Enhancing program quality in a national sample of after-school settings: The role of youth-staff interactions and staff/organizational functioning

"Overall, this study provides evidence for the importance of workforce development initiatives that focus on improving staff-youth interactions, at least in part by increasing community engagement and staff teamwork and efficiency" (p. 403).

1. What is the research about?

Evidence suggests that attending high-quality after-school programs can improve learning outcomes and promote social development in youth. There is a growing body of literature on the characteristics of high-quality youth settings, but little is known about how quality translates to positive youth development outcomes.

This article examines the associations between organizational factors, staff relational practices, community engagement, and young people's perceptions of after-school club quality. In particular, the researchers are interested in whether staff relational practices – establishing caring relationships, setting high expectations, positive behaviour management, encouraging youth input and agency, and cultural sensitivity – explain associations between staff/organizational characteristics and perceived club quality.

2. Where did the research take place?

Data was collected at after-school clubs across the United States.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth aged 12-20 who attend after-school programs, and staff of these programs.

4. How was the research done?

Quantitative data was collected at Boys and Girls Clubs of America through online surveys. Clubs were included in this study if 80% of registered youth completed the member survey and at least three staff members completed the staff survey. The final sample included 57,710 youth and 5,231 staff members at 740 sites.

Staff were asked about staff relational practices (establishing caring relationships, positive behaviour management, cultural sensitivity, setting high expectations, and youth input and agency), organizational factors (staff identification with youth experience, staff satisfaction, staff teamwork, and efficiency), and community engagement (school engagement and family engagement). Youth rated their club experiences across five measures: emotional safety, physical safety, sense of belonging, fun, and adult caring relationships. The researchers also considered individual measures (age and gender), as well as site-level measures (average daily attendance and low socioeconomic status).

The main limitation of this study is its reliance on self-report measures. The cross-sectional and non-experimental design means that researchers are not able to establish causality.

5. What are the key findings?

The researchers' hypothesis – that staff relational practices explain associations between youth's perceptions of club quality and staff/organizational characteristics – was partially supported.

Two organizational factors are *mediated* by staff relational practices: **staff teamwork and efficiency**, and **community engagement**.

A third organizational factor – **identification with youth's experiences** – is found to be *directly associated* with perceived club quality.

The study also reveals differences based on club size, as larger clubs are associated with less positive relational practices and lower perceptions of quality.

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6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This research shows that organizational and staffing factors can improve program quality by supporting positive relational practices in after-school settings. The authors suggest that organizations should "look beyond a focus on staff competencies to ensure **a supportive and professional work environment with clearly defined roles and effective monitoring**" (p. 402). In particular, after-school programs can promote positive staff-youth interactions by **connecting with families and schools**, and **developing staff teamwork and efficiency**.

The study also highlights the value of staff identification with youth's experiences. After-school programs should consider **hiring youth workers who share youth's backgrounds or help staff gain a better understanding of youth's lived realities** (e.g. through training in youth development or by engaging with members of the youth's communities) to improve program quality and outcomes for young people.

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