Chapter 2
Key Components of Engaging After-School Programs for Children and Adolescents

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Introduction

Millions of children and adolescents participate in after-school programs each year. A recent report indicates that families continue to value the contribution these settings make to the development of their children (After-School Alliance, 2014). Indeed, the literature suggests that youth have many positive experiences that are not easily matched in other contexts of their lives (e.g., Larson & Dawes, 2015; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009). Understanding what factors and processes help to make these after-school programs so attractive and useful to many youth and their families has been a focus of research in the field (e.g., Pearce & Larson, 2007). A landmark report from the National Research Council (NRC) on community-based youth programs identified eight features of after-school programs that advance youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The authors drew on available research and theory to develop the list of features. The features include physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community. This work highlighted the need to pay attention to processes in the setting that promote youth development. Specifically, they made the case for looking not just at what adolescents may see when they walk in the door of a program with these features, but rather the underlying processes that foster outcomes like engagement with the program. In the current chapter, the goal is to shed light on processes that

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facilitate youth engagement with programs that have many of the features highlighted by the NRC report (see Pittman, this volume, for additional discussion of the NRC features).

The information and perspectives presented in this chapter are that of a practitioner and researcher. We focus on three of the eight features highlighted in the NRC report, structure, support for efficacy and mattering, and supportive relationships, because they relate to the focus of our practice and research on youth development experience in after-school programs. We highlight program practices that have been informed by results from over 40 years of program development and implementation. We also draw on findings from an ongoing program of research focused on understanding processes that impact engagement in youth programs (see Fredricks, Naftzger, Smith and Riley, this volume for more on engagement). To provide structure and context for the discussion on the three features, we will refer to two community-based youth organizing programs that have been the focus of our work. We begin the next section with a description of these programs and their goals. We have also included a discussion on gender and developmental-stage issues because they provide important contextual background for thinking about the components we discuss.

Two Examples: The Center for Teen Empowerment and Dorchester Bay Youth Force

The programs that have been at the center of our research and practice are two youth organizing programs: The Center for Teen Empowerment and Youth Force. Youth organizing programs typically involve adolescents working collaboratively to identify and work towards meeting social change goals in their local communities (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012). Goals identified by such programs include racial-, economic-, environmental-, educational-justice and immigration rights among others (Torres-Fleming, Valdes, & Pillai, 2010). The youth are typically supported in their work by adult staff members, who are intentional about supporting youth autonomy to plan and implement program initiatives or social action campaigns. Importantly, these programs are distinguishable from other types of youth development programs because they are intentional in their view of youth as *assets* who have the capacity to be agents of their own development. Youth are not passive recipients of information or directions. Program practices reflect the effort of staff to align their value of youth as assets with the provision of opportunities for involvement.

The *Center for Teen Empowerment (TE)* is an asset-based youth development agency, founded in Boston in 1992, that is serving high-risk youth and neighborhoods in Boston, MA, and Rochester, NY. The mission of the program is to contribute to the development of empowered youth and adults who can act as agents of positive individual, institutional, and social change. The second author of this work is the founder and director of the program and leverages his years of

experience observing and helping to facilitate the development of youth to this discussion of the key components of youth programs.

Dorchester Bay Youth Force (Youth Force) is a community-based youth activism program that serves youth from urban and economically under-resourced neighborhoods in Boston, MA. The mission of the program is to develop youth leaders who can contribute to efforts to bring about social justice in their communities. The first author has been part of a community-university partnership with this program for several years. As part of this collaboration, youth and the adult staff have been participating in a qualitative research project aimed at understanding the factors and processes that support youth motivation and engagement in program activities. To illustrate the points raised in this discussion, excerpts from interviews with the youth will be incorporated throughout the discussion of key program components.

Key Program Components

Structure. A key component of after-school and youth programs is appropriate structure, which broadly refers to clear and consistent expectations and rules for individual and group-based actions. Indeed, both youth and adult staff in programs stand to benefit from the sense of control and predictability that comes with appropriate structure. Research suggests that positive youth developmental outcomes are associated with programs that explain rules and consequences to participants early and clearly (Garza Sada, et.al., 2017; Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009). It was also important that there was not a pattern of improvising rules and consequences ad hoc throughout youth involvement. Additionally, developmental theories suggest that the boundaries should be flexible enough that youth are able to experience the program in ways that match their growth and development. Research in the school context suggests that youth benefit from increasing independence as they grow older (McLaughlin, 2000; Merry, 2000; see Wigfield, et al., 2015 for a review). This means that the program boundaries might need to shift in response to the developmental needs of the youth. In one of the few studies conducted that has explored this topic in the context of after-school programs, Jones & Deutsch (2013) found that program activities and relationships did shift in response to changing needs of developing youth, which had positive implications for their socio-emotional development. In sum, structure supports the goals of the program, and consequently youth development outcomes. But it is also critical that programs that are *responsive* to youths' changing developmental needs are the ones that are likely to be most effective in supportive positive development.

There are some similarities in the strategies that Teen Empowerment and Youth Force have developed and implemented to provide appropriate structure. The Teen Empowerment Program model involves a systematic approach to creating a structured framework for youth. New members learn about the structure of the programs from existing members via a peer-to-peer socialization process. In both

programs, youth are asked to sign contracts designed to provide information about expectations and consequences for their actions and performance. Especially in Teen Empowerment, there is a strong focus on highlighting the rules and consequences for infractions because some youth who join the program have had little experience with the type and level of structure that is required to promote positive development. The program does not shy away from attempting to engage these youth in programming; instead there is a strong interest in serving these youth who may be in the most need of the support and opportunities programs can provide.

Importantly, the youth experience this structure as positive and helpful in building their character and skills for the future (Garza Sada, et al., 2017). Our research suggests that youth valued the clear and consistent rules that they received about their behavior and performance at the program. The excerpt below, from an interview with a youth participant, illustrates how teens talk about the value of learning to work within a set of rules.

> …All the Youth Force teens have to come to work, if you're late then you get violations and if you get enough violations you can actually get fired, so yeah, I think that's a skill we're learning…And yeah it's gonna help us in the future because we're all going to have to get real jobs like in the future.…

In sum, the youths' narrative suggests that they valued the structure of the program and recognized how useful it was for accomplishing short and long term goals. This is notable in light of the research literature, which links the perceived utility of a task with interest in carrying out the task (see Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Importantly, in both programs, the adult leaders were very intentional about building up youths' skills so that they could take on active leadership roles in the program. This development of skill likely contributes to the development of a positive subjective valuing of the program work, which is integral for sustaining engagement. Overall, program structure, which includes clear and enforced rules, is an integral component of effective programs for youth.

Support for Efficacy and Mattering. Another important component of engaging programs involves the provision of opportunities for youth to develop a sense of efficacy and mattering (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Research suggests that youth develop a sense of efficacy when they have the opportunity to experience the right combination of challenge, skill, and support of competence (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1997). Ideally, the challenge should be personally meaningful, in that it fits with the developmental stage, personal characteristics, and skill level of the youth. Mattering refers to the sense that ones' efforts and contributions matter in places they occupy.

Teen Empowerment has been successful in making this process a reality for scores of youth for many years. This practice starts in the early stages of the youths' involvement in the program. When new youth enter the program, adult staff work to understand, and then employ, the strengths they bring to the program. For example, many youth have established relationships with neighborhood-peers and therefore are well situated to step into roles that involve recruiting new members from the community. Buiding on this asset, youth are taught how to combine their skill at

relationship building with recruiting techiques that have been honed by professionals who do outreach work. These roles provide the opportunity for youth to build on their own established capacity to develop relationships and be accepted as part of a community. The program provides support for applying and deepening this skill set. The outcome is that youth develop confidence in their capacity to make a meaningful contribution.

In Youth Force, our work with the youth also revealed the focus of adult staff members to scaffold teens' development and movement into independent leadership roles. Specific strategies include assigning the newcomers with manageable tasks that function to scaffold the development of skill and responsibility for programs goals at a pace that is not overwhelming. One Youth Force staff member gave the following explanation:

> …you can't give someone that just came in the task of making a turnout chart because they'll be like, "what's a turnout chart?" They're not gonna see the value in it until after they see it work…

In sum, a main theme from our practice and research is that making explicit efforts to involve youth from early stages of participation helps to put them on a pathway towards sustained engagement. One approach is to start by asking youth to employ competencies they have developed in contexts outside of the program as a launch pad for developing new skills and then nurturing the continued development of this skill in the program. Support for mattering also comes when youth realize that they have opportunities to contribute to the creation of better lives for other youth in their communities. It is important to note that although the contributions of adult staff are essential, the staff work with youth to determine the appropriate level of input they would like from adults (see Hall, Fay Poston, & Dennehey, 2017).

Caring and supportive relationships. Another key component of engaging youth programs is the caring and supportive relationships that exist between members (e.g., Rhodes, 2004). This includes peer-to-peer and youth-adult relationships. Interpersonal relationships support engagement via various pathways. First, relationships provide instrumental support that can help adolescents respond effectively to program-based or non-program-based challenges that could derail their engagement with program work. Relationships are also developmental contexts that provide opportunities for youth to get feedback about their ideas and behaviors. Positive relationships can help youth develop a sense of belonging—state that has been linked to the positive motivation and engagement that research suggests are important for the development of intrinsic motivation (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In both Youth Force and TE, interactive exercises help youth develop supportive and caring relationships with their peers. In emerging research, the first author and her colleagues have documented the importance of relationships as a key feature of successful programs at different stages of youths' involvement in program activities (Dawes, Garza Sada, & Hargrove, 2017). Program practices and traditions in Youth Force nurture relationships from the start of youths' involvement in the program.

In the interview excerpt below, a youth describes how ice-breakers (i.e., interpersonal activities designed to help individuals learn about their peers) were important for helping him feel connected to his peers.

> I remember when I first started like the ice breakers and being a new person. I was so worried about whether these people would, you know, some of the people would like me or not, but they did. And at that first meeting we played a whole bunch of games and I really enjoyed it so I've been here since.

The above excerpt is illustrative of the narrative of other youth who experienced the impact of interpersonal interactions that were warm and welcoming. Additionally, the youths' narratives pointed to the uniquely instrumental importance of these peer relationships at different points in their trajectory of participation. For the newcomers in particular, welcoming peers is critical for reassuring newcomers that the space is safe and worth exploring. This is an important early experience for the development of a sense of community that was observed among youth who had been participating in the program for some time (Dawes, Hargrove, & Garza Sada, 2017). The sense of community worked such that youth held each other accountable for the work on group goals and served as role models for others to emulate. In sum, the presence of supportive and caring relationships was an important tether to the program for the adolescents of Youth Force (see Ehrlich, et al., 2017).

At Teen Empowerment, along with the explicit focus on using ice-breakers and interactive exercises to foster relationship building, the program views the use of interactive modes of work and communication as a means of significantly increasing productivity. This convention is based on practice-derived evidence that the group functions optimally when youths' voices are heard and when group members are given the tools they need to develop relationships based on mutual trust and respect. In this kind of caring and safe environment, youth become willing to take chances and experiment with new forms of creative problem solving. Furthermore, the use of interactive methods brings out thoughts, feelings, experiences, and skills that would otherwise remain hidden. Thus, this approach creates a much broader basis for reaching a consensus to take action and maintain the motivation to see successful implementation of these chosen acts.

Developmental Stage and Gender-Based Demands

Developmental theories, such as the life-span development perspective (e.g., Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980), highlight the importance of examining how youths' experiences in different contexts vary across developmental periods (i.e., childhood and adolescence). Each stage is characterized by differences in biological, psychological, and social capacities that are relevant for how young people respond to contextual demands. For example, youths' declining participation in organized sport activities is impacted by changing perceptions about their proclivity for a

specific activity (e.g., sports and drama), and developmental progression of motivational beliefs. Adolescents' cognitive capacity may facilitate a deeper or more sophisticated processing of experiences (e.g., gaining knowledge about the activity and experiencing positive feelings about the activity) that motivation theories posit precedes the development of motivational beliefs (e.g., Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

The developmental science literature suggests that engaging programs tend to be attentive and responsive to the developmental needs of their youth participants. For example, one program we know of created a space for pre-teens that was separate from the space used primarily by teens. This response by the program is likely to have helped the two groups of youth to experience the setting more fully. For example, older youth have the opportunity to participate in activities that fit their interests. Additionally, older youth may be granted more leeway to act on their increasing desire for autonomy to initiate projects and activities that fit their needs. This practice would be in line with highlights from research and theory on the need to be responsive to the changing needs of young people (Jones & Deutsch, 2013).

The literature also suggests that gender directly influences children's motivational beliefsand participation through gender role expectations and schemas (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). For instance, boys consistently report higher perceived competence, value, and participation in organized sports than girls (e.g., Fredricks & Eccles, 2002; Greendorfer, Lewko, & Rosengren, 1996). Additionally, theories such as the gender intensification hypothesis (e.g., Eccles & Bryant, 1987; Hill & Lynch, 1983) and gender schema theories (Bem, 1981; Slavkin, 2001) state that as children mature and enter high school, the impact of differential gender socialization is likely to manifest in the choices/attitude of males and females about sports. In a real world setting, the pressure to conform to gender roles may shape the lived experience of boys and girls in extracurricular activities and subsequently their perceptions of the quality and importance of the activity.

Conclusions

After-school programs are rich developmental contexts that play important roles in the lives of youth and their families. It is essential that stakeholders continue to investigate operational processes and document the findings about how various processes support youth developmental outcomes as well as institutional growth and improvements. These efforts should contribute to an enhanced understanding of when, why, and how key components of programs shape the emergence of specific outcomes within participating youth groups. We offer the following points for more consideration, with the caveat that the landscape of after-school programs is populated with much diversity in terms of the history, focus, and goals. Therefore, the readers should think about the recommendations within the unique context of their program.

Recommendations

(i) Identify the key program components that are the most meaningful for your specific program. Work to enhance both areas of strength and weakness. Include all stakeholders in the process (i.e., youth, parents, adult staff), as this step may foster the development of important connections that enhance the quality, and impact, of the program.

(ii) Provide developmentally appropriate structure for youth. Clear expectations and rules can serve as guideposts as youth work and develop in the program. There will be variability among youth in terms of their readiness to respond immediately to expectations; therefore a tiered plan for responding to the different levels of readiness is recommended. This greater capacity to develop and adjust programming in response to the needs of participating youth is an asset of after-school programs - so capitalize on it.

(iii) Practitioners should pay attention to youths' early experiences (i.e., the youths' first visit to the program) in order to make it as positive and welcoming as possible. Youth who feel warmth and acceptance will be more inclined to invest their time in the program and begin a journey towards positive engagement.

(iv) Programs serving youth from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds should make it a priority to learn about any unique needs and interests. This information may be useful for informing dialogue and decisions about what is needed to make the program welcoming.

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