

Chapter 2

Universal Challenges, Specific Contexts: Insights from Looking Within and Across Different After-School Settings

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The content for this chapter comes out of collaborative workshops at a two-day conference focused on after-school programs, hosted by Youth-Nex: The University of Virginia Center to Promote Effective Youth Development in October of 2014. During the concurrent workshops, there were breakout groups for the following types of programs: STEM, arts-based, sports-based, educational empowerment interventions, mentoring programs, and comprehensive after-school centers. Each

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breakout group consisted of a scholar/researcher, a practitioner, and at least one youth representative from the type of program being discussed. Participants at the conference were drawn from local after-school programs as well as national after-school organizations, and each group aimed to have a mix of participants in terms of geography. Each group was tasked with discussing opportunities and challenges unique to their programs. The goal of this paper is to look across these discussions, and highlight important strategies that apply across after-school programs, as well as discuss specific challenges that each type of program may face.

This cross-cutting chapter looks both within and across with the following questions in mind: (1) how can looking at different types of after-school programs highlight specific challenges and opportunities; (2) and what does the lens of these specific programs show us about after-school programming in general? What follows is a broad discussion of challenges faced by all of the programs, as well as opportunity ‘sparks’ aimed at overcoming these challenges highlighting specific programs. The language of “sparks”, defined as “anything that activates or stimulates; inspiration or catalyst” (dictionary.reference.com), was chosen to capture both the innovation and creativity of the programs and organizations that participated in these groups and the ways that programs had found to catalyze change in challenging circumstances. Each section highlights challenges and ideas (sparks) which can activate progress in light of these challenges. Following this broader look, we present themes unique to specific types of programs as well as the list of opportunities and challenges produced by workshop participants in each group.

Workshop Participants and Process

This paper draws on the collaborative discussions that took place during the breakout sessions at a conference focused on after-school programming. As such, it is not a traditional empirical study in terms of participant sampling and data collection methods. Participants were drawn from a network of invited guests to the conference who represented both local and national after-school advocacy and intermediary organizations, university-based research centers, and youth-serving organizations. Within each session, participants included local and nonlocal participants, youth representatives, as well as additional conference attendees. Each group had three co-facilitators, a program practitioner, a youth program participant, and a researcher/scholar. Other participants self-selected into groups based on interest in

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particular topics (e.g., STEM, SEL, etc.). Each group was tasked with taking detailed notes and reporting these notes and major discussion points back to the lead author. The lead author did not use a formal mechanism of qualitative data analysis on these notes. Rather, the notes were compiled into one list and sorted to identify common overlapping themes as well as issues specific to the types of programs. It is this analysis that is presented below. These themes and their corresponding interpretations were returned to the co-authors for feedback and member-checking.

Challenges (and Opportunities) Across Different Types of Programs

Critical Challenge: What does it all mean? Data, Accountability, and Indirect Effects

In the after-school world there are numerous consumers of data, and different stakeholders often have an interest in different pieces of data or outcomes. After-school programs (ASPs) are left to navigate these varied interests, while aiming to primarily serve their youth participants. At the conference, speaker Karen Pittman, co-founder, president and CEO for the Forum for Youth Investment, spoke during the opening panel and addressed the question: “Why does after-school matter from a positive youth development (PYD) perspective?” She challenged the audience to consider how a focus on achievement data, for example, might mask a focus on overall development and ultimately hinder efforts to look more broadly at promotive elements of programs (see Pittman, 2017). Any narrow focus on single outcomes risks masking the more holistic picture (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002). This was particularly relevant for the arts- and sports-based programs, who often find an indirect effect in their outcomes. Such programs tend to focus on ‘soft skills’ such as creativity, collaboration, motivation, and problem-solving. While these skills have links to more easily measured and assessed outcomes (such as academic achievement), communicating their impact is a challenge (Daykin et al., 2008; Theokas, Danish, Hodge, Heke, & Forneris, 2007). Additionally, funders aren’t the only ones interested in data. Major questions across groups were:

- How do the programs make use of the data at a local level?
- How do program leaders actually design and implement ‘evidence-based’ practices?
- How do program staff understand the data coming out of their own programs and use it in a formative way?

Opportunity Spark: Partners for Change. Workshop participants identified the challenges above as key moments where researchers could be immensely valuable. From the perspective of program directors, it would be helpful if researchers could serve as a translator to funders and help them navigate the

outcomes ‘mismatch’ (such as the overemphasis of funders on ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ skills or the frequently shifting outcomes priorities of funding organizations and the challenge this presents to programs responsible for collecting their own data) and the challenge of documenting developmental and psychosocial growth. The mentoring group brought up the issue of the researcher needing to be accountable to real-world issues. A closer collaboration between researcher and program partner can aid the researcher-as-translator activities, as well as inform the shape and direction of next questions for researchers and evaluators (Granger, Tseng, & Wilcox, 2013; see also Fredricks, Nfatzger, Smith & Riley, 2017 for example of a national program collaborating with researchers on evaluation).

From the perspective of researchers in the discussion groups, program directors might make an effort to support the data collection needs of researchers, or provide space and cultural/institutional support for a participatory evaluation. Moreover, they might actively engage the researcher in professional development efforts, to help staff see the connections between practice, research, and priorities set by funders.

Research partnerships can also provide opportunities for programs to make better use of their data through the lens of an expert in the ‘field’ who can bring this perspective to the actual ‘field’ of the program. Thus, the researcher can serve as a translator: helping programs contextualize and convey their findings to interested stakeholders, and helping programs make use of and consume data that informs their daily practice (for multiple examples, see Lerner & Simon, 2014). In many ways, those involved in this translating role may draw from the examination of successful intermediary organizations in educational settings (Scott & Jabbar, 2014). Intermediary organizations have focused on many of the issues that sit at the intersection of funding, policy, and practice (Honig, 2004).

Critical Challenge: Privileging Youth Voice

The mere presence of youth participants in the conference as a whole and in each of the workshops was largely perceived as ‘refreshing’ and ‘energizing’ amongst workshop and conference participants, highlighting how rarely youth are present in spaces where research is discussed. However, it actually represents a larger challenge that ASPs (and researchers) must also grapple with: how and when are youth allowed (or encouraged) to influence programs? This is also directly tied to research and evaluation, as well, in that many have shown that involving youth in the research process is ethically important and provides more complete and valid data (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kirshner, 2007; Krenichyn, Schaefer-McDaniel, Clark, & Zeller-Berkman, 2007; Sabo Flores, 2008). In some ways, this is not a minor question in that programs can often mirror or represent on a smaller, more local scale what it means to be active and engaged in society and community (Flanagan, 2003; McFarland & Thomas, 2006). This question was particularly relevant to the empowerment-based programs, who recognize that critical consciousness is a

precursor to social action, and the ways that programs engage critical consciousness can vary (Fox et al., 2010; Ginwright & James, 2002; see also Dawes, Pollack & Sada, 2017, for example of youth-empowerment program practices). Thus, across workshops, the presence of youth brought up questions that focused on:

- How should we involve youth in our governance and evaluation?
- In what ways do our organizations mimic adult life and offer leadership opportunities for youth?
- What is the obligation of ASPs for fostering a social or civic awareness amongst members?

Opportunity Spark: Privileging Youth Voice. The task of involving youth voice or cultivating critical consciousness can seem very daunting to any program, regardless of how well-established or supported it may be. There are often major cultural shifts that must accompany the incorporation of more youth voice. But the common issue of ‘scale’ (bringing the program to a larger base) provides a lens for understanding youth voice and helps us see ways of scaffolding youth participation. While some programs may take on active community improvement projects, others can create local ways to involve youth voice and participation (Salusky et al., 2014; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). The Weikhart Center offers a guide for developing youth advisory committees that can work with program staff to represent the voices of participants and shape program changes and development (<http://cypq.org/yds>). This structural change also often influences programming, ASP participant satisfaction, and potentially developmental outcomes. Anecdotally at the conference, mentoring programs reported increased relationship success when the youth identified a person within their network who could serve as their official mentor in a sponsored program. This provides an example of a relatively minor shift in the authoritative voice of recruitment (initiating a match versus being given a match) and of privileging youth voice at the beginning of an otherwise adult-structured program. Programs should feel encouraged to look at their own organizational structure and identify ways, both large and small, that they can incorporate more youth voice into decision-making and program activities. Youth voice can even be incorporated into ongoing evaluation efforts, often with the result of identifying key aspects of program activities and outcomes that adults may overlook (Sabo Flores, 2008).

Critical Challenge: Skills Delivered or Development Facilitated?

Across all programs, but particularly tangible in STEM programs, was the idea that mere access or exposure to technology is *not* the same as actual engagement with and learning from the technology. Rather, it is the engagement in the activity, with a more knowledgeable adult, that provides a catalyst for transferal of important social

and cultural skills (see Fredricks et al., 2017). This idea builds directly from Barbara Rogoff's work seeking to understand the youth development occurring in Girl Scout programs wherein she and her colleagues argue, "development is a process of participation in sociocultural activities...inseparable from interpersonal and community processes" (p. 45). In other words, development is something you *do* with others (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995). In the youth-empowerment programs, this conceptual understanding of development as activity was discussed as empowerment being something that is facilitated, not something that is done or given to participants. In STEM programs, the emphasis is on connecting youth with knowledgeable adults that show them how to make use of the technology and work with them to foster both technical skills and broader problem-solving skills that employers desire.

Opportunity Spark: Developmental Power of Relationships. Recognizing that ASPs are firmly grounded in the arena of youth development, which can range from young children through adolescence, workshop participants brought up the importance of relationships. Youth participants themselves argued that relationships matter, and this was a theme across groups (see Dawes et al., 2017). Relationships can serve as the vehicle for delivering the range of social and academic skills in a way that is productive and long-lasting for youth (Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Rhodes, 2004; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005). Computers4Kids, for example, is an organization that delivers technology to under-resourced communities. However, it does so through a scaffolded mentoring relationship that pairs youth with a mentor for one year to engage in concrete, technology-based projects. Over the course of the year, the goal is that soft skills will be fostered in tandem with increased knowledge and technical skill. Understanding the importance of relationships, and developing programmatic ways to improve relationship strength, may help with outcomes for any type of program, regardless of content focus (see Balcazar & Keys, 2013 for an overview of mentoring relationships; see Barnett & Feigin, 2012 for a health-related example).

Critical Challenge: Decreased Participation in Adolescence

Another broader discussion in the conference that was addressed in the workshops was the challenge of retaining teen participants in after-school programs. In part, this may be due to the natural increased mobility of adolescents as they age, as well as freedom to participate in activities not tied to a school or organization. However, the arts programs and empowerment programs did not experience this as much, and it is likely that their activities are seen as more developmentally relevant to adolescents. The expressive nature of music writing, song-producing, theater, film, etc., directly appeal to teens' need for expression (Gallagher, 2007; Larson & Walker, 2006). Similarly, empowerment and civic engagement programs often engage teens in the communities around them—offering connections that can lead to employment or internships, while also helping them see that they can influence their surroundings.

Opportunity Spark: Developmentally Appropriate Activities. Considering the developmental activities that may be most appropriate for after-school program participants provides an opportunity for assessing who the organizations are serving, how they are serving them, and how they might engage other populations (see Dawes et al., 2017). Understanding the developmental needs of young children, early adolescents, and later adolescents can help programs tailor their content, structure, activities, and approach in a way that naturally appeals to these needs (Eccles et al., 1993). It can also help to understand what relationship features might be most developmentally appropriate (Noam, Malti, & Karcher, 2013). Focusing on socio-emotional support, recognition and acceptance may be particularly effective for early adolescents. Older teens, however, may want to see things that connect more directly to their lives after-school, or to their increasing awareness of their community, or that directly relate to identity expression and individuation, as often occurs in adolescence (Futch, 2011; Jones & Deutsch, 2013).

A Holistic View of Youth: Challenges and Opportunities Raised by Specific Programs

Within each workshop, the strengths and unique lenses offered by the different types of programs was discussed. Together, these challenges show the various ecological levels of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) that surround youth, and highlight sites for change, intervention, or continued cultivation. What follows is a synthesis of these challenges with the actual bulleted lists prepared in each workshop. In some cases, facilitators also made note of specific perspectives brought by the youth participants.

STEM

STEM programs were seen as particularly promising places to provide twenty-first Century Learning Skills that are directly applicable to youth's future employability and post-secondary schooling. The challenge is in communicating that these skills are happening, demonstrating transfer, and building the types of relationships that facilitate youth learning the skills in effective ways.

a. Challenges

- i. Youth in low income neighborhoods need access to technology AND to people who know how to use the technology in creative ways (can share how they use it in the workplace).

b. Opportunities

- i. Develop 21st Century Learning Skills. Learn *with* computer rather than *from* computer which allows students the opportunity to develop higher levels of critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills.
- ii. Develop skills desired by employers. While creating projects at Computers4Kids, for example, students must engage in logical reasoning, collaborate as a team and apply technology appropriately.

c. Youth point of view

- i. Relationships matter. That is what helps make a strong after-school program, regardless of content.

Arts-Based Programs

One youth participant in the workshop who attends an after-school arts program, said that the organization “helps me be my full self”—implying that he gets to explore parts of his identity that he doesn’t have the same freedom or encouragement to explore in other settings. However, in this current funding environment, identity exploration is not sufficient activity to define and secure funding for an entire program. As a result, many arts-based programs are forced to position themselves to specific funding opportunities (representing the particular priorities or mission of the funding organization) that may be targeting specific interventions or outcomes. The result is a “mission creep,” wherein programs have to adjust their mission or goals to meet these specific requests from outside funders. Such adjustment can shift programs away from simply providing a safe-space or opportunities to explore new artistic domains towards trying to connect particular skills or outcomes (e.g., academics) to the aims of the program. Mission creep has an effect on staff, who may feel strained by being pulled in multiple directions, but it can also affect participants who may have invested in a particular collective identity (Futch, 2013) of a program that, through mission creep, becomes fractured and diffuse.

a. Challenges

- i. In what ways can arts-based programs allow for some influence of youth on their environments, rather than just vice versa (examples might include youth creating murals, performances, or public information campaigns)?
- ii. Outcomes mismatch: arts-based programs tend to see their outcomes as more developmental, social, emotional, etc. but funders and agencies want to see academic outcomes. While these domains are linked, they are developmental and often not easy to show in just one year’s time. Thus, it can be hard for these programs to frame their outcomes in a way that matches what is currently high priority.

- iii. Very limited and competitive funding can also lead to “mission creep” where the mission of an organization strays from its original intent in order to get funding through a grant initiative.
 - iv. From a participant: “Teens aren’t the problem, it’s the people who perceive them”—how can arts help with this?
- b. Opportunities
 - i. Participant: “Art teaches us about ourselves”.
 - ii. Influence identity development in adolescence (offers avenue of self-expression, opportunities to meet across difference, opportunities to try on new roles)
 - iii. There seems to be an increasing prevalence of funding initiatives related to the arts from foundations.
 - iv. Opportunity for researchers to serve as a go-between and help on-the-ground organizations be able to speak to the demands of funders/grants more easily—and to help funders understand the difficulty of measuring certain outcomes in these types of programs.
- c. Youth point of view
 - i. “MRC [The Music Resource Center] helps me be my full self”.

Sports-Based Programs

Within sports-based programs, a key challenge identified was that coaches often bring a plethora of sports expertise, but far less youth development expertise. This lack of training in youth development is a missed opportunity. Coaches may benefit from having an understanding of basic developmental stages, the needs of adolescents, the struggles and challenges that teens are often facing, and the identity pressures that often comes along with adolescence. One suggestion was to use the 5Cs framework of Positive Youth Development (PYD) as a way to build connections between sports content and youth development (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2011) which has been shown to have success in youth self-esteem outcomes (Smoll, Smith, Barnett, & Everett, 1993; see Pittman, 2017 for discussion of the need for a PYD theory of change and Fredricks, et al., 2017 for example of a sports-based youth program that used a PYD framework for evaluation).

- a. Challenges
 - i. Translating what we do into language for prospective funders.
 - ii. Coaches need more than just sports expertise; also need youth development focus.

- iii. Modifying and growing the program while maintaining high quality.
 - 1. How to adapt to other communities but be culturally responsive.
 - 2. How to increase impact without decline in quality or standards.
- b. Data
 - i. What do sports-based youth development (SBYD) programs/practitioners measure and how?
 - ii. Now we have data, but what do we do with it?
- c. Opportunities
 - i. Promotion what SBYD programs are and can be: obesity prevention, pregnancy prevention, violence reduction, gang prevention, etc.
 - ii. Teach the 5Cs of PYD to coaches and how to incorporate these intentionally.
 - iii. Programs can be adapted for certain populations or communities.

Educational Empowerment Interventions

Youth-empowerment programs, which often include an implicit aspect of group counseling, create an environment that builds upon universality, positive peer-influence, and accountability. Universality is an idea that stems from group psychotherapy, wherein individuals may feel unique in their struggles but, upon entering a group, realize that others have faced similar challenges and they recognize that these issues may be more universal than unique (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). This allows youths who have gathered together in the program to witness their shared experiences, receive validation for their feelings, and identify techniques for coping. When well-moderated, they can provide a culture of positive peer-influence that builds off of the universality, where peers become assets rather than risks (Kahne et al., 2001). Ultimately, this leads to accountability, particularly in programs that involve an element of action research where youth work collaboratively to create and present a project or product that catalyzes community change.

- a. Challenges
 - i. How to measure the effects of empowerment-based interventions?
 - ii. Outcomes of group counseling experiences are not always necessarily the intended measurable outcomes. As such, it can be difficult to accurately reflect the positive change that has taken place, particularly for funders and other stakeholders invested in the mechanism for change.
 - iii. While empowerment-based interventions, particularly those facilitated in group counseling experiences, do translate into achievement outcomes,

there is often an indirect effect through other noncognitive variables that may not be suitable for relevant grants. There is also a risk of ‘deviancy training’ wherein unstructured or poorly structured groups may foster an atmosphere where antisocial behaviors are supported (Dishion & Dodge, 2005).

- iv. Creating more sustainable mechanisms that can follow up with participants after they have completed the program.

b. Opportunities

- i. To create a space within which adolescents can feel safe, heard, and reinforced for strengths that may go unnoticed or unacknowledged in their everyday life.
- ii. Empowerment is not something group leaders can do, necessarily, as much as it is something group leaders can help to facilitate in participants.
- iii. Group counseling interventions can create a space for universality, positive peer-influence, and accountability to occur.
- iv. To link individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors to social change.
- v. Clear need for opportunities for adolescents to explore their emotional and social selves and the intersection with academic and career identities.
- vi. Critical consciousness is a key component of personal empowerment, in that it raises the awareness of oppression in society and the sociopolitical implications that follow.
- vii. Giving validity to one’s existence closely follows critical consciousness development, as it is the precursor for social action, which is taking the awareness and empowerment and facilitating change in their community.

c. Youth point of view

- i. There is a sense of connection with others in the group which can carry beyond the term of the actual group experience. There are new bonds formed, which are important in reaching one’s goals (i.e., accountability, encouragement, etc.). Quote: “Before this group experience, I felt ‘blaaah,’ now I just have more of a sense of purpose” (see also: <http://mp3experience.org/videos/>).

Mentoring Programs

A primary challenge faced by mentoring programs is recruitment and retention of mentors (Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 2013). There is often the perception that the commitment will be time-intensive. Indeed, relationships that terminate early can have negative impacts on youth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Specifically, while young people often find young adult mentors more relatable, young adults are

particularly challenging in that they are often transient (college students) or have increasing family commitments of their own. If relatability is recognized as a key factor in the success of mentoring relationships, how can less time-intensive mentor programs still support strong, sustained relationships in a manner that does not overburden or scare away potential mentors? One aspect of this is encouraging and helping define clear and agreed-upon boundaries that work for the successful relationship. These boundaries may vary by relationship, mentor, or mentee, creating varied expectations among program participants.

a. Challenges

- i. Perceived (or real) time and interpersonal barriers continue to make volunteer recruitment a challenge.
- ii. Young people often relate more to young mentors, but the transitory nature of life for many young adults can create issues for match retention - something vital to the achievement of youth outcomes in mentoring relationships.
- iii. Ensuring the 'right fit' from all participants. Mentoring relationships only work when all parties are engaged, i.e., child, parent, volunteer and support staff.
- iv. Healthy boundaries can also pose a challenge. As relationships develop between the mentor and child and family, the boundaries can blur and the mentor can occasionally become a mentor to the family as opposed to just the child.
- v. Site-based mentoring programs have been shown as not being effective (and occasionally being negative) if it requires pulling the child out of an existing class/program, but because of transportation issues, many site-based programs are built upon this system of pulling a child from something else to meet with a mentor.

b. Opportunities

- i. Mentoring is most effective when it draws on evidence-based practices. Unfortunately, programs are uneven in their use of evidence.
- ii. Researchers need to be more accountable to the real-world issues affecting mentoring programs, including issues around best practice in mentor recruitment, matching, training, and support.
- iii. New studies have indicated high recruitment success when a volunteer mentor has been recruited by the child from their social circle.

Comprehensive After-School Centers

As large after-school centers become seen as safer spaces for out-of-school time, there is an increased need that outpaces capacity. Such programs are often faced

with the painful task of knowing when to say no. This becomes an issue of survival, especially in terms of staff retention. A staff that is spread too thin often ends up being more reactive in nature than proactive. Dealing with youth proactively is far more useful in developmental settings, but it often requires training and structural supports to enable and foster those interactions.

a. Challenges

- i. There can be more need than capacity: when do we say no?
- ii. Sacrificing program quality versus serving more youth.
- iii. Safety and security issues detract from internal/external value of the program.
- iv. Staff culture is often reactive rather than proactive.
- v. Disparate backgrounds of new staff and high turnover of program leaders lead to fragile culture.
- vi. Stability of top leadership remains important and elusive.
- vii. Training in structured programs may be insufficient for expertise.
- viii. Locally based programs may not have training support needed.
- ix. Low frequency of training leads to under-trained workforce.

b. Opportunities

- i. Staff can provide collective mentoring (Hirsch, Deutsch & DuBois, 2011).
- ii. Structured programs can enhance reach of staff mentoring.
- iii. Focus on become a learning organization.
- iv. Hire staff who already have interests that can be developed into programs.
- v. Draw on program–university partnerships to help supervise volunteers.

Conclusion

From the discussions that occurred in these breakout groups, we can see that there are many challenges and opportunities that span across the after-school programming world. Catering to the real-world demands of students preparing to enter the workforce, attending to their developmental and identity needs, training staff to consider youth development more broadly in tandem with their particular skill expertise, helping youth and adults establish clear and realistic boundaries that work, all while serving the requests of all of the youth in a community presents a daunting task for after-school programs. However, looking more closely at specific programs offers a way to understand the dimensions of these challenges. The topics discussed in the workshop groups show that there are many levels where challenges and opportunities exist—from the interpersonal relationship level, to staff and group dynamics, to communication with funders and policy-makers. With regard to policy, the challenges and opportunities presented above provide a more nuanced way of understanding the programmatic challenges that ASPs face while they also aim to meet the demands of funding agencies, service providers, and parents and

community members. The policy takeaway is broad: there should be flexibility inherent in global policies that allows for local specificity and adaptability for ASPs. As a place where many children spend a significant portion of their time and critical developmental years, after-school programs have significant potential to influence youth at many levels of development. Yet a variety of programs are needed to meet youths' differentiated needs and cater to the diverse strengths of program staff.

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