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The Role of After-School Environments in Students' Academic Performance

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This post is by [Elise Cappella](#), Associate Professor at [NYU Steinhardt](#) ([@nyusteinhardt](#)) and Director of the [Institute of Human Development and Social Change](#) ([@nyulHDSC](#)), and [Sophia Hwang](#), Doctoral Candidate at NYU.

At a time of increased partisanship, parents across party lines agree about one thing: **the importance of public funding for after-school programming. Nearly one in four U.S. families has a school-age child enrolled in after-school; these numbers are higher for Latino and African-American children.** Families benefit from the 15 hours of weekly supervision afforded by after-school programs. Equally important, high quality programs enhance children's **social-emotional** and **academic skills**, particularly among children from **low-income families and communities**.

Knowing how, on a daily basis, to promote quality for all children who attend after-school programs in communities with a range of needs and strengths, remains an ongoing challenge. This is difficult both for community-based organizations who administer programs and social scientists who study them. One path toward generating robust and useful knowledge about how to enhance daily practices in after-school settings is through **research-practice partnerships**. Toward this end, **Good Shepherd Services** (GSS), a large community-based organization with deep roots in New York City communities, and NYU's **Institute of Human Development and Social Change** (IHDS), an institute focused on interdisciplinary, policy-relevant research in areas such as education and child development, launched such a partnership in 2014.

We started small. **Elise Cappella** from IHDS and **Miranda Yates** from GSS discussed mutual goals around understanding and promoting after-school program quality and the complementary expertise needed to achieve these goals. We were joined by colleagues at **NYU Steinhardt** (**Sophia Hwang** and **Michael Kieffer**) and GSS (Diana Torres and **Lori Krane**) and secured seed funds from internal and external sources. These awards fortified the partnership and catalyzed an initial project with five after-school sites serving low-income Latino and African-American youth (3rd to 8th grade) in one urban area.

In this project, we aimed to answer: What is the role of after-school classroom quality in students' academic skills, engagement, and self-concept at the end of the year? To do so, we collected multimethod data in the fall and spring, including classroom observations, youth and instructor surveys, and reading assessments, and analyzed the data in multilevel models holding constant individual and setting factors. We learned that **youth in after-school classrooms observed to be positive, responsive, and organized had greater academic development over the school year. Importantly, these effects were magnified for youth with initial social and behavioral difficulties**, a subgroup at risk for school disengagement. These results suggest that supporting after-school classrooms to become positive, responsive, and organized spaces may enhance academic development for low-income youth with and without social-behavioral challenges. We are disseminating these results to both science and practice audiences with the aim to move the needle in both spheres.

Recently, we broadened our initial project to pose additional questions of relevance: What types of classroom discussions improve literacy and social skills for English language learners and their native English speaking peers? What are the strengths and goals of the after-school workforce and how can these be leveraged to enrich after-school interactions? Does a light-touch peer network intervention produce integrated and interconnected peer groups (in the short term) and youth social and academic learning (in the long term)? Through a combination of existing data and planned data collection, we are beginning to seek answers to these questions.

Yet, these questions might not have been posed, and the method for answering them might not be planned, without a research-practice partnership. **Scholars, practitioners, and funders alike have sounded the call for partnerships in education research.** These are described as **ongoing, mutualistic, and intentional cross-agency collaborations that involve efforts to generate and use research**



evidence to impact education practice. Although **evidence about the impact of education partnerships is limited**, the theory underlying them is compelling. **Research derived from a research-practice partnership is expected to produce credible, usable, and meaningful evidence that holds greater promise for feasibility and impact than research conducted in isolation.** Other benefits may emerge too, such as opportunities for professional development for students and staff and the intellectual space to develop new intervention and evaluation approaches to address complex, real world challenges.

In light of this, we have worked regularly on our partnership through its initial development and subsequent maintenance and planning phases. This includes sharing resources and expertise, communicating openly across multiple stakeholders, making decisions in clear and equitable ways, formalizing the partnership structure, and taking advantage of opportunities for building internal capacity and strengthening the partnership over time. Together, GSS and NYU share the same goals of contributing to the short-term enrichment and later life outcomes of the many children and youth who attend urban after-school programs. We expect to get there as partners.

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