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The Engineering Identity of Afterschool Educators

Emma Carey

When I first heard about joining science, technology, engineering, and math into the acronym STEM, it just sounded like a list to me. I thought, "That's nice, that multiple subjects are being taught together. But I still only really like science." I wondered why these topics were lumped together, and what exactly the connections were among the four subjects, beyond the vague connections of numbers and data. And, why, all of a sudden, did my interest in one subject suddenly mean I might be working with all of them?

In high school, biology drew me into the world of science. I wanted to learn about the animals of the world: why they did what they did, how they interacted with and influenced their habitats, and what the habitats themselves were like. I loved making observations, asking questions, and then trying different tools to answer those questions. I looked up to explorers like Jane Goodall, who sat with animals with a notebook for hours, simply recording what she saw. Observations and questions came naturally to me, just as they do for most young people.

As I dove deeper into science in college, the math inevitably snuck in. I wasn't excited about it, but if I wanted to learn about the age, health, or growth of a tree, the best methods were to measure the diameter and height or to count the leaves. I observed chickens in my animal behavior class and discovered that the most concrete way to describe their behavior was to count and calculate how much of the time they were performing one behavior versus another. Math became not just a list of equations, but a communi-

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cation tool, a way to shine a light on my fascinations and share them with others.

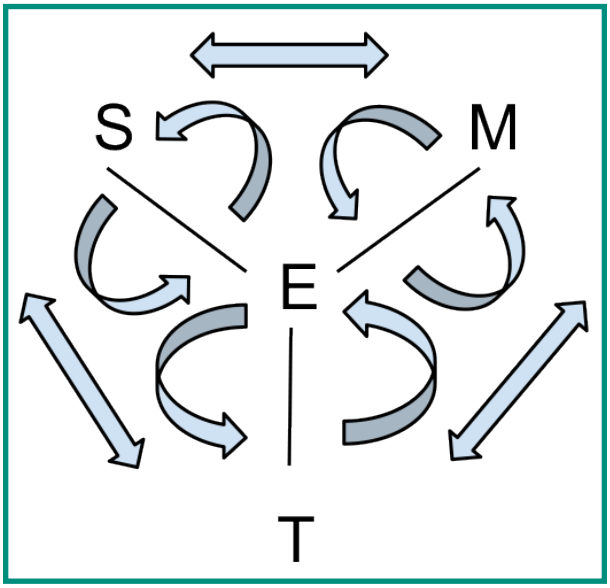
During the summers between college classes, I started teaching science at a small aquarium. Originally this job was a way to work closely with animals and to share my knowledge and my passion for nature with others. Soon, however, I discovered the joys of working with students and families. Guided by my graduate classes, I learned to encourage individuals to tune in to their own natural sense of wonder and then collect data to find their own answers to questions. I realized it was more fulfilling and effective to let youth in out-of-school time (OST) settings make their own observations, as opposed to trying to answer every question myself like a walking encyclopedia.

So, the science and the math, sure! I was on board. These two subjects were part of my interests and my life. But engineering and technology seemed a lot less familiar and accessible. Those two words were big and scary; they represented clunky computers and devices that had mysterious inner workings—things I didn't care to explore, dissect, or ask deep questions about, unlike the majestic creatures on Discovery Channel or in my backyard. I could leave the human-made mysteries to someone else, while I looked at the patterns of nature. Besides, engineering and technology sounded like the work of logistical-minded, calculating men, not wonder-loving young women like me. I didn't identify with engineering the way I did with science.

I started learning more about engineering and technology when I was learning to introduce educators to STEM. As it turns out, I've been engineering new technologies my whole life. EiE, the engineering design curriculum of the Boston Museum of Science, defines an engineer as "someone who uses [their] creativity and knowledge of math and science to design things that solve problems" (EiE, n. d.). The products engineers create are technologies. But technologies aren't just hard drives and software. Pencils, paper clips, and spoons are all technologies. Technologies don't even have to be physical objects; they can be systems or processes, such as alphabets or recipes. One way to define technology is "anything designed by humans to help solve a problem" (EiE, n. d.). When I learned these definitions, I realized that I used technologies all the time, and they didn't require a background in computers to understand. Problem solving and thinking outside the box were second nature to me while working with students. Thus, I had been engineering all along.

Engineering really tied the STEM acronym together for me. Science and math are the foundation for observing and making sense of the world, engineering is the identification of a problem, and technology is the solution designed to solve the problem. The acronym could be rearranged to MSET or to SMET, the acronym previously used by the National Science Foundation (Sanders, 2009), to reflect this order of operations. However, new technologies are helping to inform new advances in science, math, and the engineering process. Therefore, the best representation may be a nonlinear version that showcases all the connections, with engineering at the center, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Nonlinear Representation of STEM Connections



But I suppose STEM has the best ring to it.

By learning about the best practices for teaching engineering, I realized I was already engineering, and so were most people I knew, including fellow OST educators. Anyone who has finagled a way to fix a broken button during a fashion emergency at a concert or wedding, fixed a crooked table by wedging something under an uneven leg, or created a chore chart and system to make sure that the house runs smoothly is an engineer. Software engineers and mechanical engineers are well-known titles, but there are also agricultural engineers who work on pollution and environmental issues, acoustical engineers who think about

how to create the best sounds for music—and I believe educators are engineers as well: educational engineers.

Educational Engineer

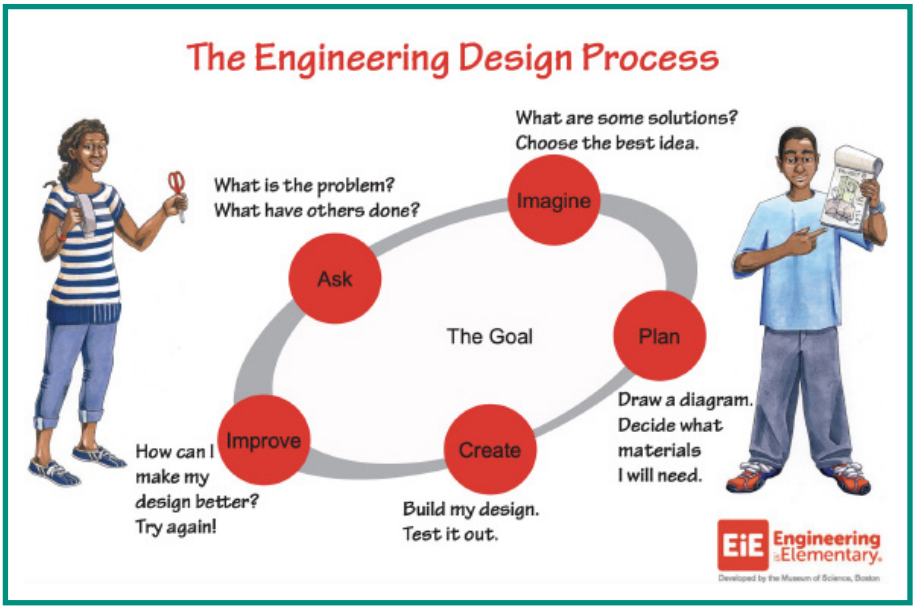
There have been multiple uses of the term *educational engineer.* Some define an educational engineer as an educator who teaches engineering exclusively. Others define an educational engineer as a someone who works outside the classroom altogether, doing research and making decisions about curricula (Anderson, 1961; Charters, 1945; Rudinskiy et al., 2020). However, Beedeez (2022) defines educational engineering as "a structured process aimed at designing, adapting, or transforming a learning system in order to optimize the effectiveness of the training." When the term is defined this way, all educators are educational engineers. The term applies to any educator who observes youth, designs lessons around the needs of their students, and revises their plans throughout the teaching process. Just as there are scientific methods and practices, there are also engineering practices and an engineering design process, such as the one illustrated in Figure 2 (EiE, n.d.). Engineers ask questions to identify a problem, imagine solutions, make plans, create designs, and then improve them.

Educators carry out these same steps while preparing and teaching a lesson, as illustrated in Table 1 on the next page.

All educators design solutions to problems using the engineering design process. Afterschool educators in particular are flexible and frequently solve problems on the spot. I have seen many examples of the engineering design process taking place in afterschool programs in my coaching experiences in the ACRES (Afterschool Coaching for Reflective Educators in STEM) program, a free, nationally acclaimed coaching program that builds knowledge and skills so OST educators can confidently facilitate STEM experiences for youth (ACRES, n.d.).

Let's take, for example, an afterschool educator planning a simple engineering project with students. They have an initial image of how engaged they want the students to be, how much students will learn, and what students will take away from the activity. The educator *asks* about the best ways to accomplish this task. They know that many students have been talking about weather and wind in school, so they *imagine* an activity that complements this topic: building paper airplanes. They start to *plan*, thinking about how they will need materials for building the airplanes, a certain amount of time, a large space in which to test the planes, and good purposeful questions to prompt the students through the design process. They *create* the lesson plan, solving problems and *improving* along the way. They plan to carry out the building process in the classroom and determine that either the gym or the hallway would be a good location for testing airplane flying distances. They find out that the gym has been booked for the day, so they decide to test the airplanes in the hallway. They hope to give the students at least three different paper options to build with. Although only two types of paper are available, printer paper and construction paper, they find a few old posters that are about to be recycled. They plan to have 30 minutes for the activity, allowing 5 minutes for directions and student brainstorming, 15 for designing and building, and 10 minutes for testing

Figure 2. The Engineering Design Process



Source: EiE (n.d.). Reprinted with permission.

Table 1. Engineering Design Process in Education

Engineering Design Process	Educators' Process
Ask what needs to be done. Identify the challenge or problem. Make observations to determine the possibilities and constraints of the task.	Identify the problem: to provide quality programming for students in the time allotted with the resources at hand.
Imagine potential ways to solve the problem.	Think about options for carrying out the lesson, using your own or colleagues' previous experience.
Plan a solution to the problem.	Determine where the lesson will take place, how to set up the space, what materials to gather, and what questions to ask the students.
Create a solution to the problem.	Design a lesson plan (the technology), or adjust a previously created lesson plan, based on the time and resources available.
Improve, or redesign, based on new observations.	Make adjustments to the lesson plan based on the number of students who attend, changes in the setting, and what students already know.

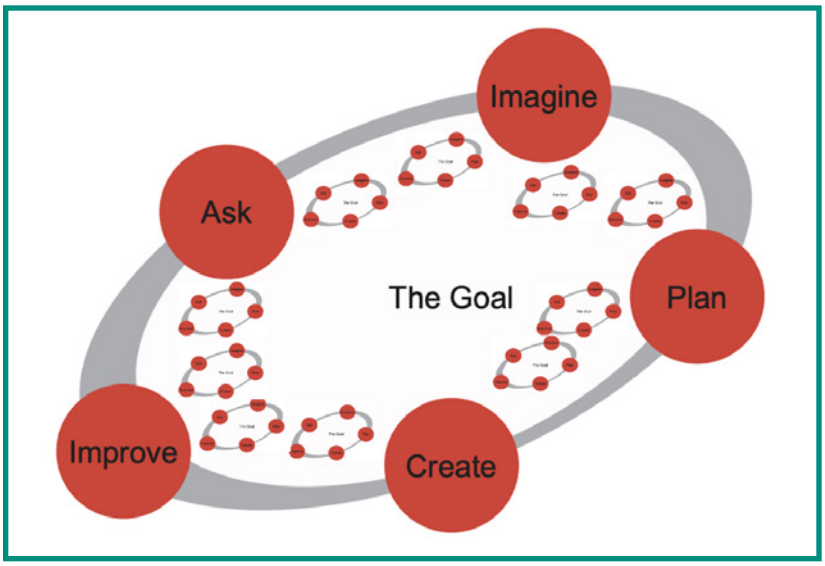
and then talking about the results. They come up with questions to prompt the students as they build, such as, "Why did you choose that type of paper?" "How do you think folding the plane in that direction will affect its ability to fly?" and "What do you notice about the flight pattern of your plane versus your classmate's plane?"

The engineering design process is neither linear nor circular. Engineers and educators both bounce around among the steps. Quite often in afterschool programs, things do not go as planned, and educators have to improvise and redesign activities. In ACRES, educators record videos of their interactions with students to reflect on their practice. Many times, when asked to explain their videos, educators share that changes occurred after they made their initial plan, and so the lesson had to be adapted.

In the paper plane example, when the time comes to implement the lesson, the educator is in the *create* phase and ready to go. However, they also find themselves going through small, fast-paced versions of the entire engineering design process as new problems arise. In response to new challenges, they ask new questions, make new plans, redesign, and improve on the fly. A fire drill at the end of the school day means the students arrive late, so the lesson time is shortened to 20 minutes. The educator shortens the introduction and presents the time constraint as an extra challenge for the students in their building process. There are more students than anticipated, and not enough materials, so the educator has the students work in pairs. They ask their planned questions as the students build, but some students are hesitant to answer. So the educator thinks about new follow-up questions to get the students to open up and think deeper, such as, "What materials do you wish you had?" Finally, as the group gets ready to test the planes' flying distance in the hallway, the educator realizes the school choir is practicing in the lobby, and the hallway is too loud. So the educator brings the students outside to the school courtyard to fly their planes.

Each of these little challenges requires the educator to work with an engineering mindset, solving problems and redesigning in the moment. Throughout the teaching process, educators use all the steps of the engineering design process. This process happens constantly in afterschool settings, not only in the initial process of planning and implementing a lesson plan, but also in the minute changes that need to occur in reaction to new situations arising. Figure 3 illustrates how mini-design processes are embedded in the larger process as educators adapt to changing circumstances.

Figure 3. Mini-Processes Within the Engineering Design Process



Note: Adapted from the EiE (n. d.) process

Building STEM Identities for Students and Educators

Current research has shown the importance of "demystifying STEM" in OST learning spaces to enable young people to strengthen their STEM identities (Cian et al., 2022; Edwards & King, 2023; Rahm & Moore, 2016). Building an identity means coming to see in oneself the characteristics of particular categories of people and developing a sense of how it feels to be that sort of person and to belong in those social spaces (Johnston, 2004, p. 23).

When educators foster familiarity and positive associations with engineering, technology, math, and science, they can inspire young people to see themselves in the world of STEM despite stereotypes and underrepresentation in STEM fields. Techniques to help students build awareness of their own STEM identities and visualize themselves in STEM careers include mapping STEM in students' everyday lives, looking for examples of STEM in photos and videos, and introducing students to STEM professionals (ACRES, n. d.). A STEM photo elicitation activity includes presenting a photo of a familiar scene, such as a construction site, a music classroom, or a garden, and asking students purposeful questions to encourage imagination and establish a problem-solving mindset: "What do you notice about the scene? What examples of science, technology, engineering, and math do you see in the scene? How might this scene be different if the picture was taken fifteen years from now?" Educators must empower students to feel connected to the scientific and engineering design processes so the students understand that they are problem solvers and that careers that involve solving problems are well aligned with their personal interests and goals (Pease et al., 2020). Engineering should be viewed not as a few specific majors or careers but as a *process* in which everyone engages daily. Educators can reinforce students' engineering identities by using language such as "Great problem solving!" and "You are an engineer!" while facilitating STEM activities.

These same strategies can be used to help educators identify the engineering in their own lives. Besides the everyday examples we highlight for students, educators can also be encouraged to see the engineering principles in the teaching practices that are already baked into their identities. They can come to see engineering as part of their identity, just as I have.

When I learned how much engineering pertains to my life, I found confidence in my ability to coach educators to facilitate engineering activities with their students. In the ACRES Facilitating Engineering Practices module, educators get hands-on with engineering. They observe and discuss technologies that don't require electricity or wi-fi signals, such as a spoon or an alphabet. They practice the engineering design process by building a tower out of notecards. In addition, they learn to empower one another by asking purposeful questions throughout the building process, saying, "You are thinking like an engineer!"—just as they will later when they implement these practices with their students.

When asked how they have solved a problem or engineered a solution in the past week, many ACRES educators talk about specific engineering activities they have done with their students. They identify science experiments, building projects, and computer science and math activities as examples. However, I have never heard an educator refer to the actual teaching process as an example of engineering. Similarly, in the ACRES Nurturing STEM Identity and Making Career Con-

nections module, coaches ask educators to think about ways they engage in STEM in their everyday lives. In this case, educators usually go beyond classroom STEM activities to include cooking, fixing something around the house, or making measurements to rearrange furniture. But they still don't think about their teaching processes. By coaching them to think about lesson plans as technologies and to consider their pedagogical problem solving as an application of the engineering design process, I encourage educators to deepen their STEM identities and boost their confidence in their abilities to facilitate STEM activities with youth.

The Bigger Picture

In addition to boosting educators' confidence in facilitating STEM, shifting the language around education can change how educators are viewed. Engineers are considered to be respected intellectuals in our society. This perception creates a divide between those who are and those who aren't capital-E engineers. The term *educational engineer* was used as early as the 1920s. It is not an accident that the term has not caught on, as Charters (1945) explains:

> [C]urriculum planners carry on activities and have ideals that parallel those of engineering, but caution has always prevailed against the public use of the term [educational engineer]. Always present has been the fear that educators might be accused of borrowing the prestige of the engineer. (p. 29)

In other words, if society started to think of educators as engineers, we might have to uplift the status of educators.

By changing the language around education, we can empower educators to see themselves as STEM professionals—and possibly even begin to shift society's perceptions of educators at the same time. Educators are professionals in their field, just like other engineers. Could calling educators *educational engineers* create a cultural shift—one that sees educators as deserving of higher pay, more benefits, and more trust and respect? Language is powerful, and taking on a title or descriptor for yourself can be life changing. Author Rumaan Alam tells his classes, "If you write, you are a writer" (Skillshare, 2020). Similarly, if you solve problems, you are an engineer. If you are designing solutions for how to best teach your students, you are an educational engineer.

Acknowledgment

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Edging Toward Democracy

The Roles of Informal Learning Organizations in a Literacy Ecosystem

Meghan C. Orman & Shannon B. Wanless

Literacy development is important for children's academic, social, and economic well-being (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). Yet racial inequities in reading proficiency persist: 82 percent of Black fourth graders did not read proficiently in 2019, compared to 55 percent of White students (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019).

System-level interventions are necessary to improve literacy outcomes, particularly for children of color. Systemwide approaches view learning and development as unfolding within learning ecosystems. A learning ecosystem is the "dynamic interaction among individual learners, diverse settings where learning occurs, and the community and culture in which they are embedded" (National Research Council, 2015, p. 5). The learning ecosystem model has been applied to STEM (Allen et al., 2020; Falk et al., 2015; Traphagen & Traill, 2014) and art (Akiva et al., 2021; Clark-Herrera et al., 2022) settings. Similarly, a literacy ecosystem is the overlapping, multilayered sectors that support literacy development in a specific region (Falk et al., 2015; Jaeger, 2016). In a literacy ecosystem model, improving literacy outcomes in a region would involve coordinating efforts among overlapping and multilayered sectors to generate systemwide changes in reading outcomes that individual teachers or parents might not achieve alone (Jacobson, 2019; Rutter et al., 2017; Senge et al., 2012).

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One important yet overlooked sector in a literacy ecosystem is informal education (Kirkland & Hull, 2010). Informal learning organizations (ILOs) provide structured but voluntary (Akiva et al., 2022) literacy services to a community. Examples include public libraries, literacy nonprofit organizations, afterschool programs, and educational media organizations (Falk et al., 2015; Kirkland & Hull, 2010).

Research on the impact of individual ILOs on literacy development is growing, but less attention has been paid to the collective roles ILOs play in literacy ecosystems. A systemwide perspective can clarify the unique ways in which ILOs support literacy development in relation to other actors, such as schools and homes, and can identify ways in which ILOs support community development beyond literacy. Further, seeing ILOs as part of a system can help identify leverage points among them for driving community-wide changes to address inequities in literacy outcomes (Weigel et al., 2005). Identifying and leveraging the collective roles of ILOs may be especially important for advancing equity and edging literacy ecosystems toward democratic ends. Our study used qualitative analysis to explore the roles ILOs collectively play in their literacy ecosystems and the extent to which ILOs perceive themselves as part of a larger community ecosystem.

Methodology

We conducted this study in 2020 as part of a larger community-engaged study focused on K–3 literacy development in an ecologically based initiative called the 3Rs: Reading, Racial Equity, and Relationships (Moye & Wanless, 2022). To explore the collective roles of ILOs in the literacy ecosystem, we surveyed and interviewed representatives from 11 organizations in a midsize Midwestern city and its surrounding county. Participating ILOs either had an explicit focus on supporting literacy development in children or identified reading support as a significant aspect of their youth programming. Included were two library systems; two literacy programs connected to larger educational organizations; one national, one regional, and one local literacy organization; one university-community partnership; one media corporation; one literacy lab; and one large afterschool organization. We relied on these ILO representatives as practitioner experts (Baars, 2011) who could illuminate their perceived roles in the literacy ecosystem and any perceived role of their ILO in a larger ecosystem of organizations. We analyzed ILO survey responses and interviews using qualitative theory-guided content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Thirteen Roles in the Literacy Ecosystem

We found that ILOs discussed 13 roles they play in the literacy ecosystem, outlined in Table 1. Only three of these roles were directly related to literacy; 10 reflected broader community ends. Of these 10 broader roles, nine aligned with the principles of community-based education outlined by Galbraith (1995). One additional role was supporting social justice efforts. Table 1 divides the 13 roles into direct service and indirect service coordination roles. Direct service roles are those organizations play in direct relation to children, families, and communities. Indirect service coordination roles involve coordinating services, either internally or externally with other organizations, in ways that indirectly support literacy development (Akiva et al., 2022).

Of the roles cited by our respondents, the first three roles in Table 1 are specific to literacy. In these direct service roles, ILOs saw themselves as not only increasing access to reading materials, but also expanding and redefining what literacy is. They also focused on enabling children to develop a positive relationship with reading. In fact, nine of the 11 ILO respondents said that expanding a culture of literacy and nurturing a love of reading were among their primary roles in the ecosystem.

The next 10 roles in Table 1 go beyond literacy; they involve supporting broader democratizing social processes in learning and development. Nine of these roles align with Galbraith's (1995) principles of community-based education, as noted in Table 1. ILO representatives discussed these roles in relation to their work with literacy—for example, supporting lifelong and lifewide literacy learning—but the roles could be relevant to ILOs in other fields.

The roles ILOs identified encompassed both direct service and indirect service coordination roles. Direct service represents the inner core of the literacy ecosystem, where organizations directly support children and families; indirect service roles reflect an outer layer of the ecosystem where coordinated efforts support organizations' work at the inner layer (Child and Family Research Partnerships, 2018). Direct service included both literacy-specific and more

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Table 1. Roles Informal Literacy Organizations Play in a Literacy Ecosystem

Role (Number of respondents)	Definition	Example
	Direct Service Roles	
Increase access to books (10)	Organizations actively increase access to books throughout the community through programming, services, lending, and so on.	"We connect children with free books and programming."
Expanding the culture of literacy (9)	Organizations (a) promote a conceptualization of literacy as going beyond reading and writing to include indirectly related content areas such as music, arts, or science and (b) incorporate this conceptualization into their practices, beliefs, and attitudes about what literacy is and should be.	"We tend to think about literacy is just reading a book, but it is everything that we do—you know, literacy, math.… There's music, there's singing … there's a lot of things."
Love of reading (9)	Organizations aim to nurture a love of reading and literacy in children, families, teachers, and all community members.	"If I see … kids … loving reading, I don't care if they score higher or lower, as long as I see them … having that excitement when they have a new book and then talking about it to their teacher afterwards."
Lifelong and lifewide learning* (11)	Organizations develop contexts, relationships, interactions, and values that give individuals opportunities and resources for learning and achievement across home and community contexts (Jackson, 2013) and across the lifespan (Galbraith, 1995).	"Our role is to help children to become lifelong enthusiastic readers, and I like to add on 'by any means necessary.'"
Inclusion and diversity* (9)	Organizations honor diversity and inclusion of people without discrimination on the basis of age, income, social class, sex, race, ethnicity, religion, or ability.	"Our free educational programs allow all children to participate, regardless of socioeconomic background."
Self-determination* (10)	Organizations support the power of communities and individuals (including children) to determine their own identities, identify their own literacy needs, access resources and skills to address those needs, and promote shared visions for their communities (Galbraith, 1995).	"You can't go in and tell a neighborhood what they need or what's important to them. You really need to embed yourself in that space and be the connector of the people that live there and raise up what their concerns are and what their needs are, and what's important to them."
Self-help* (10)	Organizations support the capacity of communities and individuals (including children) to help themselves and others with literacy development and other skills (Galbraith, 1995).	"We provide some early literacy tips, just simple things [parents] can do at home to help [their] child get ready to learn and get ready to read."
Social justice (10)	Organizations promote culturally responsive, anti-racist, and anti-classist pedagogies to actively address equity in literacy.	"We specifically work to mitigate the literacy and achievement gaps that many children from low-income households face even before they start kindergarten."
Leadership development* (7)	Organizations train youth or adult community members to be leaders, mentors, or advocates for children's literacy development (Galbraith, 1995).	"We have a pretty significant tutoring program. All of those tutors we train and we support throughout the year, they're all pretty committed literacy advocates."

Continued on page 11

Table 1. Roles Informal Literacy Organizations Play in a Literacy Ecosystem (Cont.)

Role (Number of respondents)	Definition	Example
Indirect Service Coordination Roles		
Institutional responsiveness* (11)	Organizations respond and adapt to the changing literacy needs, wants, and contexts of the people they serve.	"We always believe … that there's … room to evolve and develop in order to meet the needs of the community."
Integrated services* (11)	Organizations cooperate and collaborate with other organizations and schools through resource exchange, co-creation of resources, and/or brokering relationships (Tuma, 2020) to provide wraparound literacy experiences and programming.	"By familiarizing themselves with the programs, services, and staff of community organizations and libraries, each professional [in our organization] is better positioned to refer customers and clients to early learning supports across the county."
Localization* (10)	Organizations meet children and families where they are by providing literacy opportunities in specific neighborhoods and diverse community spaces (beyond the spaces where these organizations typically operate) and/or by providing infrastructure to accommodate travel to programs (Galbraith, 1995).	"One of the big things that organizations really need to do is … to get into the communities … to penetrate … the faith groups or … wherever the families are, the housing authority…. They need to … get into those places in order to be able to support families the way they need support and build those relationships."
Reduced duplication of services* (1)	Organizations work with other organizations to ensure that resources are being spent efficiently and impact is maximized by reducing duplicate literacy services (Galbraith, 1995).	"How can we [collectively as organizations] make sure to not just do the same thing over and over every year, every five years, every 10 years."

* One of Galbraith's (1995) nine principles of community-based education

general roles. The four indirect service coordination roles align with Galbraith's (1995) principles of community-based education. All 11 respondents identified integrating services across organizations and institutional responsiveness as roles played by their organizations. Localization of efforts—that is, meeting children and families where they are—was mentioned by 10 respondents. Only one mentioned reduced duplication of services.

We found three types of overlap among the categories of roles:

- Overlap among literacy-specific direct service roles. For example, ILOs might be expanding a culture of literacy while also nurturing a love of reading.
- Overlap between literacy-specific and non–literacy-specific direct service roles. Some non–literacy-specific direct service roles could guide literacy-specific roles. For example, ILOs might promote social justice and lifelong and lifewide learning by increasing access to culturally affirming books.
- Overlap between direct and indirect service roles. ILOs' direct service roles often seemed to influence the indirect service collaborations, and vice versa. For example, ILO respondents discussed localization, an indirect role, in relation to building relationships with communities and meeting families where they are—areas that could, according to Morris (2002), reflect the direct service role of supporting social justice.

The Ecological Niche of ILOs

In ecology, an ecological niche is "the relational position of a species or population in an ecosystem" (Elliot & Davis, 2020, p. 5). The ecological niche of the ILOs in the literacy ecosystem is to support these 13 roles. Identifying this niche helps distinguish the roles of ILOs in relation to those of other ecosystem actors, such as schools and families.

The breadth and depth of these roles uniquely position ILOs to advance equity in literacy and social outcomes and to edge the literacy ecosystem toward democratic ends. Nine of the 13 roles identified by organizations align with Galbraith's (1995) principles of community-based education: self-help, self-determination, leadership development, lifelong and lifewide learning, inclusion and diversity, localization, institutional responsiveness, integrated services, and reduced duplication of services. Individually, these roles demonstrate the value that ILOs, as forms of community-based education, contribute to the literacy ecosystem (Baldridge et al., 2017). Collectively, these roles indicate that ILOs may be particularly important in edging a literacy ecosystem toward democratic ends (Baldridge et al., 2017; Kirkland & Hull, 2010). By fulfilling these roles, ILOs may offer individuals and communities hope, dignity, and a sense of responsibility, which bears, in Galbraith's (1995) assessment, "an inclusionary and liberating significance" (p. 19). The literacy support ILOs offer is intertwined with support for leadership, lifelong and lifewide learning, self-help, self-determination, and diversity and inclusion. Because ILOs' literacy efforts are embedded within aims to support broader democratic ends, they may be particularly helpful in disrupting systemic racial inequities in literacy outcomes. Thus, these roles highlight the potential of ILOs to contribute to inclusive and equitable community-wide literacy development.

The breadth and depth of these roles uniquely position ILOs to advance equity in literacy and social outcomes and to edge the literacy ecosystem toward democratic ends.

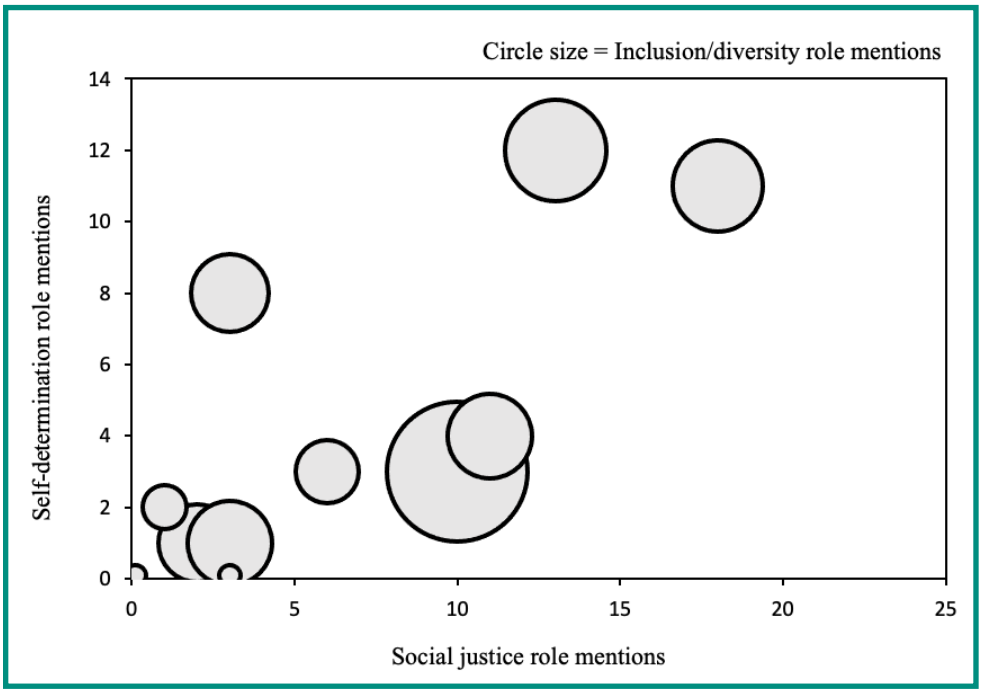
Four roles identified by ILO respondents are not included in Galbraith's (1995) framework. The broadest of these, social justice, is explored in the next section. The other three are literacy-specific: increasing access to books, nurturing a love of reading, and expanding the culture of literacy. While all three may have implications for addressing racial inequities in literacy outcomes for children in grades K to 3, the latter two may be especially important (Severino et al., 2022). For example, increasing access to books may have the strongest impact on early reading outcomes when combined with nurturing a love of reading, ensuring access to diverse and inclusive books, and expanding the culture of literacy to incorporate other forms of literacy engagement, such as art projects based on books. This observation aligns with previous literature on the importance of nurturing a love of reading in school and community-based settings (Lopez et al., 2017; Minor & Hardeen, 2020). It also reflects the idea that thinking about literacy as more than just reading books is important for addressing racial inequities in literacy outcomes (Acosta & Duggins, 2018; Yosso, 2005).

Social Justice, Inclusion and Diversity, and Self-Determination

Our respondents described promoting social justice as a distinct role their ILOs play in the literacy ecosystem. This finding aligns with previous literature highlighting the role of community-based educational spaces in disrupting educational inequities and challenging deficit narratives (Baldridge et al., 2017).

In our analyses, two roles stood out as being related to social justice: inclusion and diversity and self-determination (see Table 1). Figure 1 illustrates relationships among mentions of social justice, self-determination, and inclusion and diversity. In the figure, each of the 11 respondent ILOs is represented by a circle. Placement on the horizontal axis tracks the number of mentions of social justice; the vertical axis shows mentions of self-determination. The up-and-right tendency of the circles demonstrates that ILOs that discussed social justice also tended to discuss self-determination. Previous theory also has related social justice to the idea of honoring the power of individuals and communities to determine their own values and needs (e.g., Watts, 2004). In Figure 1, the size of circles corresponds to the ILOs' mentions of inclusion and diversity—which were not necessarily associated with either social justice or self-determination. Only two organizations, those whose large circles appear in the upper right side of Figure 1, balanced inclusion and diversity, social justice, and self-determination. The rest were off balance; the larger circles in the lower left corner had several mentions of inclusion and diversity but not much mention of social justice or self-determination. However, recent literature calls for attention to the differences between social justice on the one hand and inclusion and diversity on the other. Social justice, because it is required for

Figure 1. Respondent References to Social Justice, Self-Determination, and Inclusion and Diversity



transformative social change (Stewart, 2017), should be an educational goal (Goriss-Hunter et al., 2023) distinct from efforts toward inclusion and diversity.

Our literacy ILO respondents often discussed social justice in broad terms, such as, "We embed social justice into the work we do," or "We really stand alone in serving exclusively the underserved community." Some went further to discuss economic inequities in literacy development. For example, one respondent said, "We specifically work to mitigate the literacy and achievement gaps that many children from low-income households face even before they start kindergarten." These respondents seemed to be aware of persistent disparities in reading outcomes based on economic inequities, which have been documented for decades (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). However, inequities in reading outcomes for students of color are equally persistent. Racial and economic inequities have intersecting impacts on reading outcomes (Becares & Priest, 2015; Henry et al., 2020). Few of our ILO respondents explicitly addressed racial inequities in their discussions of social justice or diversity and inclusion.

The exceptions were two of the smallest ILOs in terms of annual budget and number of children served. Both organizations focused on supporting Black children specifically, and their respondents were the only ones to discuss deficit racialized ideologies and systemic racism. One said that if "we're doing traditional things, thinking that our kids are going to get it, then essentially, we're still coming from that deficit mindset…. We're not coming from an asset mindset." This respondent also described opportunity gaps in literacy "as an opportunity to create transformative learning experiences for Black children."

The second respondent, when discussing their ILO's role in the ecosystem, described an interaction at a parent-child literacy program. The event brought community members, including police officers, together with program families at a local barbershop. A father told the ILO representative that he was "not too comfortable" sitting next to a police officer. Asked why, the father said "I've never sat by a police officer, a white police officer too, who wasn't trying to, you know…"—an indirect reference to police violence against Black men. The ILO respondent described this event as one of the ILO's efforts to "try to change the perspective … of 'them' and 'us.'"

These two respondents clearly expressed an understanding of their ILOs' roles within what Ray (2019) calls racialized institutions: "organizations as constituting and constituted by racial processes that may shape both the policies of the racial state and individual prejudice" (p. 27). For these two ILOs, actively dismantling racist policies and processes was an important aspect of social justice, distinct from diversity and inclusion.

Systems Thinking: Direct vs. Indirect Service Roles

In distinguishing between direct service and indirect service coordination roles, ILO respondents demonstrated

a systems view of literacy development. A systems view sees an outer layer of organizational networks and learning communities (Akiva et al., 2022) that surrounds the inner layer of people, places, and processes where literacy development happens (Akiva et al., 2022; Jaeger, 2016). In the outer layer, organizations fulfill higher-order roles such as integrating literacy services, responding to communities' evolving literacy needs, and localizing efforts. By fulfilling these indirect roles in the outer layer, ILOs enable direct service workers to serve children and families effectively. As the Child and Family Research Partnerships (2018) notes, "direct service programs should be embedded within a larger system of support to have an impact large enough to change community-level indicators" (p. 1). Service coordination at the outer indirect service level helps to address complex inequities in literacy development at the inner direct service level (Akiva et al., 2022).

In distinguishing between direct service and indirect service coordination roles, ILO respondents demonstrated a systems view of literacy development.

ILO representatives showed evidence of systems thinking in their discussion of two layers of roles in the ecosystem. They noted that literacy development occurs across organizational and program settings. They also identified the value of coordinating efforts to support children's literacy development. For example, one ILO respondent commented, "There has to be some continuity [across organizations], or else [the learning] gets disjointed." Respondents also discussed barriers to indirect service coordination. For example, one said, "The biggest support missing is collaboration in terms of spaces where similar organizations can come together to combine their resources to effectively address issues such as poverty, racism, and educational inequity." Viewing literacy development as a community-wide process and elaborating on barriers suggest that organizations may be ready for system-level interventions (Akiva et al., 2017). System-level interventions would move beyond collaboration between ILOs to collaboration across sectors where ILOs, schools, and other sites of learning coordinate literacy efforts strategically (Falk et al., 2015).

Interestingly, only one ILO respondent mentioned the indirect role of reduced duplication of services. The next least-mentioned role was leadership development, which was discussed by seven of 11 respondents. Furthermore, many ILOs reported offering similar services in the same neighborhoods. One explanation for duplication of services may be a top-down approach similar to what is called the "helicopter" or "parachute" approach to science. In this approach, scientists from resource-rich institutions, such as universities or wealthy nations, "drop in" to communities with less resources to carry out research activities (Adame, 2021). Helicopter science is characterized by lack of engagement of local communities, a practice that reflects the power imbalance between "haves" and "have-nots" and may perpetuate colonization practices (Haelewaters et al., 2021). The ILOs in our sample may be employing a similar approach: using prior research or anecdotal observations to identify a need, such as low reading scores among children of color, and then addressing that need by bringing resources to underserved communities.

Recommendations

Three recommendations for literacy ILOs, researchers, and funders arise from this study:

- Distinguish social justice from inclusion and diversity.
- Form cross-sector networks.
- Pursue community-engaged research and program development.

Distinguish Social Justice from Inclusion and Diversity

Respondents from literacy ILOs seemed to use the terms *social justice* and *inclusion and diversity* interchangeably, despite conceptual differences between these constructs (Stewart, 2017). As Kendi (2019) asserts, social justice work requires clear and consistent language and definitions. To promote clearer language and concepts, staff of literacy ILOs may benefit from professional development that focuses on explicit definitions and clear, consistent language. Effective professional development would involve active learning and collective participation over an extended period to enable participants to clarify and then apply definitions of key terms (Desimone, 2011). This professional development could be even more effective if it led participants to

consider how they both constitute and are constituted by racialized social identities and how these identities intersect with their work (Ray, 2019). How has race affected the creation of their ILO, the services it offers, and its impact on literacy development in its region? Clarifying social justice language within a racialized framework will support ILOs' direct service efforts to provide intentional and responsive literacy support for children and families.

Form Cross-Sector Networks

Our interviewees' responses suggest that their indirect service may benefit from strategic efforts to transform their literacy ecosystem by connecting literacy ILOs with one another and with other sectors, including homes, schools, and nonliteracy organizations, as research recommends (e.g., Allen et al., 2020). These ecosystem management efforts (Akiva et al., 2017) could look like network learning communities (Knutson & Crowley, 2022) or execution networks (Gomez et al., 2016). An example of a network learning community is the Tulsa Regional STEM Alliance, which leverages cross-sector partnerships to improve STEM outcomes (Allen et al., 2020). An execution network is Philadelphia's Read By 4th Campaign, whose goal is to have every child reading proficiently by fourth grade. To achieve this goal, Read By 4th fosters collaboration among homes, schools, and community organizations to shift systems toward equitable changes in reading outcomes (Read by 4th, 2021).

Clarifying social justice language within a racialized framework will support ILOs' direct service efforts to provide intentional and responsive literacy support for children and families.

These and similar strategic cross-sector efforts go beyond mere interorganizational collaboration to impact literacy development at multiple layers of the ecosystem. Such efforts may be especially critical for addressing persistent structural racial inequities in literacy learning environments (Flowers, 2007; Merolla & Jackson, 2019). To get started with system-level interventions, ILOs may consider partnering with researchers and stakeholders to conduct a network analysis of their ecosystem. Examples include Russell and Smith's (2011) analysis of afterschool programs in Dallas or Orman and colleagues' (2021) analysis of literacy organizations in Pittsburgh.

Pursue Community-Engaged Research and Program Development

To avoid a helicopter approach to informal literacy efforts in historically marginalized communities, ILOs may benefit from engaging communities in research and program development (Dostilio et al., 2012). Community-engaged research is defined as a collaborative enterprise between community members and researchers that seeks to "democratize knowledge by validating multiple sources of knowledge" with the goal of "social action for the purpose of achieving social change and social justice" (Strand et al., 2003, p. 6).

The principles of academic community-engaged research can be employed by literacy ILOs and community stakeholders working together to identify unmet literacy needs and define the resources and programming that would best meet these needs. Community-engaged research to strengthen direct service roles might include convening a community advisory board or hosting focus groups with children, families, and teachers to find how well programming is meeting the community's literacy needs. To strengthen indirect service coordination, literacy ILOs might invite community stakeholders, and perhaps academic researchers, into their network learning community or execution network. In both cases, reciprocal relationships with community partners connect literacy ILOs with the communities they serve (Dostilio et al., 2012) and avoid the helicopter approach to research and program development. Such organizational efforts can have important real-world impacts on youth literacy development and community well-being (Adame, 2021).

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Out-of-School Time Sponsors and Partners

A Review of Programs for Low-Income Adolescents

Rebecca S. Levine

As communities grapple with the harmful, inequitable effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have been particularly hard on low-income and marginalized youth, renewed attention has been directed toward how out-of-school time (OST) programs can help youth reconnect and re-engage (Afterschool Alliance, 2021; Stanford, 2022).

As OST providers respond to today's complex issues, however, they are not alone. For decades, OST programs have been supported by a diverse range of sponsors and partners, including local nonprofits, schools, universities, and municipal governments. What can we learn about how these various partners have worked together to design and implement OST programs? In this article, I present the results of a systematic literature review on the sponsors and partners that support OST programs for low-income adolescents. The goal is to synthesize the types of organizations involved in OST programs, what they offered, and how they worked together to support youth in OST settings.

The Importance of Partnerships

Prior work on OST partnerships reveals various benefits and effective strategies. Griffin & Martinez (2013) identified seven categories of contributions that partnerships can provide: evaluation services, fundraising, programming or activity-related services, goods, volunteer staffing, paid staffing, and other types of contributions. Other studies have identified effective practices involving one type of partner, such as schools (Anthony & Morra, 2016; Dilles, 2010) or universities (Afterschool Alliance, 2007), or have focused on partnerships that sustain specific goals, such as extended learning (Little, 2013) or

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career readiness (Cohen et al., 2019). The National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families recommends that OST programs involve a broad set of partners in order to take full advantage of available community resources and to establish a shared vision with a common set of outcomes (Hayes et al., 2009).

In this article, I review and synthesize the available research on OST programs involving sponsors and partners from various sectors, from local nonprofits to national organizations, across a wide range of afterschool and summer programs that serve low-income adolescents. I focus on young people aged 11 to 19, or in middle or high school. The developmental tasks of this age group, such as identity exploration and college and career readiness, are different from those of younger children; therefore, potential partnerships look different (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Further, I focus on adolescents from low-income families and those from marginalized backgrounds. These youth often face logistical, social, and cultural barriers to participation in OST programming. The barriers, many of which stem from structural inequities and discrimination, include fewer quality programs than in more affluent communities, lack of safe and affordable transportation to and from programs, wanting or needing to work or care for family members, and harassment or bullying at the program itself (Kennedy et al., 2007; Lin et al., 2016; Little, 2007; Wallace Foundation, 2022). Therefore, OST partnerships must consider the unique circumstances of low-income youth, including the resources, strengths, and needs of the youth themselves and of their communities, in order to be effective.

Methods

This article is part of a larger systematic review on OST programs serving low-income adolescents; for this article, I coded the data for themes and patterns related to OST sponsoring organizations and partnerships. In other words, I examined the types and prevalence of organizations that were either sponsoring an OST program alone or partnering with other organizations as part of their initiative.

For this review, I followed best practices set forth by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021). First, on June 16, 2022, I searched ERIC, PsycINFO, and Web of Science to find studies that report on OST programs serving low-income adolescents. I also hand-searched all publications posted on the National Institute of Out-of-School Time's website, including all issues of *Afterschool Matters*, through Spring 2022. Searches were limited to studies published in English after December 31, 2011.

The search yielded 1,266 results: 1,108 articles from databases and 158 articles from NIOST. Two additional studies were added from hand searching, for a total of 1,268 results. I reviewed all articles based on inclusion criteria: studies had to be written in English, empirical in nature, and published either in a peer-reviewed journal or as a working paper from a reputable organization; articles also had to report on an OST program that was at least four weeks in duration and served primarily low-income adolescents in the United States. With these inclusion criteria, a total of 118 articles representing 100 discrete OST programs were in my final sample. For the findings, I designed a Qualtrics survey to extract relevant information about sponsor and partner organizations from the 100 programs. Table 1 outlines the content categories of the programs.

Varieties of Sponsoring and Partner Organizations

OST programs were sustained by many constellations of organizations, including schools and school districts,

Table 1. Types of Programs Included in the Review

Program Content	Number of Programs
STEM or STEAM (science, technology, engineering, [arts], math)	34
Multipurpose	10
Literacy	10
Mental health and social-emotional learning	9
Sports and recreation	9
Community health and well-being	8
Academics	5
Sexual health	3
Employment*	3
Other specialty activities	9

* Includes only programs whose emphasis was primarily on providing employment and job training. Some programs in other categories offered stipends or wages for work in their areas of emphasis.

colleges and universities, local nonprofits and community-based organizations, municipal and state organizations and agencies, and national organizations (Table 2).

Table 2. Types of Sponsoring Organizations and Partners

Type of Sponsoring or Partner Organization	Number of Programs
Schools and school districts	53
Colleges and universities	45
Local nonprofits and community-based organizations	36
Municipal and state organizations and agencies	16
National organizations	15

Schools and School Districts

Fifty-three of the 100 reviewed programs involved school sites or school districts. Often, these programs were hosted after school on school grounds. Schools provided space and facilities for programming, such as classrooms, cafeterias, libraries, and recreational spaces. Often teachers were hired to stay after school and run these programs. Hosting an afterschool program at a school can be beneficial for a number of reasons, including convenience, familiarity, and additional opportunities for students to develop positive relationships and a sense of belonging in the school community (Fenzel & Richardson, 2018).

However, hosting a program at a school can have its drawbacks. Students (and parents for any parent engagement opportunities) who feel disconnected from or unsafe at school may be less likely to stay for an afterschool program (Pelcher & Rajan, 2016). Additionally, as Maljak et al. (2014) found, afterschool programs sometimes must compete for space with school clubs or sports, navigate bureaucratic structures with teachers and administrators, and, in general, cope with complex organizational hurdles that can hinder successful programming. In their study of physical activity clubs at urban high schools, Maljak et al. (2014) found that difficulty obtaining space for afterschool programming had downstream effects such as canceled sessions, frustration for students and staff, and eventually decreased participant attendance. Securing support from school administrators may help program staff prevent, navigate, and resolve any tensions (Maljak et al., 2014).

In other OST partnerships, schools did not physically host programs but still played a critical role. One clear example is recruitment. For a number of OST programs, school teachers and counselors acted as referral sources, alerting students to OST opportunities and encouraging attendance (Whalen et al., 2016). Schools can also help advertise OST programs by posting flyers or hosting informational sessions.

At the school district level, some superintendents helped match the district curriculum standards to the goals for academic OST programs; some advocated for space and funding. One district assigned staff members, such as a coordinator of extended time, to assist in developing OST programming (López et al., 2020). However, one disadvantage of alignment with district standards is that it can limit the ability of OST organizations to design creative and engaging programs (Symons & Ponzio, 2019).

Colleges and Universities

Forty-five programs relied on colleges and universities. These institutions provided valuable resources for OST programs, including facilities such as research labs and summertime dorms, faculty who provided instruction and training, undergraduate and graduate students who served as mentors, researchers who led program evaluations, and grant funding. In OST programs hosted at colleges and universities, middle and high school students were introduced to university life, resources, skills, and networking, all of which helped make postsecondary education feel more realistic and attainable (Geenen et al., 2015; Matthews & Mellom, 2012; Monk et al., 2014; Salto et al., 2014).

Colleges and universities did not have to host an entire program in order to make a contribution; even a one-day field trip or a culminating student research conference can leave a positive impression on youth. One program included in this review partnered with a higher education institution to offer pre-college endorsements (Martin et al., 2020); another offered college credit (Bernier & Fowler, 2020) for program completion. Furthermore, some university departments of education helped OST programs with curriculum design. For example, the Whitaker Center for STEM Education at Florida Gulf Coast University supported a local science camp for Latinx students who were part of a migrant farming community by

ensuring that camp activities included evidence-based practices (Frost et al., 2021).

Colleges and universities occasionally initiated and sponsored OST programs. Such was the case of the Young Scientist Program at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis (Chiappinelli et al., 2016). An MD and a PhD student founded the program in 1991 to "recruit talent for the scientific future"; since then, the nine-week research experience has been hosted annually at the university, led almost entirely by graduate student volunteers (Chiappinelli et al., 2016).

Another mode of collaboration is when college students work or volunteer in community-based OST programs, serving as near-peer mentors, leaders, or interns. In such partnerships described in the literature, OST programs and university departments formed reciprocal relationships through which students in education, psychology, social work, medicine, and public health received exposure and supervision in their field, sometimes even receiving course credit for their time (Oparaji et al., 2015). This mode of partnership can be especially valuable in under-resourced communities, where college interns can provide academic, physical health, and mental health support that may otherwise be difficult to access (Oparaji et al., 2015).

Established, trusted CBOs embedded within communities hold important knowledge about community values and resources. Such organizations are well positioned to host, support, and sustain OST programs.

Local Nonprofits and Community-Based Organizations

Thirty-six OST programs, across all categories, relied on nonprofit and community-based organizations (CBOs). These organizations served a variety of functions, including assisting with recruitment; providing space, funding, and materials; training staff; and developing and delivering programming. OST programs also referred youth participants as necessary to community-based social work or outreach programs for help with basic needs, such as physical health, mental health, or housing, thereby providing stability and wraparound services (Kabacoff et al., 2013).

Established, trusted CBOs embedded within communities hold important knowledge about community values and resources. Such organizations are well positioned to host, support, and sustain OST programs. For example, the Newcomer English Language Learners Summer Enrichment Academy (López et al., 2020), hosted by New England Public Schools (pseudonym), was a four-week summer program serving refugee students in grades 5 to 9. To meet students' needs, the school district partnered with the International Center, a local nonprofit that supported refugee families through resettlement, education, career support, and pathways to citizenship. Center staff hosted an information session for parents and helped parents enroll their children, served as tutors during the summer program, and acted as parent liaisons when parents spoke a language other than English. Center staff also trained the schoolteachers who led classes about the refugee experience, trauma, and mental health. The teachers therefore displayed a high level of awareness of and appropriate sensitivity to the social and emotional needs of the youth. The program achieved academic success as well: Students in the program showed improvement in reading and writing across all grades (López et al., 2020).

Municipal and State Organizations and Agencies

Partnerships with municipal and state organizations and agencies appeared 16 times in the literature. Below are examples of programs that were sponsored by or partnered with parks and recreation divisions, public libraries, museums, and foster care and adoption agencies.

Parks and Recreation Divisions

Two afterschool OST programs were hosted by city parks and recreation departments (Frazier et al., 2015; Goodman et al., 2021). Both programs, delivered at parks in urban neighborhoods experiencing high levels of violence and a lack of safe spaces for youth to play outside after school, focused on mental health and social and emotional development for middle school youth. Park staff were involved in program design, recruitment, and implementation. In the case of Fit2Lead Youth Enrichment and Sports (Good-

man et al., 2021), the Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation, and Open Spaces Department mobilized both existing and new partners, including local colleges and universities, the local school district, and the juvenile services department, to help shape program goals, curricula, and outcome measures. Meanwhile, Leaders @ Play (Frazier et al., 2015) was a collaboration among a university research team, park staff, and mental health providers in response to requests from park supervisors who recognized that middle school students were aging out of their child-focused program, Kids @ Play, but were still too young for teen clubs.

Public Libraries

The program 4 Youth, By Youth (Fields & Rafferty, 2012) was a partnership between Baltimore County Public Libraries and the local 4-H chapter. The program was hosted at the library by trained library staff, along with 4-H educators, volunteers, and college interns. In another example, program staff of a summer enrichment program for English learners in Georgia used the local library to hold evening informational meetings for families (Matthews & Mellom, 2012).

Museums

The education division of the New-York Historical Society, a history museum, offered a seven-month internship for high school students (Frosini, 2017). Staff designers, archivists, and curators supervised, trained, and worked alongside the interns, known as student historians. The student historians, 60 percent of whom qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, received an hourly stipend. They led meaningful projects including curating satellite exhibits and developing resources for local history students and teachers. Interviewed participants reported an increase in agency as they developed competence in their subject area, took on responsibility, and felt a sense of purpose as they worked toward a goal (Frosini, 2017). Another program, sponsored by UConn Health, offered museum field trips during its summer programming, complementing the organization's focus on academic enrichment to prepare middle and high school students to enter health professions (Wrensford et al., 2019).

Foster Care and Adoption Agencies

Although four of the 100 reviewed OST programs were reported as serving youth in the foster care system, only two programs served this population exclusively. The Better Futures Project (Geenen et al., 2015) provided postsecondary preparation for youth in foster care who had mental health conditions. For this OST program, the state foster care agency generated a list of potential participants and checked their database for program eligibility based on age, target area, and mental health diagnosis. Then, with the caseworker's approval, a liaison from the state department of human services made contact with the family (Geenan et al., 2015). In the second case, a local adoption agency selected students to participate in a summer media literacy course within a college preparatory program (Friesem & Greene, 2020).

National Organizations

For 15 of the reviewed programs, national organizations provided support in various ways, most often with STEAM or multipurpose initiatives. Some had a central office that supported mission-oriented chapters around the country, often partnering locally for program implementation. For example, the nonprofit National Council for Science and the Environment sponsored a program called EnvironMentors, a science outreach program established in 1992. The Louisiana State University chapter of EnvironMentors partnered with another national initiative, the U.S. Department of Education's GEAR UP program (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), which supported EnvironMentors with selecting students, providing transportation and food, offering case management, and acting as parent liaisons (Monk et al., 2014). In other cases, organizations functioned as national networks with local chapters operating as independent franchises, such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. In a few cases in the review, national organizations were called in by a program to provide specialized services or professional development. For example, Innovative Learning for Minority Males, a STEM program for Black boys in middle school, partnered with a national mentoring organization to train its staff in culturally affirming mentorship practices (Ladeji-Osias et al., 2018).

Cross-Sector Partnerships

Over half of the 100 reviewed programs involved some sort of cross-sector partnership, meaning that they relied on partners from more than one sector. Cross-sector partnerships were most successful when

the partners shared a clear vision and aligned missions, engaged in ongoing communication, and made sure each partner had delineated roles and responsibilities. The case of 4 Youth, By Youth (Fields & Rafferty, 2012), the previously mentioned partnership between Baltimore County 4-H and Baltimore County Public Libraries, illustrates this point. The partners came together to offer structured experiential afterschool activities to meet the needs of youth visiting the library. 4-H contributed curricula, staff training, and university 4-H educators; the library system conducted a needs assessment with youth and provided facilities, librarians, and youth participants. Both partners met their goals: 4-H increased the number of community partnerships, youth programs, and trained facilitators in the area, reaching a larger youth audience. The public library system increased its program offerings, recruited potential library patrons, and found a new funding source (Fields & Rafferty, 2012).

In another example, in 2010, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development and the nonprofit New York Academy of Sciences partnered to develop a model for increasing OST program capacity to facilitate STEM learning (Groome & Rodríguez, 2014). This initiative placed young scientists, many of whom were volunteer graduate students, as mentors in OST programs. The city youth department provided professional development on youth development and teaching STEM, identified potential OST programs, monitored OST programs, and facilitated volunteer screening. Meanwhile, the New York Academy of Science had long-standing relationships with dozens of universities and medical institutions in the city. It recruited and trained mentors, selected STEM curricula, facilitated communication and troubleshooting between mentors and OST programs, organized events, and secured curriculum resources. Most mentors were drawn to volunteer to improve their skills in teaching and mentoring, engage in community service, or serve as role models; OST programs benefited from their mentorship and scientific training and expertise (Groome & Rodríguez, 2014).

Finally, teen employment initiatives were a notable example of cross-sector partnerships including local government, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. Various government employment agencies—including Baltimore's Youthworks (Laurenzano et al., 2021; Pierce et al., 2017), the Minneapolis Step-Up Program (Rogers et al., 2020), NYC's Summer Youth Employment Program (Grant et al., 2016; Leos-Urbel, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2014), and Chicago's One Summer Plus (Heller, 2014)—were referenced in the included studies, either as the main OST program or as a municipal partner that provided wages to youth participants for a more specialized program. Each initiative recruited, screened, and trained young participants and then connected them to private, nonprofit, and city and state government employers for summer work. These programs, made possible through a combination of federal, state, city, and private funds, were administered by various government agencies, including the Mayor's Office of Employment Development in Baltimore (Laurenzano et al., 2021), the Department of Youth and Community Development in NYC (Grant et al., 2016), and the Department of Family and Support Services in Chicago (Heller, 2014).

> Over half of the 100 reviewed programs involved some sort of cross-sector partnership, meaning that they relied on partners from more than one sector.

Limitations

This review only included studies published as peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, or working papers between 2012 and 2022. Therefore, this review does not reflect research from outside of this date range or from other study types such as dissertations or conference proceedings. All studies were conducted in the U.S., so conclusions cannot be drawn about OST programming for low-income adolescents in other countries. Additionally, many effective programs and partnerships, from which much can be learned, are not reflected in the research literature, in part due to the immense amount of resources required for the research and publication process. This review does not capture important work that happens in OST programs across the country every day.

Implications for Practice

Over 20 years ago, Noam (2001) theorized that society was entering an "era of connection," increasingly bridging institutions to solve complex challenges. As

he explained in his analysis of OST programs, "From epidemiological and resilience studies we now understand that just as risks are intertwined, so are most solutions" (Noam, 2001, p. 5).

As this systematic review demonstrates, OST programs serving low-income youth rarely worked in silos. They relied on partnerships for funding, recruitment, space and materials, curriculum design, professional development, staffing, and program evaluation. Successful partnerships had clear roles, responsibilities, and ongoing communication among all involved. Importantly, cross-sector OST programs provided a way for partners not only to meet their existing goals, but also to create new goals together that expanded their reach or services in a way that benefited the community. Partnerships were especially crucial for serving hard-to-reach youth, as well as for developing and maintaining trust with community members. Some organizations, such as foster care or refugee resettlement agencies, relied on existing databases and relationships to facilitate participant identification and recruitment, while other organizations offered staff training or designed curriculum that was relevant to the strengths and needs of the youth served.

Importantly, cross-sector OST programs provided a way for partners not only to meet their existing goals, but also to create new goals together that expanded their reach or services in a way that benefited the community.

For program leaders and staff looking to partner with other entities, a helpful starting place may be to map the landscape of local organizations, broadly conceived, including schools, universities, CBOs, and municipal and state agencies. Some areas, such as rural locations, may have fewer resources available. An important resource to consider, as some of the literature suggests, is the skills and knowledge of family members, community members, and the youth themselves (Kekelis et al., 2017). National organizations can also step in to play various roles, such as providing curricula and in-person or virtual trainings or consultation.

A more targeted approach may be to begin inward: identify a program need or area for improvement, and then scan for potential partners that can help fill that need. As the review revealed, identifying potential partners who have overlapping or complementary goals or missions can help set up a particularly fruitful relationship (e.g., Fields & Rafferty, 2012; Groome & Rodríguez, 2014). Program leaders should remember, too, that potential partners can find OST programs, especially if leaders effectively advertise the program and its goals in the community.

Researchers still have much to learn from OST program leaders about how they find, form, and sustain meaningful partnerships. The research tends to focus on what the partners do, rather than on the challenging and time-consuming process of creating partnerships and navigating the collaboration over time. However, this process can be worth the trouble. Articles in this review consistently credited programs' successes to their partners, as all made vital contributions to positive youth and community outcomes. As the field learns from successful OST programs, the immense opportunity and need for effective partnerships emerges. Such collaborations are especially important in programs for youth in underserved communities and those from marginalized backgrounds, as the field works toward creating an ecosystem of OST support that will help youth thrive.

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School Staff Perceptions of Community Afterschool Partnerships

Lindsay R. Ruhr & Laura Danforth

Abundant research has covered the benefits of and barriers to partnerships between schools and community-based organizations (CBOs; Sanders, 2001; Valli et al., 2016). Such partnerships can be defined as "connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to promote students' social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development" (Sanders, 2001, p. 20).

The aim is for schools and CBOs to come together to foster student growth, particularly during out-of-school time. Integrated partnerships can provide student support in the form of increased student learning time (McBride Murry et al., 2021), better student academic outcomes (Maier et al., 2017), and fuller provision of resources students need to grow into capable individuals (Waddock, 1995).

Despite the benefits, school–CBO partnerships can encounter barriers or challenges, especially when these partnerships are formed on "unspoken expectations" or without a comprehensive understanding of resources or capacities (McBride Murry et al., 2021, p. 6). Another barrier relates to territorialism (Sanders, 2001), meaning that schools and CBOs might disagree over who should provide what ser-

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vices to students. In order to overcome these barriers, various frameworks and guidelines for best practices regarding school–CBO partnerships have been established (Casto, 2016; Haines et al., 2015; Stefanski et al., 2016).

Olson (2018) indicates that strong school–CBO partnerships should be student-centered, have a shared vision and language, and have "formal agreements," including "facilities sharing agreements" to ensure that expectations are managed and services are complete (p. 5). If two independent organizations, such as a school and a nonprofit CBO, are to work together to provide out-of-school time (OST) programming, then they must have common goals and set clear expectations. Otherwise, "unspoken expectations" and lack of knowledge of the other organization's capacity can lead to misunderstanding of the partners' goals (McBride Murry et al., 2021, p. 1).

In solid partnerships, in-school and OST educators come together with caregivers to view one another as partners and to view each child as more than a student. A common perception is that school-day educators see only the student, whereas OST staff see the whole child. When educators, children, and caregivers join together to see one another as "partners in education," then children are surrounded by a functional "caring community" (Epstein et al., 2002, p. 20). According to Epstein (1987), families, schools, and communities all provide contexts for children to learn and grow. These three contexts may work in harmony with the goal of interchanging ideas about and goals for children, or they may be in conflict, disagreeing about how to meet children's needs and what positive student outcomes look like (Epstein et al., 2002).

This study conceptualizes school–CBO collaboration as coordination of services and resources for children and their families through transparent and open dialogue about children's specific needs. Schools should have explicit and concrete conversations with CBOs offering OST programs, discussing the value of the programming, how it fits the needs of their specific student population, and how it fills resource and service gaps (Roche & Strobach, 2019). In addition, schools should engage in routine program evaluation to ensure that OST programming is meeting the needs of all involved parties. Russ-Eft & Preskill (2009) note that evaluation is a "diagnostic process" that can highlight how an organization's strengths and weaknesses will either support or hamper new opportunities (p. 12).

Although literature detailing the characteristics of healthy school–CBO partnerships is abundant, few studies focus specifically on school staff members' perceptions of these partnerships. Our study aims to fill this gap. It suggests that schools take an active role in determining what their student body needs regarding OST programming and continually evaluate the fit between the needs and the programming.

This study conceptualizes school–CBO collaboration as coordination of services and resources for children and their families through transparent and open dialogue about children's specific needs.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to understand how school staff perceived OST programming provided by a CBO in their schools. We focused on four public schools in a single district in the southern U.S. where a single nonprofit CBO offered three empowerment-focused OST programs. The CBO aims to break the cycle of poverty by providing youth with quality OST programming that centers on empowerment through teaching life skills and social responsibility. OST programming, particularly programming with an empowerment component, has the capacity to reduce the risk of adverse outcomes for underprivileged youth (Lin et al., 2018). Our study focuses on the partnership between the CBO offering the OST programming and the schools that hosted the programming. As part of a five-person program evaluation team, we helped craft interview questions, conducted interviews, and analyzed interview data.

We use elements of Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, particularly the notions that family, school, and community should provide contexts for children to learn and grow and that communities should be involved in program development and implementation. Our exploratory analysis, based on interviews with school staff, addressed two research questions:

1. What do school faculty feel are the deliverable benefits to their students as a result of the school–CBO partnership?
2. How did the school determine relevance, fit, or school need for this partnership?

We hypothesized that school staff would be able to identify specific benefits of the school–CBO partnership and that the perceived benefits would clearly harmonize with staff members' explanations of how the school determined the relevance, fit, or school need for the partnership in the first place.

Participants were asked open-ended interview questions concerning the nature of their school's partnership with the CBO, whether they found the partnership beneficial to students, how the partnership fit in with their school environment and culture, how they determined whether the partnership was successful, and whether the school or CBO assessed students' need for the OST programming.

Participant Demographics

The seven interviewees were full-time employees in four public schools in a metropolitan school district in a southern state. Four were teachers, two were guidance counselors, and one was a principal. All were the point of contact between their school and the CBO that implemented afterschool and summer programming. Five interviewees were employed at middle schools and two at elementary schools. Three identified as men and four as women. All participants worked at Title 1–funded schools, where the majority of students were classified as low-income and received free or reduced-priced lunch. Approximately 80 percent of the district's students in academic year 2020–2021 were members of minoritized racial and ethnic groups.

Data Collection

After receiving approval from our institutional review board, we used purposive sampling to recruit school staff. We chose seven school staff members—a strategic mix of teachers, principals, and counselors—based on their established knowledge about and involvement in the OST programming in their schools. We emailed or telephoned the seven staff members to ask them to participate in the interview.

The CBO's program evaluation team conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the seven respondents about their experiences with and perspectives on the OST programming. Participants were asked open-ended interview questions concerning the nature of their school's partnership with the CBO, whether they found the partnership beneficial to students, how the partnership fit in with their school environment and culture, how they determined whether the partnership was successful, and whether the school or CBO assessed students' need for the OST programming. The interview questions were influenced by Epstein's (2018) work on how school collaboration with community partners and use of community programming should be carefully considered and incorporated into the school to address students' needs.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), whose purpose is to provide insight into the realities of participants who share a common lived experience and to examine meaning as it pertains to specific groups of people (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). RTA involves "identifying patterns across data in relation to specific research questions"; it is particularly suited to communicate study results in a way accessible to people outside of academia (Braun & Clarke, 2014, p. 2)—in this case, school and CBO staff. To address research question 1 about the perceived benefits to students, we used RTA's inductive approach, which aims to uncover deep meanings in study participants' responses. For research question 2 about how the school determined fit and need, we used the more specific semantic approach of RTA, which involves analyzing participants' explicit responses.

We began by familiarizing ourselves with the data by reading through the interview transcripts. Then we coded the transcripts, generating initial themes and patterns of meaning and using the constant comparative method to uncover specific categories of "conveyed meanings" in participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Specifically, we completed a multilevel coding process in Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software package. We initially used an open

or "in-vivo" coding method, using participants' words to describe their perceptions of the benefits of the CBO partnership for students and of how or why the partnership was chosen. These data were grouped into early categories of "characterized concepts" or conveyed meanings (Oktay, 2012, p. 54). We used axial coding to determine how concepts identified in the primary stages of coding could be grouped into categories that identified new ways to understand interviewees' perspectives. Finally, we used selective coding (Oktay, 2012) to sort existing codes into final categories and identify themes central to the described perspectives of the seven participants. During this final phase, theoretical saturation was met: Two major codes applied to the data most frequently, with no new information presenting itself.

School Staff Perceptions of the Partnership

Two central themes emerged from the data. School staff reported that:

- Students in the CBO's OST program developed social and intrapersonal skills
- The CBO, rather than the school, shouldered the responsibility of determining program fit for the school and its students' needs

The OST Program Developed Social and Intrapersonal Skills

Social and intrapersonal skills are essential "competencies, behaviors, and attitudes" that enable people to navigate the environment, develop healthy interpersonal relationships, and increase their employability (Lippman et al., 2015, p. 4). Lippman et al (2015) identify five critical skills that increase the likelihood of achieving workforce success: higher-order thinking skills, social skills, self-control, positive self-concept, and communication. When asked about the benefits to students of the OST programming in their school, all seven respondents stated that these programs improved students' abilities in three of these five skill areas. Interviewees did not explicitly say that the OST programming helped students develop self-control or improve communication skills. The programming may have accomplished these goals, but our respondents did not mention these skills. They were enthusiastic and loquacious about the program's effectiveness in helping students develop higher-order thinking skills, social skills, and positive self-concept.

When asked about the benefits to students of the OST programming in their school, all seven respondents stated that these programs improved students' abilities in three of these five skill areas.

Higher-Order Thinking Skills

All seven participants stated that the most beneficial outcome of the OST programming was that students developed higher-order thinking skills. Defined as an ability to deconstruct information from numerous sources with the goal of developing a "deeper, conceptually driven understanding" of an issue (Schraw & Robinson, 2011, p. 2), higher-order thinking is one of the most essential skills employers look for (Lippman et al., 2015). Interviewees stated that the CBO's programming enabled students to practice and sharpen their decision-making skills, a major component of higher-order thinking. One participant said:

> So far, the [OST] partnership has shown students how to reason with the actual decisions that they are going to have to make.… [The program] helps them develop into people, teaching them the rights and wrongs and ... how to understand consequences to the decisions they make.

Another participant reported that the OST program provided out-of-classroom experiences including trips to local art and science museums, libraries, and businesses that enabled students to develop and hone the ability to think critically rather than simply regurgitate facts they learn in the classroom—that is, to focus on what Tankersley (2005) called depth of knowledge over breadth of previously identified subject matter. This type of higher-order thinking enables students to consider multiple perspectives surrounding an issue and to develop judicious opinions based on empirical evidence, reason, and context (Tankersley, 2005). This respondent said:

> The children are all benefiting from the program, because these kids are being exposed to different things and different perspectives, [and] it really

helps them. Education is not just what is learned in the classroom and in a textbook, and [the program] allows them to get a greater sense of who they are in reference to their community around them and in reference to a more global setting as well, which is hard to do in a classroom setting, so it's really a benefit.… Inside of a classroom, especially here, it is a struggle to get that community perspective and that understanding of "It's not just about you." [Students] are learning that it's about things on the outside as well, and … this is hugely beneficial to the kids. They seem to enjoy the mix up and a step out of the classroom. I've noticed that [the students] are more open and … showing a lot of empathy toward others as well.

Social Skills

Social skills are universally essential and can predict future youth outcomes, particularly in future employability and workplace performance, entrepreneurial success, and future income (Lippman et al., 2015). Further, studies have found that children who learn social skills in school are less likely to encounter discipline problems in school, to become incarcerated, or to abuse drugs (Jones et al., 2015). In one study, almost 60 percent of children who attended afterschool programs had better behavior both in and out of school compared to children who did not participate (Durlak & Weissberg, 2010, as cited in Berg, 2020). OST programs can also keep children on a positive path away from crime (Berg, 2020).

Interviewees reported that the CBO program was highly beneficial in developing students' social skills. One school staff member cited skill development in the area of conflict resolution:

> Emotionally, [the OST program] spends more time here working with kids on conflict resolution and making better decisions more than any other areas of their development.… [Working on] social skills is at the top of the list because most of our kids come in thinking, "If there's a problem, you gotta fight," and we are trying to show them that there is another way.

Other teachers also expressed appreciation for the program's support in teaching conflict resolution. One described how everyone in the school benefits, including students not enrolled in the OST program:

> The students [benefit] and then, in turn, the teachers [benefit]. All of us [benefit].... Everyone who is involved is benefiting from the programming because, as the students learn to … handle different problems … with conflict resolution, they learn better ways to deal with things. That is going to affect them and then it's going to affect their peers.... That will also help the teachers in the classroom while we are trying to teach. I think it's an overall benefit for all of us here at the school.

Another participant explained that they were grateful that the OST program focused on social skills because teachers and other school staff may not have the bandwidth to work on social skills in their classrooms every day. Another respondent said that having an OST program that corroborated what school staff were teaching about social skills was helpful. Another participant reported that they appreciated the CBO programming because:

> [T]here aren't a whole lot of other programs that are offered to our students, other than [this program] and what I teach them in my classroom.... I will make comments when they cut up too much or talk back to me. I say, "Well, remember, you know your first job is in a couple more years, and if you do that to your boss, you are gonna be walking out the door." … [The program] is beneficial to them.

The finding that the CBO partnership developed social skills was particularly salient because social skills are connected to the ability to obtain and keep gainful employment (Lippman et al., 2015).

Positive Self-Concept

Positive self-concept involves self-efficacy and self-confidence across multidimensional domains—such as intellectual ability, athletic competence, social acceptance, and behavioral conduct—as well as healthy levels of self-esteem and an overall sense of well-being and pride in accomplishments (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; Lippman et al., 2015).

School is a crucial space for programming to build positive self-concept. Having a healthy view of themselves helps students succeed intrapersonally and socially (Zhao et al., 2021). Programming intended to increase students' positive self-concept, no matter their scholastic skill levels, interests, or academic standing, is particularly important, as students with a negative

self-concept are less likely to attempt academic tasks (American Psychological Association, 2021). The fewer academic tasks students attempt, the more negative their self-concept can become; thus begins a cycle of negative self-talk, negative beliefs about oneself, academic underachievement, and, eventually, lack of workforce success or employment opportunities (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; Myers-Walls et al., 2015).

All seven school staff reported that the CBO programming exposed students to, as one put it, "new and different activities, topics, and skills" they would not otherwise experience. Respondents agreed that these activities instilled "curiosity" in students and "confidence" that they can learn and excel at new things. Speaking of a CBO program centered on grooming students to become leaders, an interviewee stated:

> There has been a positive influence in that [the students] will ask me, "When are we doing that again?" This is something that they look forward to. They talk about it [being] just that positive influence.… For the kids to have something that's uplifting and different to talk about is definitely a benefit.... It allows the children to understand their strengths and ... interests from a different angle.... Education is not just what's learned out of the textbook. This is something that allows them to get a greater sense of who they are, who they are in reference to their community, who they are in reference to a more global picture, which is hard to do in a classroom setting.

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Another respondent stated that the OST programming at their school focused on entrepreneurship, business development, and financial literacy. She said that this program increased students' positive self-concept by empowering them to develop skills in previously unexplored domains:

> [The program] got them thinking about bigger-picture type things. We have had several kids after the program come back and tell us about how they are now going to start their own businesses, getting into selling [their products]. I don't think they would have come up with [those ideas] if it wasn't for ... the projects [in the program] and getting those skills ingrained in their heads. It was just exposing them to knowledge that they didn't know about before! ... We have a lot of go-getters [in the program]. Once they got that knowledge, they were going to do something with it!

Students who have social support from peers, teachers, or OST educators have a more positive self-concept than students without social support (Beer et al., 2013; Kloomok & Cosden, 1994). Further, trying new activities that incorporate support and social interaction increases students' self-esteem and enhances their beliefs about their abilities and overall value (Dagaz, 2012). According to one school staff member, exposure to "people outside the school" encouraged students to try new activities in a safe environment:

> [This program] is a great asset to these students. They are able to try different things ... and [learn new] skills. For instance, they might have drama, they might have dance, they might have art or music. They're able to do that and to present that [to us] later. So, they'll learn a performance to go along with that.... Our students are able to showcase … their talents, and people in the community are able to come see the showcase to see what students have learned, how they are benefiting from the program. And it also transfers over to the classroom, because when they're in the classroom, the teachers are able to see the [benefit] from [the program] ... to see their growth.

The CBO Determined the Program's Fit, Relevance, and Effectiveness

To answer research question 2, we asked school staff a series of questions related to the need for the OST program in their school, for example, "Is there a need for this program for your students?" and "How do you identify what needs should be addressed via community programming?" We also asked specific ques-

tions related to the fit and relevance of the program: "How does this program fit in with the other activities, programs, and partnerships that you offer your students/community/school?" "Who benefits from this program?" and "How do you determine whether or not a student benefits from the program?" Interviewees reported that the school generally left it up to the CBO to determine the fit between the school and the CBO and the school's need for the OST program. They said that their school conducted no formal needs assessment to determine the appropriateness of the school–CBO partnership.

Informal Assessment of the Need for the Program

Although all interviewees said that the school–CBO partnership benefited their students, five of the seven reported that the selection of specific programming was "informal" and seemed to be based on the type of programming the CBO had available. Some respondents reported that the CBO initiated contact the school to offer services or that the school had always partnered with the CBO, so that the OST program simply continued each year. When asked why the specific OST programs were needed at their schools, many participants cited broad—and somewhat platitudinous—explanations. For example, one interviewee stated:

> [The program] ... is beneficial to the kids because they need certain guidance, because, in a lot of cases, they don't necessarily get it from home. [Students'] home life, in a lot of cases, is less than perfect, let's just say it that way. So guidance from anybody is helpful.

Other participants' statements about reasons for OST programming were often unrelated to specific program goals or functions. Five of the seven participants stated that they appreciated the program's "academic support" and "tutoring," though these services were not part of the CBO's programming.

Informal Assessment of Program Outcomes and Effectiveness

When asked how their school assessed the effectiveness of the OST programming, some respondents reported that, as one put it, that they "thought the program was great," but they did not say how the school tracked program outcomes or effectiveness. Others stated that the school tracked outcomes like "report cards," "grades," or "academic growth in students"; however, these outcomes are not directly related to the CBO's program goals, which are to increase student empowerment through facilitation of life skills and promotion of social responsibility. Other respondents said that they simply have a conversation with the CBO program director to determine whether the program was successful. One stated:

> [The assessment of program effectiveness] has been informal.... We just leave that to [the CBO] employees, and I talk to the director of their program, and we talk about how it went last year. But it's really more informal how we as a school evaluate [the program]. It's kind of, "How did this go last year, or not?"

Such one-on-one conversations between the school leaders and the CBO director regarding program execution can be valuable. However, this respondent's comments show no evidence of true criteria for evaluating program success from the perspective of either the CBO or the school. This finding was consistent among respondents. It demonstrates the importance of schools taking an active role in determining student needs and then in evaluating whether the program addressed those needs.

Our findings illustrate the divide between a theoretical foundation outlining how best to incorporate a CBO's OST programming into schools and the on-the-ground realities of how school and CBO partnerships are formed and maintained.

Disconnects Between Theory and Reality

Our findings illustrate the divide between a theoretical foundation outlining how best to incorporate a CBO's OST programming into schools and the on-the-ground realities of how school and CBO partnerships are formed and maintained. The school staff we interviewed were unanimous in reporting that the students in the OST programming developed higher-order thinking skills, general social skills, and positive self-concept. However, interviewees' descriptions of the benefits for their students were anecdotal, vague, and nebulous. This finding is consistent with the insight of Anthony and Morra

(2016), who found a "disconnection between school and afterschool" when it came to understanding the programs that are offered (p. 36). Some respondents struggled to identify clear advantages of the social and intrapersonal skills students learned in the OST program, making superficial, deficit-based generalizations about students' families and home environments that were informed by assumptions rather than by any formal assessment. Schools are missing the potential to tailor programming to students, their families, and their unique environment.

We also found that the CBO shouldered the responsibility of determining program fit, relevance, and effectiveness in each school. None of the schools conducted a formal needs assessment on the front end to determine the appropriateness of the school–CBO partnership. Collaboration and decision-making are critical components that were missing from these schools' approach to OST programming. A formal need assessment and formal agreement could have provided the partnership with a tangible guide to meet mutual objectives (Olson, 2018). Working from only an informal arrangement based primarily on the CBO's current programming means that schools could not coordinate resources and services to meet student needs. Further, interviewees reported that the schools either did not attempt rigorous evaluation of the OST program or relied on the partner CBO to evaluate program success.

Coordination of resources and services was further complicated by the finding that the school personnel responsible for coordinating between the school and the CBO held a variety of positions: teacher, principal, or guidance counselor. Staff in these positions have varying degrees of institutional knowledge and decision-making power, a fact that could affect the formation and maintenance of the school–CBO partnerships.

Because the way in which children spend time out of school is essential to social-emotional development and educational outcomes (Jordan & Nettles, 1999), how OST programming is selected is highly relevant to schools and community partners alike. School–CBO partnerships should be determined by assessing the specific needs of students in each school and then determining what programs would best address those needs (Roche & Strobach, 2019).

Schools should spend more time engaging with CBOs about the OST programming they offer.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study has several strengths, but it also has limitations. The first is the small sample size of seven interviewees. However, small samples are not uncommon in qualitative research, and theoretical saturation was reached. The sample included school staff in three different roles—principal, guidance counselors, and teachers—rather than just in one role. One recommendation for extension of this study would be to connect a group of programs across cities or states. The Utah Afterschool Network (2018) has an Align for Success toolkit worth reviewing as it highlights the benefits of collaboration between schools and OST programs. It also has data to show the impact of collaborative efforts between school and afterschool (Utah Afterschool Network, 2018).

A second limitation is that we did not receive responses from every school where the CBO implemented its programming. Some perspectives therefore may have been missed. Though generalizability is not a significant goal of qualitative research, a larger sample size may have resulted in more diverse and generalizable results.

Another significant limitation is that no CBO staff were interviewed for this exploratory analysis. This research focused on the perspectives of school staff on the school–CBO partnerships. Still, future researchers could seek out diverse perspectives by interviewing both school staff and CBO program staff to understand how to assess student needs, how to structure the school–CBO partnership to meet student needs, and how to make partnerships work.

Implications for Practice

This exploratory analysis revealed that school–CBO partnerships provide invaluable benefits to students when OST programs develop crucial social and intrapersonal skills, including higher-order thinking skills, social skills, and positive self-concept. It also revealed that, too often, these partnerships are informal and continue year after year just because they have always been. Although frameworks and best practices for successful school-community agency partnerships have been published (e.g., Casto, 2016; Haines et al., 2015; Stefanski et al., 2016), adherence to those guidelines does not always happen

in real-world, day-to-day settings. Passivity is not in the best interest of students, so school staff must take action to change the status quo of how partnerships are formed and maintained.

Epstein (1987) notes that community resources and services should be coordinated with businesses, agencies, and other groups, as well as students, families, and the school. Students and families can be involved in school–CBO discussions (Roche & Strobach, 2019). Schools should spend more time engaging with CBOs about the OST programming they offer. They might also create a school–community liaison or school social worker to build partnerships with CBOs, conduct formal needs assessments in their school and school community, and recruit CBOs with OST programming that is explicitly aligned with student need. Best practices dictate that, once a program is thoughtfully selected and implemented, schools should also to work with their CBO partners to select a rigorous evaluation process that accurately measures program effectiveness in addressing the previously identified student needs (Roche & Strobach, 2019).

In light of the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the educational divides among students that the pandemic is exacerbating (Holzer & Lanich, 2020; McBride Murry et al., 2021), school–CBO partnerships are needed now more than ever to help students thrive, especially those in disadvantaged communities like the school district we studied. To facilitate implementation of programming that is appropriate and beneficial for their student body, school staff must continually assess the specific needs of their students, determine what OST programs would best address those needs, seek out such programming opportunities in their community, and then consistently evaluate the success of the programming.

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Behavioral Health and Trauma-Informed Integration in Afterschool

An Innovative Approach to Prevention and Early Intervention

Erica D. Kelsey

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggest that 1 in 5 children and 1 in 2 adolescents experience a mental or behavioral health disorder. CDC studies show that people of color and other marginalized groups have higher rates of behavioral health challenges than White people (2022).

Barriers such as stigma, discrimination, lack of finances, limited numbers of providers, inadequate transportation options, and lack of health insurance keep these groups from accessing and using behavioral health services. In 2022, 4.2 percent of youth in the U.S.—more than 3 million young people—had no health insurance (Cohen & Cha, 2022). Without insurance, the cost of healthcare is out of reach for many families, especially low-income households. Even if a family does have the financial means to seek mental healthcare for their child, they face a nationwide shortage of providers. In 2022, 47 percent of the U.S. population lived in an area with a shortage of mental health providers (Kaiser Permanente, 2022). Families in rural areas face additional barriers to access, including transportation needs. Additional barriers exist for young people from minoritized backgrounds, including stigma, mistrust of healthcare systems, and families' attitudes toward seeking help (Mongelli et al., 2020).

Children with high levels of stress and adverse experiences are less likely than those with fewer challenges to develop emotional regulation skills (Burkholder et al., 2016). Lack of emotional regulation can negatively affect the family system, hamper peer relationships, interfere with learning and academic functioning, and put the child at risk for several mental

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health conditions (Cameron & Overall, 2018). Half of all mental health symptoms begin before age 14; when symptoms go untreated, mental health disorders impair teens' ability to function (World Health Organization, 2021).

Community-based youth-serving organizations are often seen by participants and their families as safe and supportive environments with no stigma attached to participation. Many children attend community-based afterschool programs five days a week. In such an environment, trusted adults can consistently monitor the moods and behaviors of participants. Thus, afterschool programs that successfully and effectively integrate behavioral health services can reduce barriers and increase equity in access to high-quality behavioral healthcare. My organization, Boys & Girls Clubs of St. Joseph County (BGCSJC) in South Bend, Indiana, has successfully implemented an integrated behavioral health model into its out-of-school time (OST) programming. Other OST organizations may consider integrating components of behavioral health into their programming in order to address the unmet mental health needs of their young participants.

Integrating Behavioral Health into Boys & Girls Club Programming

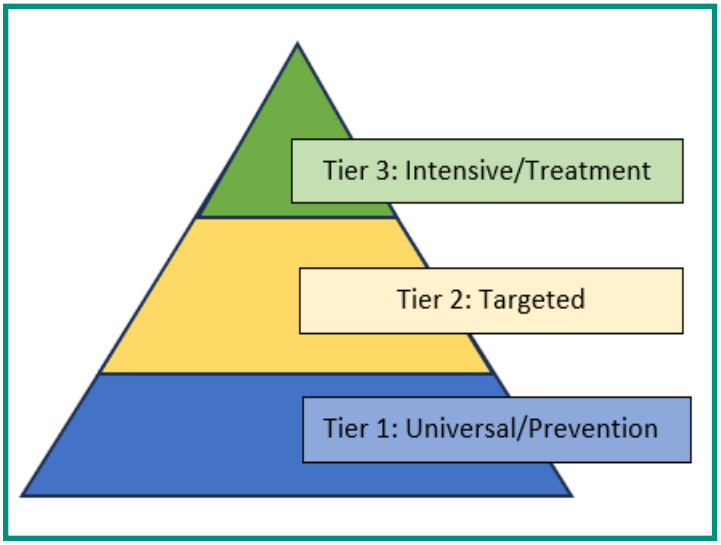
BGCSJC annually serves 3,000 youth, ages 5 to 18, through afterschool and summer programming at 30 sites, most of which are in school buildings. In early 2022, BGCSJC started working with a community partner to offer on-site mental health therapy to club members. We quickly saw the benefits and perceived that youth participants needed even more support. In August 2022, we adopted an integrated behavioral health model of care in the afterschool program, creating the Emotional Well-Being (EWB) program. EWB is a preventive mental health program whose goal is to provide emotional, social, and behavioral health consultation and treatment to club kids as well as to staff. Its early identification and intervention efforts aim to eliminate as many barriers as possible to mental healthcare.

A Three-Tiered Model

Integrated behavioral health in a community organization looks far different from traditional mental health therapy. Traditional therapy typically requires a diagnosis of a mental health condition, with marked symptoms that impair the young person's functioning. Integrated behavioral health in an afterschool program focuses on prevention and early intervention: providing care for individual young people at the earliest possible sign of distress and helping all youth develop skills that foster resiliency, grit, and healthy recognition and regulation of emotions. Trusted youth development organizations are well positioned to implement this proactive approach, which is much like a medical well-child visit or annual physical. Caring adults in the afterschool program regularly assess participants' emotional health regardless of whether the children exhibit diagnosable symptoms or express concerns. In the integrated model, mental health providers may provide some traditional therapy to young people with diagnosable conditions. However, they spend much of their time on prevention and early intervention efforts, including education and consultation with staff, youth, and families.

The integrated behavioral health model at BGCSJC was adapted from the positive behavioral interventions and supports framework (Center on PBIS, 2023). Its three-tiered approach is illustrated in Figure 1. Tier 1 reaches all participants through prevention strategies; these include properly training staff on trauma-informed behavior management and equipping staff and youth with tools to regulate emotions and foster resiliency. About 80 percent of youth should receive the support they need to be successful through Tier 1 interventions alone (Shapiro, 2014). Tier 2 interventions are targeted to participants iden-

Figure 1. Three-Tiered Model of Integrated Behavioral Health



tified as being at risk of developing a mental health disorder. Some Tier 2 programming and tools can be facilitated by properly trained nonclinical staff. Tier 3 is reserved for young people with more serious mental and behavioral health concerns. These interventions must be conducted by a licensed clinician or trainee under supervision.

The primary goal of BGCSJC's EWB program is to provide Tier 1 preventive programming and early intervention to all participants and staff, many of whom are at high risk of developing mental health disorders because of their life circumstances. EWB also offers services to young people who have mental health symptoms and concerns, without the barriers of referrals, stigma, waiting lists, and financial constraints. As director of EWB and member of the leadership team, I serve as the BGCSJC consultant and content expert on trauma-informed practices. I work with the leadership team to create a trauma-informed culture across all levels of the organization.

The EWB program currently has a full-time clinical staff of five: one director and four full-time mental health providers. The best practice ratio for school therapists is currently 250 students to one therapist (American School Counselor Association, 2023). For an organization serving 3,000 youth and over 400 staff members, this estimate equates to approximately 13 clinical providers. The unique and proactive EWB model, however, allows us to serve youth and staff effectively with far fewer clinical staff; we have approximately 600 youth for each full-time clinician. These clinicians have the support of two part-time clinical interns, who provide individual and small-group therapy; two full-time program specialists, who oversee some of the Tier 1 and 2 programming; and 12 part-time programming interns, who assist in facilitating Tier 1 educational programming. The shared responsibility and tiered model allow many adults in the organization to effectively implement nonclinical interventions, such as trauma-informed classroom management strategies, calming corners, and biofeedback. Furthermore, a trauma-informed lens is used in developing all training and programs across the entire organization. Figure 2 provides a brief overview of the programs and interventions under each of the three tiers at BGCSJC.

Promising Practices and Preliminary Outcomes

Over the past year, the EWB team has been assessing and collecting data on the effectiveness and feasibility of the tiered model of behavioral health integration. This section describes outcomes including information from a survey of club directors, data on youth

Figure 2. BGCSJC Tiered Emotional Well-Being Program

Tier 1, Staff Training

- **Staff Training**
  - Trauma-informed classroom practices
  - Behavior and classroom management
  - Conflict resolution
  - Behavior-specific praise
  - De-escalation of conflict situations
  - Suicide prevention
- **Staff Support**
  - Drop-in wellness workshops (stress management, healthy boundaries)
- **Social-Emotional Programming**
  - Zones of regulation (Kuypers, 2011)
- **Universal Screening**
  - Administration of Pediatric Symptoms Checklist-35 (parent and student self-report)
  - Tier 2 or 3 intervention (e.g., small-group or individual therapy) for young people with high scores (per PSC-35 scoring criteria)

Tier 2, Targeted Care

- **Staff Coaching**
  - Real-time coaching for front-line staff on use of prevention tools
- **Mightier Biofeedback**
  - 90-day biofeedback program on site or at home
- **Partnership with Local Applied Behavioral Analysis Center**
  - Behavioral therapy for youth as needed
- **Calming Corners**
  - Spaces in program areas where participants can go to regulate their emotions, using a variety of calming activities
- **Small-Group Intervention**
  - Determined by high scores on the universal screening
  - Psychoeducation-based group therapy with a focus on developing effective coping tools and emotional regulation strategies
  - Facilitated by licensed provider or graduate student under supervision
- **Tactile Behavior-Specific Praise**
  - Designed to help staff successfully implement what they learned in the behavior-specific praise training

Tier 3, Intensive Treatment

- **Individual Therapy Services**
  - Internal, brief, solution-focused therapy
  - External referrals as needed, with bridging services for children placed on waitlists
- **Crisis and Safety Assessment**
  - Assessment for safety concerns (e.g., suicidal ideation), with recommendations for care

referred to therapy services, and outcomes of two pilot programs: tactile behavior-specific praise and universal screening. The pilot programs are designed to improve shared responsibility and early access to interventions.

Club Director Satisfaction

After six months of implementation, the EWB team asked site directors for feedback. We asked about the effectiveness of EWB-facilitated training, the efficiency and effectiveness of the referral process, directors' comfort with seeking mental health support for themselves and for their clubs, and their satisfaction with the integrated program as a whole. In general, the directors were satisfied with the EWB program, with 11 out of 12 stating that they were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the program roll-out. Additionally, 10 club directors agreed or strongly agreed that the conflict de-escalation and communication trainings were beneficial to them as club directors; nine agreed or strongly agreed that the behaviors and responses training and suicide prevention policy training were beneficial. Nine club directors felt "pretty comfortable" or "extremely comfortable" asking the EWB team for personal support. All 12 indicated that they were comfortable asking the EWB team for support for their club. Furthermore, 11 club directors indicated that they understood the EWB program and knew the processes for submitting a youth referral or self-referral.

Improved Access

Since the start of EWB in August 2022, 140 youth have been referred to the program's individual initial consultations. Club directors make referrals when staff identify a concern with a child's emotional state or behavior so that the child can receive appropriate services in Tier 2 or 3. An initial consultation is typically a phone call among the EWB director, the site director, and the parent or guardian to discuss the referral, obtain additional information about the young participant, and make recommendations based on the three-tiered model of support. Referred participants always get support, ranging from training in coping skills to individual therapy, either in-house or externally. With this system, EWB has successfully provided timely access to mental health support. The average wait time from the referral to the initial EWB consultation was three days. After the initial consultation, individuals recommended for individual therapy waited an average of 21 days for the first appointment, as compared to average wait times nationally of three to 12 months (American Psychological Association, 2023). The EWB program continually takes on individual therapy clients without a waiting list.

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Tactile Behavior-Specific Praise Pilot

The BGCSJC tactile behavior-specific praise (BSP) program is a Tier 2 intervention to support behavior management across a club site. BSP is a positive statement, directed toward a child or group, that recognizes a desired behavior. The praise should be specific, contingent on actual behavior, and sincere. Previous research in classroom settings suggests that BSP benefits both students and teachers as an effective strategy for minimizing unwanted or disruptive behavior while increasing wanted behaviors (Cavanaugh, 2013; Gage & MacSuga-Gage, 2017). According to Downs and colleagues (2019), BSP is effective in supporting youth who are at risk of developing emotional and behavioral disorders. Tactile BSP at BGCSJC sites provides front-line staff with a tool for managing the behavior of groups and individuals through positive praise. We aim to create an environment in which positive peer and adult relationships serve as protective and restorative factors for youth who have experienced trauma. Increasing positive reinforcement through BSP is in direct alignment with this goal.

Research shows that praise is most effective in eliciting behavior change when it is given once every two minutes (O'Handley et al., 2023). We postulated that giving praise is not the difficult part for most staff. Rather, it is *remembering* to give the praise that is difficult. For one thing, giving praise is a habit, and it takes most people two months or more to establish a new habit (Gardner et al., 2012). Equally

important is the fact that our front-line workers are likely experiencing cognitive overload during club sessions. When a person receives too much information at once or has too many simultaneous tasks to perform, the resulting cognitive overload can impair performance. During club sessions, a staff member may simultaneously be overseeing several children, giving instructions to start an activity, welcoming a volunteer and giving them instruction, and trying to redirect youth who are off task. That is a lot for the brain to process at once. Adding another task—giving praise—is unlikely to inspire the desired action.

Tactile prompting allows staff members to perform a behavior, such as giving praise, without needing to remember to do so. Tactile prompting typically involves wearing a device that vibrates at certain intervals, giving a reminder to perform a behavior. Research consistently shows that tactile prompting is effective (Baddeley & Hitch, 1974; Rivera et al., 2015; White et al., 2021). White and colleagues (2021) note the need for continued research that investigates the effectiveness of tactile prompting in novel contexts. My literature review found no studies that examine the effectiveness of tactile prompting for BSP in OST; most research has focused on schools.

The BGCSJC EWB team conducted a comprehensive pilot program at one club site to measure the feasibility and effectiveness of tactile BSP. All staff at the pilot site were given a Gymboss timer, which was set to vibrate every two minutes as a tactile prompt, reminding them to give students BSP. Before starting the pilot, all staff were trained to give BSP effectively. Staff were asked to tally on paper every instance of BSP they gave every day for four weeks.

Preliminary results of the one-month pilot program indicated that the tactile reminders helped staff increase their BSP rates to a significant degree. Before starting the pilot, the site established a baseline number of BSPs. The baseline was zero; the staff did not provide any BSP statements on the day the baseline was assessed. At the end of the one-month trial, the BSP rates averaged 160 per day. To assess the impact on youth behavior, we examined the number of behavioral write-ups—behavioral concerns significant enough to warrant written documentation—before and after the pilot. Before the pilot program, write-ups occurred an average of nine times per month. In the two months immediately after the tactile BSP pilot, the average number of write-ups decreased to two.

The baseline was zero; the staff did not provide any BSP statements on the day the baseline was assessed. At the end of the one-month trial, the BSP rates averaged 160 per day.

Universal Screening Pilot

The EWB program at BGCSJC has a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention. We aim to identify youth with mental health and behavior symptoms as early as possible and to help them develop coping tools to decrease their symptoms before their functioning is impaired. Universal screening is an evidence-based approach to identifying individuals who may benefit from early intervention (Moore et al., 2022; Schaeffer, 2022). Despite recommendations that schools administer universal screening, only half of U.S. public schools offer mental health assessments, and less than half offer treatment (Schaeffer, 2022). With prevention and early intervention in mind, we developed and implemented a universal screening pilot program at three club sites. At these sites, we had participants and/or their caregivers complete the Pediatric Symptoms Checklist-35 (PSC-35), an evidence-based and psychometrically sound assessment tool (Jellinek et al., 1988; Liu et al., 2020). Of the 58 young people with completed screeners, 18 had results suggesting they were at risk of developing a mental health disorder. Of these 18 "elevations," 12 were placed in small-group therapy at their sites. Of the remaining six, two were already in counseling, two were referred out for specialty care, and two were assigned an individual therapist on site. The 12 small-group therapy participants took the PSC-35 again at the end of the six-week intervention; seven of them no longer had scores suggesting they were at risk.

Implementing Components of Afterschool Integration

Preliminary outcome data on staff satisfaction and improved access, as well as the BSP and universal screening pilots, are promising for BGCSJC's first year of behavior health integration. As the EWB program continues to collect outcome data on our programming and

initiatives, we aim to contribute to the afterschool professional community and to work collectively to establish evidence-based standards and best practices for integrated behavioral health in OST.

Getting Started

To integrate behavioral health means that all members of the organization share responsibility for the well-being of youth participants. Afterschool programs will be most successful in integrating mental health and emotional well-being programming when organization leaders and other key stakeholders support and are immersed in the integration. To obtain buy-in at all levels of the organization, we focused on the BGCSJC mission: "to inspire and enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to realize their full potential as productive, caring, and responsible citizens." We then used—and continue to use—the mission statement to highlight the importance of investing in the mental health of our youth, providing evidence on the direct link between emotional well-being and a young person's ability to "reach their full potential." Other organizations can similarly determine the extent to which investing in youth mental health and well-being is in line with their mission.

We then used—and continue to use—the mission statement to highlight the importance of investing in the mental health of our youth, providing evidence on the direct link between emotional well-being and a young person's ability to "reach their full potential."

Once leaders are engaged and invested, questions about funding and sustainability will arise. Organizations may benefit from taking a stepped approach into behavioral health integration. BGCSJC's first step in integrating mental health services started with a community partnership. We partnered with a grant-funded community program, through which graduate student clinicians saw youth clients at club sites at no cost to BGCSJC. Youth-serving organizations that are just getting started may want to reach out to local universities and community mental health centers to explore opportunities for low- or no-cost options for mental health services.

Starting small gives the organization time to assess the impact of the program and to discern areas of continued need. Both steps can help the organization obtain grant funding for more robust program development. If the organization recognizes the need to expand its mental health program offerings, exploring local and national grant funding is a next step. Collaborating with local colleges and universities, school districts, or community mental health providers may be an effective approach to securing grant funding. As the program grows and the organization shares evidence of efficacy, sustainable funding may be easier to obtain. Success stories build recognition of the organization's integrated behavior health program as an innovative part of the mission to improve the well-being of youth.

Tips for Implementation

Once an organization has acquired funding, two main needs emerge initially: finding partners to provide mental health services and supporting staff to help them integrate behavioral health into all aspects of club life. If their efforts find success, organizations may want to invest in their own mental health staff.

Partnerships

Partnerships with community organizations are key to the success of behavioral health integration. Specialty clinics, private practices, and community mental health centers can provide youth with accessible treatment opportunities, enabling the OST organization to remain focused on prevention and early intervention. The level of partner integration can vary widely; OST programs need to be flexible. Some partners may be able to offer program youth a priority spot on their waiting list. Others may offer co-located or integrated options, bringing their staff to the OST facility to offer treatment and programming.

Nearby colleges and universities can also be feasible partners for integrated behavioral health programs. Many university students seek internships for course credit and clinical experience. Because behavioral health integration focuses on prevention, students who are properly trained can learn to effectively implement programming, regardless of their college major. Besides benefiting the program, the internship opportunity may benefit the students as well, exposing them to career opportunities they may not have

considered. Giving students an opportunity to learn aspects of clinical behavioral health work, preventive education, or case management may help to combat the mental health provider shortage by provoking interest in these career pathways.

Staff Support and Training

Staff members can best support the health of the young people they serve when their own mental and physical health needs are met. Staff members who are healthy and thriving can model healthy coping strategies and support young people's emotional growth, thereby serving as a protective factor against future mental illness (VanBronkhorst et al., 2024). Support for staff can include referrals to community mental health partners, in-house well-being workshops, in-house mental health services, and intentional use of trauma-informed supervision strategies. Organizations should continually educate staff about their health-related employment benefits, such as telehealth, paid time off, and coaching.

All staff at all levels should be trained so that they fully understand behavioral health integration and trauma-informed care. They need to know what actions they can take to monitor participants' mental health and implement prevention and early intervention. Staff who learn tangible strategies to foster resilience and emotional regulation in the youth they serve will be more successful and satisfied in their work (Sapin, 2009). Training should recur throughout the year with the goal of educating staff on trauma-informed cultural change goals; empowering staff to take the lead in prevention efforts through modeling, programming, and health communication; and increasing understanding of shared responsibility.

Ways Forward

Many Boys and Girls Clubs and other youth organizations are working more intentionally to support the emotional well-being of the young people in their care. A cultural shift may be underway, but sustainable impact is still a long way away. In addition to OST programs, more organizations should consider offering some level of behavioral health prevention, starting as young as possible. Preschools, daycare centers, houses of worship, community centers, and other community organizations can join in this site-based model of care to reach more young people, especially those who most need help.

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Enabling Both Youth and Pollinators to Thrive

Youth Development in a High School STEM Afterschool Program

Amy Lang

"I would never have thought that I could go into beekeeping as a full-time commitment. It was after learning about the large impacts (good and bad) that insects have on agriculture and the environment that I could fully comprehend the scope a job with bees could cover. Though I do not know exactly what I want to be, I know that I want to pursue a career where I can work with bees and plants. I have been drawn to help others learn about the importance of pollinators and develop a passion for the environment like myself. I am now an active member of the Association of Southern Maryland Beekeepers, and have been involved in many projects teaching others about the importance of pollinators through this program."

"Susie" (all names are pseudonyms), age 15, developed the awareness of and passion for bees expressed in this quotation through her participation in a high-quality afterschool STEM program designed specifically for teens. Teens who participate in such programs reap tremendous benefits. They demonstrate increased academic achievement and life skill development (Holstead et al., 2015). Their enhanced STEM interest, attitudes, and behaviors fuel STEM-related college and career choices (Meschede et al., 2022). Teens thrive when they have opportunities to pursue their passions in safe, inclusive youth development settings with strong leaders. Thriving teens have a growth mindset, are open to challenge and discovery, are optimistic about their ability to make a difference in their communities, are able to connect with others, and successfully set and achieve goals (Arnold & Gagnon, 2018). Like Susie, they become more aware of their place in society and of

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their power to make that society better. In short, they develop the skills needed to become happy, hopeful, effectively engaged adult citizens.

Out-of-school time (OST) programs centered around STEM provide benefits above and beyond the general benefits of afterschool programming by creating opportunities for authentic active learning. STEM programs expose young people to current science and research, enabling them to see both society's need for scientific exploration and the possibility that they themselves might become scientists (Meschede et al., 2022; Riedinger & Taylor, 2016). The ability of STEM programs to inspire young people to pursue science careers is particularly beneficial in light of the STEM-related job market. According to the May 2021 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics report, STEM workers earned an annual mean of $100,900 compared to $55,260 for non-STEM workers. Growth in STEM careers between 2021 and 2030 was estimated at 13 percent, compared to 7.5 percent growth for non-STEM occupations (U.S. BLS, 2021). Further, research indicates that OST experiences can be especially significant in addressing the science identity gap in adolescent girls, helping girls see themselves as scientists and researchers (Christidou et al., 2021; Riedinger & Taylor, 2016).

Further, research indicates that OST experiences can be especially significant in addressing the science identity gap in adolescent girls, helping girls see themselves as scientists and researchers.

Furthermore, OST programs can offer healthy alternatives to self-care for high school youth. Just over half of all high school students are left to self-care after school (Afterschool Alliance, 2022). The common perception is that older youth are capable of managing their time after school. However, data indicate that teens left on their own after school are vulnerable to troubling situations. The rate of juvenile crime triples between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. Self-care and boredom have been shown to increase the likelihood of experimentation with drugs and alcohol by as much as 50 percent (Afterschool Alliance, 2004). The likelihood of having sex for the first time increases with the number of hours teens spend with no supervision (Afterschool Alliance, 2004).

In light of the proven benefits of high-quality afterschool STEM programming for teens, I worked with colleagues at University of Maryland Extension to institute the Pollinator Ambassador program. The program was launched through a county-based 4-H program at a partner site in a community outside Washington, DC. Following the 4-H Thriving Model and other research-based best practices, the program introduced participants to the vital importance of bees and other pollinators through hands-on activities. Its success in engaging participants and building their awareness of science careers can make it a model for other STEM-based youth development programs.

The 4-H Thriving Model

The Pollinator Ambassador program described in this article was designed to offer a high-quality developmental context, in keeping with the 4-H Thriving Model developed by Mary Arnold at Oregon State University (Arnold & Gagnon, 2018). This model synthesizes foundational positive youth development frameworks including Kress's essential elements of positive youth development (2005), the Search Institute's developmental relationships framework (2020), Geldhof and colleagues' five Cs model (2015), and Hendricks's life skills model (1998). Through this synthesis, Arnold has developed a logic model that outlines the critical components of high-quality youth development programs and explains how those programs contribute to positive outcomes and enable young people to thrive.

Critical Program Components

Figure 1 illustrates the 4-H Thriving Model. At the bottom are the four components critical to high-quality youth development programs: sparks, belonging, relationships, and engagement (Arnold & Gagnon, 2018).

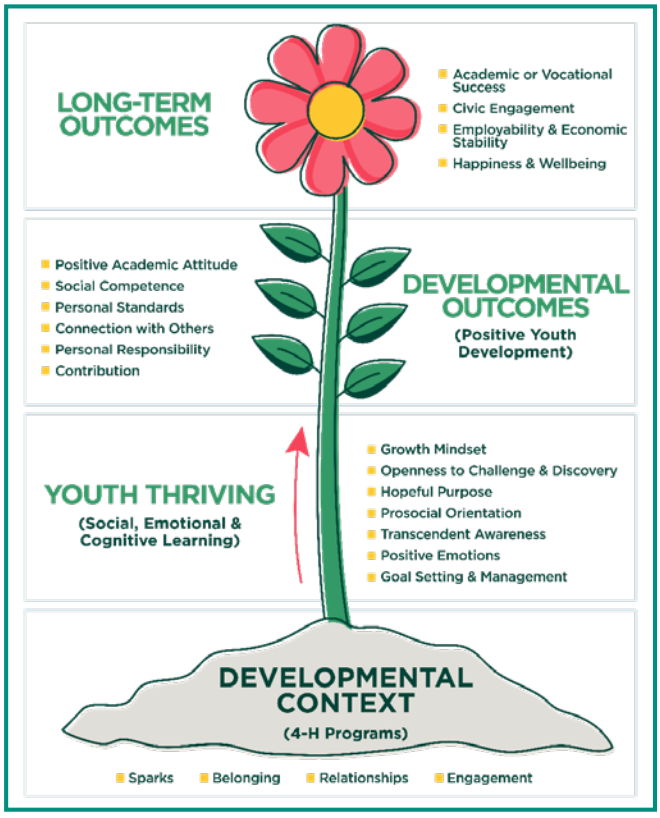
Sparks are topics of interest that light a fire in youth—passions that ignite action and energy. In order to explore their sparks, young people need to experience **belonging.** They must feel welcome, safe, and supported by leaders and peers; they must also have a strong sense that they are valuable. Belonging can be

fostered by intentional investment in developmental **relationships** in which caring adults take an interest and invest time in young participants, expecting that these young people can and will do great things. Caring adults partner with youth, listen to their ideas, challenge them to stretch and grow, encourage them to imagine positive futures, and empower them to set goals and take action steps toward those goals. Intentional incorporation of these three elements leads to **engagement**. Active engagement is a vital component of any high-quality youth development program, whose benefits can be realized only if young people attend consistently and are fully involved in program activities.

Outcome: Thriving Youth

In Arnold's model (Figure 1), indicators that youth are thriving include a growth mindset, openness to challenge and discovery, hopeful purpose, prosocial orientation, transcendent awareness, positive emotionality, and goal setting and management. When young people are thriving, they are eager, enthusiastic participants who understand that they are part of something larger than themselves; they believe they can contribute to a better society as they grow and learn. Thriving youth embrace challenges and persevere to discover new experiences. They are capable of working with others and using positivity to overcome social challenges. They set goals and develop action steps to move toward those goals. Figure 1 illustrates how these indicators of youth thriving lead toward positive developmental outcomes and then to long-term outcomes as participants develop skills for a successful journey into adulthood (Arnold & Gagnon, 2019).

Figure 1. 4-H Thriving Model



Source: 4-H Standing Committee on Positive Youth Development. Used with permission. https://helping-youth-thrive.extension.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022-4H-Thriving-Model-Flower-Graphic.png

The Pollinator Ambassador Program

I used the principles of the 4-H Thriving Model to develop and implement the Pollinator Ambassador program, with the aim of providing a replicable model for teen afterschool programming. University colleagues with expertise in pollinators and a local master gardener facilitated the sessions. After spending eight weeks learning about the role of pollinators in the food supply, participating teens served as pollinator ambassadors, traveling to classrooms and community events to teach the same ideas to younger children and their families. The program was implemented from January to August 2022 in a suburban area outside Washington, DC.

Of the 18 participants between the ages of 13 and 18, 75 percent were female. The program thus addressed the well-documented science identity gap (Davila Dos Santos et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2013) by giving these young women the opportunity to develop science skills and learn about career opportunities. The group was equally divided racially: 50 percent identified as white and the other 50 percent as African American, in a fairly good representation of the county demographics. There was significant homeschool representation, at 33 percent.

Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Recruitment efforts incorporated research-based practices that address the challenges of teen participation in high school OST programs and increase retention rates (e.g., Holstead et al., 2015; Hynes et al., 2012). For example, research has shown that teens gravitate to opportunities that invite the expression of their voices and choices (Afterschool Alliance, 2021; Holstead et al., 2015). They are interested in avenues for leadership

such as community service, youth councils, and opportunities to design or lead activities for younger children (Hynes et al., 2012). They are also eager to participate in activities they see as personally beneficial, such as opportunities to meet community service requirements (Afterschool Alliance, 2021; Holstead et al., 2015). Programs that enable teens to make a difference while learning new skills tend to have high retention rates (Hynes et al., 2012). Furthermore, teenagers demand flexible enrollment and participation options to accommodate their busy schedules (Afterschool Alliance, 2004, 2021). They seem to prefer programs that offer a menu of topic selections offered in shorter blocks of time, such as sessions of six to eight weeks (Holstead et al., 2015).

I designed recruitment and retention strategies in line with these principles. To reach young people where they are, we used multiple social media tools and word of mouth to reach potential participants. The messages tapped into teens' enthusiasm for opportunities to lead and make a difference (Afterschool Alliance, 2021), inviting young people to participate in a community service club in which they would learn about pollination and address that issue through community service and education.

In keeping with research showing that youth are motivated by personal interests and benefits (Afterschool Alliance, n.d.; Holstead et al., 2015), promotional messaging reminded recipients that community service is a graduation requirement in Maryland and that many colleges and scholarship providers use community service efforts to differentiate among applicants. The messages also emphasized that program participants would interact with and learn from University of Maryland professors and researchers. In reflective interview sessions, many participants indicated that this interaction was one of the most valuable components of the program.

To follow research-based recommendations on listening to teen voices and maintaining flexible scheduling (e.g., Afterschool Alliance, 2021; Holstead et al., 2015), we invited youth and families to speak to the program schedule through an electronic survey. The survey identified Monday evenings at 7 p.m. as the best meeting time to minimize conflicts with other responsibilities. We developed a program calendar with weekend service opportunities so participants could choose when and where to engage. Throughout the program, we invited participants to share ideas and make choices about roles and levels of engagement.

In short, we created a framework that provided structure for learning and growth but gave participants flexibility to pursue their interests and passions. Of the 18 teens who joined the program, all 18 completed it. This level of retention is a strong indicator that the program successfully addressed the participants' needs.

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Program Methods

The Pollinator Ambassador program incorporated the key components of the 4-H Thriving Model, in which sparks, belonging, and relationships built participant engagement in a research-based developmental context.

Sparks

The program design tapped into common sparks in order to empower and energize teen participants, inspiring and equipping them to lead efforts to support pollinators in their community.

Research guided the selection of the educational content of the program. Studies show that young people are not only concerned about environmental issues but also willing to take action (United Nations, n.d.). We chose to highlight the vital role of pollinators as an environmental issue because it is easily relatable for both teens and younger children. Everyone can appreciate food. Learning how pollinators help produce food is a powerful spark to help young people see the importance of supporting these insects. In Pollinator Ambassadors, teens participated in a "pack your lunch" activity that highlighted foods requiring pollination in order to illustrate the vital role pollinators play in sustaining the world's food supply.

A strong body of research indicates that teen interest is sparked by opportunities to serve as leaders and to make a positive difference in their communities (Afterschool Alliance, n.d.; Holstead et al., 2015). The program was designed with these sparks in mind,

seeking to empower youth to take leadership roles in their community. Throughout the program's eight sessions, emerging pollinator ambassadors were empowered to take on leadership roles by learning strategies to educate younger children about the vital role of pollinators. First participants experienced the activities themselves. Then they began to take on leadership roles by suggesting revisions or alternatives to the activities. Through this input, the teens began to take ownership of the lessons and activities they would soon lead with younger children and their families.

We also designed the learning experiences to be active and engaging. For example, an early icebreaker was "Pollinator Who Knew?" in which participants chose a pollinator fact and circulated around the room to chat with peers and agree on which pollinator fact was the most interesting. In another activity, teens discovered the wide variety of pollinators as they worked in groups to analyze a pictorial illustration of pollinators at work. A third activity engaged participants in physically acting out the lives of worker bees flying from hive to flower; in the process, the teens discovered the detrimental impacts of challenges such as pesticides, viruses, and mites on bee colonies. In another session, participants moved from station to station to follow the migration journey of monarch butterflies, encountering weather and predator dangers along the way. Participants explored the anatomical features of flowers involved in the pollination process as they dissected flowers and apples. Throughout, the program showcased a variety of methods to support pollinators, highlighting reduced use of pesticides, efforts to increase pollinator habitats by planting native plants that provide food and shelter, and additional supports such as building bee hotels. During each session, teens learned the content and then used this knowledge to develop teaching kits for younger children.

In addition, teens took part in planning and installing a demonstration pollinator habitat. Master gardeners led the teens through the process of garden design and plant selection based on goals and environmental factors. Af-

Sparks at Work

An extension of the Pollinator Ambassador program provided a deep dive into environmental issues and solutions. Program participants were invited to attend a national 4-H agri-science summit. Three female ambassadors accepted the invitation. At the summit, they were inspired by female professionals who spoke about their personal and career experiences and by peers from across the nation who shared an interest in food and environmental sustainability.

These young women not only brought back a number of pollinator activity ideas, but also eagerly undertook a conference challenge to expand their impact beyond the pollinator project to include other environmental concerns. This challenge proved to be a tremendous spark for all three. They worked with local agencies to develop a project idea, settling on a program that would inspire the installation of more native plants in the community. Their project was awarded $2,000 for implementation. With these funds, they created a guide booklet they called *Nurture Natives* (Bonney et al., 2022) and paid to print 47 copies, which they distributed to local nurseries to use when customers come in seeking ornamental trees.

They used the remaining funds to purchase 150 native saplings, which they gave to local residents in a giveaway event they planned and implemented themselves. Passionate about youth education on community environmental issues, they coordinated with their pollinator ambassador peers, master gardeners, and a local farmer to provide fun educational activities and games during the giveaway event to raise awareness of native plants and pollinators.

The event was a huge success, but the girls were not satisfied. Their passion had been ignited. They applied for and received a $5,000 capacity-building grant, which plan to use to replicate their county efforts statewide, coordinate wider distribution of *Nurture Natives*, and facilitate an educational native tree giveaway at the local university's Maryland Day event. Caring adult mentors have provided support and guidance along the way by facilitating introductions to community stakeholders and assisting with logistical plans for tree distribution and educational events.

ter selecting the plants, participants first learned about winter seed sowing and then proceeded to start the selected seeds in upcycled empty milk jugs. The master gardeners led the teens through a lesson on seed sprouts and winter hardening; then they helped the teens transfer the seedlings from the milk jugs to grow bags. Participants hauled soil, watered the new plants, and monitored progress. Once the plants were ready, teens helped install the pollinator habitats at two elementary schools, establishing container-based pollinator habitats to be used for teaching demonstrations.

Belonging

Instructional sessions were designed to facilitate the sense of belonging that is vital to youth development. Icebreakers and group activities to facilitate peer interaction were incorporated into each session. Facilitators continually reminded teens that their voices were essential and appreciated by, for example, inviting feedback and suggestions. The teens developed their own program logo (Figure 2), which was used on Pollinator Ambassador t-shirts and on welcome signs at the elementary schools where they planted gardens.

In preparation for community teaching events, teens selected the activities that resonated most with them and helped to identify local settings where they would like to teach children. They engaged in practice sessions in which they taught their peers and then received their feedback. These opportunities to exercise choice and leadership helped teens feel welcome, included, and valued in the Pollinator Ambassador program.

Figure 2. Participant-Designed Pollinator Ambassador Logo

Source: Pollinator Ambassadors. Used with permission.

Developmental Relationships

Pollinator ambassadors benefited from the guidance and mentorship of various adult facilitators. They were exposed to a wide variety of community agencies and stakeholders. Master gardeners, entomologists, and extension professionals from the university provided instruction on pollinators; school administrators, camp and scout leaders, and staff of various community agencies allowed the ambassadors to install container habitats and teach pollinator lessons at their sites. These adults invested their time with the clear expectation that these teens would use their new knowledge to teach others. Each teen was challenged to reach at least 25 younger children with their pollinator message. These developmental relationships helped the ambassadors stretch and grow into empowered leaders who helped other community members to support pollinators and strengthen a sustainable food system.

Program Outcomes

The pollinator ambassadors eagerly embraced community leadership roles through this project. Their enthusiastic concern for the environment has been contagious. Through the voices of these 18 teen ambassadors, 452 youth and 224 adults—a total of 676 community residents—heard about the importance of pollinators in sustaining the food supply.

The ambassadors' leadership led to the planting of pollinator habitats at two elementary schools, where children in green and garden clubs are maintaining the habitats and using them as outdoor living classrooms. Science teachers are excited to have these new teaching spaces. County public school science coordinators are hoping to see pollinator habitats installed at schools across the county.

In addition, the teens raised awareness about pollinators among community members. One adult they reached is so eager to see the work continue that they committed to donate $5,000 per year to pollinator education efforts and habitat planting—not just in our county, but across Maryland. These outcomes demonstrate that the pollinator ambassadors have had

tremendous impact on their community's interest in supporting pollinators.

Thriving Indicators and Positive Youth Development Outcomes

The 4-H Thriving Model (Arnold & Gagnon, 2019) outlines thriving indicators and positive youth development outcomes stemming from high-quality research-based programs. To examine the effectiveness of the Pollinator Ambassador program, we conducted an end-of-program survey that included both quantitative questions about students' attitudes and learning and open-ended questions for reflection. Table 1 summarizes results from the 13 teen ambassadors who completed the survey, as well as findings published in grant reports, categorized according to the indicators in the 4-H Thriving Model.

Table 1. Evidence of Thriving Indicators and Outcomes

Thriving Indicators and Outcomes	Evidence
Growth mindset	Teens demonstrated eagerness to learn about the role pollinators play in sustaining the food supply as they actively participated in educational activities and then designed teaching kits and lessons for use with younger children. On the post-program survey, 92 percent of respondents said they were interested in learning more about food production.
Openness to challenge and discovery	Teens, many of whom had never gardened before, helped design and plant a pollinator habitat at the local county extension office to support local pollinators and teach the community. The teens were willing to embrace the challenge of teaching others about pollinators. Two ambassadors began keeping bees during the program.
Personal responsibility	In the post-program survey, 85 percent of respondents reported feeling a responsibility to help their community; 93 percent reported that they would take action to create and protect pollinator habitats.
Hopeful purpose	The teens demonstrated hopeful purpose as they put their new pollinator knowledge to work, teaching and inspiring community members to support pollinators. They expressed the belief that their efforts could make a difference in their community.
Goal setting and management	Ambassadors were challenged to reach at least 25 younger children with their pollinator message and then developed action steps to accomplish that goal. They exceeded the goal by reaching 452 children and 224 adults.
Contribution	All respondents expressed an increased interest in helping pollinators; 100 percent of them agreed that they liked helping people and that the program inspired them to volunteer in their community. Additionally, 92 percent reported that they looked for ways to help their community when they learned of a problem.

Science Attitudes

Researchers were also curious about the impact of the program on science attitudes. Again, the findings indicate a positive impact: 100 percent of survey respondents reported that they learned new things about science and that they understood why protecting pollinators and increasing their habitat were important for the food supply. Furthermore, 85 percent of respondents reported having increased their interest in science generally and in advocacy for agri-science issues.

Participant Voices

In addition to the survey, we gathered participants' reflections in a post-program narrative report about how the program affected them. Their responses add depth to our exploration of program outcomes.

Erica, age 15, wrote:

> Through this program, I have become aware of the remarkable difference youth can make. In the last year, I have become passionate about advocating for positive change in my community. This project has inspired me to pursue a career in environmental law. I am passionate about protecting our natural resources and supporting U.S. farmers. I hope to eventually work with the Environmental Protection Agency or Department of Agriculture.

In the last year, I have become passionate about advocating for positive change in my community. This project has inspired me to pursue a career in environmental law.

Erica's comments show evidence of several thriving indicators and outcomes, including growth mindset, openness to challenge and discovery, hopeful purpose, personal responsibility, and contribution.

The reflections of Abigail, 16, reveal evidence of the same thriving model indicators and outcomes, as well as a sixth indicator: connection to others.

> As someone who has a deep fondness for the culinary arts, I'm always looking for something new to discover in the field of food science. In the future, I hope to own my own farm-to-table business that provides people with great food and more knowledge about agriculture. This project has inspired me to further engage in my community. I am now involved with a homeschool co-op and am in charge of a year-long program, educating kids on where our food comes from, how to support local farmers and, of course, how to make great food. I regularly talk with a local farmer, who—I am proud to say—my family now supports by purchasing a large portion of our produce from them.

Responses of Children Taught by Pollinator Ambassadors

The pollinator ambassadors taught younger children in multiple settings. One of these was summer camps, where they provided six hours of pollinator education to 70 children. These 70 were invited to complete surveys about their experience with the pollinator ambassadors. Of those who completed the survey, 73 percent indicated that they felt they could explain how people rely on pollinators for food, and 81 percent said they would like to learn more about pollinators. A full 93 percent agreed that they believed they could do things to help nature after participating in the program. Here are a few of their comments on the pollinator lessons:

- It was fun. I really liked to learn about flowers.
- Can you visit us again?
- I liked all of the activities we did, but my favorite was when we got to explore a flower and see all the parts of a flower.
- I liked when we played games in the gym, and the flower.
- I like when we cut open apple seeds and flowers.
- I had so much fun learning about pollinators and plants.
- I really loved being in the gardening and pollinating program.

The positive responses of the surveyed children suggest that the teen ambassadors were enthusiastic and effective teachers.

The Power of Thriving Youth

This study supports the use of research-based practices in afterschool STEM programs. The Pollinator Ambassador program successfully nurtured high school participants' interest in science and in local environmental activism. The success of the program

is shown by the fact that every teen who started the program finished it. In addition, the group members met and exceeded their goal for educational outreach. The pollinator ambassadors thrived through being empowered as leaders working for meaningful change in their community.

The Pollinator Ambassador program provides a promising model for successful afterschool programming for teens. It demonstrated tremendous success in recruiting, retaining, and empowering its target audience. However, the sample size of 18 teens is relatively small and is not fully representative, since 75 percent were female. In addition, 16 of the 18 participants learned of the program through a partnering community agency that offers a year-round service learning program. They may have been predisposed to engage in service. The fact that the program did not take place on school grounds immediately after school may have limited participation by a more representative sample of the high school population. Taking these limiting factors into account, further studies are warranted to explore the impact of best practice models in more diverse settings and to more explicitly tease out specific elements of the 4-H Thriving Model related to engagement and belonging.

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Making Summer Count

Youths' Perceptions of Meaningfulness and Future Orientation in Summer Youth Employment Contexts

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Summer is a unique time for students to extend the gains made during the school year by engaging in opportunities that support their growth and development. For younger teens, these opportunities may focus on developing relationships and competence; older youth may want to gain experience in the labor market (Afterschool Alliance, 2010). One such opportunity, summer youth employment programming, gives students first-time work experiences that support their entrance into the labor force. Summer employment programs boast many benefits that enable young people to explore career interests, gain connections to employers, develop a concept of work culture and expectations, and learn how to navigate professional spaces. Although such programs are beneficial to all students, they are particularly useful for students of-color. Marginalized youth are more likely to face discriminatory hiring practices and lower wages, both of which negatively impact their ability to envision their future selves and acquire financial security (Lansing

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et al., 2018). Summer youth employment programs can address this disparity by improving the economic, behavioral, and academic outcomes of students of color (Modestino & Nguyen, 2016).

Immediate benefits for students include earning a paycheck, learning job-related skills such as teamwork, and improving their work ethic (Marshall, 2018). The impact of summer youth employment programs can extend into the school year; schools see decreases in school absences and improvements in performance on state exams among participants in summer employment programs (Modestino & Paulsen, 2023). These benefits are particularly relevant for students of color, who often face educational disparities (Modestino & Paulsen, 2023). Furthermore, the benefits continue when participants enter the workforce, because summer employment programs can improve participants' confidence in completing what employers expect of them (Orrell & Ouellette, 2008). Summer employment programs can also help participants develop a wide range of skills and abilities that can be translated into many aspects of their lives, from time management skills to responsibility, motivation, and self-confidence (Leos-Urbel, 2014). Exposing youth to many career options also helps to shape and develop their career aspirations. Summer employment programs can help young people achieve their goals by pushing them to think about the steps necessary to achieve those goals, such as enrolling in career training or attending college (Modestino & Nguyen, 2016).

Studies on summer youth employment programs tend to examine youth outcomes, such as work readiness and professional skills; very few measure the mechanisms that produce positive youth outcomes, particularly the meaningfulness of students' work experiences (Ross & Kazis, 2016). Summer employment programs can not only provide participants with work experience, but also expose them to career pathways that relate to their interests while beginning to orient them toward a meaningful and stable future (Mortimer, 2010). Summer work experiences can be constructed to be meaningful through three main elements: exposing youth to new possibilities for their future, enabling them to engage with a positive support network that allows them to feel connected and needed, and giving them a sense of ownership over their work (Lansing et al., 2018). Taken together, these elements provide the foundation of a meaningful work experience. However, the types of work in which young people engage can further extend the relevance of the work to their lives and future goals (Lansing et al., 2018).

Furthermore, summer youth employment programs can facilitate participants' access to four main types of capital: financial, human, social, and cultural capital (Lansing et al., 2018). *Financial capital* refers to the money earned by an individual; summer employment programs provide access to financial capital by paying participants for their work (Lansing et al., 2018). These programs have both immediate and long-term impacts on participants' wages. They not only provide immediate income but also support development of skills that have the potential to increase participants' income over time (Ross & Kazis, 2016). Access to financial capital is particularly important for marginalized youth, who both can use the new income to fulfill immediate personal and family needs and can gain meaningful work experience that enhances future employment and earnings (Betcherman et al., 2007; Edelman & Holzer, 2013).

Furthermore, summer youth employment programs can facilitate participants' access to four main types of capital: financial, human, social, and cultural capital.

Human capital refers to the idea that work and educational opportunities facilitate the development of skills that allow young people to access labor-market opportunities that were formerly unavailable (Modestino & Paulsen, 2019). Access to *social capital* is often an important component of summer employment programs, which help participants develop supportive connections with employers and mentors who can support them in navigating their social worlds successfully (Greene & Seefeldt, 2023; McMurphy et al., 2013). Furthermore, these supportive networks can help young people to develop their goals and then work to achieve those goals (Greene & Seefeldt, 2023). *Cultural capital* refers to an individual's knowledge about expectations, behaviors, and values that are culturally appropriate (Lansing et al., 2018). Summer work experiences provide a space in which

participants can acquire what are typically called "soft skills," understand workplace expectations, and learn to navigate social situations in the workplace (Ross & Kazis, 2016). Summer youth employment programs not only provide access to these four types of capital, but also facilitate integration; that is, they help participants recognize these types of capital and learn how to leverage them in a variety of contexts (Lansing et al., 2018).

Access to capital and skill development alone do not necessarily translate into a meaningful work experience (Lansing et al., 2018). To be seen as meaningful by the youth participants (not just adult stakeholders), the work experience must be translated into a personally relevant experience in the context of their lives. Summer employment programs can support this translation by providing mentors and employers who help young people develop their sense of self and decide on long-term goals (Greene & Seefeldt, 2023). Furthermore, the social networks that young people develop in their summer work experience can help them understand how to apply the skills they learn to new contexts, supporting their ability to achieve their goals (Herrygers & Wieland, 2017). A work experience is meaningful for youth when it helps them to see both themselves and their world differently (Lansing et al., 2018).

The current study explores the efforts of one summer youth employment program to provide students with meaningful work experiences and the participants' perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work and its effect on their future orientation.

Research on young people's conceptualizations of meaningful work in the context of summer youth employment programs tends to focus on students 18 years of age or older. Less is known about the experiences of young people between the ages of 14 and 17, how they define meaningful work, and how summer employment programs affect their interests and goals. The current study explores the efforts of one summer youth employment program to provide students with meaningful work experiences and the participants' perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work and its effect on their future orientation. Most of the students in the study were under the age of 18. The Youth Enrichment Services (YES) Summer Learn and Earn program provides students with summer enrichment, their first work experience, and meaningful opportunities to engage with work. The YES context illustrates how providing youth with meaningful work experiences supports their future career interests and goals.

Context: Youth Enrichment Services

Organizational Context

YES is a community-based organization in Pittsburgh that gives socially and economically disadvantaged youth opportunities to achieve success through its academic enrichment, alternative to detention, peer mentor certification, life skills, cultural enrichment, diversity awareness, workforce readiness, and wellness-based programming. Since 1994, YES has served over 5,000 youth ages 10 to 24, empowering them to become their own best resource. YES prides itself on giving youth of color opportunities to explore, challenge, and rewrite limiting and harmful narratives they have been given by society. YES prioritizes youth on the margin; it directly confronts the social, economic, and academic injustices and disparities that overwhelmingly affect them.

YES has over 30 years of experience co-creating and implementing youth engagement programs and strategies for change alongside youth, their families, and critical stakeholders. YES is expert in meeting youth where they are and uplifting them toward where they aspire to be. YES's goal is to create a catalytic environment that fosters autonomy, cultivates ideation, nurtures assets, contributes to young peoples' holistic well-being, and provides exposure to help youth articulate and narrow in on their academic, career, and personal pursuits. These goals reflect YES's mentorship premise (see Jones et al., 2021) and highlight YES's commitment to holistic youth development. YES's summer employment program is one programmatic effort to help youth redefine success; strive toward their self-identified life goals; envision bold possibilities; and create personal, academic, and career conditions that enable them to thrive. YES's summer vision and goals complement the mission and vision of YES, which seek to empower youth and

families to become their own best resource through targeted programming.

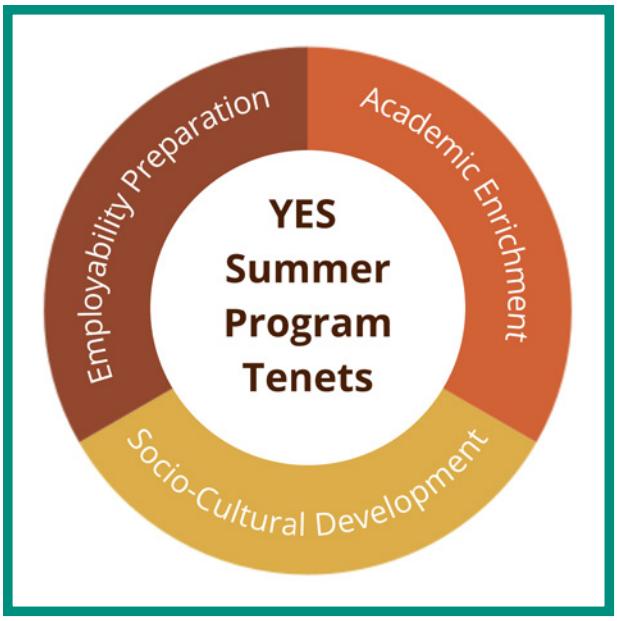
Summer Employment Context

As previous research suggests, summer employment is a critical and defining experience for young people (Modestino & Nguyen, 2016; Modestino & Paulsen, 2019, 2023). YES goes beyond traditional employment to create an experience that is transformative rather than transactional. All participants engage in a robust and comprehensive employment experience that hones their skills, directs their path, builds their network of peers and professionals, and equips them for future opportunities. YES operates a comprehensive eight-week summer employment program, called Learn and Earn, which provides underserved youth, ages 14 to 21, with employment in and around Pittsburgh. Learn and Earn students work in diverse jobs and occupational areas to gain professional experience, technical skills, and knowledge of employer expectations, as well as exposure to possible career paths. In addition to developing valuable work experience, participants also earn wages and so contribute to Pittsburgh's tax base and economic growth. Through the program, participants come to understand appropriate workplace behaviors; they also learn the rigors of the workplace, develop hard and soft skills, and explore career interests and opportunities.

The transformative learning experience extends beyond employment. YES participants not only engage as employees at their worksites but also participate in social and cultural outings with their peers and explore learning through experiential courses, for a total of 25 hours per week. YES summer programming leverages evidence-based practices and literature that reinforces the importance of supplementing students' workforce skill building with peer relationship development and academic enrichment (Ryan et al., 2019).

YES can be distinguished from other programs by its mentorship approach. YES mentoring, which is central to the organization's philosophy, is used to convey, inspire, and uphold strong personal self-conduct. YES weaves mentorship into its summer program infrastructure, focusing on employability preparation, academic enrichment, and sociocultural development, as shown in Figure 1. These elements guide YES's summer programming efforts and function interconnectedly to maximize participants' summer experiences, prepare them for future employment, broaden their academic possibilities, and deepen their peer and community connections.

Figure 1. The YES Summer Program Model



Employability Preparation

Employability preparation is a central component of the YES program model. YES exposes youth to diverse careers and work environments to help them develop knowledge of employer expectations and workplace behavior. Working as consultants, collaborators, and partners, YES participants make meaningful contributions to their workplaces' missions. In Summer 2023, YES engaged participants in diverse employment experiences that facilitated their workforce development. Workplaces ranged from community-based entities and museums to local businesses and universities, as shown in Table 1 (next page).

Academic Enrichment

Academic enrichment is an essential element of the YES program model. In response to summer learning loss and the educational disparities impacting underserved youth (Alexander et al., 2007; Cooper, 2007; Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020), YES prioritizes experiential learning opportunities that help students improve their academic aptitude, postsecondary preparedness, and connection to learning. Participants' academic experiences are channeled through experiential learning courses and participatory and project-based research projects that

Table 1. Youth Work Sectors and Sites by Number of Students

Industry Sector	Number of Sites	Number of Students
Agriculture	1	1
Business services	1	3
Carpentry	2	3
Childcare/summer camp	8	29
Culinary	1	5
Entrepreneurship	1	4
Finance	1	7
Government	1	2
Media and marketing	3	4
Museum education	3	9
Nursing home	1	5
Operations	1	8
Recreation	3	6
Research	2	2
Skill development and training	1	3
Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)	2	2
Youth education	2	4

reflect their real-life experiences, passions, interests, and curiosities. Youth participants are on the front line of these investigations, in which they develop tangible skills that transcend their summer experience.

Sociocultural Development

Sociocultural development is the final dimension of the YES program model. YES aligns with the belief that learning happens within social contexts and through peer interactions, which are mediated by culture, language, and environment (Vygotsky, 1987; White, 2010). YES therefore cultivates a space in which students learn in community with others and through positive peer interactions. Because learning is a cultural process, YES creates sociocultural experiences that expose participants to new opportunities while prioritizing their socially situated and culturally valued ways of knowing, being, and acting, as recommended by previous research (Nasir et al., 2014). YES incorporates young people's cultural practices and lived experiences into programming, especially through social and cultural outings, unique learning opportunities that enable participants to strengthen peer bonds and develop alliances.

Tiered Program Pathway

The YES summer program is also unique in that it facilitates a graduated engagement process to make programming accessible to a broad range of participants with varied developmental needs. YES tailors the three types of services described above to young people in three tiers: Summer Scholars, Advanced Summer Scholars, and YES Veterans. As outlined in Table 2 (next page), these groups are formed by age, experience, and grade level. Summer Scholars are 14-year-olds with minimal work experience seeking experiential learning opportunities, peer development, and career exposure. Their work experiences are mostly in-house at YES. Advanced Summer Scholars, typically ages 15 to 17, build on their previous work experience with YES at external locations across the city. YES Veterans are college- and career-bound youth who have engaged in YES programming for three or more years or are older than 18. They design their own leadership positions or internships within YES or at local institutions while completing independent studies as part of their work experience.

All participants' work experience is complemented with academic enrichment and sociocultural development opportunities. As they move through the three-tiered program pathway, participants deepen their technical skills, build their leadership capacity in employment settings, and ignite their intellectual curiosity through research.

Table 2. YES Cohorts and Program Opportunities

Cohort	Age / Level	Work Opportunities	Academic Enrichment	Sociocultural Development
Summer Scholars	14 years old Entering high school or 10th grade Limited or no job experience	In-house apprenticeships	Youth participatory action research course Storytelling course	Wellness Wednesdays Trip Thursdays Violence prevention symposia Cultural trip
Advanced Summer Scholars	15–17 years old Current high school students Previous Learn and Earn participants or students with limited work experience	External site placements	Experiential learning course	
YES Vets	18–21 years old High school graduates or college students Longtime YES participants with ample work experience	Internships and independent study	Independent research project	

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to better understand YES participants' perceptions of the meaningfulness of their summer work experiences. A secondary goal was to investigate how participants' work experiences related to their future orientations. The study sought to answer the following guiding questions:

1. Do participants find their summer work experiences meaningful? Do their perceptions of meaningfulness differ by cohort or by work placement?
2. Did participants' work experiences influence their future career orientations? Do their perceptions of future orientation differ by cohort or by work placement?

Methodology

To answer this study's research questions, we used data from a larger evaluation study of YES seeking to understand the summer experiences of participants and how effective YES was at achieving program goals. The main data source was pre- and post-participation surveys of YES participants.

Participants

The 97 young people who completed both the pre- and post-participation surveys represent youth ages 14 to 20. They came from various neighborhoods and represented varied racial and ethnic groups, as shown in Table 3 (next page). A large majority of survey respondents were Black. The survey population was nearly evenly divided between male- and female-identifying young people. Over half of respondents were 15 or 16 years old. In keeping with this age division, most respondents were Advanced Summer Scholars; only 5 percent were YES Vets. Nearly all survey respondents were English speakers. These demographics are representative of those of the YES student population.

Data Collection

Survey data from YES participants were collected twice during Summer 2023: once before the program began and again at the program's end. To supplement these data, we leveraged select survey responses from our partnering workforce agency, which engaged youth in post-participation surveys. All participants had the opportunity to complete the YES 30-minute self-report

Table 3. Survey Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Percentage of Respondents (N = 97)
Race	
Black	90%
White	4%
Asian	6%
Gender	
Male	49%
Female	48%
Non-binary	2%
Fluid	1%
Residential Status	
City	64%
County	36%
Language	
English	93%
Persian	2.5%
Dari	4.5%
Age	
14	22%
15	26%
16	27%
17	15%
18	4%
19	4%
20	2%
Cohort	
Summer Scholars (age 14)	19%
Advanced Summer Scholars (ages 15–17)	76%
YES Vets (ages 18–21)	5%

online survey, which was administered during in-office training days, unless they declined participation or their parents opted them out. Data collection commenced only after participants and families completed a consent form denoting their voluntary participation.

The surveys consisted of statements about meaningfulness and future orientation. Respondents rated each item on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We defined meaningfulness as a function of students' satisfaction with their work experience, enjoyment of the work, feelings of being inspired by the work, capacity for making a positive difference, and personal growth at work. (The meaningfulness scale had five items, which are listed in brief, with their average scores, in Table 5.) Meaningfulness items were included only in the post-participation survey. Future orientation was defined as a sense-making mechanism by which individuals think about, plan for, assign meaning to, and execute their future goals and plans (Seigner, 2009). (The 11 items in the future orientation scale are listed, with their average scores, in Table 8.) Items assessing future orientation in general were included in both pre- and post-participation surveys, while those asking about the effect of the summer work experience on future orientation were included only in the post-participation survey.

Data Analysis

Likert scale data can be analyzed as either ordinal or interval data. For this study, we chose to interpret our Likert data as intervals because we aim to measure concepts (Sullivan & Artino, 2013), specifically meaningfulness and future orientation. We calculated means (averages) for each individual survey item and composite (total) scores for meaningfulness and future orientation with respect to cohorts and work placement industry sectors (Boone & Boone, 2012). To interpret our calculated means, we used the Pimentel (2010) interval framework. This framework, summarized in Table 4, minimizes interval biases in Likert responses.

Table 4. Pimentel Likert Interval Framework

Likert Scale Number & Description	Pimentel Likert Scale Interval
1, Strongly disagree	1.00–1.80
2, Disagree	1.81–2.60
3, Neutral/uncertain	2.61–3.40
4, Agree	3.41–4.20
5, Strongly agree	4.21–5.00

Because the Summer Scholars, Advanced Summer Scholars, and YES Vets had different opportunities and structures in their work experiences, we explored participant perceptions of meaningfulness and future orientation with respect to their cohorts. We also conducted an exploratory analysis to see whether any differences emerged among responses based on participants' work assignments. Though we analyzed pre- and post-participation scores on the future orientation items related to participants' general impression of their futures, we chose to report only post-participation scores. Other future orientation items and meaningfulness items have only post-participation scores. The differences among pre- and post-participation scores on the six future orientation items that have both were not significant enough to lead to meaningful conclusions.

Results

Survey results indicate that, on the whole, YES participants found their summer work experience meaningful. They also had fairly strong future orientations. For both scales, we report on average scores for each item on the post-participation survey and then examine composite scores for each scale by YES cohort and by work sector.

Meaningfulness

Average scores on the five survey items in the meaningfulness scale, shown in Table 5, range from 3.63 to 3.89. All of these scores, and the total composite meaningfulness score (3.73), fall within the Pimentel (2010) interval *agree*.

Next, we calculated composite scores combining all five meaningfulness items for each cohort of YES participants, as shown in Table 6. Using Pimentel interpretations, Summer Scholars and Advanced Summer Scholars *agreed* that their work experiences were meaningful, while YES Vets *strongly agreed*. These results should be interpreted with caution because the survey sample included only five YES Vets.

Table 7 displays students' post-participation perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work by industry sector. Young people who worked in government, research, and STEM all *strongly agreed* that their work experience was meaningful. Average scores for most other sectors fall into the Pimentel *agree* category. Average scores for participants in three sectors fall into the *neutral/uncertain* band; the one participant who worked in agriculture *disagreed* that their work experience was meaningful. The numbers of participants in almost all work sectors are quite small, so the results must be interpreted with caution. The sector with the

Table 5. Meaningfulness Component Scores for All Participants

Survey Item (rated on a scale of 1 to 5)	Mean Score	Pimentel Interpretation
My work experience was meaningful to me.	3.74	Agree
My work contributed to my personal growth.	3.73	Agree
I feel inspired at work.	3.63	Agree
My work made a positive difference in my community.	3.63	Agree
I enjoyed my work experience.	3.89	Agree
Composite meaningfulness score	**3.73**	**Agree**

Note: N = 97

Table 6. Meaningfulness Composite Scores by Cohort

Cohort	Number of Students	Mean Composite Score	Pimentel Interpretation
Summer Scholars	18	3.41	Agree
Advanced Summer Scholars	74	3.74	Agree
YES Vets	5	4.72	Strongly agree

Table 7. Meaningfulness Composite Scores by Work Placement Sector

Work Placement Industry Sector	Number of Sites	Number of Students	Mean Composite Score
Strongly agree			
Government	1	2	5.00
Research	2	2	4.90
STEM	2	2	4.40
Agree			
Skill development and training	1	3	4.07
Carpentry	2	3	4.00
Media and marketing	3	4	3.95
Recreation	3	6	3.87
Childcare/summer camp	8	29	3.84
Business services	1	3	3.80
Museum education	3	9	3.73
Finance	1	7	3.60
Youth education	2	4	3.50
Operations	1	8	3.45
Neutral/uncertain			
Culinary	1	5	3.28
Entrepreneurship	1	4	3.25
Nursing home	1	5	3.08
Disagree			
Agriculture	1	1	2.20

most participants, childcare/summer camp, with 29 participants, falls squarely in Pimentel's *agree* band.

Future Orientation

Table 8 displays average post-participation scores for each item in the future orientation scale. On average, YES participants *agreed* with most future orientation items. The highest scores indicate that participants believed they would have a successful future and understood that education and hard work would help them achieve that future. The lowest scores, falling into Pimentel's *neutral* category, are on items related to the role participants' worksites played in developing and solidifying their career interests and the extent to which their work experiences were aligned with their future goals.

Table 9 displays composite scores on the future orientation scale, post-participation, by YES cohort. The total composite indicates a fairly strong future orientation, with scores increasing fairly steadily from the youngest cohort to the oldest. The composite scores of Summer Scholars and Advanced Summer Scholars fall into the *agree* Pimentel band. The composite scores of the five YES Vets fall into the *strongly agree* category.

We also analyzed post-assessment future orientation composite scores by participants' work placement sectors, shown in Table 10. Three sectors, STEM, government, and youth education, fell into the *strongly agree* Pimentel band. Most sectors earned average future orientation scores in the *agree* band. The five participants with work assignments in nursing homes had the lowest average composite scores in future orientation.

Table 8. Future Orientation Component Scores for All Participants

Survey Item (rated on a scale of 1 to 5)	Mean Score
Agree	
I believe I will have a successful future.	4.08
I believe that getting an education will positively impact my future.	4.07
I believe that I can achieve a successful future if I work hard enough.	4.03
I often make plans for my future.	3.85
My family stresses that getting an education is important for future success.	3.71
This work experience has helped me to develop and/or gain skills that will be useful in my future career.	3.67
This work experience helped me to think about my future career opportunities.	3.58
The future I want to have is different from the future I expect to have.	3.51
Neutral/uncertain	
This work experience aligned with my future goals.	3.38
My worksite helped me to develop new career interests.	3.36
My worksite helped me to solidify my career interests.	3.21
Composite future orientation score	**3.85**

Note: N = 97

Table 9. Future Orientation Composite Scores by Cohort

Cohort	Number of Students	Mean Composite Score	Pimentel Interpretation
Summer Scholars	18	3.63	Agree
Advanced Summer Scholars	74	3.87	Agree
YES Vets	5	4.34	Strongly agree

Discussion

This study sought to investigate YES participants' perceptions of meaningfulness in their summer work experiences and examined how those experiences related to their future orientations. Composite average scores on the two survey scales indicated that YES participants as a group agreed that their summer work experience was meaningful and that they were oriented toward their futures. These findings, which are consistent with previous literature, underscore the importance of summer work experiences in creating meaningful opportunities for students, particularly youth of color (Orrell & Ouellette, 2008).

The YES Summer Learn and Earn program built all four types of capital that young workers need for a solid start toward successful careers (Lansing et al., 2018). The immediate benefit was financial capital in the form of payment for their work. Financial capital is particularly important for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Betcherman et al., 2007; Edelman & Holzer, 2013). The program built human capital by teaching participants skills they can use to obtain and succeed in future jobs. Social capital came from the mentorship of YES staff and from connections with peers and supervisors at their worksites. Finally, participants, particularly those in their first jobs, gained cultural capital by learning the basics of what employers expect of employees.

Below we discuss conclusions we draw from results for specific survey items and from cohort and in-

Table 10. Future Orientation Composite Scores by Work Placement Sector

Work Placement Industry Sector	Number of Sites	Number of Students	Mean Composite Score
Strongly agree			
STEM	2	2	4.36
Government	1	2	4.29
Youth education	2	4	4.21
Agree			
Media and marketing	3	4	4.07
Carpentry	2	3	4.05
Recreation	3	6	4.05
Research	2	2	4.00
Skill development and training	1	3	4.00
Childcare/summer camp	8	29	3.98
Museum education	3	9	3.86
Operations	1	8	3.77
Finance	1	7	3.73
Business services	1	3	3.71
Entrepreneurship	1	4	3.64
Agriculture	1	1	3.57
Culinary	1	5	3.46
Neutral/uncertain			
Nursing home	1	5	3.34

dustry sector results for both the meaningfulness and future orientation scales. We also suggest implications for research and practice.

Components of Meaningfulness and Future Orientation

The scores on the five items in the meaningfulness scale fall within a narrow range. The highest rated item was that participants felt their work experience was meaningful, with slightly lower scores for enjoyment, inspiration, community contribution, and personal growth. However, the differences among scores are not large enough to suggest any conclusions.

Scores on items in the future orientation scale vary enough to permit observations about specific components of YES participants' future orientation. Participants expressed the belief that their futures would be successful and that hard work and education are important catalysts for their future success. Respondents' identification of the value of education is consistent with previous literature (Davis & Niebes-Davis, 2010; Jamieson & Romer, 2008). Educational and work opportunities facilitate the growth of human capital, though participants may not have understood this connection. Oyserman and Destin (2010) note that adolescents sometimes can conceive of their futures but struggle to understand the mechanics and processes to achieve their vision. Our respondents expressed an understanding that hard work is fundamental to future success, but they may not have fully understood how human capital translates into improved opportunities in the labor market.

YES participants agreed that their work experiences helped them think about the future. They were less likely to agree that their work experiences helped them to develop or solidify specific career interests. The fact that participants spent only six weeks at their summer worksites may be a factor. Developing or solidifying career interests takes time, as well as mentorship and resources. Participants also were less likely to agree that their summer work aligned with their future goals. However, they generally felt their experience was positive. The literature suggests that youth benefit from summer work experiences that are positive and meaningful, whether or not the experiences are future oriented (Briggs et al., 2019; Davis & Heller, 2017).

YES participants also tended to agree that they cultivated useful skills for their future careers. They were acquiring human capital they could use to improve their career opportunities. According to a survey conducted for the YES annual report, the skills they gained ranged from communication and time management skills to work ethic and collaboration skills. Taken together, the work placements supported the development of soft skills (YES, 2023). Also, these first-time work experiences built participants' cultural capital—their knowledge of workplace expectations and their ability to navigate workplace social contexts. Research shows that amassing transferable skills early not only helps young people achieve success in their careers and in other domains of their lives but also supports their advancement toward their postsecondary future selves (Carey, 2022).

Differences by Cohort

Students' experiences of meaningfulness and future orientation differed by cohort. In both scales, composite scores tended to be lowest for Summer Scholars, somewhat higher for Advanced Summer Scholars, and highest for YES Vets. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that older students tend to find meaning in summer employment experiences (Modestino & Paulsen, 2023). In general, younger students may not have explored or thought deeply about long-term career interests or goals. They may benefit from skills they learn from summer work as a foundation for skills they will develop as they are exposed to more career paths and career-affirming experiences. For the YES population specifically, one difference is the type of work assignments: Summer Scholars typically work in-house for YES, Advanced Summer scholars are assigned to workplaces throughout the city, and YES Vets typically craft their own work experience. This difference can help explain differences in the meaningfulness and future orientation scores. However, we must note that YES Vets were the smallest population, with only five respondents. Furthermore, YES Vets typically have participated in Learn and Earn in previous years; this experience could skew their responses.

Also, these first-time work experiences built participants' cultural capital—their knowledge of workplace expectations and their ability to navigate workplace social contexts.

Differences by Industry Sector

YES participants' ratings of the meaningfulness and future orientation of their work based on their industry sector must be interpreted with caution because the numbers of participants in most sectors are quite small. Still, their responses may provide some insight. For example, the highest rating on the meaningfulness scale was in government work. YES participants who worked in local government had the opportunity to work alongside political leaders and explore real applications of government. STEM, research, and youth education also made it into the *strongly agree* band for one or both scales.

Some industries seemed more likely to facilitate participants' future thinking than others. More insights are needed to understand the mechanisms that support young people's future thinking and perceptions of meaningfulness in diverse industries. The literature suggest that relational, individual, structural, and ecological factors influence young people's future orientations (Seigner, 2009). Such components could be at play in YES participants' summer work experiences. The diversity of industries that fell within the *agree* band on the meaningfulness and future orientation scales highlights the need for further understanding.

Implications

This study's findings are relevant both for the research community and for practitioners in youth employment contexts. The field needs more qualitative data on meaningfulness and future orientation, especially for younger youth of color. Specifically, future research should focus on developing a framework to understand how 14- to 17-year-olds make meaning from their work experiences. Furthermore, research could delve into what makes specific work experiences meaningful or enables them to foster future orientation in young workers. For example, if other studies show that work in government or STEM tends to be meaningful to young people, researchers could look more deeply into the young workers' experiences to determine what elements could be replicated in other work sectors.

The field also needs evidence about future orientation in work placements. Perhaps researchers can discover ways in which worksites can intentionally build in components where youth reflect on the experience and think about their futures. Such reflection may not occur by happenstance but only through purposeful planning.

One implication for practice is that practitioners must be intentional in developing summer youth employment programs that are meaningful and build participants' future orientations. Younger participants particularly, as first-time employees, must initially gain exposure to work experiences that foster and build their curiosity. Summer employment programs are designed to curate participants' learning experiences; practitioners should frame summer work experiences to integrate career exploration and long-term interest development, helping participants understand how early work experiences relate to future careers. For example, they can design programs to engage youth in career assessments, career mentorship, and project-based activities to elicit future opportunities. When possible, practitioners should engineer work experiences that align with participants' future goals.

Conclusion

Participants in the YES Summer Learn and Earn program engaged in experiences that developed skills to support their academic and job-related interests and their competence in research and work skills. They also gained connection to adults who helped them develop and refine their career interests. The summer work experiences supported development of human and cultural capital by giving YES participants opportunities to develop soft and hard skills they can carry over into work contexts. Additionally, by providing work experiences that were meaningful and important, YES helped participants develop their confidence in professional spaces and their ability to acquire the future they dream of. Furthermore, participants engaged in mentorship relationships with YES staff, which provided access to social capital. The connections they built with mentors exposed them to various career pathways and different ways to think about the world. Taken together, participants' experiences in YES' Summer Learn and Earn program enabled them to develop critical skills, knowledge, and beliefs that will continue to support them long after they receive their final YES paycheck.

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Critical Black Feminist Mentoring

A Framework for Making Black Girls' Lives Matter

Dyann C. Logwood

In the wake of current sociopolitical movements, research on the lives of Black girls and women is gaining momentum. However, studies providing Black girls space to voice their experiences within learning and afterschool environments remain a crucial—and often ignored—component of this conversation. Such conversations provide Black girls with the opportunity to counter dominant negative and stereotypical narratives, to define what Black girlhood looks and feels like, and to become leaders and agents for change. Research centered on Black girls is useful for enhancing afterschool programs and school curricula and for providing insight into the emotional struggles Black girls continue to face within and beyond their learning environments. Research exists exploring the significance of mentoring programs that center culture and identity in the lives of Black girls (Weiston-Serdon, 2017), but a need remains for the examination of intersectional identity, experiences of oppression, and tactics to combat oppressive forces through the programming and practices of mentor programs.

This study had three primary objectives. The first was to identify ways mentoring programs provide participants with a safe space to tell their stories—shifting traditional hierarchies of power that often place Black girls on the lowest rung by exploring the role of dialogue within program activities. The second was to examine a mentor initiative that directly engages with middle school Black girls where they spend most of their time: at school. The third was to offer counternarratives opposing the one-dimensional depictions of Black girls in middle school that shape public discourse. I hoped to elicit

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these counternarratives using dialogue, consciousness-raising based on the program curriculum, and steps to create change. The counternarratives highlighted the intersections of race, class, and gender and the ways in which Black girls are required to navigate the minefield of hazards associated with an intersectional existence.

Afterschool mentorship programs are one intervention that can provide Black girls with the opportunity to interact with people who want to listen to, support, and guide them through the various stages of their personal development. This article explores the multidimensional and intersectional experiences of Black girls as they relate to schooling; narratives of resistance; and curricula, programs, and initiatives that center Black girls.

Critical Black Feminist Mentorship: Centering Black Girls' Voices

In reflecting on the creation of theory in communities shared by Black women, Black feminist theorist bell hooks (1994) expressed that shared lived experiences of Black women are linked to processes of "self-recovery, of collective liberation" (p. 61) and fulfill the function of empowerment and freedom—when the goals are to transform and empower. Thus, a theory that is intentional about centering the specific experiences of Black girls was necessary in examining the mentorship model that is the subject of this study.

On completing the study's analysis, I saw that concepts related to Black feminist pedagogy, Black feminist thought, and critical mentorship were significant components but were not sufficient as individual theories to account for the findings. Thus, creating a critical Black feminist mentoring theory was necessary. Critical Black feminist mentoring combines the components of all three theories and adds to literature on critical mentorship and Black feminist epistemologies and practices. Additionally, components of the theory are similar to what Huff (2019) advances on intersectional identity development and perspectives on an ethic of care. Huff (2019) theorizes that those who mentor Black girls must have an understanding of the components of social identity fostered by the individual, culture, and community to effectively support adolescent Black girl development. Similarly, mentorship with Black girls demonstrates a capacity to encourage sisterhood, which can lead to solidarity through the use of dialogue and intentional support, thereby creating spaces where Black girls can freely develop their individual and collective voices (Brown, 2009; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011). Within these free spaces, Black girls are given opportunities to counter toxic and stereotypical ideas about Black girlhood. Dialogue can serve as an opportunity for Black girls to develop their voices and intergenerational relationships—relationships that can lead to the positive development of Black girls (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011). "To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries" (hooks, 1994, p. 130). Finally, Huff (2019) suggests that critical mentorship with Black girls encourages consciousness-raising through intentional activities and dialogue, as well as activities that happen organically. These opportunities have the ability to teach Black girls to resist varying forms of oppression.

Furthermore, critical Black feminist mentoring builds on Huff's work (2019) by emphasizing the importance of mentors understanding intersectional identity development and the significance of mentorship grounded in a Black feminist ethic of care (Collins, 2000). Intersectionality provides an opportunity to connect identity to historical, social, cultural, and political systems in a way that heightens the girls' and researchers' understanding of Black girlhood. It also provides an understanding of the injustices and inequities that must be resisted through consciousness-raising and activist work. A Black feminist ethic of care causes an understanding of the importance of connection as a means of survival and humanization. In White patriarchal and capitalist societies and social institutions, engaging and reciprocal care is not seen as significant and is often questioned as unethical and unprofessional; however, mentorship with Black girls necessitates this type of care and understands it as an act of resistance.

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Critical Black feminist mentoring is a useful model in countering the deleterious experiences adolescent Black girls have in formal educational spaces. It combines components of Black feminist pedagogy, Black feminist thought, and critical mentorship as outlined in Table 1.

Methods

Because the primary goal of this study was to understand the experiences of Black adolescent girls in middle school—and to assess their understanding of those experiences—a qualitative approach was employed that used phenomenological interviewing techniques and ethnographic observations of one university-community collaborative mentorship program in the 2016–2017 school year. When working with multiple methods, researchers have a responsibility to engage in reflexive practices as a means of understanding how their own experiences are both similar to and different from those of participants in the research (Hemming, 2008). To remain attentive to researcher positionality and potential biases, I meticulously maintained a personal journal and field notes throughout the process. Additionally, an ethic of care was utilized throughout the study to promote self-reflection and mindfulness in shaping how the information was collected, so that shared (or similar) experiences would not silence participants' voices within the research (Pratt-Clarke, 2010). Amplifying Black girls' voices and providing them with the space to write their own scripts and narrate their experiences in middle school was a primary concern in the study. I understood the girls in this study to be the experts of their own experiences; therefore, they were asked to tell the stories of middle school life that were of supreme importance to them.

Participants

Participants in this study were 11 Black public middle school girls (grades 6–8, ages 12–14) enrolled in an afterschool program partnered with a mentor program coordinated by Eastern Michigan University. The afterschool program staff informed the Black girls in the program of an opportunity to participate in a research study. Those who were interested attended an information session with me; 11 of the 14 girls in attendance expressed interest in participating in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Project BIG is a university-sponsored afterschool program that meets once per week. This mentoring initiative is a partnership between a university, a community middle school, and an on-site academic support program. University students enroll in a mentoring course that meets twice weekly and uses a critical Black feminist and intersectional curriculum. The course also provides ongoing training to prepare a diverse cohort of students to create and run project-based activities at the middle school that meet state-required social-emotional learning and project-based learning (activities fostering empathy, creativity, initiative, and reflection) outcomes for afterschool programs. Students in the course are encouraged to think critically about the socialization of young people and the potential for personal and social change through mentoring and academic service learning. Project BIG's curriculum is one of the significant ways middle school girls

Table 1. Critical Black Feminist Mentoring Connections and Sources

Component of Critical Black Feminist Mentoring	Connections and Sources
Intersectional identity development	Black feminist pedagogy (Huff, 2019), Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000)
An ethic of care (Noddings, 2002) that creates safe spaces offering dialogue and counternarratives	Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), critical mentoring (Huff, 2019)
Intergenerational relationships showing the importance of connection as a means of survival and humanization	Black feminist thought (hooks, 1994), critical mentoring (Huff, 2019)
Consciousness raising, empowerment, strategies for resisting oppression, community building, and sisterhood	Black feminist thought (hooks, 1984), critical mentoring (Weiston-Serdan, 2017; see also Huff, 2019)

can develop their leadership and social-emotional skills, and femtors serve as positive college role models Project BIG participants can emulate. (This study uses the terms *mentee* and *femtee* interchangeably, as well as *mentor* and *femtor*—with the understanding that femtors are university student mentors trained in culturally responsive, intersectional, feminist mentorship models.) Although the number of university students fluctuates semester to semester, the femtors are able to continue their mentorship work after completing the course and act as leaders for incoming cohorts in subsequent semesters.

I am a Black woman who created the curriculum for the mentor program and acted as an observer during the mentor training process and sessions with the mentees. I conducted two semi-structured interviews, ranging from 30 to 90 minutes, with 11 participants. Consent to participate in the study was granted by school administrative staff and parents or guardians, and the girls assented before the interviews began. Interviews were conducted in comfortable, private rooms during lunch or afterschool program activities. Open-ended questions were utilized, and follow-up questions were developed based on participants' responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

To analyze the data, I used NVivo software and the word frequency function in Microsoft Word to code the transcripts and notes from the interviews to determine the most prominent topics or issues discussed. Several common themes emerged from analysis of the interview data. Prominent in the participant narratives were discussions of the interactions between the femtees and femtors, the ethic of care in mentoring, femtee–femtor relationships, and voice—or lack thereof—within the school environment. In addition to discussing the complexities of their experiences with bullying, microaggressions, and in-school violence, the participants spoke of the significance of a model such as critical Black feminist mentoring. Additionally, through participant observation and feedback, the girls in the program were able to inform the application of critical Black feminist mentoring.

Results

Intersectional Identity Development

Mentorship without a focus on the intersections of identity and experiences with intersectional oppression fails to address the many challenges faced by marginalized adolescents (Weiston-Serdon, 2017). Thus, opportunities to support positive racial, gender, class, and general social identity development of Black girls are imperative. Activities in the program, such as dialogue circles, encouraged personal and group reflection and discussion about stereotypical perceptions and treatment due to ideas of beauty, race, and gender, as well as about how the girls saw themselves fitting within those definitions. Ultimately, the goal was to promote a positive body image and self-concept as they related to participants' identities as girls. The girls in this study shared several statements that addressed the support provided through the program as a whole and specifically by the femtors; this support also fostered an empowered form of identity development.

During one dialogue circle, I observed a balance between participants who were insecure because of being teased about their skin tone and hair texture and those who demanded that all mentees be confident in their race and proud of their beautiful ethnic features. For example, "Justine" (all names are pseudonyms), who has struggled with bullying due to her legally blind status, questioned the idea that someone would be insecure about their skin tone and race: "You are beautiful the way you are. Why are you insecure about your own color and your race?" By contrast, Shia discussed the stereotypes in society and in school about Black girls and academic success: "They say, 'Black kids don't care about their education' or 'They're stupid.' … I made honor roll for first quarter, second quarter, first semester, and second semester so far." Shia further shared she felt comfortable because her femtor supported her when they had opportunities to discuss Shia's personal experiences. She emphasized that one of her femtors even met her mother; femtee and femtor were able to share experiences outside the program. This sharing further increased her comfort with the femtor—both inside and outside the program. Building comfort in this relationship was easier due to the shared identity of the femtee and the femtor. Girls and women need mentors who are of the same racial identity and can share lived experiences and similar struggles, as these affirming opportunities promote academic, social, and cultural success (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011).

Development of Individual Voice

The opportunities for sharing during the dialogue circles in the program and during individual sessions outside the program increased the girls' ability to

share hurtful, as well as joyful, experiences. Critical mentoring emphasizes the importance of supporting this type of sharing as a means of developing a collective understanding. For Black girls, because of their experiences of being silenced and victimized in formal educational settings, mentoring spaces are perhaps one of the only places that allow them to develop their individual voices. Black girls need people in their lives who will encourage them and create opportunities for them to develop and share their stories (Brown, 2009). The girls in this study illustrated how the program provided these opportunities. Shia said the program gave her a chance to speak in a way that was authentic to her: "I was always able to say what I felt and share ideas. It made me feel good: like I was important and that I mattered." Similarly, Tracey alluded to her ability to be open in the program and said that this ability created a sense of belongingness for her: "It made me feel like I could talk about stuff and not be scared about it.… It makes me feel wanted, that I have someone on the Earth who actually cares about me." The mentoring space gave Tracey an opportunity to disclose her experiences and views without being judged; it provided her with the company and support of other Black girls and women. The creation of opportunities to use their voices to describe experiences, to resist poor treatment, and to support each other leads to agency among Black girls.

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Agency is central to the sustainability of Project BIG, which has featured opportunities for the femtees and femtors to shape the future of the program since its inception. During sessions, femtees and femtors often have opportunities to propose and facilitate activities if a preplanned activity is not working or if the session is disrupted due to circumstances during the school day. During one observation, this process occurred organically after a particularly rough day at the middle school. The mentees arrived to the session with low energy; many of them remained quiet as the activity began. One of the more active students in the program stated there had been a lot of drama during school that day. She then asked one of the femtors to play some music to cheer people up. The planned activity required each person to take a section of a banner to draw pictures and cut words and pictures out of magazines to describe how they would address various forms of injustice. Some of the students worked quietly with their femtors, coming up with a couple of ideas to address injustice. One of the students stated she should write a play and include everyone's ideas. This suggestion modified the guidelines for the banner activity, but it provided each student with the opportunity to share their ideas and enabled everyone to work together to design the play. During the session, more femtees began to request songs, and the activity grew into a community-building session in which everyone had an opportunity to share their ideas to address racism, sexism, ageism, and other forms of oppression. The success of the banner activity informed future sessions led by the femtors, who began to incorporate listening to radio-edited hip-hop, pop, and rhythm and blues into many of their sessions. This activity highlighted the importance of merging creative opportunities with traditional activities and of preparing femtors to accept changes to sessions when the needs of the femtees take priority over scheduled activities.

Opportunities for mentee contributions are a normal part of the mentor program. Mentees provide feedback at the end of each session, reflecting on what went well and what they would change. This feedback informs how the mentors shape upcoming sessions and provides the mentees with a sense of purpose and ownership within the mentor program. Youth participatory action research and a critical Black feminist mentoring model promise to intentionally build upon the voices and agency of the girls in the program. Youth participatory action research as a method of observation and analysis works with youth, in this case the Black girls in the program, as a means of engaging in a collaborative process of critiquing various aspects of the program and developing counternarratives to otherwise deficit-based responses to violence and trauma. By empowering the girls to lead activities in the face of hurtful acts and share their knowledge with educational administrators and program coordi-

nators, the program enabled the girls to see their lives in a larger context.

The feedback from the past few years of Project BIG has ultimately shaped the curriculum and changed the organization of femtor and femtee relationships from a formal pairing to an organic experience. Overall, the opportunities for individual and collective voice, as well as agency within the program, cannot be analyzed in a silo, but instead must be understood as part of a larger dedication to solidarity based upon shared experience and an ethic of care.

Community Building: Solidarity and an Ethic of Care

A critical Black feminist mentoring model fosters the development of sisterhood and notions of solidarity, using an ethnic of care (Collins, 2000) as a means of building that solidarity. The girls in this study spoke to these ideas more frequently than any other component of the framework. Pia described her relationships with the femtors and how they encouraged her to build friendships with other girls in the program: "They put you in different groups with different people you normally don't hang out with, so you got to work together as a team.... It is fun because I get to express my feelings."

As carers, the femtors held the responsibility of supporting the girls in the program by sharing stories of solidarity and modeling how to navigate society and the communities in which they belong. Caring also looks like sharing personal experiences through dialogic opportunities (Collins, 2000); solidarity is fostered in the ability to connect through shared struggles. For example, Aritha shared, "[The dialogic opportunities] made me feel like other people had stuff, not just me. Like other people been bullied and had different [struggles] I didn't know they had." Additionally, Jazmine shared that the support of her femtors made her more self-confident: "It made me feel that I could do more than I thought." Jazmine's response is one example of the power in femtor support. She further described how her relationships with the femtors in the program encouraged her to succeed and pursue future choices:

> [The support of femtors] makes me feel like I can have somebody to rely on, and then when I actually succeed in what I want to do, I can go back and thank everybody for being there for me, when nobody else was.

What becomes clear is that solidarity should not be considered as separate from an ethic of care because together they demonstrate the power of the femtor–femtee relationships. The power of these relationships is evident even when it occurs during homework pep talks such as the one Kim described: "I was struggling in math, and then the one girl was, like, 'Just keep trying it and never give up,' and then I never gave up, and now I'm, like, really good at it." Part of the ethic of care from a Black feminist perspective is to demonstrate and act upon the idea of social responsibility (Collins, 2000). The femtors in this program demonstrated their ideas related to an obligation to serve as guides through conversations and encouragement. Tracey described an incident in which her femtor encouraged her through feelings of insecurity:

> When we played the games, sometimes I didn't want to play 'cause I felt like some of the people didn't like me, but the person that guided me through it, she was all nice about it, and she persuaded me to play the games.

Additionally, Jazmine shared that the support of her femtors made her more self-confident: "It made me feel that I could do more than I thought."

The femtor who assisted Tracey created a sense of belonging that encouraged her to participate during other sessions. This encouragement happened with other girls in the program, such as Pia, who described the comforting relationship she had with her femtor: "I feel like she connects with us, like she actually sits down and talks to you. She's, like, 'I went through this, too,' and I think that's what kind of got me close to her."

One of the significant aspects of the mentoring program was the development of supportive relationships between the femtees and the femtors that embodied a Black feminist ethic of care (Collins, 2000). These intergenerational relationships encouraged compassion for all involved participants and fostered a closeness the femtees perhaps had not felt in formal

educational spaces or often in their families and community. Additionally, these connections humanized the femtees' experiences, thus equipping them with survival strategies and support systems. The critical Black feminist mentoring model offered fluidity for the femtees to self-select different femtors in different situations, thus building solidarity and community.

Consciousness-Raising and Resistance

Finally, the critical Black feminist mentoring model presented opportunities to engage in dialogue and consciousness raising, which in turn equipped femtees with the skills necessary to transform their social worlds. During the program, the consciousness-raising and education were not always about historical forms of oppression; sometimes they were about confronting everyday microaggressions. Justine, for example, shared that the program provided space for her to feel better about herself: "They teach me not to be afraid and to stand up for myself and not watch others get bullied, which I hate seeing." Other opportunities for consciousness-raising and resistance were found in the activities associated with the curriculum dealing with the history of women and people of color. Jazmine described one such activity:

> We did some research on history, Black history, mainly female history. And then we drew a picture of ourselves and wrote under it how pretty we were and other [affirmations].… It made me feel good 'cause it was, like, when I don't look in the mirror I can look at that picture and see a bunch of stuff that *I am* instead of saying I'm not pretty and stuff like that.

Jazmine further explained that she was able to resist by taking action: "It's not that I'm [inferior] or anything; [the program] showed me … I have the choice to do more if I want to." Critical mentoring and critical Black feminist mentoring are designed to incite possibilities that move beyond the status quo (Wieston-Serdan, 2017). Tracey also brought up her experiences with the curriculum and its role in teaching her and her peers about histories of oppression; this learning led her to a heightened consciousness and the ability to critique the history traditionally taught to children:

> We learned ... how a long time ago, we were in slavery and the White people had more power.… There's a couple of other [rights] Black people didn't have.… I was wondering, why does our skin even matter? Like ... you know how Obama is Black and everybody thinks all the racism is gone and stuff, when it's really not.

The mentorship program helped the participants critically analyze topics often ignored in formal educational spaces and gave them opportunities to engage in difficult conversations that often led to a critical awareness of the political state around them. The discussions of these topics encouraged an understanding of the connection between historical forms of oppression and the present-day experiences of the girls. The realization that their current circumstances are deeply connected to the concerns of the past was a point of deepening awareness, which led to a desire to create change for themselves now and in the future.

Discussion

The girls' narratives disclosed experiences that demonstrated confidence in the face of bullying, microaggressions, and fighting in educational settings. The reflections about their experiences within Project BIG and their feedback about the success of the program, as well as the observations during their interactions with femtors and site leaders—interactions that were heavily influenced by the training of the femtors—all demonstrated the significance of utilizing a critical Black feminist mentoring framework to shape the curricula of mentoring programs involving Black girls.

Furthermore, the girls' reflections demonstrated the impact their relationships with the femtors had on the persistence and efficacy of the femtees. Similarly, the data collected demonstrated the significance of a mentorship model and program supporting the intersectional experiences of Black adolescent girls; the fostering of sisterhood, solidarity, and care of those serving and participating in the program; the creation of space for their authentic voices; and the opportunity to increase consciousness that leads to advocacy and action. The impact of the program and the benefits of femtor–femtee relationships are evident throughout the participants' reflections on and assessment of the program.

Implications

Efforts are needed to redefine how schools and society at large view Black girls. Throughout their lives, Black girls' identities and overall development are influenced by educational, familial, and societal factors. Many

normative ideas of development push Black girls into prescribed gender roles from the moment they are born; these roles are often in direct conflict with their own views of and expectations for themselves. Teachers, parents, and community members often encourage young Black girls who are otherwise confident and outspoken to be silent and "ladylike." The inclusion of Black feminist theory gives Black girls the space necessary to disrupt traditional notions of ladylike behaviors, which have been historically grounded in notions of White women's purity and chastity (Giddings, 1984; Sanders & Bradley, 2005). Forcing Black girls to conform to traditional definitions of gender roles places them in opposition to teachers, who are often unaware of their biases, and places these students on a path that jeopardizes their academic performance and future success (Morris, 2007).

Programs like Project BIG focus on intentional relationship building as well as the recognition of students' individual strengths, skills, and talents. Such programs offer students an alternative means of obtaining an education and provide them with a break from traditional methods of learning, thus increasing their ability to imagine a wider variety of future successes and possibilities for themselves (Neuman, 2010). These programs also place Black girls in a position to become a support system for their peers, improving their relationships with each other and thus creating counternarratives that stand in direct opposition to bullying cultures.

Additionally, it is important to illuminate and validate a variety of experiences to tell stories that disrupt the prevailing negative depictions of Black adolescent girls and youth culture. Black adolescent girls are a product of their total environment. How they experience that environment, filtered through multiple identities, impacts how they develop throughout their life cycle. More studies considering the intersectional perspectives associated with the adolescent development of Black girls, as well as varying modes for adolescent support and growth, are needed. Research discussing the relationships among educational institutions, families, and communities is central to the development of adolescent girls and can assist in creating and maintaining educational practices and policies that center the experiences and voices of Black adolescent girls.

The following are some considerations for educators and school administrators to support Black girls and other underserved student populations:

- Support marginalized students by implementing critical and Black feminist perspectives into staff training and middle school curricula
- Create and facilitate opportunities for a symbiotic relationship among afterschool programs, social workers, and schools with wraparound services benefiting the whole student
- Hire staff who reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the student population
- Include students in the creation of programs and trainings for teachers and staff and of programs for students
- Provide quality professional development grounded in theories promoting equity, social justice, and understanding for teachers, administrators, and staff

Critical Black feminist connections, practices, and programs are one way to nurture broken communities while improving the efficacy of the educational system as a means of overcoming the many barriers to success faced by Black girls and other marginalized youth.

Consistent and effective critical Black feminist mentoring, which provides a bridge among individuals, communities, and society, can be the framework used to inform these considerations. Critical Black feminist mentoring supports relationships that consider the intersectional experiences of Black girls and other marginalized youth, as well as the need for care-centered relationships. Critical Black feminist connections, practices, and programs are one way to nurture broken communities while improving the efficacy of the educational system as a means of overcoming the many barriers to success faced by Black girls and other marginalized youth.

Conclusion

Research on culturally responsive, inclusive afterschool programming exists because stakeholders, including researchers, students, parents, socially conscious schools, and community organizations, demand spaces of inclusion (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; Simpkins et al., 2017). These spaces ensure

the full recognition of the identities, conversations, relationships, knowledge, and activism of Black girls. The spaces counter stereotypically acceptable notions of girlhood that tend to use Whiteness as the guide. However, more spaces are needed to promote positive experiences and analyze inequitable attitudes, behaviors, and policies. Opportunities that center the complex experiences of Black girls and help them to navigate the world around them are necessary.

As demonstrated in this study, mentorship following a framework that is understanding of the intersectional identities and development of Black girls can continue to demonstrate that Black girls are indeed magic, unique, and worthy. Project BIG employed opportunities for identity development, dialogue, interpersonal relationship building, consciousness raising, and action. The project is a formal program, but leaders must devise a plan to create and implement programs that follow similar tenets in educational spaces, communities, workplaces, and the global society. Doing so encourages more adolescent Black girls and Black women in general to learn effective strategies to challenge the cultural and social norms that uphold silence as the norm by enabling them to engage in dialogue and activism. Ultimately, through a critical Black feminist mentoring model, Black girls and women can use their voices in ways that are progressively empowering without penalty, censure, or psychological distress.

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A New Challenge for Summer Interns: Behavior Management

Researcher's Notebook

Shannon Macalingay

As part of NIOST's work with summer learning programs in Massachusetts, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 youth interns working in five summer program sites across the state. Sites were grantees of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, which is managed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Youth interns, who were high school students, generally worked six to eight hours a day for five to seven weeks of the summer. Their motives for participating in a summer intern program included the opportunity to explore a career pathway in out-of-school time (OST), youth development, or education and to improve general employment skills and knowledge in a paid summer job. Interns had myriad responsibilities. They led small groups of children in activities such as arts, reading, math, science, and technology; co-planned activity plans with teacher mentors; managed children during informal social times; and supervised snacks, meals, and outdoor play.

One area that was particularly challenging for interns was behavior management. In analyzing interview transcripts, we grouped discussion on this topic into three themes: personal connections, professional development, and the aid of teacher mentors.

Personal Connections

Several interns reported that establishing personal connections with a child can set the foundation for

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a better approach to managing behavior. For example, interns would connect with children about their neighborhood or discover a common hobby, sport, or music preference.

Some interns mentioned that sometimes they built connections using a strong "intuitive" feeling they had from being an older sibling or from a previous background in other OST or childcare programs. One intern said that their experience as an older sibling enhanced their ability to teach children how to express their emotions in constructive ways. Another intern explained that they worked to project themself as a person "you know you can come to if you need anything."

Securing connections through personal conversations during activities and free social times helped the interns unpack some of the causes underlying a child's behavior. Then they could move forward feeling they could, as one put it, "handle certain situations" with confidence.

Professional Development

All five summer programs provided specialized training for interns and often invited interns into professional development offered to teaching staff. Most programs' intern training was held the week before the program started; sessions focused on professional skills such as conflict resolution, lesson planning, public speaking, multitasking, and community building. The workshops discussed how to apply these skills to common scenarios the interns would encounter while working with children.

One intern explained that developing a "teacher-like mindset" was an essential strategy for managing behavior. This intern described that mindset as including the establishment of base rules that children can incorporate into their daily routine. Setting boundaries that all children can follow is an important first step toward creating lasting habits and a supportive and predictable program environment.

Teacher Mentors

Interns took full advantage of the teacher mentors in their program, working closely with these mentors to pick up tips and advice they could apply to the situations they faced in daily programming. They cited approaches to positive behavior and engagement such as connecting with a child's favorite teacher to share strategies, identifying meaningful rewards that could spark self-regulation, and generally adding flexibility into their work with children. One intern noticed that devising flexible daily activity plans made it easier to add children's ideas and interests into an activity. Such adaptations raised the level of fun while creating a focused learning experience for all.

Interns benefited from observing as well as listening to mentors. One intern explained, "I actually imitated my mentors because I saw them dealing with the same thing…. [It] turned out to be working pretty well. Watching them makes a lot more sense than just letting them explain to you."

How Interns Learned About Behavior Management

Investing in interns for summer learning programs can be a valuable strategy for growing staff numbers, enhancing connections with children in the program, and providing a first employment experience for local teens. Almost inevitably, young workers struggle with the challenge of behavior management. The interns we interviewed said that creating personal connections with children, using the skills they learned from pre-program professional development, and being receptive to the advice of seasoned teacher mentors helped them create the toolbox they needed for a successful summer program internship.

Interns took full advantage of the teacher mentors in their program, working closely with these mentors to pick up tips and advice they could apply to the situations they faced in daily programming.

NEW FROM NIOST

Children's Perspectives on Literacy Skill-Building Activities in OST Programs

Researcher's Notebook

Greer Marshall

In 2019, NIOST began working on the Philadelphia Out-of-School Time Literacy and Quality Improvement Initiative (OSTLit), which continued through December 2023. During these four years, with funding from the William Penn Foundation, NIOST trained program leaders and staff at 10 Philadelphia afterschool programs to facilitate literacy skill-building experiences for elementary school aged children. NIOST investigated the impacts of this support by observing program practices and interviewing program staff.

In addition, to understand OSTLit's impact on participants, NIOST researchers conducted three focus groups, each consisting of three to seven children who had attended one of the afterschool programs for at least one year. The participants, who were selected by program staff, were mostly second- and third-graders. Researchers facilitated conversations designed to elicit children's perspectives on three key questions:

- What literacy skill-building activities did they experience in their afterschool programs?
- In what ways did their participation in these activities impact them?
- How did the literacy skill-building activities differ from their experiences in school?

Literacy Skill-Building Activities

In all three focus groups, children conversed about activities that involved independent reading, reading aloud, and writing stories. Children in two of

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the three groups reported both reading aloud to a friend and reading aloud to the class. Two participants in one group also mentioned reading aloud to an instructor as a regular activity. Writing stories and journaling were common activities mentioned in all three focus groups. Collaborative writing and word games were mentioned by multiple children in two focus groups.

In each focus group, children expressed that their afterschool program's literacy skill-building activities were often enjoyable and exciting. They preferred literacy activities that allowed them to be playful and creative. Games such as word searches and vocabulary guessing games were particularly popular among participants in two of the three focus groups. One participant explained, "We did a spelling bee and everybody … was so excited because that's the game that everybody loves to play." Children in all three focus groups mentioned that anything involving peer collaboration, such as reading aloud with a partner or writing a book with the whole class, were the most favorite activities.

Children in all three focus groups mentioned that anything involving peer collaboration, such as reading aloud with a partner or writing a book with the whole class, were the most favorite activities.

Another key characteristic of "fun" literacy skill building was room for choice and creativity. Children in one focus group concurred that journal writing was enjoyable because they had the freedom to write about a wide range of subjects and feelings. One participant explained how journaling meant "you can write any story you want, like a friendship story, a sad story, a happy story, or a silly story." Another participant elaborated, saying that writing after school was different from writing during school, because "in school … right now we aren't writing fiction stories, so [after school] we get a chance to write made-up fantasy."

Moreover, participants' anecdotes about their journals indicated that they were working on a variety of skills. One used their journal to make observations: "I make maps of the room.... I write about the maps and write about what the room looks like." Another described collaborative writing: "Some days me and [my friend] will write in our journals, and we'll make a story that's six pages.… Our stories are connected."

Impacts of Literacy Skill-Building Activities

In all three focus groups, children were proud to share that their literacy skills were getting better over time. In one group, two participants described how their writing skills improved as a result of journaling after school. One explained how journaling generally "helps you with writing" because it is an opportunity to practice "making more stories and being more creative." The other participant added that journaling had helped them use correct spelling and grammar in school writing assignments. Similarly, in another focus group, a participant credited their improving grades to their participation in the afterschool activities:

> In school, we learn a lot with our teachers, but also this [afterschool program] has been a very big help for me.… When I got to this school, I went in the program, and my mom said that my grades have been going up a lot.

Children expressed a sense of accomplishment at having mastered literacy skills and were proud of the amount of time and work they had devoted to this mastery. One child exclaimed, "I literally read every single day!" Children in all three focus groups brought up their enjoyment of literacy-oriented project-based learning that resulted in a product, such as a book in which each student wrote a page or a collaborative "word wall" placed in the hall outside the classroom.

A Different Way of Reading

Children experienced reading in their afterschool program as different from reading at school, describing a more relaxed and social environment. One participant explained that, although they were "bored" by reading and writing for "practice," they were excited to be part of a "special activity, and it's something cool, and we celebrate it."

In two of the three focus groups, children mentioned that their afterschool programs allowed them to read alongside or in collaboration with friends who were not in their class at school. One child explained

that being with these friends in a relaxed, familiar setting allowed them to have more fun while reading:

> When you're with your friends you feel more comfortable reading.… I'm not trying to say that we don't have friends in school, but I feel more comfortable here [at the afterschool program] because the activities are more fun and also some of us have been here for three years.

According to another child, reading was a way to make new friends and strengthen friendships: "If you read to somebody, then you become friends, and then when they read to you, that's just called *good friends*."

Focus Group Insights

Findings from the focus groups demonstrate that children were excited about the ways in which their afterschool programs facilitated literacy skill-building activities. This message is consistent with outcomes reported in the NIOST research brief on OSTLit. According to pre–post program observations, the variety and frequency of literacy skill-building activities offered in afterschool programs increased after staff members received training and support. Children were observed engaging significantly more with light-touch literacy practices, such as sharing their writing with peers and conversing about books they had read. In interviews, staff members discussed key benefits of OSTLit interventions, including their increased confidence in teaching literacy and children's increased engagement in and enthusiasm about literacy. These focus group results should further encourage program leaders and staff members to be confident and enthusiastic about creating a literacy-rich afterschool environment for children through the intentional integration of playful and interactive literacy activities.