Relationships

The Key to Student Success in Afterschool Programs

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Student success and achievement in afterschool programs depend on caring adults who go above and beyond to make children feel that they are special and can achieve anything (Akhavan, Emery, Shea, & Taha-Resnick, 2017).

In the Oxnard (California) School District, where I am the afterschool grant manager, many of the 200 staff in the Oxnard Scholars afterschool program are working in their first job. This is the first time they have been in charge of young people and the first time they have been called "teacher." These firsts can be drawbacks, but they also can create powerful opportunities to build staff members' capacity to engage students and enrich their lives.

To shape the Scholars program into a caring afterschool environment, program leaders and I have worked with the staff to help them understand the importance of their relationships with students. Frameworks focusing on developmental assets and developmental relationships have helped us show our young staff how to build positive adult relationships with program participants. Other programs may be able to use some of these ideas to enable their own staff to foster the relationships that lead to student success.

Context

Approximately 2,500 children in grades 1 through 8 attend the Oxnard Scholars program at the district's 20 schools. The program is voluntary; parents register their children knowing that students are expected to attend five days a week. At some schools, 100 or more families are on a waiting list for the program, which offers art, recreation, literacy, math, engineering design, and sports programming. The district partners with the city of Oxnard to offer the program with support from a state funding stream for afterschool education.

Challenges

Oxnard School District is characterized by high poverty, large populations of minority students and stu-

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dents with limited English proficiency, and low student achievement. The community offers limited childcare resources and has one of the highest removal rates in the state for child protective services. Though the city is surrounded by farms, housing is dense, with multiple families living in one household.

In a study of students graduating from Oxnard schools, Akhavan and colleagues (2017) found that students' self-reported success was connected to relationships with caring adults who taught them perseverance and challenged them to meet high expectations. Though some students are receiving these supports, there is room for improvement. The 2016–2017 California Healthy Kids Survey (Oxnard School District, 2017), which measures school climate and reports on factors important to resiliency and youth development in grades 4 through 12, showed that, among Oxnard fifth-grade students:

- 45% said that they do not have an adult who cares about them at school
- 20% reported that they were told they were doing a good job
- 50% reported rarely or never being asked about their ideas in school
- 50% reported they did not get to help decide things (Oxnard School District, 2017)

These findings show why the Oxnard Scholars program needs to focus on caring adult relationships to support student success.

The Need for Professional Development

More, perhaps, than teachers, afterschool program staff are poised to provide caring relationships, teach perseverance, and challenge students. These are the factors I target in afterschool professional development. For the first time, I feel I have made sustainable progress in helping Oxnard Scholars staff connect to students—simply because I have spent more time training them to build relationships. In the past, training focused on content, activities, and lesson delivery; most of my energy went into teaching pedagogy. I assumed that afterschool program staff came to the job knowing how to connect with students. The fact is that some did and some did not. If staff learned to facilitate great activities but couldn't relate to students, the activities would fall flat. Students' desire to participate dwindles when the students can't relate to the staff.

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Having identified this shortcoming, I took a closer look at our staff trainings. What was missing was how to connect with students. When adults build positive relationships with students, students want to participate. They bond with adults who they know care about them. To address this gap, I looked for resources to show staff how to build relationships so the students could connect to the program and its activities. I found the necessary resources from the Search Institute, a research-to-practice organization based in Minneapolis. The Search Institute's Developmental Assets framework (2006) and its Devel-

Figure 1. External Development Assets

Support	Empowerment	Boundaries and Expectations	Constructive Use of Time
Family support	Community values youth	Family boundaries	Creative activities
Positive family communication	Children as resources	School boundaries	Child programs
Other adult relationships	Service to others	Neighborhood boundaries	Religious community
Caring neighbor	Safety	Adult role models	Time at home
Caring school climate		Positive peer influence	
Parent involvement in schooling		High expectations	

Note. The list of 40 Developmental Assets® is reprinted with permission from Search Institute®, Minneapolis, MN 55413; 800-888-7828; www.search-institute.org.

opmental Relationships framework (2018) gave me the tools to teach staff how to relate to students.

Developmental Assets

I used the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets for Middle Childhood (Ages 8–12, 2006) to guide professional development for our afterschool staff. The developmental assets are factors in students' lives that help them succeed in school and beyond. The more assets students have, the more likely they are to succeed. The Search Institute breaks down these developmental assets into two broad sets of categories: internal and external. Each category has 20 assets. The 20 internal assets are grouped into four categories: commitment to learning, positive values, social competency, and positive identity. The 20 external assets are similarly grouped into four categories, as outlined in Figure 1: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time (Search Institute, 2006). The external assets are the ones afterschool staff are most likely to be able to provide for program participants.

The 40 Developmental Assets introduced staff to the effect they can have on students' lives. The list of external assets helped staff see what assets they can provide for their students. They saw how small changes in their interactions with students could have large effects on students' lives. When I introduced the assets, I asked staff to reflect on their own lives to identify people who had helped them when they were in school. Parents are not the only people who guide and shape young lives. Any of the adults who connect with students during the day can provide external assets, from teachers to secretaries, lunchroom workers, custodians, and, of course, afterschool staff. Another way the staff connected to the assets was to reflect on that one student they were worried about, the one who kept them up at night. Then they identified how many of the 20 external assets they could give that student within the program structure.

As staff realized the potential to connect more fully with their students, they wanted to take this training to the next level to learn better strategies for connection. The Search Institute's Developmental Relationship framework provided the tool we needed.

Developmental Relationships

The Developmental Relationships framework (Search Institute, 2018) is the actionable complement to the 40 Developmental Assets. It outlines specific strategies staff can use to establish, build, and maintain positive relationships with students. Each of its five elements, shown in Figure 2, includes three to five concrete actions adults can implement (Search Institute, 2018).

I incorporate the Developmental Relationships framework in staff development to help staff members with behavior management. Better relationships equal better behavior. In the beginning, I work the framework into a conversation about rules, rewards, and consequences. At the next training, after staff have applied the rules in the classroom, we revisit behavior management. This time, we address special circumstances, such as dealing with defiance, autism, or any issue that comes up in the first couple of months of the school year. These conversations highlight how having a respectful relationship with students can assist in de-escalating situations. In training, staff members dissect actual incidents (with names changed); as a group, we suggest helpful and respectful ways to work with the situation. I use actual scenarios when possible because they are typical of what the

Figure 2. The Developmental Relationships Framework

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staff see in their programs every day. Showing students that they matter, providing support, and sharing power go a long way to prevent and address problem behaviors. Using the framework in staff development in this way allows us to discuss each of the five components: express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities.

Express Care

People often decide to work in afterschool programs because they care about children. Expressing care includes five actions: "be dependable, listen, believe in [the child], be warm, encourage" (Search Institute, 2018). At first glance, this element seems straightforward, but open discussion with program staff revealed that expressing care can take many forms. For example, one site coordinator shared that she makes appointments with individual students. She explained that the children all want her attention at the beginning of the program day. Unless the need is urgent, she sets appointments for later, thus helping the students feel acknowledged while freeing her time to get the program started. When appointment time comes around, the coordinator can give each student her undivided attention. The students saw the coordinator expressing care in three ways from the framework: being dependable, listening to them, and being warm.

After learning in training about expressing care, another site coordinator instituted Every Monday Matters to show children how they can contribute to their world. Every Monday Matters centers around three principles: *I matter, you matter,* and *we matter.* Using these principles intentionally, the site coordinator sets up opportunities for students to have a positive effect on their community. Students have decorated bags with caring messages for local food banks and have made yogurt parfaits to show school teachers and staff their appreciation. The coordinator recognizes the students for every positive action she observes. She thanks them for coming to the program and then asks how she can help them. She is expressing care through believing in the students, being warm, and encouraging students by praising them for their efforts.

Challenge Growth

The Search Institute framework includes four actions under "challenge growth": expecting children's best, pushing them to go further, structuring accountability, and helping students learn from their failures (Search Institute, 2018). Challenging growth is similar to teaching students to persevere. Students learn to persevere when they are encouraged and motivated to keep at a task until they succeed. I talk a lot with staff about expecting the best from students by, for example, pushing students to polish their work to the point that it is ready for publication or presentation at an art gala or science fair.

The Oxnard Scholars program supports students who want to compete in an annual districtwide speech competition. As the staff have become more proficient in helping the students write speeches, they have also learned how to help the students exceed the expectations of the competition's judges. One of our literacy staff members worked with a school-day teacher to organize opportunities for students to deliver their speeches to an audience beforehand so they would be less anxious on competition day. This staff member has helped students live up to their potential by teaching them to reflect on how their speeches went and to make improvements. She has challenged the growth of every speech competitor in her classroom. Last year one of her students finished in the top three districtwide.

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Beyond the many individual examples of staff challenging students' growth, the goal is to embed challenge so that it is a value across the program. Conversations with staff are key to achieving this goal. No one could reach every one of 200-plus staff members individually, so we connect in site-based cohort groups at monthly trainings. In small groups, we discuss examples of valuable practices that frontline staff members, site coordinators, and program administrators have observed. People can better internalize their learning when they process concepts through everyday examples. These conversations are governed by guiding questions that encourage personal reflection: How can you take this practice further? How can you polish it? How can we change together? How could we adapt this practice to achieve our goals? This process encourages staff to personalize

the practice and, over time, builds their confidence to act on what they think. We want staff to know that they are empowered to go beyond the activities they have been given if they want, for example, to implement a suggestion from a student. At its core, the training focuses on challenging the growth of staff so they are more comfortable challenging the growth of students.

Provide Support

Over the past few years, several of our program coordinators and staff have completed degrees in counseling and taken jobs as counselors for local school districts. I attribute this interest in counseling to the afterschool environment, with its emphasis on providing support for students. Providing support, according to the Search Institute (2018), involves assistance with navigating difficult situations, empowerment, advocacy for student needs, and clear boundaries. Afterschool staff often see students in different ways than school-day staff do. They may have more opportunities to talk with students and help them with academic or social and emotional skills. Our staff are the ones who directly observe homework completion, so they see how the amount or difficulty of the homework affects each student. The support they provide may take the form of coaching the student to talk with a parent or teacher or of the staff member directly advocating for the student.

When training staff to provide support, I make sure they know the systems at the school as well as outside systems that offer other resources. For example, Oxnard School District has a Wellness Collaborative with multiple agencies to provide students and families with support ranging from tutoring to dental care to food resources. At a districtwide training, afterschool staff members learn about the Wellness Collaborative and what it does. Site coordinators get more detailed information, learning how to access Wellness Collaborative resources through their school outreach counselor, school principal, or program administrator.

Share Power

Sharing power connects to youth voice. The four related actions in the Developmental Relationships framework are respect, inclusion, collaboration, and opportunities for students to lead (Search Institute, 2018). Program staff who share power set clear expectations and teach students how and when to use their voice. Staff need to feel comfortable enough with daily operations to allow students choices within the programming. Sharing power requires mutual respect between students and staff.

Teaching staff to share power takes coaching and patience. I ask questions like these: How do you think that worked? What, if anything, would you do differently next time? Coaching this element means praising power-sharing actions, asking a lot of reflective questions no matter how those actions turn out, and reassuring staff when things go sideways. I saw this process in action in a recent incident in which an activity leader in her first year—first weeks, really—got into a power struggle with a student. Our junior high drama lead, who was filling in for the site coordinator that day, debriefed with me afterward. I was amazed at his ability to clearly articulate his observations about the rookie's mistake. He noted that some first-year staff feel they have to "take charge" in order to maintain control, so that they are not likely to share power or to back down when conflict arises. To share power, staff have to feel comfortable easing up on their control by building trust through clear expectations and consistency. It takes time. Similarly, developing this skill takes lots of team conversations, modeling, and site visits focused on mentoring staff.

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An example of sharing power is our Friday Night Live clubs, which provide drug- and alcohol-free activities while encouraging students to be leaders and advocates for a safe community. At one site, for example, students went on community walks to examine their environment. They quantified access points for alcohol and tobacco in their school neighborhood and advocated with the school board, city council, and store managers to reduce or eliminate sales of these harmful substances. The students came up with the idea; staff simply helped them implement it.

Expand Possibilities

The three actions of expanding possibilities are "inspire, broaden horizons, connect" (Search Institute, 2018). Afterschool is all about expanding possibilities. Students engage in activities that they do not experience during the school day and can explore new ideas. For example, when a staff member was charged with leading an engineering project with a group of middle school students, the students asked if they could revitalize the school garden—and that became their project. Other sites have taken advantage of "I'm Going to College" activities offered by local universities. These field trips have expanded students' possibilities.

At first glance, training staff to expand possibilities could appear hard if staff members do not know about resources to which they can connect students. But those connections do exist. I focus training on resources at the school sites and within the district. Students often show their passion in what they draw, what they bring to school, and what they talk about. Training staff to expand possibilities focuses on being attentive to students' interests and connecting those interests to real-world concerns. Every employee on a school campus has a network of people and interests. When an employee finds out a student is interested in, say, the ukulele, the staffer can ask around to see if anyone on campus plays the ukulele; if not, there are always online videos. If a student is interested in motorcycles, the staff member can introduce the student to a school employee who rides a motorcycle to work each day.

Training for Relationships

Relationships are the key to helping students succeed. The experience of the Oxnard Scholars program shows how training the staff to build strong relationships with youth enabled them to share great practices and connect students to resources to meet their needs. The Search Institute's Developmental Assets (2006) and Developmental Relationships (2018) frameworks have been vital tools in training staff to see the impact they can have in students' lives. These frameworks helped us begin ongoing conversations on how to build and facilitate relationships that help our youth persevere and connect to learning. Caring positive relationships help children and youth develop the skills they need to achieve success in school and in life.

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