A Safe Place to Learn and Grow: Fostering Youth Social Skills in Afterschool Programs

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The benefit of afterschool programs in preventing risky behaviors and promoting healthy development in children is well established. Afterschool programs that seek to develop life skills, such as social skills in youth have been shown to improve academic outcomes. How are these life skills developed in out of school contexts? This chapter describes the perspectives of 27 afterschool program practitioners (Program Directors, Site Directors and Line Staff) from five afterschool programs in California on the promising strategies for promoting life skill development in youth. How social life skills that may improve academic outcomes are developed in youth is highlighted in our study.

The benefit of afterschool programs in preventing risky behaviors and promoting healthy development in children is well established (Children Now Report Card, 2004). In recent years, the emphasis on academic standards in K-12 education due to legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act (Wenning, Herdman, Smith, McMahon & Washington, 2003), has resulted in new opportunities for afterschool programs to demonstrate improved academic outcomes among their participants (Simpkins, 2003). In California, this movement prompted the California Department of Education's After School Education and Safety Program (ASES) to require that programs deliver an educational and literacy element and an educational enrichment element (California Department of Education, 2008). Consequently, programs funded by California Department of Education responded by implementing tutoring and/or intensified academic focus and reduced the emphasis on overall life skills development in youth (Massachusetts 2020, 2004).

For students who are not doing well academically in school, intensified remedial academic work in afterschool programs such as tutoring has been shown to be less effective in improving academic outcomes than programs that also include life skills development (Massachusetts 2020, 2004). In afterschool programs that develop life skills in youth, increased academic outcomes included improved homework completion and quality, improved grades, higher scores on achievement tests, and reductions in grade retention (Miller, 2003). Similarly, in a review of several afterschool program evaluations, Lauer, Akiba, Apthorp, Snow & Martin-Glenn (2006) concluded that afterschool programs have positive effects on student achievement when they included activities that were both academic and social.

In this chapter, our research on life skills is guided by Dr. Patricia Hendricks' (1998) definition of life skills, where she identified life skills as abilities youth learn that will them to successful in living a productive and satisfying life. Authors also draw on the Search Institute's framework of forty "developmental assets" considered to be positive factors for healthy youth development, which

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complements Hendrick's life skills (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2003). Using an interpretivist approach researchers conducted a qualitative and exploratory study to answer the following question, namely, how do afterschool providers develop life skills in youth that may promote academic success?

Effective Afterschool Program Practices to Promote Life Skills in Youth

Youth participation in afterschool programs often results in improved student achievement (Huang, 2000, Miller, 2003). One of the contributing factors that support youth's improved academic outcomes is the development of social skills in youth in the context of afterschool programs (Durlak & Weisberg, 2007). Caring relationships among adults, adults and youth, and among youth facilitate the development of social life skills in youth and is also one of the critical elements of effective programs to support academic success (O'Donnell & Michalak, 2002; Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 1999; Dworkin, Larson, Hansen, 2003; King, Vidourek, Davis, & McCellan, 2002; Rhodes, 2004; Birmingham et al, 2005; Rieg, 2007).

Careful staff selection of a person that can foster these nurturing relationships may be the single most important factor in providing a consistent nurturing presence in a young person's life (Garmezy, 1991; Miller, 2003; Pianta, 1999; Rutter, 1985; Vandell, Reisner, Brown, Pierce, Dadisman, & Pechman, 1996; Werner, 1993). Selection of staff who have passion, respect and concrete skills for working with young people (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006), influence youth to perceive adults as caring and supportive mentors (Dworkin et al, 2002). Afterschool programs provide special and unique opportunities for peer youth mentoring due to the multiple age groups present. Peer mentors serve as a positive role model for younger youth while providing emotional and social support and academic assistance for the mentee (King et al, 2002).

The literature described thus far provides insights into the importance of adult-youth and peer relationships that develop social skills in youth that may improve academic outcomes. However, questions about how these social skills are developed in youth to improve academic outcomes have not been adequitely addressed. In this chapter, the authors describe how caring relationships with adults and peer mentors in the context of afterschool programs facilitate the development of social life skills in youth that may improve academic outcomes.

METHODS

This study was conducted from May 2005 to June 2006. Interview protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Davis. Authors employed reputational sampling to survey afterschool programs to determine which programs placed an emphasis on developing life skills in children that may promote academic outcomes.

Sample

The research team initially mailed a survey to 30 afterschool programs using the networks of Cooperative Extension staff in California. Twenty-six programs responded of which 13 indicated they aimed to improve academics by developing life skills, and expressed an interest in participating in the study.

The authors selected five programs that were representative of the rich programmatic, organizational, structural and geographic diversity in California's afterschool programs to participate in the study. All programs served diverse and low-income children. Two programs represented Afterschool programs from southern California, while three were from northern California. The number of afterschool sites managed by each organization ranged from two to 31, with youth participation ranging from 85 to 3363. Three programs served school aged children, while two sites also provided pre-school care.

The interviews were conducted by three 4-H Youth Development Advisors with the University of California Cooperative Extension, in teams of two interviewers. One interviewer conducted all interviews to provide consistency in the interview method. Authors conducted interviews with five Program Directors, 10 Site Directors and 12 Line Staff. Program Directors' educational background and experience varied including former classroom teacher and assistant superintendent, former nurse with a master's degree in education, a person with

extensive youth development experience, and someone with masters in psychology. Site Directors' range of experience and education was similar to that of Program Directors. Line Staff's education and experience was more varied than the other two groups. Their experiences ranged across computer knowledge, dance, cooking and literacy. One Line Staff was also a school teacher during the day and one Line Staff had been a youth participant in the same afterschool program where she worked.

Data

The selected afterschool programs were asked to provide written documentation about their programs and to self-select two sites that best demonstrated successful practices of bridging life and academic skills. Program Directors were interviewed individually, and group interviews were conducted with Site Directors and Line Staff.

Grounded theory was used as a research framework for this study. Grounded theory involves using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and the interrelationship of categories of information (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As a result, each afterschool program employee responded to detailed and specific questions asked of them whose responses and non-verbal communication were hand recorded by the interview team as well as audio recorded and transcribed. After conducting the first two interviews, researchers refined the interview question to better capture the information being sought. Lastly, interviewers prepared a written interview summary that recorded contextual or situational nuances for each interview.

Participant observations were conducted by two authors for 30 minutes at each site, while youth and staff engaged in educational experiences to observe how life skills were developed in youth. While the afterschool programs in this study explicitly stated that one of their program's foci was life skill development in youth with the intention of improving academic outcomes, these programs did not have program evaluations that supported this claim.

Analysis

The research team employed qualitative methods and inductive analysis, as this research was exploratory, oriented toward discovery, and aimed to capture promising program practices. Grounded theory was used to triangulate the data, "two primary characteristics of this design are the constant comparison of data with emerging categories and theoretical sampling of different groups to maximize the similarities and the differences of information" (Strauss & Corbin in Creswell, 2003, p. 14). The findings were categorized along the primary question addressed by this study. Researchers then returned to the data to assess the most salient examples of strategies afterschool providers used to develop life skills that may promote academic outcomes.

RESULTS

The afterschool programs in this study provided low-income and diverse youth approximately one hour for homework, followed by enrichment activities. Programs emphasized the need to deliver a balanced program between homework, enrichment, physical activity and nutritious snacks.

This section describes the perspectives of afterschool program staff on life skills development in youth. Line Staff described developing positive and healthy relationships as being the most essential life skill to foster in youth. Directors spoke of the importance of hiring the "right" person that was caring and passionate to facilitate the development of relationship building. To foster relationships, staff spoke of the importance of creating a safe place for children to foster a sense of belonging and nurturing relationships. These elements of relationship building will be further explored in the following paragraphs.

A Safe Place to Learn and Grow

During our interviews, afterschool administrators were asked to describe the components of their program they were most proud of. Most administrators indicated that creating a physical and emotionally safe space was one of their top priorities, and talked at great lengths about how they accomplished this. Giving youth a sense of physical safety in an afterschool program involved several practices. This was exemplified in a comment by another staff who stated, *"a place to go, also where they can learn and grow and it's not just babysitting, you know the quality program where they can grow."*

Program Directors expressed that the process of creating and fostering emotional safety begins with program staff. Staff expressed the importance of creating emotionally safe places for their participants and developing meaningful relationships with children as ways to promote a sense of belonging. Furthermore, directors and staff described their programs' missions as explicitly identifying the creation of safe environments. This was one of the instances where directors and staff articulated and embraced the same essential components of the program. Practitioners described how a safe afterschool environment contributed to improved academic outcomes and stated that creating an environment that is non-threatening, where children feel safe to ask questions and confide in staff about their problems created a place where children can "learn and grow".

Staff Mentoring Youth

Developing nurturing relationships between staff and youth were described by practitioners as an important factor that contributed to improved academic outcomes. Staff readily described how they provided nurturing relationships to youth, yet not all of them could articulate how these relationships may improve academic outcomes. In terms of expressing the importance of relationship building, a Program Director shared that the most important thing they do is develop and strengthen relationships with kids. Afterschool Program Staff *"are someone safe to talk to, it's not mom, it's not the teacher, it's not the Principal, they call me coach…they're in your corner kind of feel. That's kind of what we provide, is that non-threatening person you can talk to provides you with stuff. You know intangible stuff… we connect with kids."* Staff went on to describe that the program provides youth with the opportunity to feel like they belong and further engages them in their environment; while at the same time creating a sense of connection. When pressed on how this sense of connection may improve academic outcomes, staff stated that by virtue of feeling connected to the program, youth learn to express what they need and what they do not understand. A staff person stated: *"…because of the open communication that we have with the kids and that they still let us know what they need…they're able to go to the teacher and say I don't understand this. I need this and this. So they are getting their needs met in the classroom."*

In a program in southern California, staff explicitly described the connection between the development of social life skills and improved academic outcomes. Staff expressed that once the relationship between staff and youth is established, they were able to coach youth through goal setting and by presenting probing questions that help youth improve academically. Staff coached youth on goal setting for better grades, to graduate from junior high school, and where they want to be in five years. The practice of probing questions was also used at another site in the northern California where staff coached youth by asking questions such as; *"…so how can you do that differently; okay so you didn't get a good grade on the test so what do we need to do to get there; how do we do [it]..*"

Authors consistently observed afterschool providers striving to foster a caring, nurturing adult relationship with youth in their programs in an effort to improve their academic outcomes. At one site researchers visited, afterschool program staff encouraged kids to work hard, to graduate from high school with the promise of attending their graduation. A Line Staff from another site said *"I saw that it [spending one-on-one time] was helping him to feel secure and be able to do things in the classroom"*.

Peer Mentoring

Our analyses identified peer mentoring as one of the conditions for relationship building that promoted life skills development in youth. Authors identified and observed this strategy in all of the afterschool programs, even though the way it manifested itself in programs varied among program sites. One program created a formal structure (i.e. intentional, regular, orderly) to promote peer mentoring, while the rest of the programs offered an informal structure (i.e. casual, non-systematic). One program established a formal interaction between the middle and high school afterschool programs to create an environment that encouraged peer-to-peer mentorship and peer role-modeling. This created an environment where *"the older kids rise to the occasion and they kind of mentor and bring the young ones along and the young*

ones they want to be like the older ones. They're not going to mess with them. They are going to try and emulate those kids so it actually kind of works very well." The informal approach involved using older teens at random to lead activities or to teach younger children. They focused on the importance of positive friendships and peer relationships with the hopes that by having friends who are high achievers kids will avoid gangs, drug use, and be high achievers themselves.

At another site, Line Staff described how group activities encourage group and social interaction among youth that allowed them the opportunity to work together and learn from one another. This person observed that *"when youth work together such as in staging a play, they are able to get ideas from one another, there is an interaction, they have discussions where they can go back and forth with one another, and they also learn to work with others – all of these skills are beneficial for when youth get older and have real jobs where they have to learn to work with others."* The program director shared that teachers have told him that after the kids participated in the afterschool program's play, they came back to class more engaged.

DISCUSSION

In this study authors sought to identify the promising practices that afterschool providers use to develop life skills in youth that may promote academic success. The practice of selecting caring staff that develop a safe learning environment for youth, where staff foster caring relationships among staff and youth, were instrumental in developing social skills in youth that may result in improved academic outcomes.

It is not surprising to find that fostering and cultivating relationships is an integral component of Afterschool programs. It is through these mentoring roles that adults and/or youth fulfill the role of coach, friend, and confidant for youth, which in turn helps to create a sense of belonging and create safe places for youth. (Herrera, Sipe, McClanahan, Abreton, & Pepper, 2000). It is in these nurturing relationships that participating youth increased their sense of belonging in the program and their comfort level that was then applied in the classroom. Developing organizational structures in programs such as staff selection, mentoring, and relationship building are identified as techniques that foster a sense of belonging in youth that helps them navigate school. (Moore, Bronte-Tinkew & Collins, 2010). It is evident in our analysis that purposeful staff selection was particularly effective in hiring staff capable of intentionally developing and fostering caring relationships with youth.

While Program Directors and administrators stated that their programs did bridge life skill development and academic outcomes, they only provided anecdotal data to support these claims. Some Line Staff were able to explicitly state how social skill development improved academic outcomes by helping children become more engaged in school, learning to ask questions in the classroom and practicing goal setting to improve grades and planning for future education goals. Other staff seemed unsure of the connection between these two programmatic emphases. The varying perspectives from staff on how life skills development is an end in and of itself, versus it is a way to improving academic outcomes describes a possible disconnect in communication and between Directors and Line Staff.

This inconsistent message provided by Directors and Line Staff pertaining to how life skills bridge academic outcomes for youth may also illustrate the disparity between what seems to be program ideals versus actual program implementation. That is to say that the statements provided by Directors could be perceived as the place where the program aims to be whereas the statements provided by the Line Staff describe where the program actually is. Hence, although the Directors speak of intentionality in life skill development to promote academic outcomes, it appears that the level of intentionality among Line Staff is varied and depends primarily on the individual. This brings us back to the importance of careful staff selection.

It would be interesting to explore how and why certain structural and/or programmatic emphasis are either a point of convergence or not among Directors and Staff as they pertain to life skill development in youth to improve academic outcomes. In our study, Staff and Directors agreed that creating a safe place to learn and grow was important for youth, yet as stated

above they did not always agree on the level of intentionality of developing life skills to improve academic outcomes. Exploring these inconsistencies will strengthen programs and improve developmental and academic outcomes for youth.

CONCLUSION

Our study focused on identifying the promising practices that afterschool providers use to develop life skills that may promote academic success. As mentioned in the methods section, researchers trusted that when afterschool programs stated that they focused on life skill development in youth to improve academic outcomes, that their program evaluations would support this statement. However, since authors found no rigorous evidence of this, we cannot infer that the life skill development in these programs lead to improved academic outcomes, instead we offer the perspective of afterschool practitioners on how participating youth do improve academically. Our examination of life skill development across diverse afterschool programs allowed us to elicit the importance of developing organizational structures to foster relationships among staff and youth as a critical element in fostering social life skills in youth.

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