Afterschool Program Quality and Student Outcomes: Reflections on Positive Key Findings on Learning and Development From Recent Research

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In my years researching the effects of afterschool programs on children’s social and academic outcomes, I have observed the power that high quality programs can have on the learning and development of young people. This paper provides some reflections on selected research from my own study of the field in recent years, which has been deeply informed by that of many others. Since my first study of afterschool programs conducted more than 25 years ago (Vandell & Corasaniti, 1988), I am heartened by the growth in our understanding of the effects of out-of-school time from a virtually unstudied area to abundant and solid evidence on the positive impacts of high quality programs. Whether they are called afterschool, expanded learning opportunities, out-of-school time, or something else, we know from research that these types of opportunities can lead to positive outcomes for children and youth, as well as families, communities, and schools (Durlak, Weissberg, & Panchan, 2011; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009).

As the nomenclature in the field has evolved, so too have my own research lens and lines of inquiry. Through my investigations over the years, I have developed some beliefs about the implications of what we have learned for policy, which I share at the end of this paper. In my estimation, based on years of examination, high quality expanded learning programs are essential to the learning process because they provide young people with opportunities to relate to their world in new ways. Strong programs foster an orientation of being open to novel experiences, of being interested in others and the world, of being inquisitive and creative, and, ultimately, of becoming lifelong learners (Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2005; Shernoff & Vandell, 2008). As I see it, we have before us today unprecedented opportunities to ensure all expanded learning programs make a difference for children and youth (Vandell, 2012). [⋯]

Program Quality and Student Outcomes—Academic, Social, and Behavioral

My recent research, including the Study of Promising After-School Programs (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007), the Longitudinal Study of Program Quality (Pierce, Bolt, & Vandell, 2010), and the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (Li & Vandell, 2013; Auger, Pierce, & Vandell, 2013; Lee & Vandell, 2013) reinforces previous studies that the breadth, quality, intensity, and duration of expanded learning programs make a difference in both short-term and enduring effects on student academic, social, and behavioral outcomes (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009; Vandell, 2012). Based on the evidence, following are key characteristics of high quality expanded learning programs:

- foster positive relationships between program participants and staff,
- build positive relationships among program participants,
- offer a blend of academic and developmental skill-building activities,
- promote high levels of student engagement,
- maintain an orientation toward mastery of knowledge and skills, and
- provide appropriate levels of structure as well as opportunities for autonomy and choice (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Other recent studies reveal that positive staff–child relations are important for both academic and socio-behavioral growth. Reading and math grades are associated with positive relationships between program staff and participants, and supportive interactions with nonparental adults are important for facilitating child adjustment. In addition, when dosage is high (that is, students attend expanded learning programs frequently and regularly), research shows that expanded learning programs can be a significant factor in fostering positive academic and social outcomes (Pierce, Bolt, & Vandell, 2010).

Other investigations (Auger, Pierce, & Vandell, 2013; Li & Vandell, 2013; Pierce, Bolt, & Vandell, 2010) that I have conducted with colleagues reinforce the finding that the availability of a diverse array of structured, age-appropriate activities is positively associated with student math grades and classroom work habits, particularly at the elementary level. As students get older and seek more autonomy in their out-of-school activities, research tells us that greater flexibility in programming becomes more important (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007).
Some of my research sheds light on the types of activities in expanded learning programs that correlate with various student outcomes. For example, students who participate in the arts have been found to have greater self-efficacy and achievement orientation, as evidenced by their increased time doing English homework and reading for pleasure (Li & Vandell, 2013; Vandell, Pierce, & Karsh, 2011). Additionally, participation in sports seems to be associated with better work habits, self-efficacy, school attachment, and achievement orientation (Vandell, Pierce, & Karsh, 2011).

Social and behavioral outcomes. There is substantial evidence from the current body of research that expanded learning programs promote positive social and behavioral outcomes (Durlak et al., 2010). High quality expanded learning opportunities are linked to gains in social skills with peers, increased pro-social behavior, and reductions in aggression, misconduct (e.g., skipping school, getting into fights), and illegal substance use (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). These opportunities also demonstrate promise because they have been shown to increase student engagement, intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, and positive states of mind (Larson, 2000; Shernoff & Vandell, 2008). These findings are significant because the social and emotional outcomes that are fostered through high quality afterschool programs lay the psychological groundwork for the kinds of cognitive processes that are required for mastery of academic content knowledge and skills to apply that knowledge.

Academic outcomes. We know from research that engagement in activities that are both fun and that require focus helps develop the competencies needed for academic learning, including concentration, intrinsic reward, and motivation (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007; 2008). For example, in the Study of Promising After-School Programs, students who regularly attended high quality programs demonstrated significant gains in standardized mathematic test scores as well as self-reported work habits (Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). This study and other recent research provide a solid basis for three core assertions that should be used to continue to advance the field:

- Expanding learning programs show promising evidence for helping to close the achievement gap.
- High quality afterschool programs have positive long-term effects on school attendance and task persistence.

• Expanded learning opportunities have positive cumulative effects on student grades and academic work habits (Vandell, 2011 February).  

Conclusion

We have come a long way in having a growing body of research and evaluation evidence that quality afterschool programs work and make a positive difference. We also know a lot about improving quality. So at the local, state, and federal levels, it is time for us to find the will, energy, and resources to expand quality afterschool programs in the many schools and communities that need and want them—not in another 10 years, but now. In so doing, we will truly be able to leverage the power of expanded learning for student and community success.

References


Vandell, D. L. (2012, June). *Expanded learning opportunities can make a difference*. Presentation to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation Board of Directors, Flint, MI.


- See more at: http://www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds/article/afterschool-program-quality-and-student-outcomes-reflections-positive-key#sthash.GZPFlQSS.dpuf