

Best practices in after-school programming for secondary school students

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Abstract: Over the past twenty years, After-School Programs (ASPs) in both Canada and the United States have increasingly become increasingly as a potential tool to create more equitable academic outcomes between different groups of students. Despite the prevalence of ASPs, program developers and school administrators know little about the program factors or components that produce desirable outcomes in their target populations. After reviewing 124 different sources, including 117 academic journal articles, six technical reports and one book, six best practices for ASPs for secondary school students were identified: clear mission; safe, positive, and healthy climate; recruitment of a diverse mix of youth; addresses barriers to participation; hiring, training, and retaining high quality staff; and use of a flexible curriculum with engaging content. Most of the research on best practices in ASPs focuses on structural elements, such as participant recruitment and human resources. This review also calls for program developers and school administrators to invest in more rigorous research and evaluation efforts to generate reliable knowledge and build program evaluation capacity.

Keywords: after-school programs, out-of-school-time program, program evaluation, student programming,

Introduction

After-School Programs (ASPs) have the potential to produce more equitable outcomes and raise achievement amongst students in both elementary and secondary schools (Cornelli, Sanderson, & Richards, 2010; Davies & Peltz, 2012; Gay & Corwin, 2008; Kwiczala, 2014; Lauver & Little, 2005). ASPs and programs that occur before school are widely utilized across Canada: a recent survey (Sinha, 2014) states that 86% of students in Quebec, 51% of students in the Maritime Provinces, and 50% of students in Ontario participate in before- or after-school programming. The same survey (Sinha, 2014) reported that 43% of students in the province of British Columbia are involved in ASPs, with 38% of students in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta also participating in programs that occur before and after school. Similarly, over 10 million elementary and secondary school students in the United States participate in ASPs, with demand outpacing the current supply of available programming (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Despite the fact that ASPs serve a high number of students, little is known about why or how these programs are effective (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Scott-Little, Hamann, & Jurs, 2002; Wright et al., 2006).

While the sheer number and variety of ASPs exploded in recent years, research and evaluation of such efforts have lagged far behind. The literature base surrounding ASPs lacks quality and is not sophisticated enough to suggest that an ASP will work for a particular group of students in a given environment. Although this research surrounding ASPs is not able to offer the level of specificity discussed above, it does hint at a number of best practices, which could potentially create more equitable academic and non-academic student outcomes. The programs themselves may be effective, but there is a consensus in the literature that the lack of quality and rigor associated with the research, evaluation, and monitoring of ASPs has left much to be desired (Beckett, Hawken, & Jackowitz, 2001; Berry & Lavelle, 2013; Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Hallfors, Cho, Sanchez, & Khatapoush, 2006; Hanlon, Simon, O'Grady, Carswell, & Callaman, 2009; Rapp-Paglicci, Ersing, & Rowe, 2006; Wright, John, Alaggia, & Steel, 2006). Identifying this gap in the research base focusing on ASPs is important because governments and foundations typically require that the programs they fund be evidence-based. Evidence-based programs must have conducted research demonstrating effectiveness or the potential to produce positive outcomes in participants. For example, Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, and Foster (1998) state that many ASP evaluation designs are negatively influenced by site-level staff turnover, and are fraught with either small sample sizes or unsatisfactory administrative data collection procedures. Further, Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan (2010) reviewed a number of after-school programs and evaluation reports, citing serious methodological flaws that included, "lack of initial group equivalence, high attrition among respondents, low levels of student attendance, and the possible nonrepresentativeness of evaluated programs" (p. 294). Additionally, few ASPs have undergone rigorous evaluation (Wright et al., 2006). Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell (2010) could determine very little about specific program content associated with success in an after-school environment because the literature they reviewed displayed the same methodological concerns

listed above. Selection bias may be a further limitation of the current research on ASPs (Mishna et al., 2013). That said, the literature base seems to imply that participation in ASPs can lead to increased student achievement (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Scott-Little, et al., 2002) and a variety of positive student non-academic outcomes, such as development of leadership skills and increases in self-esteem, stress management, and self-efficacy (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Huang, 2006; Scott-Little, et al., 2002; Wright et al., 2006). Due to the dearth of valid and reliable research on ASPs, program developers and school administrators know little about factors which can produce desirable outcomes in their target populations.

This review explores English-language research produced between 2000-2015 surrounding after-school programming designed and provided for secondary school students. Beyond examining the credibility and relevance of the current literature, this review seeks to identify gaps and limitations in the research base, and attempts to identify best practices evident in effective after-school programs.

Methodology

All of the studies selected for this literature review were published in English. Apart from some seminal studies published in the late 1990s, the vast majority of the selected references cover the period from 2000-2015. This range was chosen to ensure that the literature reviewed is both current and relevant. The purpose of this review is to synthesize best practices from the academic literature exploring ASPs. Eight databases were searched for potential studies for inclusion in this review: ProQuest, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, JSTOR, EBSCOHost, Education Research Complete, Thesis Canada Portal, Google Scholar, and the Microsoft Academic Search.

Different combinations of key words were used to search the databases, including the following: after school program, after-school program, after-school program evaluation, after-school program outcomes, after-school program research findings, best practices after-school program. The reference lists of the analyzed sources were also mined for any relevant references. References were initially selected if they involved research on, or evaluation of, after-school programs for secondary school students. Selected studies were published in a variety of sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and project reports produced by government and professional organizations. The initial search produced 103 of the 124 total unique references included in this literature review.

The references were then reduced to ensure they met the selection criteria: specifically, that selected references had to be either empirical studies, evaluations, or syntheses of past research on after-school or similar programming involving students in a secondary school setting. This second step in the search process resulted in 19 peer-reviewed journal articles and 11 professional reports being excluded as they focused solely on programs geared towards elementary school-aged youth.

A final search of the databases produced 50 additional sources. The final selection of sources to be analyzed consisted of 117 academic journal articles, six technical reports, and one book, for a total of 124 references. The vast majority of empirical studies conducted on after-school programming in secondary schools were quantitative in nature. Solely quantitative studies accounted for 50 of the 124 references. Of these, 18 employed survey designs, 23 used quasi-experimental designs, eight were true experiments, and one was based on complex quantitative modeling of an existing dataset. Twenty-four references were based on solely qualitative designs. Eighteen of these studies relied on interviews or focus groups to generate data, while five were based on narrative designs that sought to tell stories about participant experiences. In terms of methodology, 10 of the selected references employed mixed-methods approaches and 22 were conceptual in nature. An additional 18 syntheses of past research (literature reviews, meta-analyses and meta-evaluations) were included in the final selection of references. Only the key themes to emerge during the analysis are reported in the following section. Each of the identified best practices had 10 or more references, indicating it has a positive influence on participants in ASPs. A small number of articles indicated that best practices in development and delivery of ASPs involves programming related to self-efficacy (Anderson, Sabatelli, & Trachtenberg, 2007; Berry & Lavelle, 2013; Durlak et al., 2010; Huang, 2001), anger management (DiBiase, 2010) and/or developing leadership in participating youth (Jones & Deutsch, 2013; Pittman, Irby, Yohalem, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004). Each of the areas of programming discussed above are not reported in the findings as they were all cited in less than 10 of the references included in this review. Similarly, while there is also evidence to suggest that developing and maintaining connections with the families of participants is a best practice (Capaldi, 2009; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 1998; Wagaman, 2011), this theme was evident in fewer than 10 of the sources reviewed for this study.

Summary of Findings

It became clear early in the process that research on ASPs is an emerging field of study. At this point, there is not a single formula, or set of concrete criteria for creating and implementing a successful or effective after-school program because few ASPs have been rigorously researched or evaluated. Therefore, little is currently known about the specific programmatic features that lead to positive academic and non-academic outcomes, such as increases in academic achievement, leadership, emotional regulation, and managing stress (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Durlak et al., 2010; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Fashola, 2003; Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2006; Scott-Little et al., 2002).

Six best practices were identified from reviewing the literature. Most of the research identifying best practices in ASPs has focused on the structural elements of the programming. As such, the vast majority of the best practices identified in this review are related to those structural elements (e.g., human resources, participant recruitment). Each of the best practices displayed in *Table 1* will be discussed in detail throughout the remainder of this review.

Table 1. Best practices for ASPs targeted towards secondary school students

<i>Best Practices</i>	
1.	The program has a clear mission and is organized around achieving those goals.
2.	The program has a safe, positive, and healthy climate.
3.	The program recruits a diverse mix of youth to participate.
4.	The program addresses barriers to participation.
5.	The program hires, trains and retains high quality staff.
6.	The program has a flexible curriculum and has content that is engaging and meaningful to students.

Clear Mission and Organized Around Achieving Goals

This best practice is supported by 21 references cited in this review. For instance, Granger (2008) states “programs should be intentional about what they are trying to achieve” (p. 16). This is echoed by Pittman et al. (2004), who explain, “practitioners who implement successful approaches are very intentional about what they do and how they do it” (p. 28). Program developers and staff should be specific about the goals of the program (e.g., intended outcomes), organize their efforts around a small set of intended goals associated with the ASP and be clear about how participation in the program will lead to those outcomes (Jemmott, Jemmott, Braverman, & Fong, 2005; Mazza, 2012; Wright, John, Livingstone, Shepherd & Duku, 2006; Zhang & Byrd, 2005). Zhang and Byrd (2005) indicate that for ASPs to achieve their goals, “it is critical for after-school programs to be well organized and to have quality curricula, implementation, supervision, facilities, and evaluation procedures” (p. 5). For example, an ASP evaluated by Wright et al. (2007) utilized an evidence-based model of social development to cultivate “students’ attachment to adults and prosocial peers, commitment to school, and academic achievement” (2007, p. 35). Wright et al. (2007) also note that the three interventions offered by the program they studied were cooperative learning, classroom management, and peer tutoring, mentoring and mediation. These three interventions were all rooted in the social development model that served as a starting point for the program. In this way, the model used to develop the ASP served an important role as program staff organized their efforts around that model and how to achieve the program’s intended outcomes (Wright et al., 2007). Program activities were practiced in a way that allows for the development of trusting relationships between youth and program staff. This is an example of a program with a clear mission, which, in this case, is to encourage bonds with the school, adults, and peers. The content and activities in the program evaluated by Wright et al. (2007) are rooted in theory and evidence that support the notion that the planned activities and interventions will impact participating youth in the manner intended. The most effective programs will typically articulate the inputs and outputs as well as the short-term and long-term outcomes they wish to achieve: this is done by using program evaluations tools and theoretical models, such as a logic model or a theory of change. These tools are beneficial in both the planning and evaluation phases, as they keep program developers focused on the outcomes they wish to achieve, in addition to better defining their intervention and the work necessary for it to be effective.

A Safe, Positive, and Healthy Climate

The promotion and implementation of a safe, positive, and healthy climate which promotes and reinforces positive social norms has overwhelming support in the literature as a best practice in after-school programs in a secondary school environment (Anderson, Sabatelli, & Trachtenberg, 2007; Davies & Peltz, 2012; De Kanter, 2001; Nelson, McClintock, Perez-Ferguson, Shawver, & Thompson, 2008; Riggs & Greenberg, 2004; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). Davies and Peltz (2012) describe a safe, positive, and healthy ASP climate as a place that can provide “proper facilities and equipment, predictable environments, opportunities for self-expression, sharing of feelings and thoughts, and time for unstructured play and fun.” (p. 15). Similarly, Roth et al. (1998) mention that program staff who create positive climates in ASPs demonstrate “individual attention, cultural appropriateness, and choice and responsibility given to adolescents” and a place where “adolescents can feel safe, and caring adults support and empower them to develop their competencies” (p. 442).

Wright and colleagues (2006) discuss the importance of a positive climate for staff and students, which is a common finding in literature reviews and meta-analyses in this field. They state that “research about youth programs often emphasizes the importance of relationships, a supportive climate, and youth engagement – social processes that appear to be linked to positive developmental outcomes” (p. 351). As a best practice, a positive program climate was cited as a predictor of programmatic effectiveness in 32 of the sources studied. Safe, healthy, and positive ASP climates provide students the opportunity for risk taking and to learn from their mistakes. A positive program climate has also been cited as an element in high quality programs that maintain excellent levels of youth engagement (Beckett, Hawken, & Jackowitz, 2001; Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Cross, et al., 2010; Mahoney, Eccles, & Larson, 2004).

Participant Recruitment

Lauver and Little (2005) advocate for recruiting students with similar academic and non-academic backgrounds into the same ASPs as an easy method for program administrators to raise attendance at their specific program site. Conversely, evidence gathered from 40 other references suggests otherwise. More specifically, programs should make an effort to recruit different types of youth to participate in ASPs, including a mix of youth who come from different socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities, differing levels of academic achievement, and students with varied types of involvement in the school.

In perhaps the most interesting finding to emerge from this dataset, Frazier, Capella, & Atkins (2007) suggest that negative student behavior and attitudes can “infect” other participants, staff satisfaction, and the program climate: in turn, this influences how the program operates and limits its potential impact. For instance, in their meta-analysis of after-school programs, Wright et al., (2007) mention that “programs that isolate high-risk youth into homogeneous groups appear to reinforce antisocial behavior” (p. 45), including aggression, anger, and hostility. Similarly, Cho, Hallfors, and Sanchez (2005) conducted a randomized control trial of Reconnecting Youth, an after-school program that was seemingly well designed to promote healthy youth development in secondary school students. At their six-month follow-up with the students enrolled in Reconnecting Youth, higher incidents of drug use in addition to negative outcomes in terms of anger management, depression and emotional distress were reported amongst the participants. The authors determined that these negative findings are a product of the program clustering youth with a history of low academic performance and a record of poor behavior at school (Cho et al., 2005). Other studies included in this literature review support that notion. For example, Eccles and Templeton’s (2002) meta-analysis discusses how problematic behaviors, such as truancy, anger, drug use, and low connection to school associated with the participants in ASPs are linked to more of those behaviors in other participating youth. Further, Wright et al.’s (2007) findings indicate that “programs that isolate high-risk youth into homogeneous groups appear to reinforce antisocial behavior” (p. 45). This line of inquiry suggests that youth attitudes and behaviors can be influenced by repeated interactions and engagement with peers, and in this case, negative behaviors spreading to other students in the ASP. Dishion, McCord, and Poulin (1999) referred to this process as peer contagion. If program developers ignore these findings, ASPs with aims to decrease deviant or negative behaviors in youth may actually be involved in increasing the prevalence of those activities.

On the whole, the literature clearly supports recruiting a diverse mix of youth to participate in ASPs. In fact, just as negative peer influences can infect a program and decrease outcomes for all youth involved, positive peer influences can have the reverse effect. Jones and Deutsch (2013) as well as Rorie,

Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, & Connell (2011) mention that positive attitudes and behaviors, such as intrinsic motivation, self-confidence and leadership can also “rub off” on their peers and aid in creating a safe, healthy, and positive program climates. This programmatic feature provides participants with “a consistent opportunity to affiliate and bond with deviant peers,” and the “subtle modeling of deviant behaviors and to complementary imitation, socialization and reinforcement” (Cho, Hallfors & Sanchez, 2005, p. 371), both within and outside of the after-school program environment. There is also evidence (Berry & Lavelle, 2013; Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010) to suggest that students who self-select into the ASPs experience more positive outcomes than those who join for other reasons. This underscores the importance of engaging content and positive peer-to-peer relationships in generating engagement amongst participants.

Attrition and Barriers to Participation

Limiting attrition and managing barriers to youth participation was another best practice to emerge from the literature. Concerns about student transportation home from program sites (Vandell et al., 2005; Rapp-Paglicci, Ersing, & Rowe, 2006; Wright et al.) and competing activities (Vandell et al, 2005) were two potential barriers to participation and retention in ASPs that came out of the literature. Transportation home from an ASP site can be problematic for many students and their parents, especially those from a low socioeconomic status (SES). Lessening this barrier is important, considering many ASPs are designed to serve and empower students in low-SES communities. Other activities taking place after school, such as athletics, clubs, and part-time employment conflict with the time slots in which most ASPs are delivered, thereby limiting the number of students who are available to participate. Effective programs often aim to reduce attrition and attract participating youth by decrease the barriers discussed above (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Wright et al., 2006). Other strategies incorporate other best practices, including promoting and implementing engaging content, involving youth in supportive relationships with staff, and a positive program climate. There is also evidence in the literature suggesting that students who have “dropped-out” of after-school programs are those who stood to benefit the most from participation (Berry & Lavelle, 2013; Grolnick, Farkas, Sohmer, Michaels & Valsiner, 2007). There is no way even the best ASP can positively influence the academic and non-academic outcomes for students who cannot attend the sessions because of transportation concerns or conflicting schedules.

Hiring, Training and Retaining High Quality Staff

ASPs are only as effective as the staff they employ to work with participating students. The literature reviewed only focuses on staff who are being paid for their work in ASPs (Bodilly and Beckett, 2005; Capaldi, 2009; Everett, Chadwell, & McChesney, 2002; Fashola, 2003; Gineski, 2003; Granger, 2008; Lauver & Little, 2005; Halpern, 2002). Yet, it is worth mentioning that some ASPs are delivered by volunteers, and as a result, may have difficulty retaining staff since individuals may find paid employment or decide to volunteer elsewhere.

In terms of ASPs with paid staff, the program workforce is generally “young, untrained and prone to frequent turnover” (Granger, 2008, p. 15). As such, the importance of hiring, training, and retaining high quality staff is a best practice that clearly emerged from the literature and cannot be understated (Bodilly and Beckett, 2005; Capaldi, 2009; Everett, Chadwell, & McChesney, 2002; Fashola, 2003; Gineski, 2003; Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawicki, 2010; Kugler, 2001; Lauver & Little, 2005; Halpern, 2002; Rhodes, 2004). Findings from a study conducted by Gottfredson et al. (2010) “suggest that staff quality might be the single most important characteristic of program success because the quality of program staff seemed to affect other aspects of implementation” (p. 378). They also note that “staff members who were highly educated, well trained, and employed long-term appeared to observers to be more skilled in providing youth services” (Gottfredson et al., 2010, p. 378). According to the same study, staff with these qualifications and high levels of professional development “appeared better able to establish sound management, create a positive social climate and provide engaging content” (Gottfredson et al., 2010, p. 378). It appears that quality staff both lead to a better structural functioning of the program, and are better prepared to develop meaningful positive relationships with youth (Deutsch, Wiggins, Henneberger & Lawrence, 2013; Halpern, 2002; Jones & Deutsch, 2013). The ability of staff to develop meaningful relationships with youth is particularly important to the success of any ASP. Wagaman (2011) argues that empathy is a key ingredient in both empowering youth and increasing their social skills, and that these findings were especially strong for

youth from households with a low socioeconomic status. Rapp-Paglicci et al. (2006) also state that a sense of empathy and the ability to work with youth are just some of the skills necessary for ASPs to be effective and meaningful for students. Further, to reduce negative outcomes, Fagan (2007) and Capaldi (2009) indicate that programs should strive to achieve a gender balance between staff and aim to hire staff who have earned bachelor's degrees.

Ensuring that staff are appropriately trained is also a vital component of effective ASPs. For example, Huang (2001) notes that ASPs can help youth deal with stressful situations if they are, "staffed with educators who are trained to understand youth development" (p. 52). Larson and Walker (2010) advocate for initial and ongoing training for staff in ASPs because of the diverse nature of issues and dilemmas they face on a daily basis. The goal is "not to teach youth workers that there is one right solution for every dilemma, but rather to help them develop abilities to see the underlying complexity of situations and expand their repertoire of responses" (Larson & Walker 2010, p. 348). Rapp-Paglicci and colleagues (2006) emphasize that even the most qualified and credentialed staff will have to undergo some sort of professional development—such as training on the program curriculum, group facilitation, and classroom management—before entering an after-school environment.

Flexible Curriculum and Engaging Content

Engaging content is important when teaching any subject in any context. The literature suggests that successful ASPs develop and implement a flexible curriculum that allows for youth-driven activities where participants have a voice in their learning (Granger, 2008; Kugler, 2001; Roth, et al., 1998; Smeijsters, Kil, Kurstjens, Welten, & Willemars, 2011; Wright et al., 2006). Youth-driven programming can include creating a student advisory council and giving participants a voice in program design and implementation. Effective programs can also provide youth with opportunities to get involved, such as allowing participants to take on facilitation responsibilities and/or other leadership roles within the program.

It is absolutely vital that after-school programs do not feel like "school after school," especially for those students who have experienced difficulty in traditional classroom settings (Cornelli, Sanderson, & Richards, 2010; Gay & Corwin, 2008; Lauver & Little, 2005). For instance, Fashola (2003) states that if "students don't experience success during the school day, it is highly unlikely that they will be motivated to remain in school for another 2-3 hours unless they can be ensured that their negative experiences during the school day will not be replicated" (p. 417). Similarly, Davies and Peltz (2013) mention that the effective ASPs they investigated provided students with "opportunities for self-expression, sharing of feelings and thoughts, and time for unstructured play and fun" (p. 15). ASPs should be trying to increase engagement in learning and school bonding, rather than directly trying to improve academic achievement (Berry & Lavelle, 2013). Berry and Lavelle (2013) compared the socio-emotional outcomes between students who joined an after-school program because of personal interest and those who joined for other reasons, such as being referred to the program by school staff or enrolled by parents/guardians. The authors' findings state that "motivation stemming from enjoyment and future goals were relatively strong predictors of positive developmental experiences (e.g., emotional regulation, initiative, teamwork, social skills)" (Berry & Lavelle, 2013, p. 79). These sources suggest that successful and effective ASPs have a flexible curriculum packed with activities and content that is engaging and meaningful for participating students.

Conclusion

The lack of consistency and rigor evident in the ASP literature reviewed—124 recent academic journal articles, book chapters and technical reports—made identifying the six best practices associated with effective after-school programming a particularly trying task. According to this large research base, effective ASPs have a clear mission and promote a safe, positive, and healthy climate. The literature indicates programs associated with iatrogenic outcomes for participants typically cluster youths with a history of low academic performance and misbehavior at school. This is perhaps the most interesting finding of this review, as it means that both positive and negative student behaviors can spread to other students in the ASP. Effective ASPs also make efforts to both address barriers to participation and hire/train/retain high quality staff. The final best practice identified with effective ASPs derived from the 124 references included in this review is the importance of a flexible curriculum and engaging content that is meaningful to students. While there are no guarantees that even the most well-intentioned program will be effective in a given school context, program administrators and school leaders are highly encouraged to

seek out and only work with ASPs that contain these six best practices. ASPs that incorporate these six best practices and a rigorous program evaluation component have been linked to positive academic (e.g., GPA, attendance, etc.) and non-academic outcomes (e.g., increased confidence, increased self-esteem, etc.) for participating youth.

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