

IDENTIFYING HIGH QUALITY YOUTH PROGRAMS

An Overview

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Overview

Out-of-school time is a recurring block of time full of discretionary opportunity, choice, and flexibility (Minnesota Commission on Out of School Time, 2004). It is the time that youth are awake but not in school (i.e., weekends, school holidays, evenings, early mornings, late afternoons, and in the summer time). During adolescence, young people have a significant amount of this “free time” available to them. Indeed, in their comprehensive review of time use among children and adolescents around the world, Larson and Verma (1999) found that approximately 40-50 percent of the waking hours for high school youth in Europe and the United States were spent in leisure time or free time. In addition, much of that free time for adolescents was spent without companionship or supervision from adults.

The Importance of Out-of-School Programs

Out-of-school time can be an opportunity for youth to engage in positive activities that enhance their development and foster their competencies, or a time to participate in negative activities that increase their chances of yielding to social pressures such as engaging in drug use, early unprotected sex, and antisocial activities (Villarruel & Lerner, 1994). For example, crime statistics show that most acts of youth delinquency (including alcohol and substance abuse, youth crimes, and delinquent behavior) occur during after-school hours when youth are not supervised or engaged in youth programs (Fox & Newman, 1998). Moreover, FBI statistics indicate that 47 percent of violent juvenile crime occurs on weekdays between the hours of 2 and 8 p.m. (Snyder & Sickmund, 1997). Given these findings, public support for more structured activities during the out-of-school hours has grown during the last decade (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). In a nationwide poll of voters, nine out of ten saw the need for some type of organized activity or

place for young people to go after school, even though those same voters reported that their states are challenged with increasing budget deficits (Afterschool Alliance, 2002). With an increased allocation of federal and state funding for youth programs, it is essential that young people, their parents, and others be able to identify high-quality programs.

Youth programs provide opportunities for socialization and learning to fill adolescents’ discretionary time. Scholars have identified youth development programs as important contexts for promoting crucial life skills and providing safeguards against negative behaviors (Larson, 2001; Lerner, 2004; Perkins & Borden, 2003; Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003). Numerous studies document the association between youth participation in school and community-based youth programs and positive developmental outcomes as well as increased resiliency and protective factors (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1999; Redd, Cochran, Hair, & Moore, 2002; Villarruel, et al., 2003).

Autonomy-granting activities and experiences that are engaging, challenging, and interesting promote a range of competencies and skills. Referred to as “flow” experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), these activities involve a high level of goal-directedness, concentration, and intrinsic motivation. Larson (2000) posits that structured voluntary youth activities provide a rich context for “flow” activities to occur and ultimately foster the development of initiative. Through participation in these experiences, adolescents engage in discovery processes about their skills, talents, and interests because they have opportunities to problem-solve, make decisions, and work with others. The power of these activities comes from the “voice” and “choice” that youth are afforded within school, youth program, and community contexts.

McLaughlin (2001) found that youth with high levels of participation in community youth programs were more

likely to: (1) have good grades; (2) rate their chances of attending college as “very high;” (3) consider themselves as “worthy persons;” and (4) express a sense of civic responsibility. There is strong evidence that time spent in youth programs can positively influence the development of young people by contributing to enhanced self-esteem, assisting in the ability to overcome adversity, increasing leadership skills, and increasing willingness to engage in efforts to help others, including involvement in political and social activities in young adulthood (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Participation in youth development programs has also been associated with enhanced school performance and increased aspirations to attend college, as well as efforts to maintain good physical health (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Hanks, 1981; Quinn, 1995; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Further, some structured youth programs have been found to be critical in helping immigrant youth successfully adapt to their new culture (Roffman, Suárez-Orozco, & Rhodes, 2003).

Although there is documented evidence for positive benefits from participation in out-of-school experiences, there is also the potential for negative outcomes. Eccles and Gootman (2002) note that two in-depth observational studies found that sports promoted masculine aggressive and competitive norms. Further, Scales and Leffert (1999) noted that involvement in highly competitive sports has been associated with “increased problem behavior in the form of alcohol use (Jerry-Szpak & Brown, 1994) and increased use of other substances” (Collingwood, Reynolds, Kohl, Smith, & Sloan, 1991). Nevertheless, the potential benefits gained through participation in and engagement with youth development programs are substantial. Opportunities for participation and contribution allow youth to develop a sense of belonging, mastery, generosity, and mattering (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & van Bockern, 1990; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). A sense of mattering is created when a youth is efficacious, that is, a youth has an opportunity and feels competent to do things that make a real difference in their social world (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). For example, youth’s participation in structured out-of-school experiences can provide a thread of connectedness that addresses youth’s need for belonging and recognition through interaction with peers and adults.

Identifying Quality Out-of-School Programs

Youth programs foster positive youth development by creating developmentally intentional learning experiences. Developmentally intentional learning experiences have three main components (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005). First, opportunities are designed to build positive relationships among youth and adults and among youth and their peers. Second, the knowledge, skills, and competencies to be learned and developed are identified, along with the learning methods involved. Third, the experience is

tailored to the individual needs of the participating youth. In addition to providing developmentally intentional learning experiences, the positive influences that youth programs have on adolescents are dependent on several elements: (1) the focus of the program, (2) the degree of participation by youth, (3) the adults involved with the program; and (4) the context in which the program takes place (Perkins & Borden, 2003).

Programs that use process-focused strategies, that is, they have a dual emphasis of reducing risk and increasing assets, are more likely to have a positive influence on youth. These programs focus on developing the personal and social assets of youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) rather than viewing youth as problems to be managed (Lerner, 2001). High-quality out-of-school programs conduct activities, establish environments, and encourage sustained peer-peer and youth-adult relationships that are intentional and deliberately focused on youth’s capacity to flourish.

More frequent participation in youth development programs would seem to be associated with an increase in the number of experiences that youth have to build their personal social assets, or the “five Cs:” (1) competence in academic, social, emotional, and vocational areas; (2) confidence in who one is becoming (identity); (3) connection to self and others; (4) character that comes from positive values, integrity, and a strong sense of morals; and (5) caring and compassion (Perkins & Borden, 2003). In her ten-year study of youth and youth programs, McLaughlin (2000), for instance, found that youth with higher levels of participation in community youth organizations were approximately 15% more likely to view themselves as worthy persons.

The quality of youth development programs is directly linked to the skills and competencies of adults who devote their expertise, time, and energy to youth programs (Yohalem, 2003). Adults who are successful at fostering positive youth development possess certain characteristics, including a strong sense of commitment to the youth, the view of youth as partners, and an orientation toward promoting youth empowerment and skill development.

Understanding the key characteristics of a quality out-of-school program

Creating an appropriate context is crucial for fostering positive youth development. Context, more than what youth see, refers to how the program setting and activities engage youth (Walker, et al., 2005). Therefore, programs must ensure the program setting includes the essential elements of a positive youth development program. These elements are derived from the research of Eccles and Gootman (2002) and other scholars (Catalano, et al., 1999; Durlack, 1998; Lerner, 2001; McLaughlin, 2000; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998):

- Physical and Psychological Safety – The program provides a safe haven both physically and emotionally.

- **Appropriate Structure** – The program has clear rules, expectations, and responsibilities. Youth are involved in creating the rules, expectations, and responsibilities because generally, those rules are embraced by youth when they have direct input in their development.
- **Supportive relationships** – The program has adults involved in the activities and events that provide a vehicle for trusted connections to form and be maintained.
- **Opportunities to belong** – The program provides activities and events that foster friendships and provide youth with a sense of a positive group experience.
- **Positive Social Norms** – The program’s culture (e.g., habits and expectations) that governs behavior and daily interactions involve conventionally accepted social behaviors.
- **Support for Efficacy and Mattering** – Both individually and in groups, the program provides youth with the opportunity to be useful and to make a difference in their social worlds. Youth are sincerely acknowledged for their contributions. The recognition conveys a positive view of youth.
- **Opportunities for Skill Building** – Through its activities and team-building experiences, the program provides youth the opportunities to build their skills (e.g., leadership skills, decision-making skills, cultural competence, communication skills, problem solving skills, and civic responsibility). The program provides learning opportunities that are interactive, reflective, and engage multiple learning styles. For example, programs employ experiential learning opportunities and encourage young people to take positive risks. Whether they are successful or not, these attempts are viewed as part of the learning process.
- **Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts** – The program coordinates its efforts and communicates regularly with families and schools to ensure similar norms and expectations across settings. The program offers a variety of activities and events that involve parents (e.g., social events, parental workshops, and volunteer opportunities).

While no single program can address the needs of all young people, every program can incorporate the essential elements of quality programs. We believe that quality programs incorporate these programmatic elements within their curriculum and through the interactions with young people.

Internet Resources

4-H Afterschool: The 4-H Afterschool website has information regarding its mission, programs, a pdf document describing the organization, an online afterschool journal, resources (guide to starting 4-H clubs in afterschool

organizations, staff training information, and a sampler of 4-H learning activities), grant opportunities, curricula, news, and mentors. There is also a section called Afterschool Partners, which lists and describes the eight partners of 4-H Afterschool. <http://www.4hafterschool.org>

Boys and Girls Clubs of America: The Boys and Girls Clubs of America website provides information on its mission, programs, their partners, and updates. They also provide a pdf document of their 2004 Year in Review, a list of board members, and how to start a Boys and Girls Club. There is also a kid’s center with links regarding youth members’ achievements and its National Youth Day. <http://www.bgca.org>

CYFERnet: The Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network is a comprehensive website that includes sections in Early Childhood, School Age, Teens, Parent/Family, and Community. Each section has practical and useful information to guide parents, including lists of sites and resources that are available. <http://www.cyfernet.org>

One World Youth Project: One World Youth Project is a unique global sister-school initiative for middle and high school students, linking groups throughout the world together in learning partnerships. The One World Youth Project website is linked to a news page listing the current and recent stories of youth projects around the world. Many of the stories are reports written by the youth involved in the project. The site also includes many links on joining the project, satellite groups, forums, and project sites. <http://www.oneworldyouthproject.org/news.html>

The Forum for Youth Investment: The Forum for Youth Investment website provides information and resources regarding important issues, such as youth development, youth policy, out of school time, youth action, and education. It also provides information regarding its history, mission, and staff in addition to its publications, current projects, contact information, and e-newsletters. <http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org>

The National Collaboration for Youth: The National Collaboration for Youth is part of the National Human Services Assembly. This website provides information regarding its numerous member organizations, a pdf document regarding youth worker competencies, and descriptions of the Aging Caucus coalition and the Family Strengthening Task Force. http://www.nassembly.org/nassembly/issue_coalitions.htm#1

YMCA: The YMCA website provides information on how to locate a local YMCA, information regarding the YMCA movement, an online store, how to become employed, and how to get involved (becoming a member/volunteer/donor). It also provides information regarding YMCA summer camps and how to start a new YMCA as well as links to YMCA International. <http://www.ymca.net/index.jsp>

Youth Service America: The Youth Service America website provides information regarding its programs and services, awards and grants, memberships, news and events, partners and sponsors, how to donate, contact information, and a description of their organization. It also has a section about National Youth Service Day (NYSD) with links regarding tools, awards and grants, post project results, project ideas, and their partners and sponsors. <http://www.ysa.org/nysd>

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