

Conference Proceedings

NSACA 2004 Leadership Day Research and Evaluation Track

Research and Practice: A Two-Way Street

February 26th, 2004, Tampa, Florida

Prepared by Harvard Family Research Project and the Forum for Youth Investment

Due to the overwhelming demand for the research and evaluation information presented in this year's research and evaluation leadership day track, Harvard Family Research Project and the Forum for Youth Investment prepared a summary of the day. This document provides an overview of the panel sessions, including summaries of speakers' remarks, presentation slides, contact information for each panelist, and a list of the key resources cited during the day. Since the primary goal of the session was to provide an opportunity for meaningful, shared dialogue between researchers and practitioners, we open this summary with a presentation of the key research questions that practitioners posed to panelists throughout the day.



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Research Questions Raised by Practitioners

General Comments About Research

- The time frame for research studies is too long.
- We need to fund longitudinal studies.
- We need to connect research-based findings to funding requirements.
- The after school field needs a research-based statement about what outcomes after school programs can expect to impact.
- Research often suggests that the solution is to change the program; we need to reframe some conclusions so we are looking at what is best for young people.
- We need to conduct targeted research on specific populations to better serve currently underserved groups (e.g., immigrants children, children with disabilities, etc.).

Specific Research Questions

Programmatic Questions

- Recognizing that parents select after school programs for their children in grades K–5 (as opposed to middle school students that tend to self-select), how do parents choose programs?
- What are the influences of school personnel (teachers, principals, administrators) on after school programs?
- What can we do in after school programs in the K–5 years to increase the likelihood of participation in middle and high school?
- How can programs help youth academically (beyond homework) and link to the school day?
- Is homework an effective strategy for improving outcomes?
- What is the appropriate balance between learning and wellness?
- What are best practices related to training, recruitment, and retention?
- What is the impact of “on-site” training models on staff skills and competencies?
- What is the impact of participation on outcomes?
 - What is the impact of breadth of participation?
 - What is the impact of deep engagement in one area on young people?
 - What is the impact of integrated, thematic programming on outcomes?
 - What is the relationship between longevity of participation and outcomes?
- What is the impact of quality, meaningful leadership involvement of participants on programs and youth?

Systemic Questions

- How can after school programs provide continuity for children as they transition through different school and community settings?
- What can we do about the realities of achievement gaps and the challenges that presents to after school?

- What is the impact of quality and its links to:
 - Intensity, depth, and breadth of participation
 - Classroom practices
 - The “professional pipeline” challenge
 - Quality of staff and staff training on participation, and eventually outcomes
- How do programs affect the phenomena of social disconnectedness among youth and within communities?
- How do other developed countries handle out-of-school time (OST), including professionalization issues?
- What is the nature and extent of behavior differences between school and OST environments, and to the extent that this difference is significant, what are the programmatic features and variables that contribute to the difference?

Comments on Dissemination of Research Findings

- Use the NSACA state affiliates as a dissemination outlet.
- Use research for advocacy messaging.
- Use the research to engage large groups of people in a discussion about solving the problems of today’s youth.

Panel I: Research and Practice Perspectives on Out-of-School Time Programs and Participation

Beth Miller, author of *Critical Hours: Afterschool Programs and Educational Success*, and Sandra Simpkins Chaput, author of forthcoming paper, *Measuring Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs: Its Intensity, Duration, & Breadth*, presented their research findings and engaged in a dialogue with four practitioners working with after school programs across the nation. Priscilla Little, from Harvard Family Research Project, and Alicia Wilson-Alhstrom, from the Forum for Youth Investment, facilitated this panel.

Summary of Speaker Remarks

Critical Hours: Afterschool Programs and Educational Success (2003)

Beth M. Miller, Consultant, Miller Midzik Research Associates

Miller explored the links between out-of-school time and positive development, particularly during early adolescence, paying special attention to the role of after school programs in promoting learning. Many studies conducted over the past two decades point to the links between after school program participation and educational success, including greater engagement in learning and higher academic performance. Programs must fit the interests, values, and norms of students from diverse cultures. They must be less formal than school. To achieve positive outcomes, programs must also find ways to expose young people to the world beyond their immediate experience, to raise their expectations of themselves and their ability to make their lives better, as well as improve the communities they live in.

When programs succeed, students have increased motivation to achieve academically and the skills they need to realize their goals. All programs are not equally effective, and young people respond differently depending on their individual personalities, talents, resources, and needs. Based on analysis of the existing research, Miller concluded the following:

- Youth benefit from consistent participation in well run, quality after school programs.
- After school programs can increase engagement in learning.
- After school programs can increase educational equity.
- After school programs can build key skills necessary for success in today's economy.

For a complete copy of *Critical Hours*, visit the Nellie Mae Education Foundation website at www.nmefdn.org/CriticalHours.htm.

Measuring Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs: Its Intensity, Duration, & Breadth (forthcoming)

Sandra Simpkins Chaput, Research Associate, Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP)

Before evaluators and researchers can fully understand the relationship between participation in OST activities and outcomes, we need to have a deeper understanding of youth's participation. Simpkins found that around 70% of researchers and evaluators have grouped youth into one of two categories: those who participate in OST activities and those who do not participate. Although these groups have been, and will continue to be, useful in our understanding of OST programs, they overlook many details. Simply defining participation in such global terms glosses

over information about intensity (i.e., how often youth attended activities), duration (i.e., how many years they have participated), and breadth (i.e., whether they have participated in one or several activities). Research on youth outcomes and OST participation suggests that these three overlooked dimensions of participation are useful in characterizing participation and predicting youth outcomes. In her presentation, Simpkins Chaput defined the various measures of youth's participation in OST activities and highlights their utility by reviewing some of the evaluation and research findings.

View Simpkins Chaput's presentation at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/projects/afterschool/conference/NSACA_Simpkins_presentation.pdf.

Measuring Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs: Its Intensity, Duration, & Breadth will be available this summer from HFRP at www.hfrp.org. To be notified when it becomes available, sign up for the HFRP OST updates email at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/subscribe.html.

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Panel II: Getting Inside the Black Box: How and Why After School Programs Work

Jodie Roth and Christina Borbely presented preliminary findings on their meta-analysis study from four different literature bases and solicited practitioner feedback on a range of issues and topics to inform a future research agenda. Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom, from the Forum for Youth Investment, facilitated this session.

Summary of the Session

The session began by asking practitioners to select which of several terms they most closely identified with their program: school-aged care, after school, youth development, prevention, youth development, or out-of-school. Both practitioners and researchers discussed the ways in which out-of-school time is framed and the extent to which different frames capture what occurs in programs. This opening conversation was used to launch discussion about three areas of interest to the researchers:

1. Youth's activity involvement
2. Youth's time use and participation patterns
3. Program outcomes

1. Youth's Activity Involvement

Participants were asked to hypothetically consider what they would do with a 20% increase in funding to expand programs. This question was used to get at practitioners' views of important considerations related to youth's activity involvement. Response themes included:

- Service-learning programming is valued.
- There is a need to expand enrichment options and reduce costs for such options for youth and families.
- There is a need for programming geared toward emotional development, including mentoring and peer mediation programming.

Roth presented preliminary research findings in this area, including:

- There are clear benefits for youth who participate in community-based positive youth development programs, including fewer risk-taking behaviors and better academic outcomes.
- Participation in school-based extracurricular activities during high school predicts a variety of positive outcomes during young adulthood, such as high school graduation, college attendance, political participation, and psychological adjustment.

Roth also presented several questions, not yet answered by research, that her team is bringing forward, and asked practitioners to discuss questions they'd like researchers to answer. Roth's questions included:

- Why is participation beneficial? What is it about involvement that leads to positive outcomes for participants? The activities per se? A supportive adult? A different peer group?
- How do structured activities promote development? Are certain activities better than others? Are there common features of activities that lead to positive outcomes?

Practitioners raised questions that they would like to inform a future research agenda, including:

- How and to what extent do activities and various activity types matter? To what extent does it matter whether specific activity types are bundled together in an intentional way (rather than a hit-or-miss approach to scheduling program activities, e.g., does it matter that a program bundles physical and academic activities over other possible combinations)? Are some sets of activities more effective in supporting outcomes than others? To what extent are activities associated with specific areas of development? To what extent are they associated with development of the whole child?
- What is the evidence to support what practitioners sense anecdotally that activities that are related to specific competencies or career areas lead to outcomes related to future interests, aspirations, or competencies in those areas?

2. Youth's Time Use and Participation Patterns

To open the second part of the session, practitioners were asked to rank the importance of four variables on youth outcomes based on their practitioner wisdom: content, quality, frequency, and duration. This was used to unearth nuances between variables related to participation.

Practitioner response themes included:

- Quality appeared to be most important in practitioners' beliefs about what impacted participation and subsequent positive outcomes for youth.
- Quality was connected to relationship building and trust.
- Several suggested that frequency of attendance were indicators of quality and led to youth's participation over a long duration.
- Several further suggested that frequency was a key concern among those working with the most vulnerable youth (i.e., young people whose alternatives are unsupervised spaces, gangs, etc.) have a greater need for frequency of participation, with quality or content being a hook to ensure that the participation is happening frequently.
- One practitioner raised the point that quality and duration intersect when one considers that programs must evolve over time to remain a quality program for kids who stay over time (i.e., the program needs to be fresh, new, and developmentally responsive).
- Staff discussions often focus on frequency. (E.g., How many kids are coming? This is a funding-driven concern as programs are reimbursed based on participation.)
- Parents are probably most concerned with quality and frequency.

Roth presented preliminary research in this area, including:

- There are mixed findings about impact of the length of participation.
- In their review to date of effective programs, nearly half of the programs failed to engage youth for more than a few months. Program duration, however, was unrelated to program success.
- In the National Research Council's review of evaluations, they found some evidence of increased benefits for the few longer-term programs evaluated.

Roth also presented a few key questions related to participation that they have already identified for further investigation:

- How many different types of activities are youth involved in?

- How does participation change as youth age?
- What is the most important aspect of participation? Is it the amount of time daily, over the week, or over a range of years?
- Is there a cumulative effect of sustained involvement?
- What are the effects of involvement in a variety of after school activities for youth from different backgrounds?

Practitioners raised questions that they would like to inform a future research agenda, including:

- What effects does participation in OST programs have on children's behavior?
- Are there a set of best practices related to supporting youth's participation?
- What can research tell us about how to balance structure with choice?

Practitioners also noted that research could be helpful in clarifying to parents and the public the importance of play in children's lives and the reasons why programs should be structured around that need. Additionally, practitioners cautioned about how research gets used to set program policy, particularly in scenarios where one piece of research gets overly emphasized (e.g., the Mozart Effect or Baby Mozart techniques).

3. Program Outcomes

In the third part of the session, practitioners were asked to generate a list of outcomes they thought their programs achieve. Responses ranged from things that were not formally measured to very tangible outcomes that are routinely measured with varying degrees of rigor. Responses included: improved behavior, increased attendance, self-esteem, and child empowerment.

The facilitator then asked participants to take one or two of the outcomes they wrote down and sketch what they do that is intended to influence that outcome—programs, activities, or interactions—and why they believe or know that it works. This exercise generated a discussion between practitioners and the research team.

Roth presented preliminary research related to outcomes, including:

- Research demonstrates positive impacts for participation, but little is known about why.
- Program evaluations tend to focus on decreasing risk behaviors, such as substance use or school problems, with less focus on positive outcomes, such as nonacademic skill development or character development.

Roth also presented a few key questions already identified for further investigation:

- How do programs achieve their success?
- Are any of the proposed opportunities and supports more important than others?
- What is a "good enough" amount of these opportunities and supports?
- What drives positive outcomes? The type of activity? The level of participation? The opportunities and supports offered? Something else?

Practitioners suggested that future research should further examine the role of caring adults and interactions between youth and adults in influencing outcomes. Additionally, a few practitioners commented that sometimes research undermines existing programs (via funding), and would like to see more practitioner-researcher collaboration to avoid this effect when possible.

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Panel III: What Research and Practice Tell Us About Participation and Retention

Dale Blyth, Lynne Borden, Mary Marczak, and Sandra Simpkins Chaput discussed their latest research studies on participation and retention in after school and youth development programs.

Summary of Speaker Remarks

Bridging Research & Practice: Challenges & Opportunities for Professional Development Systems

Dale A. Blyth, Ph.D., Associate Dean for Youth Development & Director, Center for 4-H Youth Development, University of Minnesota Extension Service

The opening presentation for the panel on participation began with an overview of what youth development is and our responsibilities as youth development professionals.

What is youth development?

- Youth development results from the accumulation of each youth's everyday experiences of people, places, and possibilities.
- It occurs whether we do anything or not.
- It occurs at school, in the family, and in the community and during all hours of the day.
- It is based on the choices of parents, caregivers, and the youth themselves.

Our responsibility as professionals are:

- To help ensure youth's development is positive rather than negative or simply random
- To be intentional about the learning environments we create
- To provide and promote experiences filled with "developmental nutrients" that are age appropriate
- To help youth get engaged in their own development and learning

Blyth then suggested reframing youth development using a new analogy of the "developmental diet," that encourages healthy "exercise" of "habits of engagement." He proposed three developmental nutrients, which are the things you need to succeed: caring people, constructive places, and challenging possibilities. Habits of engagement include helping parents, caregivers, and especially youth make healthy choices about the people they are with, the places they go, and the possibilities they choose. They also include helping youth develop healthy habits of getting engaged in their own learning and in contributing to their community. Some of the healthy habits that youth need to exercise include:

- Engaging in their own learning and development
- Choosing healthy activities over unhealthy ones (e.g., musical performing over drug use)
- Choosing "developmentally rich experiences" (e.g., service learning) over developmental empty calories (e.g., TV watching)
- Experiencing the "high" that comes from mastery and making a difference

Blyth concluded his remarks by calling for the creation of professional development systems that bridge research and practice and that have the following elements:

- A solid bedrock of understanding around what development is—an analogy or theory

- The educational supports and the policy structures that are needed
- User-inspired research questions
- Research-inspired reflection

View Blyth's PowerPoint presentation at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/projects/afterschool/conference/NSACA_Blyth_presentation.pdf.

What Research and Practice Tell Us about Participation and Retention

Lynne M. Borden, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, University of Arizona

Compared to family and community factors, research has shown that time spent in youth programs is the most consistent predictor of:

- Youth thriving
- Enhanced self-concept
- School performance and aspirations to attend college
- Improved occupational attainment
- Increased ability to overcome adversity
- Increased willingness to engage in efforts to help others
- Improved leadership qualities
- Increased efforts to maintain good physical health
- Involvement in political and social activities in young adulthood

Research shows that these predictors are especially salient for disadvantaged and underserved youth, for whom programs may be less available. In an effort to understand why disadvantaged and underserved youth do or do not participate in after school programs, Borden and her colleagues at the University of Arizona, Penn State University, and University of California-Davis, are asking youth program staff nationwide to engage their middle and high school youth in an online research study that examines youth participation in structured activities during the out-of-school hours. Specifically, this study focuses on youth participation in organized activities, such as: band, debate team, school sports, community sports, community choral society, 4-H club, and others. It asks youth about how they made their decisions to join certain activities and not join or quit other activities, what they do in those activities, and what they get from being involved in those activities.

For more information about the study, please contact Lynne Borden (email: bordenl@ag.arizona.edu or tel: 520-621-1063). If you have other questions, please contact one of the following: Lynne Borden from the University of Arizona (email: bordenl@ag.arizona.edu or tel: 520-621-1063); Stephen Russell from the University of California-Davis (email: strussell@ucdavis.edu or tel: 530-752-7069); or Daniel Perkins from Penn State University (email: dfp102@psu.edu or tel: 814-865-6988).

View Borden's PowerPoint presentation at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/projects/afterschool/conference/NSACA_Borden_presentation.pdf.

What's Up? Youth in Out of School Time Study

Mary S. Marczak, Youth Development Researcher & Evaluator, the University of Minnesota, Center for 4-H Youth Development

Marczak presented an overview of her participation study, examining the decision-making processes involved in how older youth (middle and high school students) spend their time in five communities (very rural, small town, small city, suburb, and urban). Her research team conducted face-to-face interviews and mailed surveys to high school and middle school students and parents of older youth. In total, there were 100 youth interviewed, 50 parents interviewed, 170 youth surveyed, and 90 parents surveyed.

Her five key research questions were:

1. What young people spend their time doing in out-of-school time (during the school year and summer)
2. How decisions are made about how they spend their time
3. Why they choose to or choose not to participate in structured opportunities
4. Factors that promote or are barriers to participation
5. Perceived availability of opportunities in their communities

The rank ordered responses indicate that most youth are involved in some sort of structured activity out-of-school. Specifically, the survey responses revealed the following participation rates: sports related (68%), club type of activities (46%), creative arts (40%), religion based (40%), service related (35%), and after school programs (25%). The major reasons youth report for participating are: to have fun, to develop skills, to stay in shape, because it interests them, and because they are good at it. Primarily, young people report that they get themselves involved in the activities, while about two-thirds report that their mothers are influential in their participation. Several recurrent barriers to participation emerged in the analysis:

- Nothing available for older youth (especially for rural and urban)
- Cost or transportation (especially for rural and urban)
- Lack of variation in opportunities—only school-related sports (with the exception of suburban)
- Don't have time (rural and urban—due to family responsibilities, suburban—due to conflicts with other things they are involved in)
- Lack of motivation (key for parents)
- Personal factors (e.g., too shy, not very outgoing, likes to be alone, not the “type”, is more of a “girly-girl”)

For more information about this study, please email Mary Marczak at marcz001@umn.edu.

View Marczak's PowerPoint presentation at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/projects/afterschool/conference/NSACA_Marczak_presentation.pdf.

Measuring Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs: Its Intensity, Duration, & Breadth
Sandra Simpkins Chaput, Research Associate, Harvard Family Research Project

See summary on page 4.

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Selected Resources Suggested by Panelists

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The Forum for Youth Investment: www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

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