Participant Perceptions of a UACS Afterschool Program: Extending Learning Beyond the Classroom

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Abstract

To date, relatively little research has examined the perceptions of children and parents involved in university-assisted partnership programs. In this paper, we present findings from a case study of a university-assisted community school (UACS) afterschool program wherein we interviewed participating students and their parents. We also completed participant observations at the school site and included the perspectives of the two central administrative staff (i.e., the school principal and the afterschool program coordinator), as this served to deepen our understanding. Our findings highlight how the students and parents positioned the UACS afterschool program as being significantly different from the regular school day, while also noting how the program positively shaped the children's lives. Further, we highlight how the administrative staff positioned the university as central to the afterschool program; in contrast, the students and parents did not mention the resources that were bound to the university. We conclude with implications for practitioners and scholars engaged in university-assisted partnership work.

Key Words: university-assisted community school, UACS, afterschool program, partnerships, students, parents, perceptions

Introduction

Both preK–12 schools and universities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate improved effectiveness as educational institutions. This longstanding concern followed the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (Holmes Group, 1986), which highlighted significant educational disparities in U.S. public schools. Since these concerns were initially raised, universities and preK–12 schools have been called upon to work together to identify ways to mutually improve their everyday practices (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). While the concept of universities and schools working together is not new, as it has its roots in the higher education civic engagement movement of the early 1900s (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007), calls for improved collaboration have intensified given the demand for increased accountability for student performance. Bringing together universities and schools can create a variety of possibilities as well as tensions for school and university personnel because of differing cultures (Eckel & Hartley, 2008; Lindahl, 2006); yet, it is not clear how children and families make sense of and are impacted by these partnerships. The existing literature has documented the impact of university–school partnerships on students, schools, districts, and/or community members (Patterson & Silverman, 2013), but to date, little empirical work has examined the experiences of children and families involved in university–school partnership programs. Thus, in this article, we present findings from a case study exploring the experiences and perceptions of parents and children who participated in a university-assisted community school (UACS) afterschool project. In particular, we highlight the ways in which parents and students perceived UACS afterschool educational experiences as being different from those found within the regular school day and how this was viewed as positively shaping the participating children's lives. We position this study at the intersection of afterschool research and research on university–school–community partnerships/the community schools movement.

Specifically, we first offer a literature review that highlights afterschool program impacts and a brief overview of the connection between community schools and the growing body of literature on UACS interventions. Second, we discuss the theoretical perspectives that informed this work, particularly at the data analysis stage. Third, we present the methodology that we used to complete this research. Fourth, we present the key findings, offering illustrative quotes related to the three themes. Finally, we discuss our findings, pointing to the implications for practitioners and scholars engaged in university–school partnerships more generally.

Literature Review

This literature review begins by situating the discussion, and our study more generally, within a brief history of UACS. We then highlight the literature that points to the UACS as an intervention and, more particularly, an afterschool program. In doing so, we emphasize how there is little research that attends to the perceptions of participating students and their parents.

University and School Collaboration

The existing research documents well the various ways in which universities and schools can collaborate (e.g., Baker & Murray, 2011; Grineski, 2003; Slater & Ravid, 2010). Indeed, our review of the literature suggests university–school partnerships typically fall into one of seven categories: (1) efforts to change curriculum or instructional approaches in the classroom (Balfanz & Mac Iver, 2000); (2) efforts to improve school leadership, such as principal preparation or leadership development (Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2011); (3) teacher preparation and professional development (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier, & Dempf-Aldrich, 2010; Holmes Group, 1986; Johnston, Wetherill, High, & Greenebaum, 2002); (4) central office improvement (Honig & Ikemoto, 2008); (5) research endeavors of interest to school systems (Ehrlich, Gwynne, Pareja, & Allensworth, 2014; Preston, Goldring, Guthrie, & Ramsey, 2012; Turley & Stevens, 2015); (6) college access (Núñez & Oliva, 2009); and (7) extended learning time (Luter, Lester, & Kronick, 2013). A growing body of literature has highlighted the challenges experienced when universities and schools collaborate (Higgins & Marickel, 1997; Kezar, 2007; Watson & Fullan, 1992), while also pointing to the possibilities that these partnerships have for school reform. Indeed, Goodlad (1993) pioneered a study of these partnerships based on his extensive experience leading university–school partnerships.

More recently, however, the university–school partnership literature has grown beyond the school and university walls and out into the community (Luter et al., 2013) where it has engaged local education reform actors in the shared mission to improve educational experience. Furthermore, the higher education civic engagement movement has served to advance a compelling moral, ethical, practical, and economic case for universities to catalyze community partnerships (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011; Stanton, 2008). One particular strand of this literature has proposed that universities have the potential to catalyze simultaneous neighborhood transformation and school reform partnerships (Taylor & Luter, 2013). One model that seeks to link school improvement with the simultaneous reform of higher education and neighborhoods is the university-assisted community schools (UACS) intervention.

A Brief History of University-Assisted Community Schools

The UACS intervention advanced by the University of Pennsylvania's Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships grew out of the community schools model of school improvement (Harkavy & Puckett, 1991). Scholarly and practical attention in education has been directed at schools that take concrete steps to include intensive and expanded services either linked to (Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997) or based at (Dryfoos, 1994; Kronick, 2005) the school. In her seminal book, Joy Dryfoos (1994) wrote about "full-service schools" that were meeting the nontraditional (and noncurricular) needs of students and their families. While Dryfoos (1994) herself claimed that "it is not even possible to define when a school is 'full service' rather than 'partial service'" (p. 99), she did provide a list of services that one might expect to be included in a full-service school. These schools were known for providing a web of support for children to address mental and physical health in addition to the needs of the surrounding community, but no certain set of prescribed interventions characterized a full-service school. Dryfoos's concept of "full-service schools," while focused solely on meeting the health needs of children and families, played into a larger national movement related to meeting the needs of families, children, and communities which is now referred to as "community schools" (U.S.; Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003) or "extended schools" (U.K.; Cummings, Dyson, & Todd, 2011). The Children's Aid Society (2013) considered the related concept of a "community school" as being one that has a strong instructional core; expanded learning opportunities for enrichment; and a full range of physical health, mental health, and social services available to children and families. Kronick (2005) conceptualized the theory driving what he called "full-service community schools" as including collaboration between diverse stakeholders; a vision for promoting systems change between schools, community partners, and public systems; and a focus on preventing children from entering juvenile and criminal justice systems. This is similar to the vision of "full-service community schools" recently conceptualized by Stefanski, Valli, and Jacobson (2016), as parents and students are not viewed as passive recipients of services.

University-Assisted Community Schools as an Intervention and Afterschool Program

The UACS model is a particular kind of community school model that has been the subject of many theoretical and practitioner-oriented publications (e.g., Grim & Officer, 2010; Harkavy, Hartley, Axelroth-Hodges, & Weeks, 2013; Taylor & McGlynn, 2010). However, little empirical work has sought to examine the implementation of a UACS, particularly in relation to how

children and their parents perceive the UACS. Some have suggested that the dearth of empirical research related to the UACS model is because UACS efforts typically fit the unique needs of a particular school in a particular place at a particular time (Lawson, 2013). It is, in other words, a process and product innovation designed to improve the components of the schooling (and non-schooling) enterprise that are mutually agreed upon by the school, university, and community stakeholders (Lawson, 2010). The ideal UACS also includes a "community development" model in which the university and school jointly work together to address underlying, structural causes of school underperformance by linking schooling activities to the regeneration of the surrounding neighborhood (Stefanski et al., 2016).

The literature on the UACS intervention has mostly included programmatic descriptions, which have tended to highlight the potential of the intervention as well as its successes. Some of the most frequently discussed benefits include: increased services offered to students, such as mental health care or experiential learning; increased sharing of university resources; utilization of college student paraprofessionals to deliver additional instruction or specialized services, such as health screenings or afterschool program offerings; teacher networking opportunities; and increased interaction with researchers (Grim & Officer, 2010; Moore, Brennan, Garrity, & Godecker, 2000; Taylor & McGlynn, 2010). Harkavy et al. (2013) have described the impacts of UACS efforts using results of surveys of teachers in UACS schools. They noted that teachers reported that children who were supported by UACS programming improved in their academic performance and their participation in class. The researchers also administered surveys to K–8 children and found that children reported that participation in the UACS afterschool program helped with homework, increased confidence that resulted in better school performance, increased interests in school day learning, and improved school day attendance (Harkavy et al., 2013).

The literature focused on afterschool programs has highlighted how such programs can have a variety of impacts on children, ranging from improving academic achievement (Auger, Pierce, & Vandell, 2013; Pierce, Auger & Vandell, 2013) to generating long-term occupational success and educational attainment (Auger et al., 2013) and from supporting physical well-being to promoting social/emotional learning (Auger et al., 2013; Hall, Williams, & Daniel, 2010). Other research has highlighted how impacts on children in afterschool programs is never guaranteed, as these impacts depend upon program quality measures, including supportive relationships with adults, mastery orientation, appropriate program structure, overall climate, and staffing experiences and needs (Vandell et al., 2005; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). While

the majority of research studies have focused on the general population of students, a few have examined afterschool programs' impact on specific student populations, including those who are economically disadvantaged and/or from racial/ethnic minorities (Hall et al., 2010; Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005). These studies have disclosed that afterschool programs can support students' academic success while also serving as a "safe haven" by providing structured activities as opposed to just "hanging out" with friends—especially for students living in low-socioeconomic environments.

The majority of the research about afterschool programs has employed quantitative methodologies (e.g., Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010; Kahne et al., 2001). Such research has produced limited understanding of the ways in which youth and families make sense of their experiences in afterschool programs. Notable examples of qualitative scholarship have suggested that children participating in these programs perceive such contexts as "fun" places to work on homework (Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010), safe places where autonomy is valued yet support exists (Hall et al., 2010), and contexts that build social capital (Jarret, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). This scholarship has also pointed to the varying perceptions of children who are from nondominant groups (Perry & Calhoun-Butts, 2012), suggesting that afterschool programs could also have an impact on youths' cultural identities and expanded notions about their future life opportunities.

Yet, to date, there is little scholarship that documents how those participating in UACS afterschool programs make sense of such interventions. Existing literature on the impact of afterschool programs (reviewed above) focuses on those programs designed and implemented by the organizations themselves—not necessarily by an outside group such as a university. While there is some scholarship focused on how to design university–school collaborations and implement programs and interventions (e.g., Bosma et al., 2010; Gieselmann, 2008; Nandan, 2010), little scholarship has documented (1) the implementation of a comprehensive afterschool intervention led by a university but linked to a whole-school reform, and (2) the influences these kinds of programs have on staff, students, and families (Luter et al., 2013). We sought to position our study within the growing body of literature documenting the strengthening relationships between universities, school officials, and afterschool staff in implementing innovative afterschool programming (Duran, Höft, Lawson, Medjahed, & Orady, 2014; Smith et al., 2014), which holds promise.

Interestingly, the research highlighting that high-quality afterschool programs make a demonstrable impact on a variety of youth development outcomes has greatly influenced the development of the UACS afterschool intervention (e.g., Kahne et al., 2001). Yet, there is minimal empirical work focused on

examining the UACS afterschool intervention, particularly in relation to student and parent perspectives. Thus, in this study, we sought to document the everyday experiences of children and parents participating in a UACS afterschool program. More particularly, the purpose of the study was two-fold: (1) to understand the experiences and perceptions of youth and parents/caregivers about a UACS afterschool program, and (2) to explore the initial influences of the UACS afterschool program on families and youth. While we were mainly focused on how students and parents understood the UACS effort (thereby allowing their voices to drive the results), we were particularly interested in how the UACS supported children and their families as they navigated the schooling process. Our primary research question was: How do participating students and their parents perceive a UACS afterschool intervention?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspectives informing our research were inspired by the positive youth development (or PYD) paradigm (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004), or the core competencies that children are thought to acquire through school-based prevention programs, as well as the broader literature related to UACS (highlighted above). Positive youth development arose as a counter-movement to the deficit perspective of adolescent development advanced by early psychologists (Lerner et al., 2005). Early approaches to adolescent and youth development were framed as the absence of risky behaviors, such as *not* participating in drinking, drugs, or unsafe sexual activity (Benson, 2003). Positive youth development research, in contrast, is associated with the "five Cs": competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/compassion (Lerner, 2004).

At the same time that positive youth development grew in the psychological literature, a parallel notion became popularized in the school-based youth development literature (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). Concerns mounted that social institutions that traditionally served as mechanisms for the social and emotional development of children, such as the family and faith-based institutions, were no longer fulfilling these roles. As a result, schools were under increasing pressure to provide opportunities for children (Short & Talley, 1997). Consensus coalesced around the belief that a school's mission should include providing additional services, such as physical and mental health (Greenberg et al., 2003). Thus, afterschool interventions were one way that schools were thought to achieve the social and emotional learning outcomes that were central to positive youth development (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010).

As such, we drew upon a theoretical perspective centered on the academic, social, and emotional well-being of children for our study, adopting

a framework developed by researchers at the University of Illinois–Chicago's Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which focuses on evidence-based social and emotional learning aimed at developing the following competencies: (1) self-awareness, (2) social awareness, (3) self-management, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2003). These five competencies informed our coding scheme and the way by which we interpreted the dataset. In addition, our analysis was shaped by the literature around UACS in relation to school–university partnerships as we considered how the participating students and parents perceived the university and the school.

Methods

In this study, we employed a qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2014) which included participant observations (Salway, Harriss, & Chowbey, 2010). In doing so, we studied the perceptions of youth and parents who participated in a UACS afterschool program, inviting them to reflect on how the UACS shaped their life and school experiences.

Researchers' Roles

Throughout this study, we sought to maintain a reflexive stance (Pillow, 2003), taking into account how our positionalities and the ways in which who we are shaped what we came to know. In line with this commitment, we recognized that our role in and outside of the research site informed how we came to interpret the data. For instance, during the course of one school year, the first author volunteered as a classroom assistant and built a relationship with many of the students who ultimately participated in the study. This ongoing interaction allowed easier access to the research site as a participant–observer. In addition, the first author collected the majority of the data. Similarly, throughout one school year, the second author served as a classroom teacher and teaching assistant in the UACS, coming to know many of the children who participated in the study quite well. Thus, for the first two authors, the daily work offered opportunities to engage in extensive participant observations, providing a deep contextual understanding that extensive time in the field can offer. The third author, who identifies as an education policy researcher, was not part of the daily functioning of the UACS, but was included as an outside evaluator for this study and participated in the analysis of the data. The fourth author was the university faculty member who collaborated with the elementary school to begin the UACS. His work within community schools began well over a decade ago and resulted in him being integrally involved in the day-to-day functioning of the UACS.

Participant and Site Description

The UACS intervention under investigation in this study began in 2010 after a local businessman provided three years of funding to a university education faculty member (Kronick) for an afterschool program. The faculty member, who had been working with principals and local elementary schools for many years, collaborated with one elementary school principal who wanted to expand the services her school was offering by developing an afterschool program embedded within a community school model. This urban Title I school included grades K–5, with a total of 320 students. At the time of this study, the school had a 37% mobility rate, and 90% of its students received free or reduced-fee lunch. Across the student population, 23 different countries and 30 languages were represented. This school was located approximately four miles from the downtown core of a midsized southern city with a metropolitan population of just under 700,000 ("Urban Area Criteria," 2011). Its resident population was relatively diverse, with 79% identifying as White alone, 9% identifying as Black, 6% identifying as Asian, and 4% identifying as other races. Renters occupied the vast majority (70.1%) of the dwellings in the area. Rolling hills surrounded the school and were populated mostly by single-family houses, with at least five apartment complexes, several industrial properties, and an interstate making this a unique urban neighborhood.

Together, the university faculty member, the school principal, and a team from the district hired an afterschool coordinator while also coordinating the involvement of various university departments, community agencies, and volunteers. The afterschool program included 55 university and community mentors and volunteers who provided a variety of programs, including philosophy classes, nightly tutoring, counseling services, Chinese class, and a circus program (focused on cooperative problem-solving and mindfulness), among many others (see Lester, Kronick, & Benson, 2012, for a fuller description of the programs included). At the time of this study, the UACS was open five nights a week from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. during the regular school year. In the summer months, the UACS was open from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. While all children in the school were eligible, due to limitations in funding, initially only 75 children (23% of the school population) participated in the afterschool program, selected based on a series of "risk" factors such as attendance, tardies, grades, and behavioral referrals. For more details about the afterschool program's initial implementation, see Luter et al. (2013).

We used purposeful sampling based on the criteria that students participated in the UACS afterschool program for the entire academic year (Patton, 2002). We worked with the staff coordinator to send home permission slips/

informed consent letters with the children that participated for an entire year. Children whose parents returned the permission slip/informed consent were interviewed for the study. The total sample included 31 participants. This included 17 children between the ages of 7–11 (Grades 2–5) who were currently participating in the UACS and 12 of their parents. Of the 17 children, 10 boys and 7 girls were interviewed. Of those children, 76% ($n = 13$) identified as Black, 12% identified as White ($n = 2$), and 12% identified as Hispanic ($n = 2$). Of the 12 parents, 9 women and 3 men were interviewed. Of those parents, 42% ($n = 5$) identified as Black, 42% identified as White ($n = 5$), and 16% ($n = 2$) identified as Hispanic. At the time of the data collection, all of the interviewed children had participated in the UACS for at least nine months. Finally, in addition to the participating children and parents who were the primary study participants, two administrators were invited to participate—the school principal and the UACS afterschool coordinator. At the time of this study, the school principal had been at the school for eight years, serving exclusively in the role of principal, and the UACS coordinator had been working with the UACS for nine months.

Data Collection

After receiving Institutional Review Board and school system approval, we initiated data collection. Data was collected at the end of the first nine months of the UACS afterschool program being in operation. More specifically, data sources for this study included: field notes, 12 parent interviews, 10 child focus groups, one individual child interview, four follow-up child interviews, and ongoing participant observations. Ongoing field notes were taken by the supervising faculty member (Kronick) two times per month over the course of the school year. Luter carried out the focus groups with the participating children and individual interviews with the parents. We created interview protocols based on phase one of the study (Luter et al., 2013), and we piloted these protocols with children of similar age (Grades 2–5) in a different elementary school's afterschool program. Questions for children included:

- How would you describe your experience in the UACS/afterschool program? Have you noticed any changes in your learning or schoolwork since you started coming to the UACS program?
- If so, can you talk about them?
- If you could change some things about the program, what would you change?
- How is the UACS program different (or the same) from your regular school day?

Questions for parents included:

- Have you noticed any changes within your children since they started attending?
- What changes have you noticed with your child? Family?
- How about your relationship with the school?
- Talk about some of the challenges and successes you have encountered with the program.
- Since your child has started participating, have your expectations matched what the program offers?

We also supplemented our initial data by conducting interviews with the school principal and UACS coordinator, which we used to contextualize our analysis of the student and parent perspectives. The interviews and focus groups occurred over five days in the last month of the school year. Child focus groups lasted, on average, 20 minutes, while parent interviews lasted an average of 10 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and stored on a password-protected computer. The interview with the school principal lasted 45 minutes, and the interview with the UACS coordinator lasted 60 minutes. Participant observations occurred over the course of one week in the last month of the school year.

Data Analysis

We used an inductive approach to data analysis, conducting a thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2013) of the interview data. After the first two authors transcribed the interview data and removed all identifying information, all four authors engaged in multiple iterations of line-by-line memoing and coding, working toward consensus on the coding scheme between researchers to enhance reliability (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). We used codes directly informed by the literature as well as descriptive and in-vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013). Next, given the relationships between data sources (e.g., participant observations and focus groups), we developed categories and subcategories of codes. We eventually produced abstract themes which are presented below.

As a collaborative research team living and working in different locations, we carried out joint data sessions via phone and Skype. In addition, we individually coded and memoed the data, sharing our analysis with one another via ATLAS.ti project files. This allowed us to engage in a more nuanced and robust analysis of the similar and dissimilar ways in which we individually approached the data, thereby allowing us to merge ideas and develop consensus around how to approach the data set.

Warranting the Findings

Aware of our positionalities and partiality, we approached the interpretation of the data as an emergent process and sought to ground our claims in the data. We also took intentional steps to warrant our claims, thereby seeking to establish trustworthiness. First, throughout the data collection and analysis process, we acknowledged the need to maintain reflexivity. Similar to Atkinson (1990), we believed that the final research "texts" did "…not simply and transparently report an independent order of reality" (p. 6). Rather, we recognized that we were a part of the research process and therefore sought to chronicle our position through maintaining reflexivity memos and research journals. Further, we preserved the data and our joint decision-making process in such a way that it might be made available to certify that the "data exist...and that the interpretations have been made in ways consistent with the available data" (Guba, 1981, p. 88). In other words, we maintained a clear audit trail.

Findings

We generated three themes from the qualitative analysis of the student focus group and parent interview data, with these themes being further developed in relation to the principal and afterschool coordinator interviews. First, we noted that the participants described the UACS afterschool program as being remarkably "different" from the "regular" school day. These differences were cast positively and positioned as being linked to the purpose of the UACS afterschool program, with many of the participants pointing to specific activities that made the space "different." Second, we found that the participants, particularly the parents, described the UACS afterschool program as being a pathway for positive youth development. Notably, the parents gave explicit examples of the ways in which their child's participation in the program resulted in social, emotional, and academic growth. Finally, across the data, we noted that the participating students made little to no reference to the university's role in the UACS afterschool program, with the university positioned as simply part of the school. In this way, the university was perceived as an "insider" and simply part of the daily operations, rather than being thought of as a separate entity. We discuss each of these themes in greater detail below.

Theme One. "Different:" Two Worlds, One School

Across the data, the participating students and parents shared how they perceived the UACS afterschool program as being separate and distinct from the "regular" school day. As one student explicitly stated, "It feels like you are in a different world." The source of these perceptions appeared closely related

to the types of instructional activities provided within the UACS afterschool program as well as instructional approach taken by UACS afterschool program staff. Parents and students frequently used positive language to describe these differences, with many parents viewing this "different" world as "enriching" for their children. For instance, one parent noted that:

He's [my son's] always been focused on his school work but he, he's even more dedicated [now]. He enjoys coming to the afterschool program because there is different things that he can do. It is not really on a set schedule time to do things like in a classroom…with afterschool, if they see he's lacking in a certain subject, then they get a little bit more one-on-one time. And with me, they say, "hey, you may want to see if you can find a few things to do at home" to help him through whatever he's having problems with.

The above quote illustrates well how eight of the parents oriented to the afterschool program as uniquely addressing their children's needs in ways that were different from their everyday schooling experiences—which seemingly exceeded their expectations of the program. Much of this "difference" was described as being linked to the individualized approach that was used by the UACS staff when they interacted with the children. For example, data indicated that staff and volunteers who participated in the UACS provided circus, recess, and enrichment opportunities to students who participated. Similarly, all but two students (all focus groups except one) shared that the UACS was "different," frequently comparing it to the "regular school day" which some described as "boring." Some of the participating students described the UACS afterschool program as being "really…really super-duper fun" because it introduced different forms of enrichment. This student shared:

Yeah, and when I am in an afterschool program, it's really, really, really, really, really, really, really, super-duper fun. Because when you get to do music, and you know, really, when we get music, we get to talk at the end for 10 minutes.

In one of the focus group conversations with students, two participants described what made the UACS afterschool program "different," noting:

Student 2: Yeah, I think it's different, too.

Student 1: 'Cuz in regular school you don't have snack, circus…well, we have music.

Student 2: Regular school don't have, like, Chinese.

In the above quote, the students positioned the *difference* as being centered on the activities they engaged in while at the UACS, which were frequently

described by both students and parents as being distinct from "regular" school activities. In the examples offered by the students, snacks, circus, and Chinese language instruction were described as activities that were not readily available to them during the regular school day. Another student shared the following:

Student: It's different.

Interviewer: How's it different?

Student: Because in normal school we don't have circus classes.

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Student: And, but, afterschool program we get to learn what we don't usually learn in, um, our daily lives.

The above student offered a contrast between what happened in "normal school" with that which occurred in the UACS afterschool program. Specifically, he noted the "circus classes" (which offered an opportunity for the students to learn team building skills while engaging in actual circus tricks) as being unique to the afterschool program, while also depicting his experience as something that resulted in learning that impacts his "daily" life. Similarly, another student shared, "I learn to be intelligent [at the UACS]" through "new learning things."

Despite the positive assessments offered by many of the parents and students, 11 of the participating students expressed being "bored" by the "learning" in the afterschool program, while simultaneously perceiving what happened in the UACS space as involving the teaching of "different stuff." This sense of "boredom" was often linked to "tutoring" or "academic time" by the students, further highlighting the value placed on the "unique" activities that the students associated with being different from their "regular" day. In short, the more similar the UACS afterschool program became to the regular school day, the less students and parents perceived that it was a distinct or different world. The afterschool coordinator further clarified this felt difference, noting that:

You gotta get the kids up, 'cause they've already done that for six hours. You've gotta get them up, a little more hands-on, moving around. So you can kind of supplement what the regular day is doing, support the teachers, support the school district…give the kids a chance to, to experience some other activities.

Thus, in this way, the afterschool program was constructed as being both different from the "regular" school day and a "support" to the school's broader aims. Similarly, the school principal further highlighted how what happened at the UACS was different from the "regular" school day, even naming the students who attended the UACS afterschool program her "full-service kids."

Further, she highlighted how the UACS program evolved out of a full-service community school model and how it served a very unique role in creating opportunities for the "full-service kids." She shared:

> Well for me, being, seeing all of the aspects of my kids at the school, there's multiple purpose; the real mission part of me wants to just take my students that I've identified to keep them safe in a place where they, where they're not, um, at their apartment complexes with nothing to do, so that they're finding things to do that aren't safe, um, where they, if they have academic challenges, they can work with people that are gonna help them with those and that are trained to help them, that can help identify their needs, that we can program it so that they get the extra help that they may not be able to get at home, through no fault of their parents, no fault of any individual, but just that, it's just not set up for them at this particular time for them to get that help.…It's not a babysitting program, but it's geared for a specific need to address…social needs of some of the children.

Here, the principal pointed to how she, too, envisioned the UACS program as fulfilling a role that was different from yet complementary to the regular operation of the school. For instance, while there was an explicit focus on providing a "safe" place for students to be after school hours, there was also an emphasis on academic growth. Our participant observations also pointed to how the afterschool staff experienced a certain degree of autonomy over the program structure while remaining responsive to the school's desire for academic enrichment. Thus, from one perspective, this finding suggests that the UACS afterschool program created a unique space in the school that could potentially engage students in enhanced learning opportunities. Yet, from a different perspective, it is possible that UACS program's "difference" generated a certain degree of division between the school and the program, which we also noted in our participant observations and have reported in previous research (Luter et al., 2013). Indeed, the afterschool coordinator noted this potential division, stating that:

> With some of the, the visions and beliefs of what the program should be, the school district has theirs, the university has theirs. You try to appease a lot of people on both sides.

Despite the potential for differences across "visions and beliefs," the participants perceived these differences as facilitating positive development, which we discuss next.

Theme Two. "We was the baddest kids ever…but:" UACS as a Path for Positive Youth Development

The majority of the students who participated in the UACS afterschool program were selected by the principal, whose goal was to provide support to "at-risk" children who might not get it otherwise. In fact, four of the students who participated in the focus groups specifically spoke about being the "baddest kids" in the school; yet, such comments were followed up with descriptions of how the UACS afterschool program changed their perception of self. For instance, one student shared the following:

> Student: Yeah, because I used to be like, not that smart, but, like, as I, when I started the afterschool program, I have learned more.

> Interviewer: Really? How do you, how can you tell?

> Student: Because when, like, I don't actually know all my multiples that much, but now I actually know all of them…we do a lot of multiplication, and right now I'm doing like this coloring thing of multiplication, and it's helping me more.

> Interviewer: Okay.

> Student: Like if you forget some of them, I still have a back up.

While more than one-half (n = 11) of the students who participated in the focus group articulated improved academic skills, most (n = 7) of the participating parents described how the afterschool program improved their child's behavior, relationship skills, and decision-making abilities. One parent offered evidence of explicit changes in her son's behavior since he began participating in the program, noting:

> Since he's been coming here, like, he usually stays in the house and doesn't really talk to anybody. But ever since he's been coming here, he goes outside. He makes new friends. He talks to other people. He's been, he's, he's a lot friendlier now, so he'll, he'll like take his aggression out on us. But since he come here, like they'll kick the ball or something, and, I see, like, he takes a whole lot of aggression out in running and ((unintelligible speech)). So when he comes here, when he comes home, he is a lot [more] calm. He doesn't want to argue with anybody.

In the above quote, the parent pointed to how the program supported her son in developing new social and emotional skills, which were described as being in evidence in the home context as well.

Other parents more generally described their child as "growing" both socially and academically, with one stating:

I mean he's, he's grown a lot, you know with the program, umm, I mean with the tutoring part. You know. Hm, that's been really good for him. So it's help with his reading, with his math. And then, you know, also, playing with the kids afterschool has been great, too.

Related to this, seven parents specifically discussed how their children were developing "character skills" and becoming interested in attending school now that they know their day will end with the afterschool program. For instance, one mother said:

The fact that my daughter prefers to come to school just so that she can, one, finish her class, and then two, go the afterschool program. She hates when I come early. They do homework. They go over their homework, and then whatever they have questions on, they help them with those. But like I said, she loves it. I love it…I think the purpose of the program is, one, to teach confidence and, kind of like, covers integrity and trust… trustworthiness, and, um, and, more than likely, a lot of confidence.

While social and emotional characteristics were frequently noted as "improving" or "growing" due to experiences in the afterschool program, many parents also explicitly emphasized the positive impact on academic achievement.

Notably, the majority of the children invited to participate in the afterschool program were struggling to meet academic standards. Thus, an explicit goal of the program was to implicitly and explicitly impact student achievement. Interestingly, parents who were interviewed frequently offered examples of how the afterschool program positively improved their child's academic achievement. For example, one mother noted:

…like I said, the successes [with the afterschool program] have been with my son's coming up in his grades, his reading scores…I was thinking [the afterschool program would be like] more of a daycare setting where they did just whatever they wanted to, and, you know, people were just around. But it has been totally different. Like, you know, doing their homework and making sure that it gets done before they get home, which helps me out.

In the above quote, academic support was highlighted, with the program positioned as providing support to the parent as well. While this comment more generally pointed to the positive aspects of the program, more specifically, across the data, one particular program within the UACS was commonly mentioned as contributing positively to youth development—the circus arts program. Both the students and parents perceived the circus program as positively shaping both social and emotional development. One student stated:

Student: Yeah we do different kinds of things [in circus], and they let you do free play. And, we do a meditation at the beginning of circus.

Interviewer: You do a meditation at the beginning of circus.

Student: Yeah.

Interviewer: Interesting. What's that like?

Student: Fun. Like it's just, calm yourself, and be quiet and breathe for a couple of minutes or so. Then we, first we do like the same specific thing, and then we just have free time.

Similarly, parents recognized the ways in which the circus arts program served to support the development of their child's social and emotional well-being. One parent shared, "My 'wild child' wouldn't listen to no one…now he interacts with people, and, you know, he listens to the staff …talks with people…plays with kids. He's changed." Another parent simply stated, "She's more social," with another parent claiming, "It [the circus program] just helped her become more confident in herself." One parent went further and said, "Change nothing [about the program]…because what they doing...they [are] sowing the seed into them so they are going to be able to take it to the fifth and the sixth grade…if it was 24 hours [all-day program], it would be great."

While the parents and students all noted the positive impact of the circus arts program, our interview with the afterschool coordinator affirmed how the activities embedded within the afterschool program were explicitly designed to generate positive youth development:

We have a circus program Monday through Thursday where the kids are able to do, uh, team-building activities and confidence things. They get up, get moving, and focus on building their self-confidence. And then what we do Fridays is supplement that with a character development class where they're able to journal and have, maybe some roundtable, feather-circle type of activities where they can discuss what's going on in their lives and what they're going to do over the weekend.

Indeed, this particular theme illuminates how many of the participants, particularly the parents, perceived the UACS afterschool program as being a source for improved behavior and social/emotional learning for the children enrolled as well as a source of additional academic assistance and support.

Theme Three. "Like a special volunteer:" The University and Its Resources

As previously noted, the UACS program included a variety of programs, such as circus arts, Chinese language instruction, music, tutoring by university students and faculty, nightly family dinner, mental health groups, and adult GED classes. Volunteers led the majority of the activities, with a few of the core

activities, such as the nightly meals, being supported through the grant funding. While some of the activities mentioned in interviews and observed during field visits were not necessarily new to the school environment (e.g., music, dinner, GED classes), others were viewed as nontraditional and "different" (e.g., circus, Chinese instruction), with school personnel noting that these activities would not have been possible without the university's resources and ongoing involvement. In fact, the principal and UACS coordinator positioned the university's resources as being central to the very functioning of the afterschool program. The school principal, for instance, described the central role the university volunteers played within the UACS:

> The university is partnering with us to be able to provide that, so, uh, the whole project has a coordinator that's hired to coordinate the services… with the identified students, then we have the classes that provide that academic support, plus it also gives 'em an extra enrichment that provides, um, the students the motivation to want to be here, besides just the fact that they are provided a place to be.…Some of 'em have transportation, if they can't get home in the evenings, the university provides volunteers through their various academic programs.…Then we have volunteers coming in through university programs like the art program, the athletic program, engineering, the law school…I know I'm leaving a bunch out.

Her quote highlights the depth with which the university supported the program. The afterschool coordinator also described the ways in which the university volunteers served the UACS:

> The people willing to come in and give their time, obviously being a UACS, you've got a lot of, you've got probably 90–100 volunteers coming in from the university…departments willing to give up their time— art education, philosophy, nutrition, and wanting to come in and do programs with the kids. And, that's something that the [university] departments' students are doing to help support the program.

In the above quote, the various university departments, university students, and sheer number of volunteers ("90–100") were positioned as central to being a UACS. In this way, the university was viewed by the administrative staff as providing essential resources to run the program.

While university volunteers and the "U" component of the UACS was described by the principal and afterschool coordinator as being the infrastructure behind the program, the university itself was mentioned only two times across all the focus groups with the students and never mentioned by the participating parents. It was also not mentioned during participant observations. We found this to be a notable finding, as the student and parent perceptions regarding

the university stood in contrast to the administrative staff. In fact, when the university was mentioned by the two students, it was discussed in relationship to the "university volunteers," with one student stating:

Student: It [the afterschool program] has fun teachers.

Interviewer: You think it has fun teachers. Okay, hm. How do –

Student: And the university student volunteers.

Another student referred to the faculty member (Kronick) who operated the UACS as a "special volunteer…who owns the university." This theme, then, points to the unique role that the university played—one that was somewhat invisible to the students and parents. In this way, this particular finding elucidates how, in many ways, the university staff operated the UACS afterschool program as "insiders," being viewed as simply part of the school system. This "inside" view perhaps afforded the UACS staff enormous potential for impacting student learning and school operations.

Limitations

As with any study, we were bound by several limitations. First, three of the four researchers were geographically located in different areas than the program. We relied mostly on Dr. Kronick to take ongoing field notes to help confirm findings that emerged from the point-in-time interviews. Luter, Lester, and Lochmiller may have missed some of the nuances and small interactions between children, families, and school staff. Still, some attempt was made to triangulate the findings through this ongoing field note-taking. Also, Luter and Lester were regular volunteers of the program the year before data were collected, so many of the students recognized and were familiar with us. Second, our data were collected from the students and parents who agreed to participate in the study. It is possible that parents and children who had different points to raise were simply not heard in this study because they did not elect to participate. The afterschool coordinator spoke to parents and children about the study, so we attempted to ensure that everyone felt knowledgeable and welcome to participate. Finally, our study is limited to only what students and parents reported. We did not seek to confirm students' gains in personal or academic development with improved school performance or on a validated scale of any sort. Such an effort is for future studies.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from this study demonstrate the extent to which a UACS can serve as a pathway for positive youth development and how university resources

(e.g., volunteers and programs) can become an integral part of the school community seeking to improve educational experiences for students, particularly those who are at-risk. Given these findings, we see the contributions for this paper affirming past research (e.g., Lawson, 2010, 2013), while offering important insights drawn from the perspectives of participating students and parents. In the UACS we studied, designed for children in Grades 1–5, the opportunity for students to participate in the program, as well as the resources that partnerships brought to bear, served a unique need for the school. Students were provided with educational experiences that were different from those they experienced during the school day. These experiences were perceived by students and parents as both extending upon the regular school day and creating new opportunities for student engagement and development. In serving this need, the school, its students, and parents saw the UACS as a valued resource, and, in this respect, we see the findings as largely affirming past research about the effectiveness and value of university-assisted community schools (Grim & Officer, 2010; Harkavy et al., 2013; Taylor & McGlynn, 2010).

We also found evidence that the UACS program was in line with the existing literature on afterschool program impacts. Our study did suggest that a university-assisted afterschool program could foster: (1) self-awareness, (2) social awareness, (3) self-management, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2003), but our study further suggested that the issue is more complex. Children do experience things in these programs that are not often discussed, such as "boredom" and bullying (discussed by two children), which are challenges for practitioners and scholars to collaboratively handle (Apsler, 2009; Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). We argue that the addition of youth and parent voices to the literature base strengthen it and reflect reality.

As we noted, in our study, the university was essentially a silent partner. However, our research also suggests that universities can be partners in helping schools meet their family and community engagement goals. As discussed in the Equitable Parent–School Collaboration research project, some of the most important indicators of parent engagement include a respectful, welcoming school climate and leadership who develop and maintain meaningful relationships with families and communities (Ishimaru, Lott, Fajardo, & Salvador, 2014). Further, according to the most recent Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015), school leaders should also be supported in knowing how to engage families and communities. We argue that the UACS could be a promising site for leaders to become more familiar with how to collaborate and build strong connections with families and communities.

The findings from this study also provide insights into the effective implementation of UACS and in so doing contribute to the relatively thin literature base about implementation of these partnerships (Bosma et al., 2010; Gieselmann, 2008; Nandan, 2010). Namely, the findings from this study indicate that effective implementation of a university-led partnership rests on the university's ability to marshal resources for the partnership, develop meaningful programs that are aligned to school needs, and develop relationships that instill a sense of trust and collegiality. As we noted in the third theme, the participants recognized the volunteers from the university and saw them as integral but rarely referred to the university itself. We suggest that this is a potentially new line of research wherein we seek to define how UACS participants characterize the university as an agent in the partnership and how these characterizations might ultimately be linked to the success or failure of such a partnership. For example, in partnerships where the university is perceived as being overly involved and/or controlling, it might be that partners struggle to achieve buy-in with the participating parents and students. Likewise, in partnerships where the university is too distant or disengaged, there may not be sufficient support or motivation to launch or sustain a partnership.

Finally, the study has implications for both the UACS and school reform fields. Given pressures within the school day to focus intently on tested subjects, a university-assisted, full-service community school provides an alternative model for schools to consider when seeking to blend academic subjects with enrichments. In the case of the UACS we studied, students and parents both perceived the value of enrichment activities, such as hands-on learning, circus, music, and art. The availability of such supports may be particularly valuable given current fiscal challenges on public schools, as well as the feeling among educators that time within the instructional day should be devoted to academic subjects that align with current test-based accountability expectations. The ability of a university partner to marshal such valuable resources seems a particularly worthwhile initiative, particularly for low-income students who attend schools where such resources may not be as widely available.

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