



Youth belonging and cognitive engagement in organized activities: A large-scale field study



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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies of organized activities have found that participation is associated with a range of positive outcomes; however, findings from recent randomized trials have been more mixed. Understanding youth's psychological experiences of program involvement – their cognitive and emotional reaction to and participation in activities – may be key to understanding the influence of organized activities. Hierarchical linear modeling was used to investigate correlates of youth belonging and cognitive engagement in a sample of 1160 youth in 123 program offerings in 66 sites. Results revealed that intensity (frequency) of exposure positively predicted belonging and cognitive engagement; however, duration was negatively associated with cognitive engagement. The staff practice of providing a welcoming atmosphere predicted belonging; whereas provision of active skill-building predicted cognitive engagement. These relations were found to vary across content type.

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Participation in organized activities during out-of-school time (OST) is a common experience for youth in the U.S., with participation estimates ranging from 54% (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2007) to 90% (Duffett & Johnson, 2004). Organized activities take place in school buildings through traditional extracurricular offerings and the more recent 21st Century Community Learning Center program (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), through national organizations such as 4-H and Boys & Girls Clubs, and through local community centers and faith-based youth organizations. The present study focuses on multi-purpose afterschool programs, which tend to offer multiple organized activities with diverse content such as academic support, enrichment activities, arts, sports, and service. Research has produced promising evidence that participation in such activities can lead to a range of positive outcomes including improved academic achievement, reduced risk behaviors, increased civic engagement, and improved psychological functioning (for review, see Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009); however, findings from randomized studies are more mixed.

A recent randomized trial of afterschool programs for middle school students (Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010) found no effects for academics or other outcomes, echoing the earlier findings of Mathematica's national evaluation of 21st Century Community Learning Programs (James-Burdumy et al., 2005). Although such studies have

been critiqued on methodological grounds (Mahoney & Zigler, 2006), taken at face value the findings suggest an interpretation given by the researchers of the randomized trial: "We know that after-school programs can contribute to positive development but many programs have failed to do so" (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010, p. 371). This presents a question with important implications both for developmental science and policy: What characterizes successful organized activities compared to those that fail?

A promising approach to addressing this issue is to take a step back from outcomes and investigate and build greater understanding of youths' involvement experience; their in-the-moment psychological perceptions of the interactive climate and activities presented. This includes youths' emotional reactions to the social context, of which their sense of belonging is a key component; and youths' cognitive engagement, their mental involvement in individual and group tasks presented. Involvement experience is particularly important in learning contexts where attendance is not mandated, as negative experiences may result in reduced exposure, and without sufficient exposure no program can produce effects. Exposure is a subcomponent of participation, a subject that has received some research attention in recent years.

Participation in the voluntary context of organized activities is a multi-dimensional construct, involving related yet distinct factors associated with youths' depth and length of involvement (Mahoney et al., 2009). In a model presented by Bohnert, Fredricks, and Randall (2010), participation is conceptualized as consisting of intensity (frequency of participation in an activity), duration (participation over time), breadth (participation across activities), and engagement (affective, behavioral,

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cognitive); antecedents to participation include child context (demographics, family, etc.) and program characteristics. Participation dimensions are related across time and participation leads to positive youth outcomes.

Fig. 1 presents a conceptual model of participation based on the model of Bohnert et al. (2010). Pathways not tested in the present study are depicted as dashed lines. The model in Fig. 1 is less comprehensive than Bohnert et al.'s (2010), in order to allow us to target the specific areas of this study. In addition, our model depicts the program setting as a youth-in-context, transactional system, which separates individual and contextual factors. Productive participation occurs when individual and contextual factors come together in a 'fit' of youth in context (cf., stage-environment fit in Eccles et al., 1993; person-environment interaction in Hunt, 1975). Specifically, involvement experience creates a sense of identification or belongingness and a perception that tasks are cognitively at an appropriate challenge level. On the person-side (top left box), youth bring background influences such as demographics and their previous exposure. Person-side factors can influence the context side; for example, a staff member may adjust her program practices in response to the characteristics of the youth in the setting. On the context side (bottom left box), program features, including staff practices, group characteristics, and the content offered, have a direct impact on youth experience. We depict belonging and cognitive engagement with their own boxes, because as described below, contextual features may impact these aspects of involvement experience differentially. The rest of this introduction explores each aspect of this conceptual model.

Involvement experience

Belonging

Belongingness,¹ the idea that people want to feel like they fit in and matter in a group, has been studied as a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000), as an aspect of affective engagement (Fredericks et al., 2011), and as an antecedent to motivation, effort, and achievement (Goodenow, 1993). Belongingness and related ideas such as "home away from home" have been promoted extensively for OST (4-H, 2010; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hirsch, 2005); however, studies directly assessing belongingness in organized activities are rare. In one exception, a belongingness measure developed for use in Boys and Girls Clubs was found to correlate with program attendance and community involvement measures (Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002), and this measure was later found to predict protective and risk factors better than attendance rates in a sample of 98 youths in community-based afterschool programs (Anderson-Butcher & Fink, 2005). Faircloth and Hamm (2005) included extracurricular involvement as an indicator of school belonging and found support for belongingness as a mediator of motivation and achievement.

Cognitive engagement

Youth engagement has been called the "missing link" in organized activity research (Bartko, 2005). Cognitive engagement in particular may be very important for continued participation and uptake of developmental benefits. Flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson, 2000) provides a useful perspective from which to conceptualize cognitive engagement in OST settings. A flow experience, defined as a mental state involving total immersion in an activity, is believed to occur when challenges match skills (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). Not every cognitively engaging experience is necessarily a flow experience; however, in OST, youth perception of the 'right' level of challenge and concentration may be an important contributor to cognitive engagement (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007) representing intellectual fit in the youth-in-context system.

¹ Several terms are used in the literature including belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ford & Smith, 2007), sense of belonging (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Maslow, 1943), and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Youth background

Demographics

In previous research, youth experiences of a program varied substantially by their demographic characteristics; in particular, by age, gender, and parent education. In her review, Osterman (2000) states that school belonging research suggests that need for belonging likely varies across age and gender. The importance of age is supported by well-documented declines in OST participation across the school years (e.g., Denault & Poulin, 2009). In their study of after-school features, Pierce, Bolt, and Vandell (2010) found an interaction of observed positive staff-child relations by sex for math and reading (suggesting that boys gained more than girls from positive staff-child relations), and Pierce, Hamm, and Vandell (1999) found sex differences in associations between child-care experiences and child adjustment. Parent education serves as an indicator of socioeconomic status, a factor which also may affect participation and involvement experience (Mahoney et al., 2005).

Previous exposure

Many studies have suggested that "more is better"; that is, with some caveats, greater degrees of exposure to organized activities tend to be associated with a wide range of academic, developmental, and psychological benefits (for review, see Bohnert et al., 2010). For example, participation across multiple years (duration) is associated with greater benefits than a single year (Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Greater breadth of participation also tends to be associated with benefits, both in terms of the sum of activities youth attend and the diversity of types of settings in which they participate (Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Rose-Krasnor, Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006). Pattern centered work has revealed that particular profiles of breadth are associated with different outcomes (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Peck, Roeser, Zarrett, & Eccles, 2008; Zarrett et al., 2009).

A few caveats to the "more is better" rule should be mentioned. There is some evidence for a threshold at which greater participation does not yield more benefit; however, this threshold appears to be very high, with effects tapering only in small groups of the most intense participation (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998; Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006; Rose-Krasnor et al., 2006). Roth, Malone, and Brooks-Gunn (2010) found that the duration-outcomes link may be qualified by age; specifically, increased duration is only associated with academic achievement gains for elementary age students.

Program features

Evidence suggests – not surprisingly – that programs with particular features produce better outcomes for youth participants (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Pierce et al., 2010). Program features include a variety of aspects that generally relate to the design of the organized activity and affect the youth-in-context system; specifically, staff practices, group characteristics, and content types.

Staff practices

Staff practices are complex, both to employ and assess. In OST, as in school research, every instructor must negotiate a tension between the idea of "best practices" – the assumption that certain instructional behaviors are generally better for all kids in all situations (cf., Pianta & Hamre, 2009) – and the idea that staff practices should be adjusted to content and the youth present. Basic staff practices that support students cognition and socioemotional experience may be particularly important in organized activities with voluntary participation; however, school research suggests several arguments that apply to OST: individual students have differing needs, pedagogical content knowledge is important, and the complex practice of teaching cannot be simplified to a few prescriptions (Blumenfeld, Marx, & Harris, 2006; Brophy & Good, 1986).

Several staff practices have been shown to affect engagement and belonging in organized activities. Lerner (2004) and others have referred

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