

Qualities That Attract Urban Youth to After-School Settings and Promote Continued Participation

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Background/Context: Studies carried out over the last two decades have established structured after-school programs as significant contexts for adolescent development. Recent large-scale evaluations of after-school initiatives have yielded mixed results, finding some impact on adolescents' attitudes toward school but limited impact on their academic performance. One clear conclusion of these studies, however, is that it matters how often and for how long young people spend time in after-school settings.

Purpose/Research Question: This study describes the features of after-school settings that are most appealing and engaging to youth growing up in low-income communities.

Setting: Analyses focus on a network of five after-school centers that serve predominantly racial and cultural minority youth living in low-income urban neighborhoods.

Participants: Participants in the study include 120 youth who varied in their frequency of participation in the after-school centers. Of these participants, 20 were in elementary school, 76 were in middle school, and 24 were in high school. Forty-two percent identified themselves as Asian American, 22% as African American, 13% as Latino/Latina, 7% as European American, and 5% as Filipino, and 10% were categorized as "other" or "unknown."

Research Design: *This study is a qualitative investigation geared toward understanding young people's subjective experiences and meaning making. Data are drawn principally from focus groups and individual interviews with participants over a 2-year period and supplemented with field work conducted by a team of trained youth ethnographers.*

Findings: *Our analysis of these data points to three features of the youth centers that youth identified as valuable: supportive relationships with adults and peers; safety; and opportunities to learn. Results highlight the meaning and significance youth ascribed to each feature, while also underlining the important function that centers with these features play in adolescent development.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *After-school settings have the potential to serve as a unique developmental niche by meeting needs that are not consistently met in other contexts. Young people's descriptions of supports and opportunities also underscore the interrelationships among the positive features they perceived. Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are encouraged to recognize after-school programs as core contexts of development that should be assessed according to the full spectrum of adolescents' developmental needs.*

After-school hours have long been recognized as critical opportunities for adolescent development (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). The call to engage youth in productive, prosocial activities after school has been met with a proliferation of programs and community centers. In recent years, these after-school settings have been supported by substantial increases in federal, state, and private funding (Kane, 2004; Pittman, Tolman, & Yohalem, 2005). Because of this increased recognition of and funding for after-school initiatives, practitioners, researchers, and policy makers need to better understand the qualities of after-school programming that make them effective and engaging.

Recent large-scale evaluations of after-school initiatives have yielded mixed results, finding some positive impact on adolescents' attitudes toward school but limited impact on their academic performance (Granger & Kane, 2004). One clear conclusion of these studies, however, was the significance of participants' frequency and duration of attendance. It matters how often and for how long young people spend time in after-school settings. As Kane (2004) explained in his review of these large-scale evaluations, "No program can make a difference if it does not change the daily experiences of youth and it cannot do that if attendance is poor" (p. 2). Although this conclusion may not surprise practitioners, it underscores the importance of knowing what aspects of after-school settings young people find engaging. In this study, we draw on qualitative research in a network of five urban after-school centers to understand the experiences of adolescent participants. Building on research that has

established structured after-school programs as significant contexts for adolescent development, we explore young people's own ideas about the developmental supports and benefits in these settings. We hope that in doing so, the voices of young people themselves can inform policy discussions and future research on quality and value in after-school centers.

THE AFTER-SCHOOL CENTER AS DEVELOPMENTAL NICHE

Researchers have documented the academic, social, and emotional changes that many adolescents endure as they transition out of elementary school into middle school and high school (Eccles et al., 1993; Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987). At the moment that adolescents need supportive relationships, opportunities for autonomy and choice, and a sense of competence in their dealings with the world, many secondary schools offer precisely the opposite characteristics. Eccles and her colleagues have described this lack of alignment between the context and the individual as a mismatch in "stage-environment fit." Academic efficacy and achievement suffer when students lack supportive relationships with teachers, have fewer choices in their school work, and are subject to public comparison with their peers regarding academic achievement (Eccles et al.; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Urban public schools in particular have been singled out as places that are often too large, anonymous, and lacking in opportunities for meaningful connections between teachers and students (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002; Fine, 1986).

Given this divergence between the environment created in many schools and adolescents' developmental needs, researchers have noted the potential value of after-school centers as alternative developmental contexts. Noam and his colleagues described after-school settings as "intermediary spaces" in which adolescents have safe places to experiment, form an identity, make choices, and resolve crises (Noam & Tillinger, 2004). According to Noam and Tillinger, the term *intermediary* captures the bridging role that after-school programs can play for adolescents as they navigate different worlds of school, family, and neighborhood. Similarly, Deutsch and Hirsch's (2002) research on urban Boys & Girls Clubs revealed that youth viewed these after-school programs as alternative contexts of development. Specifically, youth thought of their Boys & Girls Clubs as "home-places" characterized by supportive, family-like relationships that provided a distinct space for identity development (Deutsch & Hirsch).

In this sense, it may be useful to think of the after-school setting as comprising a unique developmental niche characterized by particular

routines and beliefs that nurture development in adolescence (Super & Harkness, 1986). According to Super and Harkness, the niche shapes children's developmental pathways while also being responsive to their maturing capacities for responsibility and autonomy. Conceptualizing the after-school setting as a developmental niche directs attention to these settings as core contexts rather than supplemental contexts of development.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

With the need for and the existence of these after-school contexts becoming well publicized, researchers have begun to document outcomes associated with participation. Of central interest to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are achievement-related benefits that result from involvement in after-school programs. Studies carried out over the last two decades have reported contradictory results. In some studies, youth reported fewer school absences and improved academic performance after participating in after-school programs (e.g., Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003). However, evaluations of four multisite after-school initiatives, as reviewed by Kane (2004), reported limited impact on youth achievement outcomes. None of the evaluations, which included the 21st Century Learning Centers, New York City's After-School Corporation, and the San Francisco Beacon Initiative, reported a statistically significant impact on achievement test scores after 1 year of participation.

Detecting achievement gains over the course of 1 year of participation, however, is a nearly impossible task given the proportion of time that youth spend in after-school programs and the proportion of that time spent focusing on academically related skills (Kane, 2004). In addition, contradictory findings about program effects may be explained by variability among after-school programs that are studied. Some researchers target school-sponsored extracurricular programs, whereas others study school-based after-school programs or neighborhood-based community centers. These contexts each serve different populations of adolescents representing a wide range of prior experiences, family contexts, and dynamics at school. In addition, individual programs often define specific criteria for entry and specific goals of participation. For example, some school-based programs may require students to maintain a minimum grade point average to continue their involvement. Comparison samples and long-term longitudinal designs, therefore, are necessary to confidently isolate program effects.

Although evidence of powerful academic achievement effects is

limited, researchers have begun to document other outcomes associated with participation in after-school programs. For example, youth who participated consistently in well-run after-school programs reported greater engagement in learning and motivation to succeed in school (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Mahoney et al., 2003). Youth also reported higher self-esteem and improved emotional adjustment and interpersonal skills (Barber et al.; Gerstenblith et al., 2005; Mahoney, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000). Additionally, researchers have documented gains in adolescents' initiative, communication, leadership, and connections to community (Larson, 2000; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999).

Ethnographic research has also shed light on the positive "frames for identity" that community youth programs provide minority youth (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). Policy discussions often construct inner-city African American, Latino, and Asian American youth in terms of deficits, vulnerabilities, and even pathologies. But by engaging young people in publicly visible activities, such as the arts, sports, or social activism, effective programs help transform the kinds of public identities available to urban youth (Heath & McLaughlin; Kirshner, 2006). Such programs, staffed by adults with a deep awareness of the local social context, seek to reframe urban youth as resources for their schools and neighborhoods (Checkaway et al., 2003).

One finding that cuts across these various studies of after-school settings pertains to level and duration of participation. Young people benefit from their involvement in these programs when they are actively involved over a sustained period of time. Given that consistent and engaged participation is essential to realizing the benefits of after-school programming, researchers must capture what adolescents find appealing and what motivates them to maintain their involvement over time and in meaningful ways. Too often, however, the perspectives of youth themselves are missing from discussions about how after-school contexts should be organized. In this qualitative study, we set out to learn from young people participating in San Francisco Beacon Centers how they felt about their involvement in the program. This study was designed to complement a quasi-experimental evaluation designed by Public/Private Ventures. Drawing on focus groups, interviews, and youth ethnography, we feature young people's descriptions of what attracted them to the Beacons and what kept them there.

Our analysis focuses on three features of the Beacon Centers that were valuable to youth: supportive relationships with adults and peers; safety; and opportunities to learn. These themes that youth reported are well documented in the literature on adolescent development. With regard to relationships with adults, research has documented the critical role of a

nonfamilial, caring adult mentor in the lives of low-income youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). A caring relationship with a teacher also has been linked to students' engagement in and motivation to learn in school (Goodenow, 1993; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Friendships have been studied as a safe space for adolescent development as youth begin to develop new identities distinct from their childhood attachments (Brown, 1990; Way, 1998). A sense of safety and belonging has been associated with positive learning and developmental experiences (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Roeser et al., 1996). Finally, personally meaningful learning opportunities have been correlated with key learning outcomes, such as effort, intrinsic interest, and effective learning strategies (Ames, 1992; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998). Thus, prior research supports the assertion that youth perceptions of supports and opportunities promote attitudes and behaviors that steer adolescents toward increased achievement and adaptive academic and developmental outcomes.

Although each of these themes has been the subject of previous research, the youth in our study provide detailed examples of the ways in which the Beacons created these much-needed developmental supports and opportunities. More important, our analyses highlight how and why each of these features contributed to decisions regarding initial and continued participation. After an overview of the San Francisco Beacons Initiative and our methods for this study, we present Beacon participants' perspectives on the meaning and significance of their relationships with adults and peers, their sense of safety, and opportunities to learn. We conclude this article by discussing implications for researchers and practitioners.

SAN FRANCISCO BEACONS

The Beacon Centers in San Francisco¹ were introduced in 1994 as part of an initiative inspired by New York City's Beacons (discussed in Cahill, Perry, Wright, & Rice, 1993). The initiative had firm roots in principles that stress the need to consider learning in broad terms and keep the range of young people's developmental needs in view. Specifically, Beacon Centers were designed to offer youth a broad range of enrichment opportunities in five core areas: education, career development, arts and recreation, leadership, and health. Programming and site planning were grounded in the initiative's Theory of Change, which outlined long-term goals for youth participants, specific steps toward achieving those goals, and benchmarks along the way. Key strategies articulated in the Theory of Change included the creation of new developmental opportunities and experiences for youth through innovative program

choices and supportive interactions with qualified staff (see Walker & Arbreton, 2004, for more detailed discussion of the Theory of Change).

Between 1996 and 1998, the San Francisco Beacon Initiative launched five Beacon Centers serving five distinct neighborhoods within the city. School sites were selected within those neighborhoods to host the centers' staff and activities. All the Beacons were based in schools that served ethnically diverse, low-income, and immigrant populations. Four of the Beacon Centers had dedicated space at the school site. One center was located at an overcrowded middle school and, out of necessity, ran some programs off-site. Three of the centers were located at middle schools, one was housed in a high school, and one was housed in an elementary school.

BEACON CENTER PARTICIPANTS

The initiative sought to recruit low-income and academically at-risk populations of youth to the Beacon Centers. Based on analyses conducted for a larger scale, quasi-experimental evaluation of the San Francisco Beacons, the centers did indeed recruit their target population (Walker & Arbreton, 2004). Table 1 summarizes the demographic background of

Table 1. Demographic Summary of Beacon Youth Participants

	Beacon 1	Beacon 2	Beacon 3	Beacon 4	Beacon 5
Host school	Elementary	Middle	High	Middle	Middle
Number					
Daily average*	124	180	79	114	112
Total 6 months†	356	463	420	722	683
Grade level					
Elementary	81%	10%	2%	42%	22%
Middle school	11%	68%	31%	45%	63%
High school	8%	23%	68%	13%	15%
Ethnicity					
African American	0%	20%	10%	5%	30%
Asian/Pacific Islander	92%	16%	64%	69%	50%
Latino	4%	51%	5%	4%	12%
European American	2%	3%	8%	11%	1%
Multiracial/other	1%	9%	12%	10%	6%
Gender					
Male	51%	51%	62%	52%	63%
Female	49%	49%	38%	48%	37%

Note. Table adapted from Walker and Arbreton (2004).

* Daily average is based on data collected by Walker and Arbreton over the course of 1 year.

† Total is based on data collected by Walker and Arbreton during the last 6 months of the data collection year.

youth who participated in the Beacon over the course of 1 year. In comparison with a sample of students who attended the host schools but elected not to attend the Beacons, a higher proportion of Beacon participants (50% vs. 28%) received free or reduced-price lunch. Beacon participants also reported baseline grade point averages and standardized test scores that were significantly lower than the non-Beacon comparison sample. Latino and African American youth were overrepresented at the Beacon Centers, whereas Asian youth were underrepresented in comparison with the ethnic distribution within the school as a whole.

BEACON CENTER PROGRAMMING

Each Beacon Center partnered with a neighborhood agency to offer activities covering the core programming areas. Whereas individual centers offered a different array of specific programs, all centers had some form of tutoring or time set aside for homework, in addition to physical activities, arts, computer training, youth leadership councils, and social action campaigns. A wide range of physical activities were offered, including dance classes, self-defense, recreational sports, and nature walks. At some centers, youth interested in the arts could choose to participate in a crafts activity or join a dance performance troupe. Computer training ranged from basic skills to youth-run Web sites. Leadership and social action activities engaged youth in issues of Beacon Center governance and community issues such as toxic waste and sexual harassment.

On a typical day at a Beacon, youth participants were greeted after school by “safety and support” personnel who staffed the front desk. At some Beacon Centers, youth committed to a program or activity for a semester, whereas at other centers, youth could choose from a list of activities on a daily basis. Most programs met once or twice a week; over the year, attendance ranged from 1.0 to 2.7 days a week.

BEACON CENTER STAFF

The centers were staffed by individuals with varying backgrounds, commitments, and tenure. Each center included staff members from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Across the five centers, 33%–50% of the staff lived in the communities served by the Beacons. As summarized in Table 1, the size of each Beacon Center varied, and therefore, the number of staff at each site varied as well, ranging from 20 to 40 individuals. However, fewer than half of the Beacon Center staff members were full-time employees. Instead, the centers relied heavily on staff who

were responsible for their discrete activities and on average made a commitment of 1–10 hours a week.

Understanding dynamics between youth participants and adult staff members requires knowledge of the distinction between full-time Beacon staff members and more transient program facilitators. Full-time staff members worked in the Beacon space at the school during school hours and after school, whereas program facilitators were only at the centers on the days and times that their activities were scheduled. In addition, because youth could choose their activities, the staff-to-youth ratio varied by center and by activity, ranging from a ratio of 1:1 to a ratio of 1:20. At four of the Beacon Centers, the average staff tenure was 10–15 months, with 60%–80% of staff working for one year or less. At one center, tenure was significantly higher, averaging 29 months.

DOCUMENTED IMPACT

According to evaluation reports, Beacon participation was not associated with improved grades or test scores (Kane, 2004; Walker & Arbreton, 2004). Instead, evaluators found evidence that Beacon participation served as a protective factor against low self-efficacy for youth who participated for at least a year. Specifically, middle school youth who participated in the Beacons did not experience the typical drop in academic self-efficacy that most youth reported during early adolescence.

Additionally, according to survey results, 90% of participants reported a sense of peer and adult support within activities, 85% felt a sense of safety at the Beacons, and 70% thought that the activities offered something new and interesting (Walker & Arbreton, 2004). Regression equations predicting the number of sessions attended indicate that relationships, safety, and opportunities to learn were each independent, significant, and positive predictors of long-term participation. Survey measures were carefully crafted based on prior research and experiences with youth in after-school settings. Nonetheless, through our interviews with youth, we were able to learn more about their specific experiences and the ways in which these positive features are interrelated.

METHODOLOGY

DATA SOURCES

We collected data geared toward understanding young people's subjective experiences and meaning making. Data were drawn principally from focus groups and individual interviews with Beacon participants over a 2-year period between spring 2000 and spring 2002. These data were

supplemented with observations and interviews conducted by a team of youth ethnographers.

Focus groups

In order to hear from a large sample of youth while still leaving room for substantive discussion and explanation, we conducted a series of focus group interviews. We worked with site staff to identify focus group participants and made efforts to get a broad sample of Beacon participants who varied by race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), neighborhood, participation type and frequency, and other site-relevant factors. At each of the five Beacon Centers, we conducted four rounds of focus groups with the same pool of students. Over the course of our study, we conducted 44 focus groups with a total of 120 youth. Of these participants, 20 were in elementary school, 76 were in middle school, and 24 were in high school. According to the participant database maintained by the Beacon Centers, 42% of the participants in our study were Asian American, 22% were African American, 13% were Latino/Latina, 7% were European American, 5% were Filipino, and 10% were categorized as “other” or “unknown.”

During the first round of focus group discussions, youth were asked questions about their reasons for joining the Beacons, what they liked about it, and what they would change or improve. Subsequent meetings with the youth focused on discussions of the Beacon in comparison with school and neighborhood contexts. Youth were asked to describe their school or their neighborhood and then were asked how their experiences in the different contexts were similar or different.

Individual interviews

Researchers met with individual youth for a formal interview at three time points over an 18-month period. One-on-one interviews were conducted with a subsample of 21 youth participants. Although most of these youth were recruited from the focus group sample, some were also recommended by Beacons staff as youth who had been involved for a long time or who had representative experiences at the Beacons. These individual interviews provided an opportunity to deepen our understanding of issues raised in the focus groups. Each participant was asked to describe his or her personal experiences in the Beacon programs, in school, and in his or her neighborhood. Meeting with the same youth at multiple time points crossing two academic years allowed us to develop rapport with them and yielded thoughtful responses.

Youth ethnographers

In addition to data collected by the university-based research team, the analyses in this article also reflect findings from a team of youth ethnographers. Including youth as researchers was a strategy first used in Heath and McLaughlin's (1993) research on community-based youth organizations (see McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). In that research, youth program participants were hired as "junior ethnographers" to conduct interviews in places and with people not accessible to the adult research team.

For our study of the Beacon Centers, a total of 21 Beacon participants were recruited and trained to gather ethnographic data at each site. Youth ethnographers varied in age, gender, race and ethnicity, and class background. All youth ethnographers participated in a day-long training that taught them interviewing and observation skills. Specifically, youth ethnographers worked with adult researchers to develop interview protocols and observation strategies to capture young people's attitudes toward the community, neighborhood, and role of the Beacons.

For 5 months, teams of 2–6 youth ethnographers were supervised by a member of the adult research team at each site. Three months were spent collecting data, and roughly 2 months were dedicated to data analysis. Youth read through their interview transcripts and field notes and worked collaboratively to identify themes from the data. Adult research coordinators wrote memos summarizing the conclusions drawn by each team of youth ethnographers. These memos were then incorporated into the 2 years of data collected for the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

Our work started as a supplementary study to a quasi-experimental evaluation of the Beacon Initiative as a whole. The large-scale evaluation aimed to assess the initiative's Theory of Change in general and, with regard to young people's experiences, paid particular attention to the linkages between the quality of the programs and a range of developmental outcomes related to and including academic success. Our task was to supplement the survey-based statistical analyses with young people's voices and descriptions of their experiences. In particular, we set out to ask youth what they valued about the Beacon Centers and the extent to which their experiences at home, in school, and in their neighborhood supported or constrained their participation. Our interview protocols were designed to give youth the opportunity to describe their experiences at the Beacon, at school, in their neighborhood, and at home. We

then asked youth to make comparisons between contexts.

Data analysis was an iterative process that followed practices common in the development of grounded theory and research focused on emic perspectives (Becker, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We developed a coding tree and worked collaboratively to ensure that members of the group shared a common understanding of codes. After coding interview and focus group transcripts from the first round of data collection, we identified common patterns across the different sites. Namely, youth valued relationships, safety, and opportunities to learn. Our analyses of the subsequent waves of data then focused on these themes, the meaning and significance that youth ascribed to each feature, and contrasts with other contexts. In the next section, we present each of the three themes and use young people's own words to help illustrate what specific qualities they perceived as attractive and inviting sustained participation.

FINDINGS

Experiences at the Beacons were most commonly discussed in contrast with school and the neighborhoods in which youth lived. In this section, we begin with youth participants' opinions about distinctive features of their relationships with adults and peers and why those relationships are credited as key components of participants' experiences at the Beacon centers. We then share participants' descriptions of safety at the Beacons and contrasts that they drew with school and neighborhood contexts. Last, we present young people's insights into meaningful opportunities to learn and share their descriptions of the appeal of particular program structures and content.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS

When asked in open-ended prompts to describe the Beacons and their experiences there, youth across all five sites talked about the importance of adult staff members. They listed a number of characteristics that distinguished their relationships with adults, ranging from their informal quality (you can call adults by their first names) to the types of guidance and support that adults provided. Youth especially valued their interactions with full-time Beacons staff members, such as those staff responsible for "safety and support" throughout the centers, rather than adults who were contracted to run discrete activities. Participants' descriptions directed our attention to three adult roles that they most valued: mentors, confidants, and conflict mediators.

Adults as mentors

Although the Beacon sites were not set up as conventional “mentoring” programs, many features of the relationships that youth described were of this variety. For example, youth felt that adults listened to their personal problems, helped them stay on track in their academics, and motivated them to participate in Beacon activities. Relationships with Beacon staff were distinct from typical teacher relationships because of their more informal style of interaction and attention to participants’ personal lives. One high school student explained, “The [facilitator] that I’m working with right now . . . she’s not only like the facilitator or the head person in the group, but then I feel like she’s also my mentor. I can be very open with her and she’s been very open with me as well.” Participants at all five Beacon Centers shared this student’s value of personalized attention and guidance based on openness and trust.

To the Beacon participants, adult staff provided mentorship in multiple areas of their lives. They looked to the adults for advice in critical decisions about the future and in working through daily issues. The following statements from youth at different Beacon sites are examples of reasons youth give for why adults at the Beacons are effective mentors: “They know what it’s like,” “They lived like that before,” “She and I have so much in common,” and “I can see she has done so much for this Beacon.” Youth seemed to see possibilities for their own futures when they saw what had been accomplished by adults who were “like them,” including program staff who grew up in the same neighborhood or who shared a similar ethnic background.

Adult as confidants

Youth also described the emotional support they received from adults at the Beacons and contrasted it with their experiences in other settings. For example, the majority of young people we talked to, as well as those interviewed by the youth ethnographers, did not feel comfortable talking about problems with their teachers or other adults at school. Even youth who said that they had good relationships with their teachers at school told us that they did not talk to them about their personal lives. As one middle school youth stated, “It’s easier to tell [Beacon staff] secrets than teachers ‘cause they can keep it . . . [your teachers] can give you an F. So it’s better to talk to [Beacon staff] ‘cause they don’t have power over you.” Although Beacon staff were authority figures who led activities and enforced rules, participants did not see them as having “power over you” in the same way as a teacher at school, whose power seemed to lie in

determining academic success and life trajectories.

Youth tended to portray teachers as adults who cared solely about grades and schoolwork. As one youth said, in contrast to school, Beacon staff paid attention to individual emotional needs:

If I just want to feel sad, Arthur [a Beacon staff member] would be like, "Okay, well go sit down and just cool off for a while." And like people in school . . . [name of teacher], she's like, "Oh, it's okay. Just forget about it and do your work." And sometimes I don't want to do that. I just want to sit down for a while.

Another participant expressed a similar contrast:

'Cause if you come in here with a very hot head you just, you have time to cool off. Like, you come in here and you and your friend had, like a big fight, and like, with teachers they will just make you stay together and be so happy, but here you could, like, just stay away from each other till you guys feel really fine and then you come back together and you like each other. And, like you have a lot of space here.

At the Beacons, adults worked to create a space for youth to express their feelings, which is something that youth seemed to both need and value.

Adults as mediators

Although youth appreciated the space to experience and regulate their emotions, they also looked to adults for guidance. For example, youth described how adults helped to teach them how to manage stressful situations, how to survive on the streets, and how to "deal with [their] problems in a better way." For many youth, this meant getting help dealing with conflicts with peers. As one middle school youth explained, "Sometimes I have a problem with someone, and then [Beacon staff person] will help me on how to solve it, so I can solve the problem with someone without taking a serious reaction. [I'm learning] to calm down." This idea that adults helped to mediate participants' peer relationships was a theme that cut across all five Beacon sites. Youth saw adults at the Beacon as fair, listening to both sides in a disagreement. They would help youth to work out problems but not work them out *for* youth. As one middle school youth described, "Me and one of my friends was about to get in a fight too, and one of the Beacon staff had pulled us aside and we talked

about it and we resolved it cause it was just a misunderstanding.”

In general, youth reported that Beacon staff members dealt with peer conflicts differently than schoolteachers did. Whereas schoolteachers were said to be either detached and indifferent or authoritarian and punitive, Beacon staff were said to be involved without being overly intrusive. Whereas some youth appreciated it when adults enforced consequences and accountability, other youth valued adults who provided space to let youth handle a problem. Sometimes this meant giving youth space from each other, but it did not mean ignoring or overlooking the problem. This perceived balance between granting autonomy while still addressing the problem contributed to participants’ appreciation of Beacon adults.

Relational constraints

Not all relationships between Beacon adults and youth were viewed as supportive. Youth expressed disappointment when positive features were absent in relationships with particular staff members. At each Beacon site, youth reported examples of adults who were not good instructors, who did not provide emotional support, or who did not fulfill their mediator role effectively. At one site, an entire focus group discussion addressed participants’ criticism of one staff member who antagonized the youth.

Staff turnover also complicated young people’s relationships with adults. Youth voiced concern and confusion over adults leaving the center. Turnover seemed to unsettle the security and stability they valued at the Beacon. Staff leaving also conveyed lack of commitment on the part of adults. Youth described feeling abandoned, sad, and discouraged when staff members left.

The [program staff] plan on not continuing next year which is sort of discouraging . . . we are putting all this effort into it and we are making an effort to connect to these [staff members] and at the same time it’s like, you know, we’re going to keep going . . . but the people who should be the most important motivators are [leaving].

At another Beacon Center, a youth voiced similar disappointment: “It’s hard to be mature about people leaving . . . I got really really close to her and then suddenly she announced [that she was leaving] and then there’s this tendency not to get that attached the next time, you know?

These quotes convey young people's frustration about staff turnover and also reveal their uncertainty about future relationships with adults.

Time and space to learn from and lean on adults were critical to young people's experiences at the Beacon Centers. In addition, adolescents were engaged and interested in the life skills that they learned from adults, whom they perceived as role models. Next we describe peer relationships, which, according to Beacon participants, made the Beacon Centers both attractive and distinctive.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

Peer relationships were a prominent theme in our focus group and individual interview discussions among Beacon participants of all ages. Youth talked about the Beacons as a supportive place for friendships to develop and flourish. At the same time, the Beacons were a safe place for friends to work through problems. In addition, youth talked about relationships that were not based on friendship, but rather on collaborative and collegial interactions with youth of varying ages.

Time and place to be with friends

With regard to friendships, many youth appreciated the value of just "hanging out" with friends. In fact, with the exception of some high school students, most youth reported that the opportunity to be with friends was their primary motivation for spending time at the Beacon. Youth explained that the Beacons provide a much-needed place for youth to spend time with each other. They described their neighborhoods as lacking things to do or places to congregate. This theme was especially pronounced in the research conducted by the youth ethnographers. Most youth occupied their time in their neighborhoods by staying inside, watching TV, or playing on the computer. Youth ethnographers at one site, after analyzing their field notes together, concluded that people spent time at the Beacons because "youth want to be where other youth are." In addition to spending time with friends from school, youth appreciated the mix of social groups at the Beacon.

Although spending time with old and new friends was considered a highlight for most Beacon participants, youth also talked about the fights, tensions, and conflicts that they experienced with their friends. Discussions of peer conflict were most prevalent among the middle school students in our study. In the midst of conflict with a friend, middle school youth seemed to appreciate the resources within the Beacon. Whether it was an adult who could provide comforting words or simply a

quiet place to sit, think, and “calm down,” youth described the Beacon as a place that helped them cope with the stress of adolescent friendship.

Beacon vs. school peer groups

In comparison with school, youth described interactions among peers at the Beacon in more positive terms. At the Beacon, peers were “less cliquey,” “more friendly,” and “more caring.” In contrast, youth portrayed their schools as places full of negativity and conflict. For example, in response to the question, “How do the kids treat each other at school?” one youth responded, “At school they treat each other bad . . . sometimes they talk behind your back, and sometimes they just talk about each other. They fight and hit each other and throw seeds at each other and stuff.” Only one youth in our study viewed peer interactions at the Beacon and at his school similarly, and he described the interactions as equally bad.

The more positive perception of peers at the Beacon may be explained by the sample of youth who choose to attend the Beacon Centers. Some evidence suggests that youth recruited their friends to be in the Beacon. As friends recruited more friends, it could be that the group of participants felt a stronger sense of community or cooperation than they experienced in school. There may be some truth to the idea that youth attract like-minded youth to participate in the Beacon, thus facilitating peer friendships. However, this is a partial explanation, because there were many other reasons that people joined, including decisions by parents, referrals from school personnel, and the desire to take part in specific programs.

Peer collaboration

At each Beacon site, youth had the opportunity to participate in activities that required a group to collaborate toward a shared goal. Participants worked together as colleagues on leadership councils, social action campaigns, and Web site development. They engaged in group decision-making processes, which introduced youth to new ways of relating to others. As one young person reflected on his experiences working on a youth-led Web-based campaign,

Another thing I learned is to be more open-minded because at school, I can hang out with my friends and forget about everybody else. Here, it’s a lot of students with their own opinions . . . whether you like it or not, it’s going to be said, and it’s going to be heard. So, you just have to deal with it and just be open-minded, and say, “Okay, that’s fine, that’s her

opinion.” You know, basically taking other people’s opinion [and] not only thinking about yourself.

Among youth who participated in the youth-led activities offered across Beacon sites, learning how to listen to others and to integrate others’ opinions were newly acquired skills that were critical to the goals of their projects.

Cross-age relationships

In discussing peer relationships, youth also distinguished between those who were the same age and those who were older or younger. In general, they valued the opportunity to be with same-age peers. This was especially true for high school students, as one youth explained:

I think the reason we go to Beacon and not some recreation park is ‘cause we know the kind of people that’s gonna be there. If you go to a place that you don’t go to often, you don’t know what’s gonna go on, you don’t know what kind of people are gonna be there. But when you go to the Beacon you know most of the people are gonna be from [name of high school], and you know they’re gonna be around your grade level, so you have many things in common with them, instead of meeting kids that’s half your size, half your age, and you share no interests with these little kids.

This student articulated a view shared by other high school participants who explained that sites were less appealing if they were populated by middle school- or elementary-age youth. Middle school youth voiced similar opinions about having a space for their age cohort separate from older youth, who tended to tease them for their music choices or criticize them for making too much noise.

Some programs, such as tutoring or mentoring, provided opportunities for meaningful cross-age relationships. One high school youth described the close relationship that she had developed with middle school students whom she tutored. One of these students, when she entered high school, told us how important this mentor was during her transition into ninth grade: “She helps me through things, especially on Freshman Friday. . . . People were getting thrown in the dumpster. . . . [My tutor] and this other girl, they would help me out. . . . They were really cool about it.” Other high school youth talked about receiving assistance from juniors and seniors, such as advice about teachers and college preparation. In these cases, the veteran Beacon youth shepherded

younger members through unfamiliar situations.

The Beacons provided the space for youth to spend valued time developing relationships with their peers. At the same time, youth also gained newfound skills in collaboration and negotiation. In the next section, we consider ways in which positive relationships with peers and adults contributed to participants' perceptions of safety.

SAFETY

Although closely linked to supportive adult and peer relations, the theme of safety warrants its own analysis because of how commonly youth mentioned it as a specific feature of their experiences. Conversations about safety involved both physical and emotional elements.

Physical safety

For the most part, youth spoke of the Beacons as a "safe escape" from school or neighborhood violence. Adults acted as guarantors of physical safety, protecting or "watching over" youth, keeping potentially dangerous strangers out of the Beacon, and ensuring that problems between youth were resolved peacefully. As one middle school student described, "I feel safe there. . . . You are around people you know constantly. It's real annoying sometimes, but you don't have to worry about getting beat up or getting hurt or something." A participant at another site explained that one staff member in particular was the single reason why drugs and guns were not present at the Beacon.

Other participants made the connection between physical safety and the number of adults. For example, a high school student stated, "At the Beacon you know that there is always going to be authority around and there is always someone to go to and that people won't do [something bad] to you." Whereas at a different site, one Beacon participant explained that the Beacon felt less safe because there were fewer adults to "check around if anything was wrong."

Youth across all sites explained how adults with backgrounds similar to their own contributed to the sense of physical safety. These adults helped youth to navigate otherwise unpredictable or dangerous settings. One high school student reflected, "Most of the staff members here . . . grew up just like I did on the streets and stuff like that, so they really taught me how to stay out of trouble and stuff." At another Beacon located in a neighborhood with particularly high rates of violence, staff members escorted youth home and shared strategies for navigating the neighborhood.

Emotional safety

Youth also described the Beacon as an emotionally safe space. It was seen as a place where they could be themselves around both adults and peers whom they trusted. As one middle school youth stated, “It was easier to express myself [at the Beacon]. Like, I didn’t always have to be the funny one. I could be like really serious and I’d go that day, like, I’d be really sad and . . . people would understand that.”

Youth across sites reported feeling comfortable working out their problems—personal and social—in the context of the Beacon because they were around people who listened to them and respected them. Several youth mentioned, in particular, the “confidential” space of the Beacon; if you told someone (adults or youth) something, he or she would not necessarily tell others (other youth, your parents or teachers). As one high school youth explained, “It’s like one big ol’ family. And like, you could, like say something and then they keep it within the group and stuff.” Middle school and high school youth in particular valued the confidential resources that the Beacons offered, along with the freedom to be themselves.

In summary, our discussions with youth allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of safety for young people. For some youth, safety at the Beacon meant that they were away from the gangs and other threats that they experienced in their neighborhoods. For others, safety revolved around participants’ feelings of comfort to talk about personal problems or to let down their guard and just relax. Safety at the Beacon, therefore, should not be seen as strictly a matter of getting young people off the streets and into a place that is physically safe; it is important to consider the various dimensions of safety that youth articulated.

OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN

Opportunities to learn refer to engaging in personally relevant activities in which youth developed and practiced valued skills. These opportunities ranged from academic support and tutoring to highly collaborative, complex, project-oriented activities, such as poetry critiques, Web site marketing, grant writing, project planning, and group decision making.

Personally relevant skills

Across sites, youth valued activities that gave them the opportunity to develop skills that were personally meaningful and relevant to their

futures. For some students, these included academic skills reinforced through after-school tutoring, but for most, they ranged from art-oriented activities like drawing, poetry, and DJ-ing to leadership activities such as youth councils and peer mentoring. It was important to youth to do more than just dabble; they wanted to learn and improve in domains of interests. Some youth said that they quit activities when they felt it was failing to teach them something. One girl who participated in a poetry program explained what it meant for her to learn new skills:

I'm learning all of these different things that I didn't even know. Like I could be using a technique and I wouldn't even know about it until [the teacher] told me, "Oh, you're using this technique. . ." and I'd say, "I didn't even know that" . . . [It makes me] feel happy. It's like, I'm smarter than I think.

For this girl, learning about poetry was tied to feelings about herself as a learner. Getting feedback about what she was doing helped her to feel more competent and successful.

Part of what youth appreciated about their opportunities to learn in the Beacons was that they dealt with subjects rarely addressed in school. In the following quote, a high school participant provides her perspective on the value of a youth media program:

It's about [the influence of media, society, and culture on people], something different than I learn in school. I mean, me and my friends, we just talk about how the world is, and how people are. But we don't talk about that in class. You know, because we need to learn about things from the textbooks.

This student distinguished the content of her Beacon activities from her learning in schools. Others contrasted the skills that they learned in the two settings. For example, several highlighted communication, collaboration, and teamwork as important skills that they practiced in the Beacons more so than in school. As one youth participant of a youth-led Web-based campaign explained,

There's also the teamwork element that you don't really get at school [agreement from other students]. . . . It's just hearing opinions and to keep in mind like "I statements" and saying "this is *my* opinion," not how it is. It's great to see . . . how many different opinions you can get on [an issue] . . . it's good to keep . . . in mind those different perspectives from different parts of people.

Youth also discussed opportunities to learn a range of leadership skills. Youth who participated in social action programs spoke about skills that they were developing for communicating with the public and mobilizing other youth to follow their cause. Youth who participated in governance programs such as a youth leadership council talked about the importance of facilitation skills, greater interest in student government, and group decision making. Through youth-led programs, students had opportunities to write grants, learn conflict negotiation skills, develop public service announcements, tutor younger youth, and develop a presentation for one of their local high schools about the current student workload. Moreover, youth learned what it was like to work collaboratively with others and to be open to learning from unfamiliar perspectives.

Many youth, especially those of high school age, related the skills they learned at the Beacons to future vocational possibilities. For example, some noted that serving as a mentor or tutor helped prepare them for a career in teaching. Others discussed the link between participation in social action programs and preparation for leadership roles in the community.

Choice in programming

When young people described the Beacon learning environments they valued most, autonomy and choice were salient characteristics. One youth said she enjoyed learning at the Beacon because it was based on what youth wanted to do. "They'll ask you, 'Do you want to do this today?' They won't just tell you, 'You have to do this today!'" They'll be like, "What do you want to do today?" Young people exercised their discretion in diverse ways. Some youth chose to participate in programs that helped them with their homework so that they could have more time to play in the evenings. Other youth chose to participate in programs that would expand their competencies in areas that were personally meaningful, such as drawing, music, poetry, or dance. At sites where certain youth were required to attend a mandatory tutoring program, students expressed the wish to have more choice and freedom in their selection of after-school activities.

Whether students came to the Beacon to hang out and have a safe place to talk openly with peers, or whether they came to improve their grades by going to tutoring, to gain leadership skills, or to learn skills that they could not obtain elsewhere, one of the keys to providing engaging learning environments for youth at the Beacons seemed to be the choice in activities offered.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this study suggest that the Beacons served as a unique developmental niche for participants by meeting needs that were not consistently met in their schools or in their neighborhoods. The niche metaphor underscores the interrelationships between themes reported by youth. For example, youth valued their relationships with adults in large part because these adults helped the youth to manage their relationships with peers, especially when it came to conflicts. In addition, supportive relationships with adults and peers contributed to a sense of safety, which in turn cultivated a caring, motivating space to express emotions, try on identities, and learn new skills.

Certain design features of this study limit its generalizability to other settings and contexts. For example, the sample of youth who participated in the research were primarily those who enjoyed spending time at the center and whom staff members recommended as participants. Although the youth ethnographers did interview some youth who attended infrequently, our conclusions would be stronger if we had spoken with more young people who were marginal participants. In addition, youth may have accentuated differences between Beacons and other contexts of their lives because our study was anchored in the Beacon as a setting. We were able to partly address this limitation by relying on open-ended prompts and by probing for specific examples and stories that provided support for young people's assertions.

Finally, although youth tended to describe their relationships with Beacon adults through negative contrasts with school teachers, we acknowledge that teachers operated in a very different institutional context. In particular, teachers had to get to know much larger numbers of students within the constraints of the school day and its academic mandate. Because this study was not designed to gain a systematic or direct view of young people's relationships with teachers, we did not gather evidence that would allow us to amplify or add nuance to their portraits. Despite these caveats, we believe that our focus on participants' descriptions of their experiences has helpful implications for further practice and research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

People not programs

Youth participants connected with people more than they did with

discrete programs. Relationships and community building happened outside program time. One suggestion, therefore, is for after-school programs to set aside time and space for informal community building. It is difficult to develop a sense of community if community members rarely get to be together or interact with one another outside specific programs like tutoring or dance. Second, it would be useful for after-school centers to prioritize this kind of informal relationship building by writing it into staff job descriptions and making sure adults have opportunities to spend unstructured time with youth.

Given the importance of these relationships, staff turnover presented real challenges for youth participants. Turnover should be seen as a challenge for the broader youth development programming field to address because it relates to issues of professional credentialing, the limited salary structure for community nonprofit work, and the youthfulness of many staff who are still figuring out their careers. These constraints present challenges for community-based programs. As the after-school field develops, greater attention will need to be paid to developing and retaining talented youth workers, especially those who grew up in the community that a particular program serves.

Developmentally appropriate design

Youth programs have long struggled with how to maintain the interest of youth as they move into later adolescence. We learned that students were drawn to programs that were geared specifically toward their cohort. For example, older youth valued settings where they could interact with same-age peers, except in the case of mentoring or tutoring, in which they had clearly specified leadership responsibilities. High school students were also particularly sensitive to the kinds of skills and personal benefits offered. More than other age groups, these youth were motivated by instrumental, future-oriented goals, such as gaining job skills and building their résumés.

Tensions between academic and social goals in after-school programs

Beacons offered different kinds of academic support, ranging from academic mentoring, in which tutors sought to build long-term relationships with students, to homework help, in which students had relatively unstructured opportunities to complete homework and get help as needed. One limitation of these efforts was that some students declined to take advantage of them, including those who were in greatest need of

academic help. But those programs that required students to participate had negative consequences as well, because students felt coerced to participate and did not have opportunities to exercise the autonomy that so many of them identified with the Beacons. Some sites responded to this dilemma by informally persuading youth to avail themselves of tutoring without formally requiring them to attend. Others made efforts to build a sense of community in their tutoring programs that emphasized more than just remediation and homework completion. Nevertheless, an important reality for after-school staff and funders to consider is that the complex reasons for achievement gaps during the school day do not simply go away when opportunities after school are made available; those who are academically inclined may seek out assistance with school work, whereas those who are not may gravitate toward activities that are as far removed from school as possible.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

First, as calls for youth involvement in program decision making and evaluation grow stronger, methodologies for generating respectful and ecologically valid perspectives from youth are needed (Cook-Sather, 2002). The youth ethnographers component of this study, in particular, may provide a helpful model for initiatives that seek ways to involve youth in program evaluation and research.

Second, findings from this study, along with qualitative research about youth organizations and after-school programs in other parts of the country (e.g., Deutsch & Hirsch, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000), provide emic perspectives that are critical to the ecological validity of survey instruments. Although one must be careful about generalizing from individual case studies, the field can learn a great deal from the cumulative weight of multiple studies (Burton, Obeidallah, & Allison, 1996).

Finally, participants' descriptions of their experiences in the Beacon Centers suggest that researchers and evaluators should broaden our ideas of "success" and "impact" in after-school programs. For urban youth in particular, the benefits of participation in after-school programs may not be solely related to academically oriented outcomes. Rather, participation may fulfill more fundamental developmental needs. Benefits of participation may stem from the very qualities that are rare in school, such as informal relationships with adults and opportunities for open-ended inquiry. Meeting young people's broad developmental needs and engaging them in creative and productive activities are important precursors to academic success. After-school programs are not simply extensions of the

school day, but rather separate, core developmental contexts that should be assessed according to the full spectrum of adolescents' developmental needs.

Note

1. The data for this section are primarily based on Walker and Arbreton's (2004) evaluation of the San Francisco Beacons. Specifically, demographic data, attendance records, and staff characteristics are all based on Walker and Arbreton's published findings.

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