The Power of After-school Programs for Changing the Odds for At-Risk Children

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As dance music thumped from the blaring tape nearby, Lilliona's feet seems to hopscotch around the gym floor faster than most people's fingers would fly over a computer keyboard. She's preparing a dance performance that her after-school program is giving to the community in a few weeks. Following practice, she'll have a snack, and maybe play some games in the school's gym before boarding the bus to get home about 6:00 p.m. Even after a long day, she tells me "I really don't want to go home after school," "It's boring at home."

Lilliona's life is hardly boring after 1:50, when school lets out in San Francisco, and the after-school program begins at McKinley School. Run by the After-School Enrichment program, a nonprofit community-based agency licensed throughout California, on an average day you'll find about 120-125 kids involved in a schedule that goes from community service to Chinese art. Normally, Fridays are devoted to field trips like the Farmer's Market but because of the rain on this particular day, students and teachers are hanging out, playing games, relaxing, with some structured lessons in between.

After-school programs like these are becoming an increasingly vital part of the educational landscape. Sometimes referred to as "supplemental learning programs" (Gordon, Bridglall, & Meroe, 2005), "complementary learning" (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay, 2003)"out-of-school learning," (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006) they offer a mixture of homework help, snacks, free time arts, sports, and field trips of many kinds. But regardless of their name, they're essentially designed to mimic the

activity schedule of a devoted 'soccer mom' shuttling her children from practice to tutoring to music lessons, with play dates in between.

The explosion in after-school programs in the early 1990's occurred at the same time when communities increasingly recognized that "soccer moms" weren't quite as available as before. Stories of child in self-care and increases in alcohol and drug use and began to surface in the press. Increases in crime reportedly tripled after 3:00 p.m. Too many children were left on their own, both physically and psychologically, filling hours of down-time with TV, video arcades, and few viable alternatives (Alter, 1998). Damaging patterns, set in the early years, were becoming ever more visible in middle childhood and adolescence, often leading to declining grades, increasing truancy, and cycles of hopelessness and little opportunity.

After-school programs began to take on some sense of urgency to keep children safe and well-cared for. Organizations like "Save the Children" and Colin Powell's "America's Promise," an umbrella group for hundreds of nonprofits and corporations, foundations including Charles Stewart Mott and George Soros, along with the federal 21st Century program, all worked toward securing millions of dollars to create new "safe places" for children.

It turns out, however, that these programs not only kept children safe; they often changed their lives. Today, nearly seven million of our nation's children are in after-school programs. These after-school programs nurture children's talents, expose them to interesting people, set 'tough love' standards of behavior. Whether it's through play, work, or intense study—all interact to reinforce children's growing self-efficacy, social development, and sense of commitment and place in their community. And all of these

skills are intimately tied to students' ability to achieve, to become success in life and ultimately, to form stable relationships of their own.

A Distinctively Different Child Development Institution

As a 'distinctly different child development institution' (Halpern, 2003), after school programs offer a distinctly different type of learning from traditional schools. Lucy Friedman, founder and president of The After-school Corporation in New York City uses the term "stealth learning," (Friedman & Quinn, 2006) or learning on the sly. Quality programs often involve students in project-based learning experiences that give children opportunities to reason and discover phenomenon in their real worlds and communities.

There's actually good science behind so-called stealth learning. Influenced by John Dewey's pedagogical theory of learning by doing (Dewey, 1948), it is based on the premise that children acquire knowledge, language, and social understandings through useful activity like solving real problems or social challenges. Whether it is putting on a stage production, or participating in some type of experiential advocacy efforts, learning is not something that is isolated in the child's mind. Instead, practice grounds learning.

Cultural theorists such as Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991) distinguish this type of learning from didactically transmitting information. Real activity typically involves a "master craftsman" of sorts, from the fine tailor to the careful after-school teacher who uses a number of strategies and techniques to encourage children to tackle tasks. In this respect, adults may lend support, structure, and certainly, create rules

of engagement, but it is the children inevitably who must take responsibility for their learning.

If you think about it, only in the last century and only in industrialized nations, has formal schooling emerged as the widespread method of educating our young. Before schools appeared, the most common means of learning was through apprenticeship. Children learned by becoming immersed in an activity. They participated in chores, errands, and activities with their families, effectively learning on the job. Parents essentially mentored children, giving graduated assistance until they could do things on their own. Eventually other, more specialized mentors took over, as young adults learned a trade or went on to a profession. Architects learned to design by work with master architects. Physicians learned to operate by watching and assisting other physicians. In all of these apprentice-like activities tasks are structured just a bit more difficult than the child may be able to handle on his own yet not in the realm of impossibility. With support from a more capable peer or teacher, as noted by Vygotsky (1978), children essentially stretch themselves, take up the challenge and model skills on their own.

More often than not, this practice-based approach to learning is what you're likely to find in many after school programs. The teacher or coach considers the complexity of the learning activity and designs strategies that encourage children to try out new things. These tasks are generally geared to something relevant in their lives; and the teacher models and coaches children to apply these new skills.

Unlike school, in after-school programs, its skilled performance that matters not standardized test scores. Whether its sports, creative arts, or some urban ecology project, programs focus on mastering knowledge and skills to accomplish tasks. It is the

purposefulness, and high demands on performance and activity that may make this type of learning especially well suited to children who have in other circumstances felt defeated, marginalized, and often invisible in schools.

When After-school Programs Work

For Lilliona, the high demands for accomplishment involve keeping up with her teacher, Lincoln Chavez a local musician, and director of the program. In his late-twenties, exuding cool with his long dread-locks, black sunglasses and Lincoln cuts quite a figure as an after-school leader. After graduating college, he turned to after-school programs because, "I wanted to be a role model for kids—black, white, Hispanic, whatever—to show how important education is. I see too many kids who think they can become sports stars or music stars without getting an education. I think education is the key to opening doors, and that doors will open for them if they have the qualifications."

Lincoln's is hardly your typical teacher. Rather, he's a task-master, tough and demanding. Getting ready for the dance performance, students are practicing their moves. "Ok Santiago let your hand go in a motion that looks like you're hugging yourself." "Let's take it from the top…" "5,6,7,8.."

The moves are incredibly complicated, yet none of the children seems to give up, even after the 10th go-round. Like an effective coach, Lincoln teaches by modeling, "Watch, this is what it's supposed to look like," "Try it with me," "Yeh, Lilliona you got it!" with tremendous excitement. With his back to the students, he demonstrates, gives specific feedback like "here's how to do it--here's how you did it--here's how to do it better." Sometimes he even scolds the students, like "How many times have I told you

guys to follow through on that move." At various stages of the dance, he'll yell "freeze!" and point out what they're doing wrong, showing them how to do it the correct way.

All through these moves, Lincoln praises, provides encouragement, smiles, builds on the children's momentum, finding tiny glimmers of activity to reinforce. But at the same time, he places enormous responsibility for learning on the learner and fosters their skills through vigorous teaching, practice, and repetition. He works on teamwork: unity, team spirit, and cooperation, reminding them that there are only a few days before their community performance.

The phrase "role model" crops up everywhere, in the media, in sports, and in community programs. Lincoln clearly is one, through his words and his actions. But it's not only his striking appearance, and his energy toward his work that captures one's attention. It is who he is and what he does—his interpersonal interactions, his character and professional behavior that leaves the strong impression. Call him camp counselor, big brother, or coach, he is both leader and collaborator in helping them to learn. Children don't act out.

Later on, asking why they had experienced none of the disciplinary problems that traditionally plagued many inner city schools, Lincoln answered, "We try to work with not only with the kids but the families. We don't turn anyone away. In some cases, where the children are very needy, we'll have someone shadow them, and we may need an extra adult. But we'll work with any and all kids."

Together, the evidence suggests that after school programs which build on the needs of middle-childhood have a few essential characteristics (Neuman, 2009):

- They give children opportunities to solve problems and use their reasoning skills to full capacity.
- They focus on teamwork. Sensitive to what matters to other people, projects get them to begin to think of "we" instead of just "me." Especially for children who have been isolated from many of the essential socializing influences, teamwork provides the discipline and role models they desperately need.
- They nurture children's skills and talents. Programs that help children to explore new skill areas, discover talents within themselves, and experience doing something just for the love of it, open up new vistas of opportunity and channels of communication. These programs can build children's self-esteem, as well as the other three R's—resourcefulness, responsibility, and reliability.
- They offer choices. Children in these middle years are seeking fun, friends, voice, and choice. They seek out places where they can gather with friends and interact with adults on a relatively equal footing. They want attention, and recognition for their efforts and skills, and want to make choices about what they do and why they do it. As one child said, "I like everything I do here, 'cause I get to choose it." Interest is what drives engagement, and they stay focused when they believe the task is important and personally worthwhile.

Programs like these build a "culture" of learning that is highly connected to useful tasks, projects, and goals. At their best, they encourage children to express ideas openly, to reason, and to apply their abilities and talents to authentic activity. In many respects,

they use immersion as their model of learning, helping children learn in ways that are more connected with day to day experiences. These programs allow children to safely explore their independence, peer relationships, and leadership. They not only support healthy, positive development during middle childhood, they also put in place a critical safety net for children who are juggling a volatile mix of family, school and social pressures in harsh, disadvantaged communities.

What makes them Work

What make these programs work? Deborah Vandell and her team of researchers (Vandell et al., 2004) and The Afterschool Corportation (TASC) (Birmingham, Peckman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005) among others have been systematically gathering data to identify characteristics of high-quality after-school programs as well as promising practices. Strikingly, these independent studies converge on a number of shared characteristics around programming, staffing, and support systems. They include:

New learning opportunities: For many children, after-school programs provide their first exposure to learning opportunities in areas such as dance, music art, and organized sports, the very activities that more affluent children enjoy. Activities introduce children to experiences that spark their interests, expand their goals for what they hope to accomplish in school and beyond.

Skill-building and mastery. Successful programs create opportunities to build skills through reading activities, storytelling, writing activities. In addition to basic skills, programs involve children in practicing new skills to the point of mastery in projects that often lead to an exhibition or performance.

Intentional relationship-building: Successful programs foster positive relationships with the host school through ongoing leadership training, and team building activities. Program directors frequently communicate with school staff about curriculum ideas, homework assignments, and the needs of individual children. Relationship building not only involves school staff however. Common to these successful programs is their ability to draw from a variety of resources in the community, and maintain close partnerships with parents in the community.

A strong experienced leader/manager supported by a trained and supervised staff: Successful programs hire highly qualified site coordinators who bring a rich set of experiences in youth development and a strong connection to the community, the children, and the families they serve. These leaders articulate a program that balances potentially competing pressures of academic and social supports, and are responsible for hiring teams of professionals and community based staff who share a common belief in young children and their capacity to achieve.

Strong partnership with sponsoring organization: Successful programs have strong connections to their partnership community-based organizations, yet considerable autonomy to make programming decisions. They give site coordinators flexibility to manage the project while providing administrative and fiscal support. Strong financial and managerial support provides the sustainability needed for leaders to be able to concentrate on creating thriving after-school projects.

After-school programs that bridge formal and informal learning through community based organizations, museums, universities and clinics engage children and deepen their explorations and skill acquisition in a diversity of learning environments.

These programs involve them in an agenda laced with learning yet distinct from what happens during the schools day. In fact, their very success often hinges on their non-school flavor, and their ability to reinvigorate and replace the drill and skill environment for at-risk kids, with one that allows them to learn and use their skills and specialized talents in the practice of interesting activity.

The stake couldn't be higher. Thousands of children, many of them emotionally vulnerable, are on the precipice of developing self-confidence or self-consciousness; of industry or inferiority. Those who succeed will have some kind of structure that can let them go to the next level. Quality after-school programs provide one of the scaffolds for changing the odds for these children (Neuman, 2009).

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