the results are promising for positive effects of afterschool participation in middle school and this study provides a model for examining longer-term pathways rather than only immediate effects of programs.

In research examining the effects of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programming on STEM academic outcomes, Allen, et al. (2019) found overwhelmingly positive results for the STEM programs studied:

(1) Most youth (65–85%) reported increases in STEM engagement, identity, career interest, career knowledge, relationships, critical thinking, and perseverance, with the largest gains reported by those engaging with STEM activities for 4 weeks or more; (2) there were significant, strong correlations between STEM and SEL/twenty-first-century outcomes reported by youth; and

(3) youth participating in higher-quality STEM programming reported more growth than peers participating in lower-quality programs...This effort demonstrates how investments in STEM program quality yield high returns for programs and youth and how collaborations between research and practice can track successes and challenges, determine investments in program management, and expand advocacy and policy efforts.

These results offer a model for program design and assessment that could be replicated with positive academic results. One weakness of the study is that it relied solely on participant report to measure outcomes. That is, there were no measures of academic outcomes (e.g., standardized tests, grades) or reports of participant behavior (e.g., attitudes, engagement). Participant self-report can vary from staff or teacher report.

As an example of a study that did not utilize self-report but rather relied on school data and teacher report, Jenson et al. (2018) examined the effects of an afterschool program on primarily low-income participants of color. The quasi-experimental study showed that reading scores and school attendance were higher for program participants, as were teacher ratings of those students' math and science abilities. Intervention components included reading instruction, academic tutoring, homework help and skill building (including social-emotional skills). This study further demonstrates the potential for afterschool programs to positively influence children and youth from high-risk backgrounds. However, it should be noted this study did not include randomized controls for comparison; instead, it relied on a quasi-experimental design, which does allow for some comparison, just not the same strength.

Leos-Urbel (2015) found in a similarly non-experimental design with a sample of over 5,000 students that results were mixed when using program quality ratings to predict participant outcomes, in this case math and reading test scores. Nevertheless, the author states "taken together, these findings imply that after-school program quality and focus do relate to students' development and academic success, and suggest a holistic approach that takes into account both the capacity and strengths of the programs, as well as a broad range of students' needs for developing motivation and success." The author argues that despite the variability in findings, results point to positive impacts of ASPs.

Making a general argument for the impacts of ASPs on academic achievement, in an introduction to their policy and advocacy paper, Doster and Fears (2015) state the following:

Afterschool academic programs are vital in closing the achievement gaps of at risk students. Research points to positive outcomes related to afterschool programs for students who need an academic boost. Students who attend an afterschool program on a regular basis demonstrate growth in scholastic achievement and, overall, are more engaged during the regular school day because of their expanded confidence in the core subject areas.

Although Doster and Fears make the above arguments for the influence of ASPs on academic achievement, over the years, it has proven challenging for ASPs to demonstrate strong influence on academic achievement. In order for ASPs to provide high quality academic programming and assist schools in increasing academic achievement, strong alignment needs to occur between schools and ASPs. Bennett (2013) summarizes efforts in this area in the following way:

In recent years, attention has been given to the academic impact of afterschool programs. Some schools collaborate with afterschool programs in an attempt to align the learning that occurs during the school day with the learning that occurs during afterschool hours, and thus maximize the potential to positively impact student academic achievement. However, very little research has sought to estimate the associations of alignment practices with academic achievement...Results indicate a positive association between high alignment between principals and afterschool staff on academic achievement of students in both English Language Arts and Math, when compared with lower aligned sites. Significant negative associations were detected in Math when sites were misaligned. Findings document the need for more research in this under-studied area.

This research suggests that strengthening partnerships between schools and ASPs is a worthwhile endeavor, particularly if a goal of the ASP is improved academic achievement. At the same time, the researchers acknowledge this as an area in need of further study, which means only so many conclusions and actions can realistically be taken based on these results.

In another area of study, researchers have been interested in the effects of attendance on outcomes. Results have been very mixed regarding the effects of attendance (how much participants participate in a program) on a variety of outcomes. In a 2012 study, Springer and Diffily examined in afterschool programs how intensity (how much) and breadth (how many programs) specifically affected academic outcomes (as measured by grades) and attendance. Intensity predicted academic outcomes, but more for elementary participants than middle-school. Intensity also predicted attendance for both groups. Breadth only predicted academic outcomes among elementary participants. They argue that overall their results point to positive academic effects of afterschool programming and to benefits of attending more.

Literacy

The following studies report more results of research on academic achievement outcomes for ASPs but specific to literacy. Osborne-Arnold (2022) conducted a quasi-experimental study examining whether an afterschool literacy program improved end-of-year standardized test scores over a three year period. The results indicated significant positive results of participation

(30 days or more) compared to non-participation, suggesting afterschool programs can have an important role to play in improving literacy when participants attend regularly. The results for participants attending 1-29 days were not reported, suggesting less regular attendance does not have similar positive outcomes in terms of literacy. Similarly, in a two-year study of first through fifth graders, Dix (2021) found that students participating regularly in the program had significantly improved reading scores based on state tests. The author does not indicate a control group for comparison but the positive findings are still worth noting.

Bayless, Jenson, Richmond, Pampel, Cook and Calhoun (2018) examined the effects of an ASP targeting literacy in the early grades. They summarize their work as follows:

Afterschool programs (ASPs) in the United States have been implemented in low income neighborhoods to enable at-risk youth to access educational support services to increase academic skills. However, mixed findings about the ASPs positively affecting academic performance suggests a need for additional evaluative studies...The current study examines the effects of literacy training on the reading skills of kindergarten to third grade students who were enrolled in a community-based ASP in four public housing neighborhoods. Participants received structured literacy and reading training, individual tutoring, and a choice-based book distribution program...Participants were enrolled in grades K to 3 (n = 543). The study lasted for 4 years [and at the end] ASP participants demonstrated significantly better reading proficiency than comparison group participants over time...Study findings provide preliminary evidence that it is possible to impact reading proficiency for very high-risk students in the early grades of elementary school. ASPs that target literacy among low-income students could play an important role in boosting student achievement, and therefore in narrowing the achievement gap as young people progress through school.

Carefully designed and enacted programming can have positive impacts on early literacy, making this an important area of focus for ASPs.

Researchers have studied the careful design and implementation of a balanced literacy intervention to determine its effects on participant reading outcomes. Sheldon, Arbretton, Hopkins and Grossman (2010) summarized their research as follows:

This paper examines the relation between the implementation quality of after-school literacy activities and student reading gains. The data are from an evaluation of a multi-site after-school program in California in which continuous program quality improvement strategies were implemented to improve the delivery of a new balanced literacy program. Strategies included: (1) targeted staff training throughout the year, (2) regular observations and coaching of staff, and (3) the use of data to measure progress. Programs struggled to successfully

implement these strategies early in the initiative, but gradually improved the quality and consistency of their use. Program quality, as measured through observations, also increased. Results suggested that the size of student reading gains were positively correlated with the quality of literacy programming provided by each instructor.

These results demonstrate the capacity of ASPs to influence literacy through carefully designed and implemented programs. The results point to the need for high quality staff, regular professional development, and consistency in programming, all of which are challenges for programs to maintain, especially in the face of high staff turnover. In another highly structured program designed to influence participant literacy, CORAL, researchers examined literacy programs and considered the role of ASPs in improving academic achievement (Arbreton, Sheldon, Bradshaw, Goldsmith, Jucovy, & Pepper, 2008.) These authors provided a summary of their work:

This report presents outcomes from Public/Private Ventures research on CORAL, an eight-year, \$58 million after-school initiative of The James Irvine Foundation. Findings described in the report demonstrate the relationship between high-quality literacy programming and academic gains and underscore the potential role that quality programs may play in the ongoing drive to improve academic achievement.

The CORAL initiative's transition to a balanced literacy approach emerged amid a larger transition in the afterschool field, in which practitioners and policymakers are reevaluating the role of the after-school hours and becoming more attuned to the importance of quality programming and engagement among participants. Consequently, the evaluation of CORAL provides important guidance not only from a programmatic standpoint, but also from a public policy perspective. An understanding of the ways in which CORAL has engaged children in quality programming, and the relationship of engagement and quality programming to academic outcomes, has drawn further attention to the potential role for after-school programs in the ongoing drive to improve children's academic achievement.

At the time, this study provided key insights into the potential role of ASPs in improving academic achievement, and into core characteristics of successful literacy interventions.

Social Emotional Learning Outcomes

An area in which ASPs receive much attention is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) outcomes. This is an area outside of academic achievement in which ASPs are thought to hold significant potential because of their opportunities for relationship and community building. In a 2024 study, Fisher, et al. found that staff/student relationships, participant sense of belonging and

program engagement predicted social emotional functioning in a group of students enrolled in a large urban afterschool program. They argued that because staff turnover can be so high, sense of belonging and program engagement are very important for programs like these. These results indicate that ASPs have opportunities for enhancing SEL if they can strengthen relationships and engagement. While this is considered an area of opportunity for ASPs, it is also an area of significant challenge because of high staff turnover in the field, which can detract from continuity and relationship building at these programs.

In a paper describing the process of developing a program, Akers, Korver, Danner and Slagter (2022) explain the kinds of SEL that ASPs can promote and, in addition, provide examples of what programs can promote. These examples are a combination of hypothesis on the part of the authors and presentation of evidence from past research:

High-quality after-school programs can also lead to higher levels of social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL can lead to significantly improved social and emotional competencies. These competencies include prosocial behavior, a higher sense of self-worth, and improved concentration (youth.gov, n.d.). Through SEL, adolescents learn to apply knowledge and skills they acquire to develop healthy identities, regulate their emotions, and successfully achieve goals.

Environments such as after-school programs and mentorship opportunities that foster creativity and allow adolescents to build on their natural strengths could empower students that may not be able to develop [leadership] abilities otherwise. By growing in leadership skills and forming strong connections with mentors and peers, potential leaders in the next generation can be empowered to achieve their own goals, solve problems, and better the lives of those they interact with.

Summarizing recent research and theory, the Afterschool Alliance (2018) stated the following:

Research also points to afterschool and summer learning programs as ideal settings to help students build their social and emotional skills and competencies. Afterschool and summer learning programs are where students can connect to positive adult mentors, feel safe to try new things, and have the opportunity to acquire new skills and develop mastery in an area. In a study conducted by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, afterschool leaders were more likely than education leaders to say that social and emotional learning was central to their mission. Common principles of quality programs applying a social and emotional learning approach include providing a safe and positive environment, fostering positive relationships between children and adults, offering age-appropriate activities that work on skill development, and ensuring that offerings are relevant and engaging to

students. When programs target their students' social and emotional skills, students see positive gains in their attitudes toward peers and school, as well as in their performance at school.

The above characteristics are central to ASPs' efforts to develop SEL; these authors argue that the evidence indicates ASPs are well positioned to carry out this work and that results suggest positive impacts of such efforts on SEL outcomes in youth.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a commonly utilized framework in the fields of afterschool and youth development. It provides a comprehensive way to look at all the complexities of youth development and to consider ways in which programs and experiences impact youth, particularly SEL. Smith, Witherspoon and Wayne Osgood summarized their 2017 research as follows:

[PYD] deserves more empirical attention, particularly among children of diverse racial–ethnic backgrounds...This study explores the quality of afterschool experiences upon PYD. This multimethod study includes over 500 elementary school children in Grades 2–5 ($M_{\text{age}} = 8.80$, $SD = 1.12$). The sample comprises of 49% White, 27% African American, 7% Latino, and 17% mixed race/others with 45% free/reduced lunch eligible children. In multilevel models, independently observed quality across time positively impacted competence, connection, caring for all youth, and cultural values for racial–ethnic minority youth. Afterschool fosters PYD, including sociocultural dimensions, when comprised of appropriately structured, supportive, and engaging interactions.

The results indicate positive impacts of high-quality programs on a variety of SEL outcomes. Similarly, Wade (2015) found that at the elementary level, overall, participation in high quality afterschool programs resulted in generally improved social and emotional skills; however, the effects were larger for boys, a finding worth further examination.

In a 2014 study by Moreno, research examined an afterschool mentoring program for at-risk youth and found that it improved participants' social skills through a four-month study period. Youth identified "mentoring, non-judgmental staff, peer support, and structured challenging activities as components of the Step- Up program that contributed to this increase." This study demonstrates the potential of such programs for improving youth SEL outcomes but points to questions about sustainability of these results over time. This was also a mentoring program rather than a traditional group-based ASP which means the structure and goals of the program were different from standard programs, suggesting that the results cannot simply be grouped with results from more traditional programs.

In a look at specific aspects of SEL, Mueller, Phelps, Bowers, Agans, Urban and Lerner (2011) examined how 4-H afterschool programming could interact with and affect self-regulation and thriving. They found mixed effects of participation across 8th, 9th and 10th grade with overall

positive results. They discussed the ways in which it may be effective to match the strengths of individual students with the characteristics of their environment to optimize outcomes. Results suggested that different participants responded differently to disparate environmental characteristics, meaning that programming could be targeted to individual characteristics and needs in order to generate desired effects.

Mahoney, Parente and Lord (2007) engaged in a multi-year study to assess differences in engagement across nine programs in an urban setting and ascertain differences in participant outcomes (motivation, social competence, grades). They described their method and result as follows:

Measures of competence were determined from classroom teachers' ratings, and program engagement, quality, and content were assessed primarily through observation. Results from a hierarchical linear model showed that program-level differences in engagement predicted children's social competence and motivation (but not school grades) in a linear, positive direction ($p < .05$). This relation held after modeling several selection factors and prior competence. Engaging ASPs were also significantly higher in program quality and tended to devote more time to enrichment activities and less time to homework and non-skill-building activities.

These results suggest programs should carefully consider how they structure their time and how they improve (and measure) engagement. They also demonstrate how programs can have valuable effects even if they are not directly impacting academic achievement.

Behavioral Outcomes

Behavioral Outcomes are another non-academic area of interest for the field of afterschool. Behavioral Outcomes is a broad category that includes factors such as school attendance, school behavioral records, encounters with the justice system, risk behaviors and engagement among others. In a recent study, Enns, et al. (2022) examined whether participation in Boys & Girls Clubs affected school outcomes, encounters with the justice system or health outcomes, especially teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Results, controlling for SES and family factors, were as follows:

Participation in BGCW was significantly associated with better scores in grade 3 numeracy and grade 7 student engagement assessments. The risk of justice system encounters among adolescents (aged 12-17) dropped as the frequency of BGCW participation increased, as did justice system encounters among young adults (aged 18-24) who had participated in BGCW as adolescents. The likelihood of teen pregnancy among female adolescents (aged 13-19) and sexually transmitted infections among adolescents (aged 13-19) also declined as the frequency of participation in BGCW increased.

The research did not examine finer factors of program quality but results do suggest that participation in OST programs in general can have positive effects on behavior. Furthermore, Fredricks, Hsieh, Liu and Simpkins (2019) indicated that participating in afterschool activities predicts school engagement. The authors explored this relationship and suggested that specific program factors affect engagement.

In a literature review on the topic, Cappella, Frazier, Smith and Hwang (2020) laid out evidence that ASPs can be particularly impactful for participants with emotional or behavioral disorders. Their arguments about the outcomes of such programs for participants are similar to others' laid out in this section; the population under study is simply a subset of the general population:

Many youth spend several hours each day in out-of-school time or afterschool programs (ASPs), which contribute to youth social-emotional and academic outcomes. Inadequate safety, structure, and supervision during afterschool hours leads to increases in risky behaviors, whereas high-quality ASPs have the potential to foster positive youth development, including academic engagement, social competence, and prosocial leadership. Engagement in high quality ASPs may be especially critical for youth with, or at risk for, emotional and/or behavioral disorders (EBD). In this chapter we are guided by systems theory, public health models, prevention and implementation science, and mental health research to provide a framework for understanding and enhancing social processes in ASPs for youth with EBD. Social processes are the interpersonal interactions that create safe, supportive, and enriching environments and opportunities for the development of youth competence. In this chapter, our goals are to (a) synthesize evidence on high-quality ASPs for youth with EBD, (b) identify the common elements of high-quality ASPs, and (c) present exemplar research-practice partnerships working to improve social processes and impact outcomes for youth with EBD.

This review demonstrates the potential of afterschool programs to influence behavioral outcomes, particularly for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Just as with the general population, the quality and qualities of a program influence a program's ability to positively affect behavior.

In a study utilizing the National Household Education Survey After-School Programs and Activities 2005, Giallella (2014) shows that afterschool programs have a positive impact on school discipline and grade retention. She argues that consideration should be given to expansion of such programs in urban areas. Lauzon (2013) further argues that ASPs with a "positive youth development focus can meet the needs of those disengaged youth who are marginalised by the formal educational system." ASPs can partner with or supplement the efforts of formal schools in order to retain at-risk students.

Frazier, Mehta, Atkins, Hur and Rusch (2013), carried out a study focused on providing mental health supports at ASPs catering to at-risk children in urban settings. Results were modest but positive and the study used a matched-design to compare results at intervention sites with demographically matched sites with no intervention. The authors describe the study thus:

This study examined a model for mental health consultation, training and support designed to enhance the benefits of publicly-funded recreational after-school programs in communities of concentrated urban poverty for children's academic, social, and behavioral functioning. We assessed children's mental health needs and examined the feasibility and impact of intervention on program quality and children's psychosocial outcomes in three after-school sites (n = 15 staff, 89 children), compared to three demographically-matched sites that received no intervention (n = 12 staff, 38 children). Findings revealed high staff satisfaction and feasibility of intervention, and modest improvements in observed program quality and staff-reported children's outcomes. Data are considered with a public health lens of mental health promotion for children in urban poverty.

Effects of Summer Programs

McCombs (2019) examined over 3,000 studies of summer child and youth programs and conducted a formal review of 43 of these studies. Those were the only ones that met the Every Student Succeeds Act's top three tiers of evidence standards. From this comprehensive analysis, the author found the following:

Summer programs can be an effective way to address students' needs. The majority of programs studied (about 75 percent) were effective in improving at least one outcome...Many types of summer programs were effective. The authors found evidence of the effectiveness of academic learning, learning at home, social and emotional well-being, and employment and career summer programs, and evidence of effective programs offered to all grade levels...Programs did not tend to be effective in improving all measured outcomes...Researchers and funders may [also] want to conduct rigorous evaluations on different types of programs other than academic programs focused on improving reading achievement. There is much less evidence on the efficacy of programs focused on mathematics, science, social and emotional well-being, or career preparation, and almost none focused on physical health — all outcomes that might be successfully addressed in the summer.

In one specific study, high-potential students from low-income families attended a summer camp designed to address academic deficits (Hodges, McIntosh & Gentry, 2017). Results indicated that student scores on state standardized tests improved

Findings of Mixed or No Effects of Afterschool Programs

One significant challenge for the field of afterschool has been relative inconsistency in findings related to program outcomes. While many studies point to positive effects (see previous sections) studies have continued to surface across time that indicate either mixed effects or no effects of ASPs. These results have proven troublesome for programs as they are often cited as reasons to decrease or deny program resources. Nevertheless, many researchers and stakeholders remain optimistic and continue to seek ways to improve research methods and program quality in order to demonstrate or realize this potential. Still, it is important to have a clear picture of the evidence in the field so this section will review those research results that demonstrated mixed or no effects. As recently as 2024, in a study completed in Norway, researchers (Drange & Sandsør) found no significant effects of programs on academic achievement, student well-being or social behaviors:

Studies have shown that a lack of adult supervision of school-aged children is associated with antisocial behavior and poor school performance. To mitigate this, one policy response is to provide structured, adult-supervised programs offered after school throughout the academic year...In the past decade, the quality and content of these programs and the role they can play in integrating children have been under scrutiny...However, our...estimates show little overall effect of the program on academic performance, neither on average nor across subgroups. There is also little evidence that the program enhanced student well-being or decreased bullying and we find no evidence of increased maternal labor supply.

In 2023 in the United States, Hogan found no significant difference between students who did and did not participate in a 21st Century Community Learning Center program in terms of their academic achievement test scores in math and reading. The sole measure of participation was attendance, which is an area shown to be an inconsistent predictor of outcomes. The only outcome was standardized tests scores which means there may have been positive outcomes in other areas such as SEL or behavior that were not considered. ASPs often have as strong, if not stronger, emphasis on non-academic outcomes.

Examining non-academic outcomes, a 2022 study (Baxter, Baird and Sharpe) found mixed results. There were positive outcomes as measured by the study, but as measured by a different tool, researchers found no impacts of the program:

This quantitative-dominant mixed methods study examined the impact of social and emotional learning on students at the Building Character Program (BCP), a non-profit after school program that serves low-income students in middle Tennessee. The purpose of this study was to determine how students' social and emotional competencies compared between two school years as measured by the Panorama Survey and the Bar-On Inventory. The researchers also

investigated the relationship between student attendance and the development of social and emotional competencies as measured by the Panorama Survey. Finally, the researchers sought the perceptions of parents and interns on the impact of SEL through the BCP program. The BCP program director administered the Panorama Survey to students six times over the course of two school years. The researchers found a statistically significant difference in SEL scores between time periods for the competencies of grit, sense of belonging, and self-management.

Over the same study period, and at the same program location, these researchers found no measurable program effects on a different measure of SEL. This suggests that researchers need to carefully select their measures and possibly use more than one to accurately measure program effects. This issue adds another challenge to measuring program quality because of the resources required to engage multiple measures.

In a comprehensive meta-analysis, Lester, Chow and Melton (2020) found no significant impacts of afterschool programs on secondary students in either academic achievement or in social and behavioral skills. In addition, program quality did not affect these measured outcomes. For this research, over 2,000 studies were examined, out of which approximately 30 were included in this meta-analysis. The authors recommend an emphasis on improving the quality of data collection and program research in order to look at a more complete sample and establish whether the findings are the same when the analysis is more inclusive.

Olive, McCullick, Tomporowski, Gaudreault and Simonton (2020) conducted a small quasi-experimental study examining the effects of a four-week social-emotional learning intervention with a physical activity component. The results did not show significant impacts of the intervention on participants. The authors hypothesized that the study may have been too small or the intervention too brief.

The following study (Budd, Nixon, Hymel and Tanner-Smith, 2020) produced mixed results in terms of the outcomes of ASPs:

This evaluation examined the effects of afterschool programs-supported by an afterschool system intermediary organization (ASIO)-on middle school students' academic performance and examined how those effects varied by student characteristics and program engagement. In this longitudinal, quasi-experimental matched comparison group evaluation, propensity score matching was used to create demographically balanced samples of ASIO-supported afterschool program participants and nonparticipants. Students enrolled in the afterschool programs did not differ from non-participants in growth over time on most academic outcomes. Students attending the afterschool programs showed less growth on certain state test scores compared to nonparticipants. Student

demographic characteristics did not consistently influence participant outcomes. Among program participants only, students who were enrolled more than 1 year demonstrated a 7-percentile-point increase in state test scores per year of program engagement. There was no consistent evidence that ASIO-supported afterschool program participation was associated with improved student academic outcomes. However, study results support increased emphasis on afterschool program retention, given that longer duration of participation in the afterschool programs was associated with more growth on multiple academic outcomes.

Results do not deny all positive impacts but they are not the sort of solid findings that funders and stakeholders are looking for.

The following summary indicates results from a study by Lanford (2019) in which the outcomes of interest are not positive. This, of course, does not mean there were not other positive results but those outcomes targeted by the program do not show improvement. The study set out to do the following:

to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between at-risk students who attended the program and those who did not in the area of academic progression, attendance, and disciplinary incidents for the 2017-2018 school year at a rural high school in South Carolina. Analysis found there was no statistically significant differences in academic credits earned, attendance, or disciplinary incidents between the two groups of students.

In a 2018 study, Luce examined the effects of an afterschool program on sixth grade students' standardized test scores in math and reading. The results showed no statistically significant difference between those students who participated in the program and those who did not, although the students who did participate showed positive changes in test scores while those who did not displayed negative changes. The author suggests afterschool programs may have a role to play in improving academic outcomes but careful consideration needs to be given to program structure and content as well as student participation. The fact that results are not statistically significant makes them less useful for making a case for the program for funding or other resources. ASPs regularly face difficulties in demonstrating their effectiveness and hence justifying their existence, spending and other required resources.

In terms of non-academic outcomes, Bennett (2018) found that self-efficacy was a significant predictor of student GPA but the study did not find that participants in an afterschool program had significantly better scores for self-efficacy than non-participants. Interestingly, the program shared many features with programs that have been labeled high-quality and which *did* influence social emotional factors like self-efficacy. The author indicated this lack of effect might be explained by the fact that this program was relatively new, but had no specific evidence to support that argument. The author highlighted several studies that have found

positive influences of OST programs on SEL and several that have not to demonstrate this is an area in need of further study.

A review of the research in the UK shows mixed results, mostly because few high-quality studies have been conducted. In a review, Barry, Clarke, Morreale and Field (2018) state the following:

This review provides a narrative synthesis of the evidence on the effectiveness of community-based interventions for enhancing young people's social and emotional skills in the UK. A range of electronic databases were searched and responses to a call for evidence to youth organizations were analysed. A total of 14 intervention studies employing experimental designs that were conducted in the UK in the period from 2004 to 2016 fulfilled the criteria and were selected for full review. Seven of the studies evaluated the impact of youth social action interventions, five focused on mentoring programs and two on community arts and sports interventions. Six of the intervention studies were conducted within the last 2 years, primarily with young people living in deprived communities, and five studies employed randomized control trials. The results indicate that there is a small number of robust evaluation studies that provide evidence of the impact of social action trials (N = 4) and mentoring programs (N = 2) on enhancing young people's social and emotional skills, community engagement and reducing behavioral problems. However, none of the studies were rated as strong and eight studies received a weak quality rating indicating poor quality evidence of intervention effectiveness. The current evidence base needs to be strengthened to determine the effectiveness of community-based youth programs, including which intervention approaches are most effective, and their long-term impact and sustainability.

The mixed nature of these results further highlights the challenges faced by the afterschool field. The assumption is that the negative or mixed findings are the result of poor research design or improperly executed programs or research rather than a signal that ASPs do not work as intended but until sufficient high-quality research is produced, the field is left with a lot of conjecture.

Hathaway (2018) found no effects of participation in an afterschool program targeting academic skills. There were no differences in scores or change scores between fall and spring for participants and non-participants. The author argues it is important to carefully consider what we are expecting of afterschool programs and to make sure that we have evidence to support the efforts we make. Kim (2018) found that minimal improvements in only some areas (teacher rated mathematics and prosocial behavior) were found for students who attended an afterschool program more regularly, further indication that goals and outcomes must be

properly aligned and that we must be sure to temper our expectations of ASPs to match their capacities.

In a close look at an academic intervention, Roberts et al. (2018) conducted a quasi-experimental study of an afterschool reading intervention. Their summary of their findings follows:

We examined the efficacy of an afterschool multicomponent reading intervention for third- through fifth-grade students with reading difficulties. A total of 419 students were identified for participation...Participating students were randomly assigned to a business as usual comparison condition or one of two reading treatments. All treatment students received 30 min of computer-based instruction plus 30 min of small-group tutoring for four to five times per week. No statistically significant reading comprehension posttest group differences were identified ($p > .05$). The limitations of this study included high attrition and absenteeism. These findings extend those from a small sample of experimental studies examining afterschool reading interventions and provide initial evidence that more instruction, after school, may not yield the desired outcome of improved comprehension.

Similarly, Scarpati (2017) examined the academic effects of 21st Century Community Learning Centers on participants at five diverse, low-income elementary schools in New Hampshire. This was not an experimental or quasi-experimental study; the data were drawn from the programs' data tracking systems. Her results, over a three year period, were mixed at best with several null effects and several negative effects. There was a positive impact on reading scores for students who attended regularly over the three year period but this was not statistically significant. The author argues that consideration should be given to how programs are working to improve academic outcomes but also to other types of outcomes that might be equally valuable but were not measured here (e.g., social-emotional, behavioral.)

Challenges facing the field of afterschool related to measuring outcomes to justify resources and spending are many. Fredricks, Naftzger, Smith and Riley (2017) described the state of affairs as follows:

Increases in funding for and attention to after-school programs have led to greater scrutiny over both the quality and effectiveness...putting pressure on programs to measure both setting-level characteristics and the impact of involvement on participants. Yet research on the outcomes of after-school participation has been mixed. One reason for the mixed finding is that the effects of after-school participation vary by type of program, quality of programming, and length of youths' involvement. Better measurement can help determine which types of programs are most effective and how often young people need to attend to see these benefits.

The authors argue that more deliberate measurement would lead to more complete understanding of the effects of afterschool programs.

In her book *Why Afterschool Matters* Nelson (2016) closely examines one program in order to analyze the individual variation in effects of afterschool programs:

[It follows] ten Mexican American students who attended the same extracurricular program in California, then chronicl[es] its long-term effects on their lives, from eighth grade to early adulthood. Discovering that participation in the program was life-changing for some students, yet had only a minimal impact on others, [she] investigates the factors behind these very different outcomes. Her research reveals that while afterschool initiatives are important, they are only one component in a complex network of school, family, community, and peer interactions that influence the educational achievement of disadvantaged students.

Nelson further elaborates in a 2023 book chapter, arguing that to develop a meaningful understanding of the outcomes of out-of-school-time (OST) programming, we have to examine those programs in the larger context of individual students' lives:

By situating adolescents' trajectories within multiple overlapping spheres of impact, including but not limited to OST, the theory of embedded influence further recognizes that no single intervention can reach every child. Rather, this theory argues that behind each successful student lies an ecosystem of supports and buffers, working symbiotically to overcome the challenges presented by systemic and microlevel factors ranging from racism and poverty to addiction and abuse. For some students, OST programs supplement an already robust network. For others, these programs feature so prominently in their constellation of supports that they ultimately pave the way for transformation.

Nelson argues that we cannot fully understand the impacts of ASPs if we do not adequately situate them in their larger contexts. For example, Orman (2016) examined the effect of afterschool program dosage (number of hours attended) on student achievement and found no effect where Nelson (2023) might argue that the story is more nuanced than that. Similarly, Hamm (2015) found that there were no measurable effects of afterschool programs on state standardized tests, although school principals indicated positive effects of these programs. The author suggests that standardized tests alone may not be the best measure of the effects of afterschool programs.

O'Hare, Biggart, Kerr and Connolly (2015) examined the effects of a prosocial afterschool program targeting elementary school students and their parents. The results showed negative effects on two measures of antisocial behavior and two measures of child-reported parenting compared to the control group that received no intervention. The authors still argue in favor of

afterschool programming but indicate that program planners and staff will need to carefully match program elements with participant characteristics in order to ensure no negative outcomes. This approach is similar to that advocated by Nelson (2023, 2016.)

In their meta-analysis, Kremer, et al. (2015) describe their findings and indicate non-significant effects of ASPs. They summarize their results as follows:

Findings from the meta-analysis of 24 studies, including 109,282 youth, revealed non-significant effects for attendance and externalizing behaviours, and none of the tested moderator variables (i.e., study design, grade level, contact, control group, programme type, and focus) explained the variance between studies. However, no moderator variables related to programme quality were assessed (e.g., implementation fidelity, staff training), and the examined outcomes (i.e., externalizing and attendance) were limited. Given that ASP quality may vary by privilege and access to resources, marginalized youth may receive lower-quality ASPs, suggesting the importance of considering these additional moderating factors.

As with many research examples in the afterschool field, the researchers indicate they may not have been examining the “right” outcomes or have properly modeled all the nuances of the relationships. The findings point to challenges in afterschool research but also to optimism regarding the potential of ASPs.

Jones (2014) conducted a causal-comparative study with the hypothesis that students who participated in the studied afterschool programs would perform better than their counterparts who did not. The population for the study was low-income students who were either Hispanic or black. The only measure of program engagement was attendance, which research has shown is not a reliable predictor of program outcomes. While there were significant differences between the groups on all measures, the participating youth did not consistently outscore their non-participant counterparts, leaving the results mixed and the conclusions uncertain.

Sebastian (2013) compared a group of students participating in an afterschool tutoring program to a similar group of students at a school without a tutoring program available to ascertain whether students showed any improvement on state standardized tests during the study years (2008-2010). Data indicated no effects of the tutoring program on standardized test scores in reading, mathematics or science, raising questions about the capacity of such programs to influence achievement or the qualities necessary to do so.

In a similar vein regarding whether ASPs can bring about change, authors note that a major problem with many middle-school afterschool programs is their optional nature. Any high-quality curriculum a program attempts to administer will be limited by the attendance of individual participants. Results from their research showed that participants in an afterschool program with a high-quality curriculum did no better than their control counterparts engaged

in regular afterschool activities (Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, Rorie & Connell, 2010). Researchers did not indicate whether attendance significantly predicted or moderated outcomes. A study directly examining attendance (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie and Connell, 2009) found that attendance was sporadic and total change in unsupervised time was minimal for the students who did participate. As a result, there were no measurable effects from the afterschool program.

An IES guide (Beckett et al., 2009) reviewed a variety of existing studies on the effect of OST on academic achievement, demonstrated areas in need of further work and highlighted positive outcomes. It focused in particular on the structure of programs and what features are necessary to bring about positive changes in academic achievement. Specifically, the authors stated:

Although it is generally assumed that OST programs can provide students with positive, academically enriching experiences, it is not necessarily known how to structure programs to effectively improve student academic outcomes. Although many studies lacking comparison groups suggest that OST programs can benefit students academically, those with more rigorous evaluation designs raise questions about these findings. For example, findings from the national evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program, which is the largest afterschool program in the United States, show that, on average, students participating in the programs had no improvement in academic achievement.

In the same year, Gardner, Roth and Brooks-Gunn, asked “Can After-School Programs Help Level the Academic Playing Field for Disadvantaged Youth?” Their answer was that afterschool could be one piece of the puzzle but would be a relatively small contributor to closing the achievement gap.

Factors Affecting Quality

With the growing body of evidence that ASPs have a variety of positive effects on participants come questions about what attributes of programs are required to achieve said outcomes. A variety of research studies have laid out in detail just what characteristics are essential in order to reach specific outcomes. In an article that is widely cited to this day, Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert & Parente (2010) provided a brief history of the field of OST and then laid out factors they believed were essential for consideration in future research on quality and outcomes.

Key principles include a holistic view of development that recognizes interrelations between multiple domains of youth adjustment, attention to multiple, relevant factors within and outside of youth that affect development, examining the dynamic interplay between persons, program features, and other contexts over time, and understanding the active role of youth in affecting their

own development. These principles are examined in relation to five main areas: youth characteristics, social ecologies, program features, participation, and short- and long-term outcomes.

These authors highlight the complexity of the topic and indicate the need for carefully designed research. Yohalem and Wilson-Ahlstrom (2010) provided the following summary of the growing body of knowledge about characteristics of programs that can positively impact youth participants and the ways in which professionals can measure these aspects of quality:

...evidence that high quality programs can affect a range of important youth outcomes and that program quality matters is growing. This evidence, combined with the rapid expansion of the field, has led to increased interest among practitioners, policy makers and researchers in finding and developing tools that are designed specifically to assess and improve program quality. Program improvement has become a major focus of the work of state and local intermediary organizations in the youth development field, and public funding sources like the U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program are allocating resources for quality improvement purposes.

The hope was that these resources and efforts would allow researchers and practitioners to better understand key factors of quality programs. Despite the fact that there was movement toward accountability and measurement almost a decade and a half ago, the field of out-of-school-time still struggles with measurement and accountability, particularly *what* to measure and how best to measure it. The following sections provide evidence regarding the factors research has shown affect program quality. The first segment summarizes studies and papers that speak generally about program quality; this segment is followed by summaries of specific aspects of program quality that have been widely studied such as relationships, engagement and staff qualities.

General Program Factors

In a comprehensive review of a large number of out-of-school-time (OST) programs, Lantos, Redd, Warren, Bradley and Habteselasse (2024) state the following:

OST programs and their funders rely on sound data to make decisions about everything from professional development and student recruitment to the selection of activities to offer students. Programs operate at a range of times (before and after school, weekends, summer) and in a variety of locations (e.g., schools, community-based organizations, city parks and recreation centers), are run by a variety of entities (e.g., government agencies, private community organizations), and receive funding from a variety of sources (e.g., government, philanthropy)—each of which may be interested in a different set of data and

come with its own reporting requirements. This means there is a great deal of variation in the types of data programs collect.

Lantos, Redd, Warren, Bradley and Habteselasse (2024) conducted a large study to determine what kinds of data out-of-school-time (OST) programs are collecting and what challenges exist in measurement. They found that programs most commonly collect data related closely to their content (e.g., academics, the arts) but that most programs also collect social-emotional learning (SEL) data of some sort and many collect data based on the requirements of their funders. Many programs indicated interest in measuring progress toward equitable outcomes but made their decisions on what to collect based on useability of data, effort required to collect data and the measures available to them. In addition, programs measured outputs such as attendance and program quality. Programs indicated that they used a variety of tools to measure outcomes including traditional quantitative (e.g., survey) or qualitative (e.g., focus groups) methods. They also indicated usage of a variety of non-traditional measures including check-ins, portfolios and award systems. Although a significant amount and variety of measurement is happening at programs, there are still challenges programs face such as lack of access to standard measures of SEL or program quality, barriers to measuring long-term impacts such as civic engagement, career attainment and links between staff improvement and student outcomes. Programs also noted that data collection itself can be burdensome because staff are often not trained. Finally, reporting out can be challenging when programs have multiple stakeholders with different reporting requirements. This summary highlights some of the challenges regarding measurement and understanding program quality that are faced by the afterschool field, particularly because of the diversity of programs, audiences and goals which make defining and measuring quality so difficult.

In a meta-analysis based in China, Yao, Yao, Li, Xu and Wei (2023) found that overall there were positive effects of afterschool programs on participants. They found both academic and social emotional effects. Based on their analysis, their recommendations were “that there should be a balanced consideration of the development of student cognitive and non-cognitive abilities in planning after-school service, a substantial variety of activities in after-school programs, a flexible adoption of diverse after-school programs, and a reasonable participation frequency in after-school service.” These focal areas represent aspects of program quality considered important but these authors did not make recommendations regarding how to measure described program quality.

Dudley (2018) compared school-based sites to school-linked sites (programs not in a school or formally partnered with a school but with populations fed from a school or schools) and community-based sites. The study found that school-based sites scored higher on overall quality (based on an existing tool) than school-linked or community-based sites. In addition, participants at school-based sites perceived themselves to be both better academically prepared and more successful. This was a small study, but does suggest that further research on the type of setting would be worthwhile when considering program quality and effects of

programs on children and youth. Questions remain whether the effects are a result of the site type or of characteristics of the program which are correlated with the type of site.

In a comprehensive review of existing research, Deutsch, Blyth, Kelley, Tolan and Lerner (2017) summarized what was known at the time about program quality and the processes of examining it. They explain their findings as follows:

...We focus on three major areas: (a) understanding what after-school programs do; (b) how we study after-school programs, and; (c) what we do with the resulting evidence. We argue that researchers, practitioners and policy makers must hone conceptual models, constructs and measures, evaluation designs, and practical and theoretical questions about after school programming to provide information that is useful in determining not only whether particular programs are helping youth, but also how they are helping and how they could help more...

...The developmental nutrients, or what should be present in the “soil” of a program, are threefold: (a) caring people; (b) constructive places, and; (c) challenging possibilities. Thus, a quality program provides people who support and care for a youth, a place that offers a safe and constructive environment, and opportunities for a youth to move beyond one’s comfort level, to be challenged to grow in new ways. Developmental exercise refers to what youth do at the program to maximize the effects of those nutrients. These too are threefold: (a) experiences; (b) participation, and; (c) engagement. Effective programs are thought to be those that offer youth productive experiences in which youth actively participate and are engaged.

The authors argue that no one program will satisfy the needs and interests of all youth, so program outcomes should be measured in a more fine-grained way than overall outcomes for all participants.

According to other research, programs are making use of a variety of data to highlight strengths and areas for improvement. Hauseman (2016) conducted a literature review of 124 sources (mostly peer-reviewed articles) and concluded the following:

six best practices for ASPs for secondary school students were identified: clear mission; safe, positive, and healthy climate; recruitment of a diverse mix of youth; addresses barriers to participation; hiring, training, and retaining high quality staff; and use of a flexible curriculum with engaging content...This review also calls for program developers and school administrators to invest in more rigorous research and evaluation efforts to generate reliable knowledge and build program evaluation capacity.

Providing further evidence of general characteristics of quality, Starr, Stavsky and Gannett (2016), examining afterschool system builders, found the following:

While studies have shown that OST programs can produce results, this is no guarantee that they will; programs must be of high quality. We now know what quality looks like. In examining the programs that had short- and long-term effects on youth's academic and social outcomes, researchers have identified a number of common characteristics. High-quality OST programs: foster positive relationships between program participants and staff, build positive relationships among program participants, offer a blend of academic and developmental skill-building activities, promote high levels of student engagement, maintain an orientation toward mastery of knowledge and skills, and provide appropriate levels of structure as well as opportunities for autonomy and choice (Eccles & Gootman, 2002)...The ultimate success is to build a culture of quality, one where quality is seen by providers, afterschool leaders, and the community at large as essential to all aspects of an afterschool system and is recognized as critical to promoting positive youth outcomes.

They argue that quality must be a culture and the program must be steeped in it. They do not as directly address measurement; rather they focus on components of quality.

In a literature review sponsored by the state of Maine (Biddle & Mette, 2016), authors indicated the importance of quality in producing positive outcomes and they focused explicitly on the sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE) model of program presentation:

Overall, there is some evidence to support linking a variety of positive outcomes for youth to their participation in [OST] programming, including social and emotional, school engagement and health outcomes. Findings were more mixed regarding a clear link between strong academic outcomes and participating in [OST] programs, although this seems to be due to the wide variety in the structure of and populations served by the evaluated programs. In fact, the clearest message from the extant literature is that the quality of the program and youth attendance make an important difference in strength of these outcomes for youth (Durlak et al., 2010; Fashola, 2013; Granger, 2008; Halpern, 1999; McComb, & Scott-Little, 2003). More effective [OST] programs are characterized by having [SAFE] instructional components...

The idea of a "culture of quality" is important in the field of afterschool but is something that has proven challenging because of the piecemeal ways in which programs are assembled and run, and because there is often a lack of agreement regarding the goals and outcomes of programs depending on the stakeholders. One area of program quality that is popular to examine is dosage or attendance. Roth, Malone and Brooks-Gunn (2010) found, in contradiction to some past research and in agreement with other, that the dosage of

afterschool programs was not predictive of outcomes. For example, Shernoff (2010) found that perceived quality of experiences may be a more important predictor of outcomes of afterschool programs than dosage (e.g., days or hours attended). Roth, Malone and Brooks-Gunn (2010) found some evidence for effects when comparing youth who participated significant amounts with youth who did not participate at all, but not when examining levels of participation. This suggests that evaluation efforts should focus on the quality and qualities of programs rather than simply on getting participants to attend.

In that spirit, Grossman, Goldmith, Sheldon and Arbretton (2009) laid out three main features of program quality and made recommendations regarding measurement of those aspects:

According to previous research, three point-of-service features--strong youth engagement, well-conceived and well-delivered content, and a conducive learning environment--lead to positive impacts in after-school settings, the ultimate gauge of quality. To assess quality at a program's point of service, researchers and program administrators should measure indicators of these three quality features...In presenting and evaluating multiple measurement approaches, the authors argue that the most reliable measures are those collected from the agent (either youth or staff members) to whom the indicator is most directly tied...Findings from quality assessments should be used to feed an ongoing process of training, support, and content change aimed at quality improvement.

Similarly, Hirsch, Mekind and Stawicki (2010) presented four main areas of consideration for development of quality programming and the ways in which it is measured. They also indicated challenges to quality and measurement. The following are their listed characteristics of quality 1) student engagement, 2) program characteristics and implementation, 3) staff training, and 4) citywide policy. The authors argued it is important to go beyond attendance to get meaningful links with outcomes, including participant/staff relationships, self-reported engagement in the program and staff-reported engagement of participants. Attendance alone was not correlated with outcomes. The authors argued there are two main ways to approach program quality. The first is to look for universal characteristics that can apply to all programs and the second is to focus program quality on the needs of the participants and the unique features of the program (location, population, goals). The lack of a universal approach to program quality has made it challenging to study program quality in rigorous ways across settings. Staff training must be tailored to the program and ongoing to maximize results. Citywide policy is necessary to lay the groundwork for high quality programming.

In a compilation of a variety of work from across the country, Huang, et al. (2008) attempted to establish central features of program quality, narrowing in on three: program organization, program environment, and instructional features. From their findings, the authors developed a benchmark tool that programs can use to assess program quality. It is a checklist tool, making it

fairly simple to use but potentially lacking in nuance. It provides a simple framework for quality, however, and a manageable tool for measurement.

Vandell, et al. (2005) conducted a study of middle school students to compare a group engaged in afterschool programming at eight different sites with similar counterparts who did not attend afterschool programs. The authors state that we have known for some time that high quality experiences, those which “are deeply engaging and enjoyable, engender full concentration, and present a balance between challenge and skill propel or push development forward.” They compared program youth to nonprogram youth and found that participants spent more time in activities aligned with the above described high quality programming compared to their counterparts not engaged in afterschool programming. Programs that meet the requirements for quality have significant potential to positively impact youth development.

Unlike many of her counterparts (see above), Surr (2012) argues against rigidly defining quality by outlining central characteristics core to all programs and suggests that many of the typical key benchmarks of quality may not be the best way to define a good afterschool program. She summarizes her work as follows:

This article describes a new paradigm for accountability that envisions afterschool programs as learning organizations continually engaged in improving quality...Rather than aiming to test whether programs have produced desired youth outcomes, an increasing number of afterschool funders and sponsors are shaping more flexible, collaborative, and lower-stakes accountability systems. By designing accountability systems that fully embrace the notion of afterschool programs as learning organizations and by using research from organizational development, education, and youth development to create effective learning environments, funders and sponsors can help programs to improve quality--and therefore, to succeed in their goal of achieving better outcomes for young people.

Her approach to developing and measuring quality emphasizes the importance of focusing on the goals of the individual program and the particular population with which a program works.

Relationships

Smith, Witherspoon and Lei (2021) found that there was not a simple direct correlation between resources available to a program and the program quality. Some programs with fewer resources were better at producing positive relationships between participants and staff which, they argue, may have contributed to better outcomes, despite lack of resources.

In a study examining relationships as part of program quality, English (2020) considered youth perceptions of relationships (both youth-youth and youth-staff) in an effort to better understand the role of relationships. Results indicated that building positive relationships in OST programs contributes to positive youth development and that the skills in relationship

building can extend beyond the program to other areas of participants' lives. This was a very small study and not, as a result, generalizable, but it is significant in its depth and the contribution it can make toward future explorations of this aspect of program quality.

Another study (Cole, Tanner & Dillard, 2020) examined the effect of afterschool mentoring on at-risk youth. The researchers found three main areas through which the program had an impact: working on success regardless of circumstances, building personal relationships between staff and participants and broadening horizons. The central role staff play in these particular aspects of the program highlight the importance of quality staff, training and relationships in developing programs that produce results. Lewis, Kok, Worker and Miner (2021) similarly highlighted the centrality of staff in producing positive outcomes for youth.

Kuperminc, et al. (2019) examined the importance of staff-youth relationships and staff development in creating and sustaining program quality. They summarized their results as follows:

Findings suggest a central role of staff relational practices in establishing conditions that youth experience positively, and that staffing and organizational processes, including community engagement and teamwork and efficiency can be viewed as foundations for establishing a culture of positive adult-youth interaction, which in turn can contribute to the promotion of positive youth development. Further, identification with the experiences of youth had a direct association with youths' perceptions of club quality. These results underscore the importance of staff workforce development initiatives as key to improving youth experiences in after-school programs.

Collura (2016) summarizes two main factors that impact program quality: supportive adult relationships as discussed in this section and youth voice, which fits in with the Youth Engagement section below. Collura summarizes both findings of this research in the following way:

This study examined the association between youth's reports of afterschool program (ASP) quality and the developmental outcomes of school engagement, agency, and empowerment...Regression analyses revealed youth's reports of supportive adult relationships in the afterschool setting were predictive of their levels of school engagement and agency. Young people's reports of voice in the afterschool setting were predictive of empowerment. During focus groups, youth indicated that supportive adults provide emotional and instrumental support, and also possess attributes that make them likeable and relatable. Youth also indicated having a variety of opportunities for voice in the afterschool setting, including participating in formal decision-making structures, choosing how to participate in programming and expressing opinions in their daily interactions with staff...This study contributes to the growing body of evidence that ASPs are

effective at promoting youth developmental outcomes...From the perspective of young people, establishing meaningful relationships with adults and having opportunities to express voice in the afterschool setting are critical facilitators of their positive development.

As further evidence of the importance of relationships between staff and participants, Kuperminc, Smith and Henrich (2013) provided an overview of a special issue focused on afterschool and early adolescence, which concludes that staff-participant relationships are central to program success. They outline four main phases of program participation: program entry, becoming engaged, staying involved and developmental outcomes. They indicated the importance of internal versus external motivation for approaching initial efforts to engage participants, then they highlighted the essential role staff play in building relationships. Once students have built relationships and gotten engaged, staff have a special role to play to keep participants involved because they must adjust their interactions and relationships over time as participants mature and develop their identities. Finally, through sustained involvement, programs can have positive effects. Thus, healthy relationships between staff and participants are essential to program success and positive youth outcomes.

Just as described by Kuperminc, Smith and Henrich (2013, above) Jones and Deutsch (2013) found that a core component of program quality was shifting staff relationships to meet the changing needs of the participants. Presumably, youth feel closer and more welcome when staff behave in ways that show understanding of their development.

Jones and Deutsch (2011) examined the importance of staff-youth relationships and the ways in which relationship characteristics contributed to program climate and outcomes. They summarized the results of their study as follows:

Staff–youth relationships are a key strength of after-school settings, though more research is needed to understand the actual processes whereby these interpersonal connections lead to beneficial outcomes. This qualitative study focuses on the relational strategies that staff employ within an urban youth organization, and the ways in which those strategies contribute to a positive developmental climate. Researchers observed staff–youth interactions for a year and conducted a series of interviews with 17 youth between the ages of 12 and 18. We found three specific relational strategies that staff used to develop relationships with youth. These were minimizing relational distance, active inclusion, and attention to proximal relational ties. These strategies contribute to an overall supportive culture, suggesting a relational pedagogy in this after-school setting. The staff–youth relationships serve as the foundation for both youth engagement in programs and the promotion of positive developmental outcomes.

These authors provide solid evidence but also call for more research to confirm the results. A year earlier, Granger (2010) highlighted the importance of staff-participant relationships and demonstrated that consideration of program quality must include efforts to improve this relationship.

In an important study, Smischney, Roberts, Gliske, Borden and Perkins (2018) carefully studied the link between program quality and youth outcomes at an afterschool program; through their study, they found results which are somewhat contradictory to many of the other studies summarized in this section. It is important to note that participant outcomes were self-reported rather than observed or tested by staff or researchers, and that aspects of program quality were also reported by participants. This could account for some differences in findings between this study and previous work. Contrary to much of the published work (summarized above) the authors found that relationships were perhaps not as central to program quality and outcomes as other studies have indicated. The authors summarized their work thus:

This study represents one of the first investigations in the literature into the connection between program quality and outcomes. Its main goal was to explore how program quality components, specifically, physical and psychological safety, supportive relationships, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, and opportunities for skill building influenced a change in youth competencies related to social conscience, caring, personal values, critical thinking, and decision making following participation in a youth program...Two primary findings emerged: first, higher youth ratings of programs' skill building were associated with greater change in youth's social conscience and personal values and second, higher youth ratings of programs' positive social norms were associated with greater change in youth's personal values, decision making, and critical thinking...

...These results, while preliminary, have several implications for youth programming. First, evidence of differential effectiveness of program quality components on each core competency suggests that program developers should decide early on which youth outcomes are of greatest priority in order to ensure these quality components are emphasized amidst finite resources (e.g., money, youth program staff time). Second, supportive relationships within the context of youth programs may operate differently than previously shown...this study suggests that supportive relationships may not be the driving feature of change in youth outcomes.

There is more research that argues in favor of relationships as central to program quality but it seems further research may be required to resolve this question.

Youth Engagement

Factors of youth engagement are an area of study more heavily researched in more recent years. This section summarizes some of the findings regarding the role of Youth Engagement in program quality and program outcomes.

Sjogren, Bae, Deutsch, Zumbrunn and Broda (2022) engaged in a detailed analysis of participant engagement in afterschool programs in order to better understand how this important facet affects participant experiences and outcomes. They found several distinct engagement profiles through participant self-report and looked at how programs might better engage youth with different engagement profiles. Sjogren, Zumbrunn, Broda, Bae and Deutsch (2022) further examined participant engagement and student outcomes in their 2022 article, which they summarize thus:

Though student engagement is hypothesized to be a factor in explaining student level differences in afterschool programs, the measurement of student engagement in this context is inconsistent, and findings from the small number of studies about how engagement impacts developmental and academic outcomes are mixed...[Our] results suggest that a bifactor model of engagement best fits the data, meaning that engagement consists of four specific factors (affective, behavioral, cognitive, social) and a global factor...Results also showed positive associations with student mathematics achievement and [positive youth development], but no significant associations were found between engagement and English achievement. This study provides a theoretically aligned way to measure engagement and evidence to support engagement as a key factor in predicting youth outcomes in an out-of-school context.

In a large longitudinal study (Seitz, Khatib, Guessous & Kuperminc, 2022), researchers examined program quality as reported by youth and compared this to desired program outcomes. They summarized their research thus:

Researchers have documented positive associations among youth program quality and academic outcomes, primarily based on cross-sectional data. This study examined longitudinal associations among youth-reported program experiences and academic expectations, self-reported grades, and perceived value of school using data from the national evaluation of Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA). The sample included 101,050 Club attendees at 2,741 BGCA sites throughout the United States from 2015-2018. Latent Growth Curve Modeling was used to examine change in youth-reported program experiences as well as the longitudinal associations among perceived program experiences and academic outcomes over time. Baseline perceptions of program experiences were associated prospectively with increased perceived value of school. In addition, gains in youth-reported program experiences predicted gains in each of

the academic outcomes. These findings suggest that youth programs can promote positive academic trajectories when youth perceive the programs as continuing to meet their needs over time.

Participants who are engaged in their programs and perceive those experiences positively appear to show more positive outcomes. Additional research shows similar findings. Gliske, Ballard, Buchanan, Borden and Perkins (2021) indicated that youth ratings of fairness and safety are important aspects of program quality that are not always considered. Participants who rated safety and fairness as high showed positive effects of programs even when the overall quality was rated as mixed compared to youth in programs rated as high quality that had lower safety and fairness ratings. Similarly, Lewis, Kok, Worker and Miner (2021) conducted a study in which program quality and program outcomes were reported by youth participants. They found that emotional safety and relationship building were the most consistent predictors of positive youth development outcomes, which included academic effort along with social and behavioral outcomes. The authors recommend that programs assess their needs in these two areas of program quality (emotional safety and relationship building) and focus resources on improving them.

Given the increasing diversity of afterschool populations, Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, Vest Ettekal and Okamoto (2017) argue that more attention must be given to cultural responsiveness in order to maintain the highest quality and provide students with the best experiences and relationships for optimal outcomes.

Sloper (2016) examined the relationship between program quality and internal youth assets (e.g., commitment to learning, social competencies and positive identity). She found that youth rated their internal assets as “good” but that they actually declined over the course of a year of participation in an afterschool program. She found the following, however:

...offering more opportunities for active and engaged learning, youth voice and leadership, skill building and a safe and supportive environment, as components of program quality, were associated with more internal assets...Furthermore, several high-quality program practices predicted youth engagement and in turn, greater youth engagement was associated with higher levels of positive identity and commitment to learning after one year of program participation.

These results indicate that it is not just attendance or participation that matters for results but that the specific characteristics of the programs and how they engage youth are influential in determining outcomes.

For evidence of the importance of engagement among elementary aged participants, Grogan, Henrich and Malikina (2014) found the following:

student engagement in academic, youth development, and arts after-school program activities was significantly related to changes in teacher ratings of academic skills and social competence over the course of the school year and that students with the greatest increase in academic skills both were highly engaged in activities and attended the after-school program regularly. The results of this study provide additional evidence regarding the benefits of after-school programs and the importance of student engagement when assessing student outcomes.

Greene, Lee, Constance and Hynes (2013) reported the following regarding engaging youth:

multilevel models suggested that program content and staff quality were strongly associated with youth engagement. Youth who reported learning new skills, learning about college, and learning about jobs through activities in the program were more engaged, as were youth who found the staff caring and competent... In addition, there was a trend suggesting that providing a monetary incentive was associated negatively with youth engagement. Taken as a whole, these findings have important implications for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in understanding the characteristics of out-of-school time programs that engage older youth.

Researchers and practitioners need to give real consideration to youth engagement if they want programs to succeed. Mere participation does not produce the same results as genuine engagement. These results also point to the importance of staff quality for program quality, the topic addressed in the next section.

Staff Quality

Research has repeatedly indicated that staff quality is an important aspect of program quality. This is a challenging area for the afterschool field, however, given the common lack of training, generally low pay and high turnover across the field. Recently, an examination of a large urban program (Frazier, et al., 2021) revealed that staff proficiency and stress were the factors that contributed most to program quality and that positive parent and child perceptions of the program correlated with fewer staff-reported problem behaviors. These findings suggest that investment in staff may be an important area of focus.

Devaney, Smith and Wong (2012) demonstrated that program leadership is an essential component of program quality and that funders should invest more in advancing leadership. Many leaders in OST began their careers as front-line workers and moved up into leadership positions without any formal training. An intervention was developed that included leadership training for program leaders along with technical assistance for programs. It also involved observation of program activity by outside researchers and feedback on what they found. The authors stated that “the Weikart Center, in a rare experimental study of a continuous improvement intervention in an educational context, examined the effectiveness of the [Youth Program Quality Intervention] (YPQI) in 87 afterschool programs in five states. Results show[ed]

that the YPQI had a substantial and statistically significant effect on both the continuous improvement practices of site managers and the instructional practice of front-line staff.” These findings indicate the promise of leadership training for trickle-down effects on staff and suggest that it is worth investing in leadership for ASPs.

Rajan and Basch (2012) examined a health-education program for girls being carried out across the US and Canada. They argued that fidelity of implementation is an essential factor in program quality and that programs should include assessment of program fidelity when evaluating programs and their outcomes. Fidelity of implementation is reliant on staff for success, along with quality leadership.

Smith, et al. (2012) promoted a continuous improvement approach to afterschool program quality. This is a cyclical approach in which all parties involved receive regular feedback and coaching, along with opportunities to practice and improve. Using data from a three-year study, the authors argued that an essential place to focus effort is quality of instruction because experiences that promote engagement and skill building will lead to the best youth outcomes.

Hirsch, Deutsch and DuBois (2011) engaged in case study research to examine what factors mattered most for program quality and to find how best to improve program outcomes. They stated the following:

we outline a strategy for continuous quality improvement for after-school centers that grows out of our research ...[W]e emphasize organizational-level initiatives for staff development and program improvement. An organizational response has the potential to benefit the most staff and youth and thus gives the biggest possible bang for the buck. This approach creates structures and processes that make strategic use of staff strengths.

They argue that investment in staff will maximize returns and improve program quality for all participants.

Sinisterra and Baker (2010) described the successful implementation of a quality improvement system. They highlighted the importance of allowing time for longitudinal analysis and adjustments of the evaluation system along with staff training to ensure that programs can successfully move toward essential high-quality elements such as participant-staff relationships and youth engagement.

In 2009, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners were already pushing for better measures of program quality and practices for accountability that looked at what was happening at the point of service. Yohalem, Granger and Pittman (2009) made recommendations for different constituents to work more closely together to seek better outcomes for programs. They stated

We have an opportunity to refine and expand approaches to quality improvement using lessons from practice and research, with a particular

emphasis on improving measures, integrating information, and strengthening supervision. From a policy perspective, quality can become further embedded in the accountability movement in ways that support program improvement by focusing attention on and directing resources toward the point of service.

Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie and Connell (2010) examined the relation of multiple facets of programs and the quality of afterschool experiences to determine which aspects of programs have the most influence and to determine the impact of the programs on participants. The authors state “measures of quality of management and climate, participant responsiveness, and staffing stability were most clearly associated with youth experiences.” This highlights once again, the centrality of high-quality staffing and leadership for program quality.

In a detailed study of a single program, Daud and Carruthers (2008) noted “after-school programs have been found to develop resilience in adolescents by providing opportunities for growth, increasing academic achievement, providing a safe environment, creating supportive and significant relationships, and keeping youth out of harm’s way.” This study used interviews and observation to collect data on staff behavior and participant perception of outcomes. “Four outcomes were expressed both by the youth participants and after-school coordinators. These outcomes included: experienced a nurturing and enjoyable environment; learned positive values and behavior; tried new activities and learned new things, thus developing a perception of competence; and started to develop a positive plan for the future.” It is clear from that list that staff play a central role in allowing the program to achieve these outcomes. The authors summarize thus:

although it was clear from the interviews that the program provided the youth with important developmental assets or resources, the interviews and field observations suggested that only a minority of the staff offered the “optimal” level of nurturance, opportunities for character development, competence building, and future planning to the youth participants. The after-school program may have been much more powerful and influential if all of the after-school staff had played a greater role in the facilitation of positive developmental outcomes.

These findings indicate a need for highly trained staff who are committed to the intended outcomes of a program in order to maximize results. Gutierrez, Bradshaw and Furono (2008) created a toolkit that lays out four key steps in an ongoing cycle of program improvement: training, observation, coaching and analysis, which must be engaged in continuously in order to make meaningful change. This requires significant commitment to program staff as an essential resource in the field of afterschool.

Barriers to Quality

Blyth (2011) presented an overview of the state of the afterschool field, stating:

Based on trends and events observed or experienced by the author over the last 30 years in research, evaluation and practice, this article examines three challenges facing and shaping the future of youth programs as contexts for development. The first challenge surrounds how the field comes to understand, value and integrate different forms of knowing -- particularly quantitative data. The second challenge represents how the field shifts from proving it makes a difference to improving the ways it makes a difference by expanding the pathways to impact. The third challenge regards how the field responds to and shapes accountability pressures in ways that better align accountability rather than succumb to it. Implications of each challenge for effectively bridging research and practice are noted.

The following section examines the research and evidence available regarding barriers to program quality and the progress made over the last decade and a half.

Lack of Research

A barrier to developing and maintaining quality programs is measurement, largely because of the resources required. In response to this issue, Lamm, Pike, Edgar and Powell (2022) developed a single-factor scale to measure the impacts of 4-H programming across the country. This measure asks only for participant perceptions of experiences of the programs. It does not involve site or program observation or any input from staff. The advantage of this tool is it is simple to administer and score and designed to be administered anywhere; disadvantages are its lack of nuance and lack of alternate perspectives.

It is widely agreed that a barrier to program quality is the lack of high-quality research in the field. According to Christensen (2021):

The number of after-school programs in the U.S. has grown considerably over the past three decades, fueled in part by increased demands from working parents and increased funding. After-school programs often provide youth with a safer alternative to unstructured time while providing a context for building skills and forging positive relationships with program staff and peers. Research suggests that these programs may be particularly effective for youth with marginalized identities, including youth of color and youth from low-income backgrounds. Despite this promise, there has been a relative lack of rigorous empirical research on the effects of after-school programs on a wide range of youth outcomes. Relatively few rigorous evaluations of after-school programs have been conducted and there have been even fewer systematic reviews and meta-analyses, particularly those investigating the effects of after-school programs on youth with marginalized identities

A specific weakness of afterschool research is that many studies consider only the quantity of participation (attendance or dosage) rather than the quality of the programming to predict

program outcomes. This author (Liu, 2021) argues that studies of the effects of programs should examine the quality of afterschool experiences to find more meaningful effects.

Another issue with afterschool research is that it often looks for outcomes in the form only of improved academic achievement. In their 2020 article, Philp and Gill had previously argued “Given their non-academic benefits, we recommend that policy makers and researchers reframe their understanding of after-school programs to support more equitable outcomes for marginalized youth.” They state that in measuring impacts, emphasis must be placed on non-academic outcomes such as SEL, engagement, relationships and behavior.

A barrier to implementing high quality programs can be a lack of adequate research on characteristics and outcomes of interest. It can be challenging for program leaders and staff to locate, access and interpret the research that exists. Neild, Wilson and McClanahan (2019) utilized the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) framework for assessing the quality of research and evaluation of afterschool programs and made recommendations to compromise when necessary because even the lower tiers of research provide better information than no research. They recommended that programs look for top tier research specific to outcomes of interest when making decisions about programs or program components to implement; this is because few programs show positive results across the board. (It is also the case that few show negative results, or harm, for participants.) Challenges for programs can be a lack of top tier (Tier I: Strong or Tier II: Moderate) research related to their particular needs and interests (demographics, location, content, etc.) but even tiers III and IV (Promising and Provides a Rationale) can be valuable. The authors recommended that states encourage programs to engage in top tier research and evaluation in order to add to the body of work available but indicated that states are justified in allowing programs to make use of and engage in Tier III and IV research and evaluation until such time as there is ample top tier evidence to draw on.

Hirsch (2019) states that significant progress has been made in terms of quality research conducted on afterschool programs and these results contribute to the science of development and to program improvement. However, he argues there are missed opportunities because the results are equally useful for making a case for funding from government or private sources but are rarely used for such purposes.

McDaniel and Yarbrough (2016) review existing research on afterschool mentoring programs and make recommendations for future practice. The authors indicate that mentoring programs can have positive effects on participants and identify eight key areas of quality mentoring programs that any established or new program should strive to meet. In addition, the authors highlight the challenges in the field to date given how little research has been conducted.

Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2016), agree that a lack of research presents a challenge to the field of afterschool. They state that a fundamental problem in researching and developing quality programs is the lack of a clear definition of what is and is not a youth development program. They distinguish between programming with an explicit goal of youth development compared

to programming that merely serves youth. They note challenges in researching and developing quality programs such as a lack of understanding of how program context affects processes and outcomes and how various contexts of individual youth's lives impact their experiences of programming. These authors call for more experimental and quasi-experimental research on youth development programs because this type of research is more likely to be accepted by researchers in other fields and by policy-makers.

Baldwin, Stromwall and Wilder (2015) noted a mismatch between features emphasized and researched by programs and those required by states, funders or agencies. This issue presents a challenge for decision-making when faced with limited resources.

In an effort to improve research in the field, Oh, Osgood and Smith (2015) explored the possibility of using standardized evaluation tools to measure the outcomes of afterschool programs. They utilized two existing observation scales, the Caregiver Interaction Scales (CIS) and Promising Practices Rating Scales (PPRS). They justified their approach thus:

Well-validated setting-level measurement tools can be used for both research and practice purposes. For research, they can be used to enhance our understanding of how afterschool programs work and how to make them work better. For practice, validated measurement tools can be used to provide program directors and staff information about areas of strengths and weaknesses in their practice and to give them practical guidance on what changes should be made to better serve their students. This will help hold afterschool programs accountable for ongoing assessment of their practice and continuous improvement...Furthermore, we found that the factor structure differed little between programs serving primarily disadvantaged, urban, and minority populations and those serving mainly advantaged non-minority populations in suburban and rural settings. This result suggests that these instruments may have relatively broad applicability for afterschool settings.

The authors found that while these two standardized tools were promising for evaluation and research in afterschool programs, an issue that arose was day-to-day variability in quality of programs, meaning that programs were inconsistent in their scores even over short periods of time which might impact participants' experiences and, ultimately, the outcomes of the programs.

In terms of areas needing research, Sullivan (2012) argued that parents' perspectives should be taken into account when measuring program quality. In her study, parents' ratings of programs were considerably higher than outside observers' but they were closely correlated, which suggests parents may have realistic insights to program quality even if baseline scores differ.

Hirsch (2011) argued that despite the fact that significant amounts of research have been conducted and articles published, there is a dearth of high-quality research, particularly on the

subject of how schools and afterschool programs can work together to improve outcomes for youth.

Regarding a specific topic of research, Lerner, et al. (2011) discussed the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework and examined whether it was being fruitfully applied to programming. They found that there was often a disconnect between the idea of PYD and the actual application. This results from a lack of high quality and deliberate research in this area and from the challenges facing ASPs such as funding and staffing issues.

Mahoney, Parente and Zigler (2010) argue for a bioecological approach to studying participation in and effects of afterschool programming. They describe such an approach thus:

First, participation in [afterschool programs (ASPs)] can influence the school-related success and well-being of the whole child, including: academic performance and the motivational attributes that support cognitive growth; interpersonal competencies and social relationships; psychological well-being; and physical health. Second, the extent to which participation in ASPs has positive consequences for schooling and development requires that characteristics of the child, features of the program, and the broader ecological settings of which the child is a part (e.g., family, school, and neighborhood) be considered and assessed over time. Both propositions underscore the need for a bioecological perspective...to understand relations between ASP participation and children's schooling and development.

This kind of holistic approach to examining the quality and effects of afterschool programming presents genuine challenges in the field because of limited resources. Programs with the best of intentions for studying the quality and impacts of their work are often limited by time constraints, funding limitations or lack of staff expertise.

Focus of Programs

Another area that presents barriers to program quality is the focus or emphasis of the programs themselves. For a variety of reasons, programs find it challenging to offer optimal experiences for youth. For example, in her article, Philp (2022) demonstrates how much potential afterschool programs have to positively influence adolescent development but she argues that stakeholders are too often focused on caregiving and basic academic skills which are areas with less potential to positively impact youth compared to identity development, civic engagement or prosocial behavior. Programs are constrained by the basic needs of their participants and are thus unable to engage in higher level activities with them or provide highly engaging opportunities.

In a similar way, Quinn's (2022) research suggests, as has other research, that if programming is not tailored to the needs and desires of potential participants, it is not going to maximize its influence and result in measurable positive outcomes. Quinn found "that the central challenge

facing the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program—consistently low rates of student participation—can be addressed only by listening to the voices of young people and responding to their desire for engagement and challenge in out-of-schooltime programs.”

In considering barriers to quality, McNamara, Akiva and Delale-O’Connor (2020) set out to study opportunity gaps in the afterschool setting. Across 30 programs they found no difference in quality of staff-child interactions but they did find that staff serving low-income populations had less experience and education. Also, programs serving black or low-income populations tended to offer more academic programming. These results suggest that different populations may experience variability in programming that could lead to different outcomes. This is especially concerning when we now know that the areas in which afterschool may have the most influence are not academic.

Staff Resources

Peter (2023) argues that a barrier to improving out-of-school-time (OST), broadly speaking, is the lack of “critical foundational workforce supports—clear entry points, opportunities for advancement, fair compensation and continuous professional development.” She points out that youth development workers enter the field through multiple pathways and have highly variable levels of education. She suggests that programs must take a customized approach to offering professional development and advancement in order to develop the most qualified staff possible and retain those individuals in the long-term. These approaches to staff development, while positive, are not always realistic given the constraints programs face (e.g., budgetary and time).

In thinking about professional development, Cappella and Godfrey (2019) argue the professionals and paraprofessionals who work daily with youth in low-resource, marginalized communities are integral to youth wellbeing; yet, their professional development, and the factors that promote it, are not well understood. Furthermore, if we want to reach more youth in afterschool programs with more impact, we need to closely study and work to improve those aspects of the programs most likely to produce youth outcomes (Smith and Bradshaw, 2017). For example, program facilitators need ongoing training to reinforce prosocial behavior, reduce problem behaviors and promote psychological flexibility.

Baldwin and Wilder (2014) discuss some issues related to staffing and staff development and highlight areas in need of further research:

Similar to the dilemmas identified by [other researchers], managing the structural features of staff and space were on going and dynamic sources of tension. Some of these challenging structural issues of program implementation have been described in the literature, but how they are managed or resolved by site based leadership needs further study. The content of programming was also an issue. The content problems were associated with front-line youth workers’

mixed abilities to design daily engaging activities and site coordinators' programming guidance and management of the activity content...

These authors highlight challenges around staff preparation and program leadership. On a related topic, in a literature review, Doran (2014) found that the following features of high quality programs were most often recommended: high quality staff, low participant to staff ratios and quality instruction. These may, indeed, be features of high-quality programs but there are barriers to achieving these features, most notably funding for sufficient staff to achieve low participant to staff ratios. The field of OST faces significant challenges in the areas of professional development (PD) and quality staff, particularly related to access to PD and high turnover in the field.

Based on research that closely examined the instructional practices of staff at a set of afterschool programs, Smith, Peck, Denault, Blazeovski and Akiva (2010) stated the following:

For the after-school field, our findings suggest that for youth development programs to deliver on their promise and public investment, many after-school staff could use more intentional youth work pedagogies, building from relationships to interactions with people and materials and finally to higher order cognitive engagement with program content. If our profiles of staff practices reflect access to key developmental experiences, then the experiences of youth in many after-school programs represent missed opportunities. For example, 33% of staff in our sample failed to cultivate a sense of warmth and inclusion during the offerings that they led.

Despite these missed opportunities, 28% of staff in our study demonstrated use of an identifiable positive youth development pedagogy, representing a substantial professional skill base in a field frequently singled out for its high rates of transience and lack of professional norms. Further, almost all of the offerings sampled included welcoming and inclusive staff who delivered the basic characteristics of active learning and got involved with youth during the offering. These are clear signs of a youth work pedagogy that is intentionally designed to deliver key developmental experiences during staff led program offerings, the developmental crucible of the after-school field.

Their findings indicate both significant potential areas for growth in the afterschool field, as well as areas of existing strength.

Conclusion

A variety of research exists that shows the capacity of AS to effect positive change in a variety of areas: academic, social emotional and behavioral among them, although a fair amount of evidence suggests that its greatest potential lies outside the academic realm. One significant challenge for the field of afterschool has been relative inconsistency in findings related to program outcomes. The field has been troubled by some research showing mixed or no effects of such programming; however, many would argue these

findings could be blamed on research design or execution rather than the programs themselves. The field does face a number of challenges to developing and maintaining high quality programs including lack of resources, high staff turnover and insufficient definitive and high-quality research. At the same time, evidence clearly points to areas to which the field could turn its attention with real success, such as relationships, youth engagement and staff quality, along with improving research efforts. Overall, the AS field has much potential as evidenced by the research and publications presented in this review.

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