After-School Centers and Youth Development: Case Studies of Success and Failure.

Barton J. Hirsh, Nancy L. Deutsch, and David L. DuBois. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011

Reviewed by Adam C. Sheppard

After-School Centers and Youth Development tackles the important and challenging task of defining and assessing program quality in organized after-school settings, especially addressing the disparity between program quality across organizations. To focus the discussion, the term *center* is used and refers to organizations that are typically characterized by numerous programs (and subsequent activities) offered to youth (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs). Further clarifying their point, the authors address *comprehensive after-school centers,* which focus on a broader array of academic and psychosocial outcomes as opposed to centers that focus on more singular outcomes (e.g., drama clubs, sports leagues). While drawing upon rich literature related to after school participation and positive youth development, the authors note a particular lack of previous research linking organizational dynamics associated with program quality and the experiences of program participants. To address this gap, the conceptual framework for the study focuses on three organizational characteristics of centers that are experienced by a young person: (1) programs and activities, (2) youth-staff relationships, and (3) the culture of the center.

Recognizing that all three components are interrelated and interact in several ways to influence youth outcomes, Hirsch et al. use what they call PARC (program, activity, relationship, culture) units within their analysis of the three centers studied – all Boys and Girls Clubs. Combining PARC units (from observations of particular programs/activities/relationships) over the course of a year, a profile is created to depict patterns of consistency and change in youth involvement with the centers. Findings from each of the three studies are presented in a systematic way, which aids in their interpretation. Following an account of the organization of each center (e.g., goals, policies and practices associated with program development and implementation, youth-staff and staff-staff relationships), a detailed account of two separate participants is used to elaborate upon how the organizational dynamics influence youth involvement. Each of the descriptions of the two participants centers around a PARC profile, composed of PARC units assessed at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Additionally, the authors describe each participant's relationships with other participants and center staff, and particularly highlight youth interaction with the staff member they said they were closest to. Particularly interesting is

the focus on interactions among the different PARCs associated with center involvement, which the authors stress are important when assessing youth development over time.

"Pockets of Excellence"

The first case study, of Midwest Center, describes "pockets of excellence" with some positive findings alongside negative reports as well. A general finding from time spent at this center was the gap between the potential and the reality of PARCs is associated in large part to organizational failures. In one example, the authors describe Bob, the center supervisor, as discouraging new programming, especially for girls. With a "good-old-boys" culture established by the supervisor, another staff member, Manuel, was able to establish a chess club that resonated with youth in the club, but the culture also led to a failure to address concerns by Bill, the male participant featured in the analysis, because the concerns did not fit the manly culture.

From this case, a question is raised as to the importance of hiring staff and defining center culture. Which direction does this relation occur? The authors suggest using practices to hire staff with strong interests and skill to develop programs and activities, to circumvent limitations of existing center culture, but this seems to indicate that staff influence center culture. Alternatively, the examples cited seem to suggest that center culture influences staff practices. The male dominant culture limited the opportunities of female staff to develop programs and activities, even when many of them had the desire and showed initiative to do so. To my knowledge, there has not been a study to assess the relation between staff hiring and center culture development. Do staff get hired and conform to the preexisting culture, as in a Peer Contagion Hypothesis (e.g., Dishion & Dodge, 2005), or can staff hiring practices be used as an intervention to address detriments to center culture?

"A Study of Organizational Dysfunction"

The second case study, of North River Center, describes a dysfunctional center with evidence of feuding amongst the organizational personnel. Through their observations, the authors describe an environment where staff practices were oriented towards controlling youth behavior rather than aligning with the expressed goals of the national organization focused on positive youth development. When describing program and activity development, the authors state, "Appearance is paramount, and Mr. Jones [center director] displays little concern for the process below" (p. 131). A variety of activities are offered to youth, which may provide more youth opportunities to engage in activities that are meaningful to them. However, youth are cycled through on a regular schedule without allowing for student choice, which is a potentially more beneficial experience – when there is a fit between the youth's needs and the environment provided (e.g., Eccles et al., 1993).

Through the two in-depth studies of individual youth at North River, one of the main findings the authors present is the inability of the center to provide a complete PARC in which either one was truly engaged. With its larger membership, prominent position within the community, and long-time tenure of certain staff members, the center operated on a status quo basis. Perhaps, greater oversight by the national organization, or regional headquarters, would have identified the gap between practices and stated goals. While indicating that center-level autonomy can be positive, allowing individual centers to respond to the needs of the youth in their care, the authors also highlight a potential benefit of a more system-wide lens for analyzing inter-organizational linkages. A system-level analysis of organizational dynamics has received little attention within the organized youth-setting literature, so this book is a useful step in addressing this gap.

"The Jewel in the Crown"

The third case study, of West River Center, highlights the practices of a center touted as "the best Boys & Girls Club in the region." While staff at all three centers studied indicated they addressed goals related to positive youth development, West River was the only center to have consistently prioritized these goals as reflected in the observations at the site. At the center, senior leadership expressed an ongoing concern as to how well programs and staff were actively engaging youth in personal development. Additionally, the authors use West River as an example of how programs, activities, relationships, and culture can interact to form complete PARC profiles to describe youth experiences in comprehensive after-school centers. For example, Midnight, a young male participant, found the dance program to offer him a meaningful relationship with Victoria, one of the staff members, which also supported his cultural background. The detailed descriptions of involvement within West River's programs and activities highlights the need to focus on more than just the number of programs and activities youth participate in by analyzing the interactions as important as well.

Through the West River case, the authors are able to synthesize their analysis of the other two centers and pose the following important questions for further work on comprehensive after-school centers:

- To what extent does the center prioritize youth development not only in words, but in actions?
- Do youth attending the center have adequate opportunity to connect to a positive niche within the larger setting?
- To what extent is there likely to be synergy across the different experiences that a youth has within the center, such that the whole is greater than the sum of parts?
- What does the center do to ensure that it is hiring quality staff and providing them with optimal levels of training and supervision?
- What processes are in place within the center for continuous organizational learning and improvement?

Summary

Studying indicators of quality in after-school settings, and the related influences on youth outcomes, is challenging and complicated, but the work by Hirsch et al. provides a useful framework for assessing the differences between centers and associated impacts on individual youth. Through a detailed analysis of the organizational structure and culture of each center, followed by in-depth descriptions of youth involved in the programs and activities, the authors help further the discussion of differentiations between "high-quality" and "low-quality" programs. Beyond the insights the authors provide, there are additional questions that are raised for future study.

A strength of the work by Hirsch and colleagues is the thorough description of organization-level influences to center quality, especially related to culture and staff practices, but there is also the question as to which influences which. Do staff influence organizational culture? Or, does the organizational culture influence staff practices? The authors appear to suggest that organizational culture influences staff practices, referencing examples of administrative-level staff hindering staff initiative in developing new programs and activities for youth, so this suggests an important area for future work. If a "low-quality" adult were to be placed in a "high-quality" center, would their practices improve? Similarly, would a "high-quality" adult flounder in a "low-quality" center? These questions are important to the development of professional development opportunities in after-school settings, but they have still not been addressed within the organized activity literature.

For scholars and practitioners focused on understanding quality in after-school settings, *After-School Centers and Youth Development: Case Studies of Success and Failure* (2011) is an excellent reference to work from. As this work comes from observations of only Boys and Girls Clubs, the extent to which this framework extends to other youth-serving organizations, but the overall framework provides a useful analytical framework. Through their focus on the interactions amongst programs and activities, relationships with staff, and overall center culture, Hirsch et al. outline a systematic approach to observing youth involvement in programs and activities, which will likely be useful for future out-of-school time studies more generally.

References

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