Program Design Considerations for After-School Tutoring Programs

This Evidence Brief summarizes program design considerations for after-school tutoring programs to support improved academic outcomes for youth experiencing marginalization.

EVIDENCE BRIEF

Tutoring programs can be effectively delivered **in-person** or **online** – or through a **hybrid** model that offers youth participants both options – to improve academic outcomes.[1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9] Regardless of program delivery option, attention needs to be paid to four specific program design considerations.

1. PROGRAM FREQUENCY

Programs should consider the **frequency** of tutoring opportunities, as there is a strong relationship between *how* often tutoring is available (more than once a week, for example) and academic outcomes.[1]

In fact, tutoring has been found to be more effective when delivered in **high doses** – either three or more sessions per week or intensive, one-week, small-group programs.[4,10] Tutoring becomes more effective as the number of tutoring sessions per week *and* the overall number of weeks **increase**, although younger learners may benefit from shorter but even more frequent sessions.[4]

2. PROGRAM STRUCTURE

2a) Culturally Responsive & Affirming Approaches

Culturally responsive youth programs consider how to include the diverse cultures of participants in the design, development, and implementation of programming. In doing so, programs can "demonstrate respect, build on the strengths of the culture, and attend to clients in the contexts of their social environments, including culture."[11] Being culturally responsive (or **culturally relevant**) facilitates a student-centered approach to learning that draws on "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant … and effective."[12]

Integrating culturally responsive interventions into after-school programming, including tutoring, is important for youth experiencing marginalization, specifically racialized youth.[13] This process can facilitate opportunities for increased engagement, autonomy in learning, and the development of both self-reflection and critical-thinking skills.[14,15]

Racialized youth benefit from developing a positive **ethno-racial identity**, which "protects against the negative effects of racial and ethnic discrimination and is associated with health and positive development."[16] Programs with the appropriate resources and staff expertise can enable this by facilitating positive race-based experiences.

2b) One-on-One vs. Group Tutoring

To improve academic outcomes, tutoring does not necessarily need to be one-on-one; tutors can effectively support up to **three to five learners at a time**.[4,10] Groups larger than five learners would require more from the tutor to ensure that instruction is customized to the needs of each learner.[4] To facilitate positive relationships between tutors and learners – which can lead to increased academic outcomes – **consistency** and **consistent access** to a tutor across sessions is key.[4,10]

Tutors should consider **three ways of understanding 'presence'**[5] when engaging more than one learner – whether in-person or online:[17]

i) **teaching presence**: the design, facilitation, and direction of lessons

ii) **social presence**: the ways youth connect and create group cohesion through communication and emotional expression

iii) **cognitive presence**: the extent to which youth can construct meaning and understanding from the lessons

Tutors should also consider the **three types of interaction**[5] within any learning environment, and pay attention to how technology mediates or hinders these interactions:

i) between **the young person and the content** being reviewed

ii) between **the young person and the tutor**

iii) between **the young person and other learners**

Group tutoring models can provide opportunities to **facilitate mentoring relationships** across peer groups, which may be particularly beneficial for youth experiencing marginalization by fostering the development of **social capital**.[18] This is especially true when mentors share the same identity markers as youth participants (i.e., race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, etc.),[13] ensuring that programming is culturally responsive and supports learning, wellbeing,[14] and ethno-racial identity development.

2c) Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring fosters inclusion and allows youth participants to learn from one another.[19] Youth are paired in asymmetric relationships based on their academic competencies, with one serving as tutor and the other as tutee.[19] Both young people benefit from this active learning approach: the tutees "benefit from receiving direct instruction from a peer... [and] usually feel more comfortable, ask more questions, and better understand the content,"[19] and the tutors "benefit as they reinforce their knowledge by answering the tutees' questions."[19] Youth who participate in peer tutoring programs have consequently experienced improved academic outcomes and attitudes.[20] In this model, both tutors and tutees are considered program participants, albeit with different roles.

2d) Mentorship Models

After-school programs that provide tutoring can intentionally facilitate mentoring relationships between young people and tutors.[14] Mentoring can support program efforts to improve academic achievement, as well as behaviours and attitudes,[21] specifically with respect to youth's perceptions of educational support and expectations, both of which are associated with academic performance.[21]

Formalizing the tutor/tutee dynamic as a mentor/mentee relationship can expand opportunity and possibility for youth, "encouraging participation in school-related activities, helping develop future plans ... promot[ing] students' attachment to school, increas[ing] their academic motivation, and help[ing] them feel less lonely."[21]

3. PROGRAM FEATURES

Whether through homework support, tutoring, or a combination of learning and play, structured programming to improve academic outcomes for youth comprises sessions with the following components:[22,1]

- **Clear, specific, and measurable objectives**. Determine the outcomes of the program and the goals that each session can work towards.

- **Specific lessons and/or materials**. Determine what learning objectives need to be covered in each session by outlining a sequence of activities.

- **Ongoing assessment for the individualization of learning**. Determine the participant's progress and customize instruction to meet their individual needs.

- **Immediate feedback and encouragement**. Provide specific feedback to participants to improve their understanding, behaviour, autonomy, and motivation.

- **Scaffolding and modelling**. Start by providing instructional support, then gradually remove supports as the participant gains proficiency (*scaffolding*); demonstrate approaches for the participant to observe and imitate (*modelling*).

- **Coordinate with classroom instruction**. Align the goals of each session with those of the participant's curriculum to ensure that sessions connect to classroom experiences

4. TUTOR RECRUITMENT, TRAINING & SUPPORTS

After-school programs that offer tutoring must prioritize the **recruitment**, **training**, **support**, and **retainment** of tutors.[22,23,1]

Best practices promote the hiring and retention of tutors who are representative of the racial and cultural backgrounds of youth.[24,14] Youth "benefit from knowing successful adults who share similar backgrounds because it helps youth envision hopeful possibilities for their own futures. Staff who do not share the youth's backgrounds can also gain an understanding of youth experience through training in youth development, and through interaction with coworkers, parents, teachers, and other members of the youth's communities."[25]

Specifically, tutors can be supported in developing strategies to provide:[26]

- **Affective support**, through relationship building and setting high expectations,[25] which can increase youth's confidence and maintain their motivation.

- **Dialogic support**, through constant dialogue between the tutor and participant to ensure individualized and responsive instruction.

- **Focus support**, through the creation of sessions that prioritize learning.

- **Reflective support**, through providing youth with the opportunity to reflect on their own work and discover their own strengths, facilitating their input and agency.[25]

- **Accessible support**, through being available and accessible to youth.

Programs that support youth experiencing marginalization "also have the opportunity and task of **promoting mental health**, particularly when youth are exposed to various traumas."[27] Supporting tutors to increase their mental health literacy and/or develop skills in trauma-informed practice may further facilitate their engagement with youth in new ways.[27] Providing clear protocols for navigating a disclosure or ensuring access to appropriate referrals is also critical for tutors.

Successful after-school programs support their tutors through **professional development** and **ongoing supervision**,[25] and promote wellbeing through "peer networks, mental health supports, and a manageable workload."[24] Again, providing training about youth development can support practitioners to a have better understanding of youth experiences[25] – a process that can be further maximized when programs consider recruiting tutors from among cohorts of former program participants.[24]

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "tutoring", "tutoring program", "best practices", "promising practices", "elementary school", "middle school", "youth", "after-school", and "out-of-school time".

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