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The Quality of After-School Centers

Youth programs can be found in abundance throughout our communities. Nowhere, however, are they more prevalent than in the after-school arena. The past decade has witnessed explosive growth in after-school programs. The federal government launched a billion-dollar initiative, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers. California's Proposition 49 channeled more than 400 million additional dollars to after-school programs.[1] Several major foundations have put after-school programs at the core of their concerns. And city after city is scaling up its after-school programs.[2] Much of this growth has involved after-school centers that typically are home to a wide array of programs and services. These include the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, which more than doubled the number of its clubs, from 1,800 in 1997 to 4,000 in 2008. Clearly there is a push to make after-school programs part of the educational and youth services infrastructure. We believe in the promise of after-school programs but also are concerned about the pitfalls. We have seen both good programs and bad programs, strong centers and weak centers. It is critical to understand the factors that lead to quality and to positive youth outcomes if the after-school movement is to be built on a solid foundation.

It is easy to appreciate the push for more after-school programming. This is especially true for the school-age adolescents in low-income urban communities who we studied in this research. These young people need to cope with violence and poor schools on

[1] The expansion is discussed by Ames (2007).
[2] Holleman, Sundius, & Bruns (2010); Noam and Miller (2002)

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a daily basis.[3] Job opportunities are often few and far between. Adult role models can be in short supply as the middle class has largely abandoned these neighborhoods, many men are in prison, and parents often have work shifts that leave little time for guidance and support. After-school programs hope to step into these gaps and supplement what youth receive from family and school.[4]

Becoming an adolescent involves entering a period of increased susceptibility to emotional and behavioral problems as well as disconnection from school.[5] But adolescence is not just a time of increased risk. Other hallmarks of adolescence – experimentation with possible identities, exploration of new roles, intimacy in relationships, and concern with the future – bring with them important opportunities for growth. Increasingly, researchers and practitioners who work with teens are doing so within the frame of "positive youth development." This lens emphasizes the strengths that youth bring with them to the table, examining how contexts can support the development of characteristics such as character, confidence, connections, and competence.[6]

Good after-school programs and the centers that are home to them can provide the nurturance and challenge that young people crave. The adult staff, often of the same race and ethnic background, can appreciate the youth's life circumstances and provide mentoring, with plentiful amounts of warmth, encouragement, and

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[3] Juvenile arrests are heavily concentrated during the after-school time period of 3–6 PM (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999), suggesting that during this time youth are most vulnerable to being victims as well as most likely to be perpetrators.

[4] For an excellent discussion of how after-school programs can link to school goals and curricula, see Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay (2003). Low-income, minority youth are less involved in after-school activities than their wealthier, suburban counterparts (Pedersen & Seidman, 2005).

[5] See, e.g., Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler, and Angold (2003); Laird, DeBell, Kienzl, and Chapman (2007); Rumberger (1987); Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, and Feinman (1994). The effects of poverty are especially evident in the educational domain. Rates of proficiency in reading and mathematics among 8th-graders from low-income families (13% in each subject) are well below half that among those from more economically advantaged families (35% and 39%, respectively; Perie, Grigg, & Dion, 2005; Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005); similarly, students from low-income families are six times more likely to drop out of school (Laird et al., 2007). These figures do not capture the effects of being a student in an urban school, which data suggest compound the effects of family income level (Lutkus, Weiner, Daane, & Jin, 2003).

[6] Important work on positive youth development approaches include Hamilton & Hamilton (2004b); Lerner (2004); Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith (2003).

guidance. Staff can demonstrate positive values in action, show-
ing by example how acting responsibly elicits respect.[7] Centers can
offer challenging programs and activities that promote learning and
developmental growth as well as teach young people how to nav-
igate dangerous situations. The safe environment of a high-quality
center can shelter youth from violence, keep them out of trouble,
and give them a chance to develop the knowledge, skills, and atti-
tudes that they need as a foundation for adult life.

Most after-school programs have focused on younger,
elementary-school age youth. So, too, has much of the research. By
focusing on older youth in this study, our aim was to learn more
about how after-school programs and centers can effectively engage
adolescents and help prepare them for a successful transition to
adulthood.

On balance, initial findings from evaluations of the effects of after-
school programs are promising. In a recent meta-analysis, which
involves a statistical synthesis of quantitative research studies,
Joseph Durlak, Roger Weissberg, and Molly Pachan found evidence
that after-school programs had positive effects on a range of psy-
chosocial and academic outcomes, such as youths' self-esteem and
self-confidence, school bonding, grades, and problem behavior.[8]
A National Research Council report also emphasized an array of
positive evaluation findings.[9] Although these reviews are encourag-
ing, they cannot be regarded as definitive. Only a few studies met the
highest standard of evaluation research: a true experimental study
in which youth are randomly assigned to either an after-school pro-
gram or a control group. Many of the studies that were reviewed
did not examine traditional after-school programs, but rather highly
structured prevention programs. Moreover, some high-profile stud-
ies of after-school programs did not find effects;[10] even though those
studies may have flaws, one should not ignore the warning flags that
they raise.

[7] Deutsch (2008); Hirsch (2005).
[8] Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachen (2010).
[9] National Research Council (2002).
[10] See, e.g., the evaluation of the 21st Center Community Learning Centers Program
(Dynarski et al., 2003; James-Burdumy, Dynarski, & Deke, 2007, 2008). See also
Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell (2010) for an experimental evalu-
ation of an after-school program for middle-school students that did not find
significant results.

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We also are cautioned by how little is known about why some after-school programs are effective and others are not. This is known as the "black box" problem and it arises regarding lots of different kinds of interventions, not just after-school programs. In essence, we may know the basics of what goes into the box – the kinds and numbers of youth, the general type of program to which they are presumably exposed – and what comes out of the box – youth outcomes – but have little detailed knowledge of what happens inside the program. Clearly, not all after-school programs or centers are created equal. Some programs may be inherently superior to others by virtue of how they are designed, such as providing just the right level of developmental challenge combined with optimal approaches to instruction.[11] In the meta-analysis referred to earlier, for example, those after-school programs that included sequential, active forms of learning and an explicit focus on developing personal or social skills had notably larger effects on outcomes.[12]

Of equal if not greater importance is the quality of program implementation. Implementation research is essential to uncovering what goes on inside the black box.[13] When implementation is studied at all, the focus is typically on dosage, or the frequency of attendance in prescribed activities. Being exposed to more program activities – a higher dosage – is typically associated with improved outcomes.[14] It is more time consuming and difficult to study how skillfully activities are implemented on the ground. As a result, fewer of these studies have been conducted. It is hard to imagine, however, that this would not be a critical factor in program effectiveness. In our earlier research with after-school programs, we documented widespread problems in how carefully and competently program elements were implemented by Boys & Girls Club staff.[15] Accordingly, we devote considerable attention to the quality of program implementation in the new research reported here.

Careful examination of program design and implementation is essential for determining how, when, and for whom intervention

[11] Vygotsky (1978) would refer to the need to be in the zone of proximal development.
[12] Durlak et al. (2010).
[13] See Durlak and DuPre (2008) for a good discussion of implementation research.
[14] Gottfredson (2001).
[15] Hirsch (2005).

processes lead to outcomes.[16] Without deep understandings of these sorts, in our rush to mount more and more after-school programs, there is a danger that we will promote weak programs of little value and fail to implement strong programs adequately. There are leaders in the after-school community who share this concern. Jane Quinn, for example, concluded that program quality is "the number one opportunity and challenge in today's after-school landscape."[17] Similarly, most of the articles in a 2010 special issue of the *American Journal of Community Psychology* on after-school programs are concerned with program quality.[18] But, frankly, there are others whose focus on increasing community access to programs does not appear to leave much room to be troubled about the quality issue.[19]

Identifying and making sense of what goes on in the black box of after-school programs and centers is the focus of this book. We study how particular processes are linked to youth outcomes over the course of a year within comprehensive after-school centers. Throughout this book we make a distinction between after-school programs and centers. Boys & Girls Clubs and similar organizations (e.g., Y's, Beacons) are best thought of as comprehensive after-school centers rather than as programs in the traditional sense of this term. The typical center offers numerous programs, and youth frequently end up participating in more than one of these, if not at the same time, then at different points in the same school year. The importance of understanding the totality of a youth's experience in comprehensive after-school centers, across

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[16] As is apparent from our discussion, we view program quality as encompassing features of both a program's design and its implementation. In many instances, however, we found that these two dimensions could not be neatly separated. Many programs, for example, lacked the type of detailed blueprint or manual that would have allowed us to reliably discriminate the core intended components of the program and those that were attributable to variation in implementation.

[17] Quinn (2005, p. 481). See also, for example, Granger, Durlak, Yohalem, & Reisner (2007); Grossman, Campbell, & Raley (2007); Pittman, Tolman, & Yohalem (2005); Wilson-Ahlstrom (2007).

[18] Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell (2010); Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente (2010); Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan (2010). Granger (2010); Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawicki (2010); Larson & Walker (2010); Pierce, Bolt, & Yandell (2010); Sheldon, Arbreton, Hopkins, & Grossman (2010); Shernoff (2010), Smith, Peck, Denault, Blazaevski, & Akiva (2010); Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom (2010).

[19] Hirsch et al., (2010).

multiple programs, activities, and relationships in the same center, is a major theme of this book.

Our focus on quality arose not only because this is important to the development of the field, but because our data gave us no choice but to do so. In studying many programs at three comprehensive after-school centers, it was clear that the programs differed enormously in quality: Some were excellent, with challenging activities led by dynamic staff; others appeared to be of modest value in themselves, but when combined with other programs contributed in important ways to youth gains; and still other programs and activities, it must be said, were led by unenthusiastic staff who implemented procedures poorly, in ways that hindered and perhaps even hurt their youthful charges.

There was one other aspect of our experience that forced us to prioritize the need to understand implementation quality: It was impossible not to notice that the three after-school centers differed dramatically in quality. One of the centers had several fine programs and a number of staff with good relationships with youth. What enabled it to achieve such excellence? At the other end was a center where the quality of programs and activities was uniformly poor and youth-staff relationships were often fraught with tension; nonetheless, the young people still came. What kept attendance up and why could staff not capitalize better on the youth's evident motivation? In the middle was a center where only pockets of excellence existed. Why weren't they able to learn from what they did well to do a better job across the board?

In this book we analyze what worked so that we know better how to help young people. And we dissect what went wrong so that current and future after-school providers will be less likely to repeat the errors of their predecessors. As noted previously, there is a bandwagon that has developed for after-school programs. We share the underlying enthusiasm and will present evidence that supports it. But the field needs more than advocacy. There is also a need for sympathetic souls to stand outside of it, to be objective and critical in a tough-minded way, because that is needed to build a strong foundation as much as advocacy. We will not be critical as an end in itself. When we discuss what went wrong, we suggest how the situation could have been handled better. We intend this to be research that joins together understanding and prescription for action.

Our approach to accomplishing these complementary objectives is to present a series of intensive case studies. This is a well-trod path in the early stages of research for most fields of intervention. Focusing on three comprehensive after-school centers – all Boys & Girls Clubs – enables us to sort out relevant similarities and differences as we seek to understand contributors to the quality of individual programs and after-school centers more broadly.

Each of the three clubs provided a wide array of programs and activities. There were sports and other recreational activities, academic assistance, arts, field trips, computer work, community service, skill clubs, youth leadership opportunities, and psychoeducational groups. Each club had about half a dozen core adult staff members, supplemented by part-timers and volunteers. As sites for after-school programs, there was some level of organizational complexity, and an organizational lens is needed to appreciate the full dynamics behind program quality. So we include a case study of each club as an organization.

We then present in-depth studies of two youth at each club. We visited each club approximately twice a week and ultimately made a total of 233 site visits over the course of an academic year. This exceptional longitudinal database provides us with a unique vantage point from which to understand the course of a youth's involvement in different components of an after-school center and the various factors that helped or hindered that young person's development. This mix of organizational- and individual-level analyses enables us to provide a more comprehensive account of what quality means at after-school centers and what it takes to achieve it than would be possible using either of these lenses alone.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1.1 provides a guide to how we understand the centers and their potential effects on youth. It presents our thinking about how various individual, group, and organizational factors combine to lead the centers to influence, positively or negatively, the lives of the young people who participate in their activities. This framework emerged from our data. Once we identified the main features of the framework, we used it as a lens for structuring our analysis. There are three distinct features of our theoretical framework that we should note at the outset.
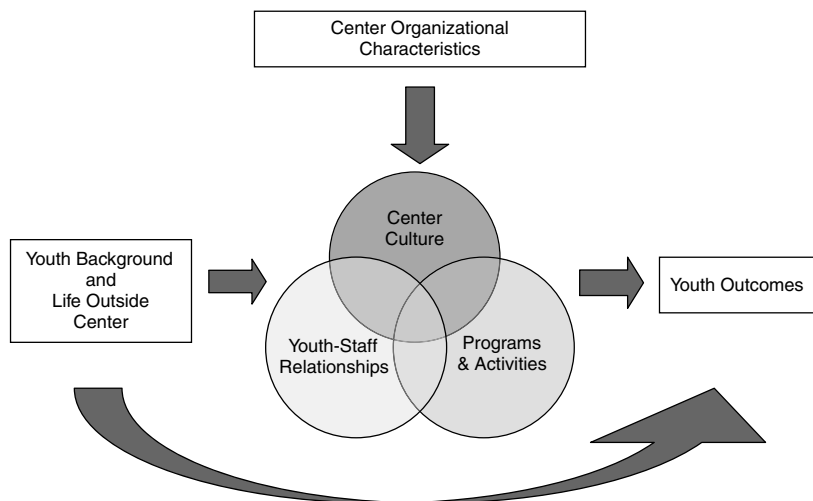
FIGURE 1.1. Conceptual framework for understanding the role of compre-
hensive after-school centers in youth development.

- The after-school center is by no means the sole force that impacts youth lives. That is why we have a long arrow that bypasses the center entirely. This book does not focus on those other factors – such as family and school – but they need to be accounted for in a more complete explanation of adolescent well-being and development.
- We are concerned with the effect of the center considered as an organization. Here our focus is on the adults who run and staff the center, and on how factors such as human resource practices, organizational learning, and staff cohesiveness affect the quality of young people's experience at the center. There is little prior research that considers how organizational dynamics can impact program quality and the experiences of program participants.
- Perhaps the most distinctive visual feature of the model is the set of overlapping circles in the middle that refer to programs and activities, youth-staff relationships, and the culture of the center. We shall distinguish elements within each circle, but they are intertwined with each other to a great extent.

Let us now turn to consider each part of the model.

Youth Background and Life Outside the Center

None of the young persons who enter an after-school program does so with a blank slate. At birth, each of these youth entered the world with a host of genetically influenced dispositions. In the years since, they have had a multitude of experiences that shape who they are when they arrive at a center. They enter with many inherent competencies, but also significant challenges as they navigate environments that do not always provide optimal support. Their family lives, financial resources, friends and neighbors, exposure to crime, access to quality schools, physical attractiveness, athletic ability, access to health care and proper nutrition, as well as personality and social skills will have a substantial impact on how they do years down the road, regardless of whether they participate in an after-school center.[20] After-school centers and programs can have an impact as well, and in some instances it will have a substantial impact, but it is never the sole influence.

There is another way in which what youth bring to the center is important and, in this instance, it is an important focus of our analysis. Center programs and staff respond differently to teenagers with different characteristics, so that their backgrounds and lives outside the center can influence their experiences in the center. We are especially alert to this possibility and examine how each young person's personality and outside experiences influence his or her life in the center.

YOUTH OUTCOMES

In after-school programs that are not comprehensive, there is often a single outcome (or set of outcomes) that is of interest. It may be developing a certain skill (such as acting) or preventing a particular behavior (such as drug use). In comprehensive after-school centers, a wider array of potential outcomes comes into play. In broad terms, these encompass academic and psychosocial outcomes.

With respect to the academic domain, there are some major markers that are of concern, especially keeping kids in school (retention).

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[20] Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente (2010) present after-school programs in an ecological framework that addresses some of these factors (see also Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009).

In these communities, youth begin to drop out well prior to high school.[21] There is also a focus on promotion into high school (which is not automatic in this school system) and getting into a high school with a stronger academic reputation. Naturally, course grades, attendance, and behavior in school (e.g., fighting) are also of concern.

For the most part, the three centers we studied were most concerned with psychosocial outcomes. Although what is most important varied according to each youth as an individual, there were three domains of particular interest.

The first involved taking on responsible roles within the various settings in which the youth participates. Most of our data concerned youth roles at the center. This might involve attending events regularly and on time and performing tasks (such as selling food at the snack stand) that the young person had either volunteered for or had been assigned. Older youth, and youth who had participated in the center for some time, were expected to take on an increased load of tasks and responsibilities, and assume leadership positions. This emphasis is consistent with the views of developmental psychologists, such as Barbara Rogoff, who think of youth development in terms of increased ability to participate in the activities of relevant cultural communities.[22]

The second domain involved the development and maintenance of satisfactory relationships with other young people and with staff. This involved the closeness of ties, being able to find mutual satisfaction in shared activities, conflict resolution, emotional support, being part of a peer group, and serving as a role model to younger kids. Relationships are of special importance during adolescence, and close ties can help young people feel that they matter and belong.

Finally, overall psychological well-being and adjustment was important. In general, this involved attention to helping youth maintain a positive mood, develop skills in emotional regulation, and avoid involvement in problem behavior (e.g., joining a gang).

All in all, these outcomes correspond to what we generally think of as increased maturity or as "growing up."[23] They represent the kind

[21] Hirsch (2005).
[22] Rogoff (2003).
[23] Some youth development researchers suggest that we consider the extent to which youth are "thriving" as an overall conceptualization of well-being (e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner, 2004).