THE THREE PILLARS OF CRITICAL HOURS PROGRAMMING

Over the last decade, we have seen a significant rise in the number and importance of afterschool programs, or "Homework Clubs," for elementary and middle-school aged children. These programs fill the critical hours between when children and youth finish school, and the end of their parents' work day. They rest on three foundational pillars which provide them with objective and direction, and are measures by which we can evaluate their success. The pillars are: 1) Skill development; 2) Safe and supportive spaces; and 3) Positive relationships. In examining existing literature on how each pillar affects child and youth experiences in the hours "bell to bell", we are able to determine that high quality critical hours programming is uniquely suited to further academic, social, and emotional outcomes for children and youth, and in so doing, supports the development of well-adjusted individuals, and strong students.

Skill Development

Evidence-based critical hours programs foster both the social and academic skills of participants. Child and youth engagement in programming was identified in several studies as being a key indicator common to the optimal development of both sets of skills. When students are engaged in high quality after school activities, they experience higher levels of intrinsic concentration and motivation which push their academic and social development forward and maximize their outcomes in these areas. Most studies classify high quality programs as those which offer "SAFE" (structured, active, focused and explicit) programming and activities.[1]

Social and Emotional Skills

Research has highlighted afterschool programs as key spaces where students expand their socio-emotional learning horizons. They offer more flexibility than academic classrooms and curricula, making them platforms which prompt students' development of a sense of autonomy and the development of profound interpersonal relationships. Social competencies which are honed in such a setting include individual goal-directed behavior[2], collaboration and teamwork. Self-esteem, self-regulation, psychosocial adjustment, empathy, and school bonding are some of the emotional

faculties which are critical indicators of positive development and successful outcomes, and are also a focus in afterschool programs.[3] As to sense of autonomy, afterschool programs offer a variety of evidence-based activity options which are age appropriate, and provide children and youth with the "just right" challenge.[4] These activities provide enrichment for participants in areas including arts and culture, sciences, physical fitness, and many others. Because there is no singular program focus, such as for a karate lesson, a dance class, or a classroom, students have the opportunity to develop several skills simultaneously. The longitudinal study of afterschool program quality by Pierce, Bolt and Vandell found that the range of choice available to them incites the development of confidence in oneself, and thus the ability to take the most from the activity and confidently form rapports with others.[5]

Several studies around high quality critical hours programs in Canada and the U.S. have determined that they decrease problem behaviours and negative attitudes in participants. Chief among discouraged antisocial behaviours are substance abuse and delinquency[6], and negative attitudes that are diverted include boredom, apathy[7] and alienation. Consequently, where students are involved in structured activities with their peers and caring adults who lead the program, studies found that participants are likely to experience "positive phenomenological states" which expand their behavioural repertoire, and incite displays of prosocial attitudes and behaviours. Significant positive attitudes displayed by program participants include understanding and perspective taking, positive attitudes about themselves and their school, and the capacity to entertain healthy interactions with others (peers and adults).[8] Prosocial behaviours which program students have identified as being products of participation in afterschool programs are: standing up for and providing emotional support to others, helping others to develop skills, complimenting and encouraging others, and being inclusive.[9]

Academic Skills

Although critical hours programs are not strictly scholastic or evaluative in nature, study findings strongly support their capacity to improve academic outcomes for participants, which likely stems from the heightened development of student social skills as well as the structured nature of the activities offered to children and youth outside of school hours.

The programs found to have the greatest impact on academic outcomes were those which offer participants "SAFE" activities. This type of activity, which can consist of academic enrichment or homework, but which is not always scholastic in nature, requires children and youth to utilize a higher degree of concentration on the task at

hand, helps children and youth to develop skills which are invaluable to academic success, such as persistence, focus, and sustained attention and engagement.[10] Another study further identified a diverse variety of structured, age-appropriate activities as being an important indicator of whether a program will influence academic outcomes, particularly as children get older – Grade 3 and above.[11]

In Durlak and Weissberg's meta-analysis of 73 afterschool programs in the U.S., they concluded that students attending programs during critical hours earned markedly higher grades and test scores than non-participants. Further, their study explicitly compared programs that offered SAFE activity options versus those that did not, and found that students participating in the former demonstrated a 12% increase in academic percentile points over students in the latter group.[12] The Promising Afterschool Program School Programs study found that there was a general 12% increase for Grade 6 and 7 students who attended a program over those who did not, or did so rarely, and that this increase could be up to 20 percentile points higher for Grade 3 and 4 students. The researchers of this study noted that math gains were made by participants, despite most activities having little to no direct relation to math.[13]

Shernoff's study on the engagement indicator in critical hours programs found that middle school students who participated in structured programs for one year were found to have higher English grades than non-participants. Further, they found that the level of challenge students experienced when involved in critical hours program activities was an indicator for higher English grades, and that a higher level of challenge and a higher level of engagement in these activities was an indicator for higher math grades.[14]

Lastly, Shernoff found that the acquisition of good work habits and invaluable scholastic skills, combined with the acquisition of social competencies and a reduction in negative or antisocial behavior, have the most significant positive impact the academic outcomes of at-risk children and youth.[15] Findings from the Promising Afterschool Programs study also indicated that disadvantaged students who participated in evidence-based critical hours programming for two years ended up academically far ahead of their peers who had not taken part in such programs.[16]

Safe and Supportive Spaces

The second pillar which supports critical hours programming is known as "safe and supportive spaces"; the environments in which children and youth spend their time "bell to bell", when they are most vulnerable. Based on existing literature in this area,

afterschool programs provide two different kinds of "safe and supportive spaces": safe in the sense of a stable emotional climate, and safe as pertains to the socio-demographic situation of the program space.

Emotional Stability

The emotional stability and positive climate which are at the heart of high quality critical hours programming are evidently related to the building of social and emotional and even academic skills within those environments. For an afterschool program to be considered safe in this sense, it must have several essential components: staff turnover should be low,[17] staff training and ongoing supervision (the capacity to address academic questions, but more importantly, participants' personal problems) should be strong and evidence-based,[18] and authority displayed by staff should be progressive, with lots of opportunity for participant autonomous choice.[19] Further, program participants should experience a generally positive and respectful emotional and relational climate,[20] and the program environment should provide mental and emotional stimulation and challenge.[21]

Study findings indicate that when many or all of these elements are present in a given program, they will heighten and secure participants' engagement in that program. As stated in the section above, children and youth's heightened engagement in critical hours programming leads to optimal development of their social, emotional and academic skills. Further, the affective and relational environment of a program, which will be explored in greater detail in the following section, is a great predictor of positive outcomes for critical hours program participants.

Socio-Demographic Safety

The "Safe and Supportive Spaces" pillar also engenders socio-demographic security, for all children, but particularly for at risk children, in low income neighbourhoods in urban centres. Children are vulnerable when left alone in their time outside of school – afterschool programs provide a safe, structured space where these children can be engaged in constructive activities during these risky hours. The Social Development Model contends that children learn patterns of behavior, prosocial or antisocial, based on their social environment and will replicate these behaviours, making a high quality afterschool program beneficial in that it helps children and youth establish positive, healthy behaviours which they will carry with them through their teen years, and hopefully for the remainder of their lives.[22]

A study by Vandell, Shernoff *et. al* on engagement in afterschool activities, in which they monitored participants within and outside of program hours, revealed that children and youth who attend critical hours programming spend more time involved in academic and arts enrichment, organized sports and physical activities, community service, and homework while they are at the program than their non-attending peers. Further, they spent less time eating and watching TV while at the program than elsewhere. Participants' positive behaviour patterns were complemented by high ratings of positive social behaviors from teachers and increased achievement on school tests, meaning that the safety of the space provided by critical hours programs is directly related to improved outcomes for children and youth who take part.[23]

Positive Relationships

The third pillar of critical hours programming that emerges in the literature is the "Positive Relationships" that children and youth develop in high quality programs. A U.S. study by Deutsch and Jones on respect in the context of afterschool programming found that in fact the primary reason children return to afterschool programs is because of the relationships they build there,[24] while a study by Rhodes and Roffman indicated that student participants who were interviewed considered the program to be a "second home."[25] While many relationships the child or youth may hold are affected by their program attendance (child-community, child-parent, child-school), two are of particular importance in positively influencing social and academic outcomes for program participants: peer-peer and child/youth-adult.

Peer-Peer Relationships

Peer to peer relationships established in critical hours programming are part of the basis upon which child and youth social and emotional skills, as explored in the research surrounding the "Skill Development" pillar, are developed and honed. Keeping in mind that engagement in the program is the key determinant of improved outcomes for program participants, Positive relationships with peers enhance participant engagement, and reciprocally, a greater degree of engagement enhances social competency, and in turn enhances relationships with peers. This positive cycle creates a web of support among peer program participants, and a common group identity, and in so doing, improves their social outcomes.

The effect of critical hours programs on the development of prosocial behaviours and the decrease of problem ones is highly influenced by peer socialization, specifically in contexts less formal than the classroom where there is more opportunity for flexibility in interactions. Findings in a study by Wright et. Al on peer bonding in critical hours program suggests "an increase in prosocial development in youth when peer social support is present. In particular, as peer social support increased, prosocial behavior and self-esteem increased as well … [while] conduct disorder, emotional problems, hyperactivity, and indirect aggression all decreased." [26]

Child/Youth-Adult Relationships

The development of positive relationships between program participants and the adults who staff the programs can be complex due to various dimensions of social bonding involved, but two studies found that they are in fact the singular most important program factor to enhance social and academic outcomes for youth.[27]

In a review of the literature, program staff-participant relationships were described as "highly personal and relational,"[28] "more intense than teacher-student relationships" because they are not impeded by an evaluative nature, and as such there is a lesser power dynamic,[29] "peer-like, but still deserving respect."[30] In a study in which program staff and participants were interviewed on site, respect embedded in the context of supportive relationships emerged as an important order in participant-staff relationships. When children felt respected by the adults running the program, they were more likely to respect them in turn and also to be engaged in the structured enrichment activities, academic and non-academic that program staff was facilitating.[31] When participant engagement level increases, their social outcomes improve, and so does their interaction with positive role models, which ultimately leads to improved social outcomes, such as "the long-term attainment of positive social adjustment."[32]

Studies have shown that positive staff-participant relationships also concretely improve child and youth academic outcomes. As discussed above, children who attend program, and do so often, have up to a 20% increase in academic outcomes over their non-attending peers.[33] A study by Gottfredson et al. on middle school students attending programs found that the most consistent student attendance occurs in programs where staff effectively creates strong emotional bonds with them.[34] Further, the Pierce, Bolt and Vandell study on program quality study reported that children who participated in critical hours programs where staff-child/youth relationships were more positive displayed academic gains in both reading and math scores at the Grade 2/3 level over those who attended programs with less strong bonds being formed.[35]

Currently, positive relationships with staff stand as one of the most promising and also most challenging aspects of critical hours programming. While this pillar appears to have the strongest influence over social and academic outcomes for participants, it is also the area in which many programs are not considered "high quality", due to high rates of staff turnover, and insufficient or ineffective staff training. This is something that must be further explored as critical hours programming research moves forward.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can confidently say that the three pillars upon which critical hours programming rests are positively and concretely influencing social and academic outcomes for children and youth who take part in them. While research in this area in still fairly new, it has thus far identified "Skill Development", "Positive Relationships" and "Safe and Supportive Spaces" as profoundly interconnected elements which are essential to a high quality "bell to bell" experience for children and youth. As research moves forward, it will hopefully continue to follow-up on participants, so that we might determine the longevity of the effects of this type of program, and hopefully see that participants have remained strong and able students, as well as confident and well-adjusted individuals.

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[14] Shernoff, *supra* note 3 at 333.

[15] *Ibid* at 334.

[16] Viadero, *supra* note 15.

[17] Cross et. al, *supra* note 4 at 377.

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[22] Wright et. al *supra* note 6 at 77.

[23] Vandell et. al *supra* note 7 at 124-26

[24] Deutsch and Jones, *surpra* note 19 at 682.

[25] Wright et. al *supra* note 6 at 78.

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[31] *Ibid* at 671.

[32] Wright et. al *supra* note 6 at 77-78.

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[34] Gottfredson et. al at 305.

[35] Pierce, Bolt and Vandell, at 390.