School Staff Perceptions of Community Afterschool Partnerships

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Abundant research has covered the benefits of and barriers to partnerships between schools and community-based organizations (CBOs; Sanders, 2001; Valli et al., 2016). Such partnerships can be defined as "connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to promote students' social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development" (Sanders, 2001, p. 20).

The aim is for schools and CBOs to come together to foster student growth, particularly during out-of-school time. Integrated partnerships can provide student support in the form of increased student learning time (McBride Murry et al., 2021), better student academic outcomes (Maier et al., 2017), and fuller provision of resources students need to grow into capable individuals (Waddock, 1995).

Despite the benefits, school–CBO partnerships can encounter barriers or challenges, especially when these partnerships are formed on "unspoken expectations" or without a comprehensive understanding of resources or capacities (McBride Murry et al., 2021, p. 6). Another barrier relates to territorialism (Sanders, 2001), meaning that schools and CBOs might disagree over who should provide what ser-

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vices to students. In order to overcome these barriers, various frameworks and guidelines for best practices regarding school–CBO partnerships have been established (Casto, 2016; Haines et al., 2015; Stefanski et al., 2016).

Olson (2018) indicates that strong school–CBO partnerships should be student-centered, have a shared vision and language, and have "formal agreements," including "facilities sharing agreements" to ensure that expectations are managed and services are complete (p. 5). If two independent organizations, such as a school and a nonprofit CBO, are to work together to provide out-of-school time (OST) programming, then they must have common goals and set clear expectations. Otherwise, "unspoken expectations" and lack of knowledge of the other organization's capacity can lead to misunderstanding of the partners' goals (McBride Murry et al., 2021, p. 1).

In solid partnerships, in-school and OST educators come together with caregivers to view one another as partners and to view each child as more than a student. A common perception is that school-day educators see only the student, whereas OST staff see the whole child. When educators, children, and caregivers join together to see one another as "partners in education," then children are surrounded by a functional "caring community" (Epstein et al., 2002, p. 20). According to Epstein (1987), families, schools, and communities all provide contexts for children to learn and grow. These three contexts may work in harmony with the goal of interchanging ideas about and goals for children, or they may be in conflict, disagreeing about how to meet children's needs and what positive student outcomes look like (Epstein et al., 2002).

This study conceptualizes school–CBO collaboration as coordination of services and resources for children and their families through transparent and open dialogue about children's specific needs. Schools should have explicit and concrete conversations with CBOs offering OST programs, discussing the value of the programming, how it fits the needs of their specific student population, and how it fills resource and service gaps (Roche & Strobach, 2019). In addition, schools should engage in routine program evaluation to ensure that OST programming is meeting the needs of all involved parties. Russ-Eft & Preskill (2009) note that evaluation is a "diagnostic process" that can highlight how an organization's strengths and weaknesses will either support or hamper new opportunities (p. 12).

Although literature detailing the characteristics of healthy school–CBO partnerships is abundant, few studies focus specifically on school staff members' perceptions of these partnerships. Our study aims to fill this gap. It suggests that schools take an active role in determining what their student body needs regarding OST programming and continually evaluate the fit between the needs and the programming.

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Methodology

The aim of this study is to understand how school staff perceived OST programming provided by a CBO in their schools. We focused on four public schools in a single district in the southern U.S. where a single nonprofit CBO offered three empowerment-focused OST programs. The CBO aims to break the cycle of poverty by providing youth with quality OST programming that centers on empowerment through teaching life skills and social responsibility. OST programming, particularly programming with an empowerment component, has the capacity to reduce the risk of adverse outcomes for underprivileged youth (Lin et al., 2018). Our study focuses on the partnership between the CBO offering the OST programming and the schools that hosted the programming. As part of a five-person program evaluation team, we helped craft interview questions, conducted interviews, and analyzed interview data.

We use elements of Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, particularly the notions that family, school, and community should provide contexts for children to learn and grow and that communities should be involved in program development and implementation. Our exploratory analysis, based on interviews with school staff, addressed two research questions:

1. What do school faculty feel are the deliverable benefits to their students as a result of the school–CBO partnership?
2. How did the school determine relevance, fit, or school need for this partnership?

We hypothesized that school staff would be able to identify specific benefits of the school–CBO partnership and that the perceived benefits would clearly harmonize with staff members' explanations of how the school determined the relevance, fit, or school need for the partnership in the first place.

Participants were asked open-ended interview questions concerning the nature of their school's partnership with the CBO, whether they found the partnership beneficial to students, how the partnership fit in with their school environment and culture, how they determined whether the partnership was successful, and whether the school or CBO assessed students' need for the OST programming.

Participant Demographics

The seven interviewees were full-time employees in four public schools in a metropolitan school district in a southern state. Four were teachers, two were guidance counselors, and one was a principal. All were the point of contact between their school and the CBO that implemented afterschool and summer programming. Five interviewees were employed at middle schools and two at elementary schools. Three identified as men and four as women. All participants worked at Title 1–funded schools, where the majority of students were classified as low-income and received free or reduced-priced lunch. Approximately 80 percent of the district's students in academic year 2020–2021 were members of minoritized racial and ethnic groups.

Data Collection

After receiving approval from our institutional review board, we used purposive sampling to recruit school staff. We chose seven school staff members—a strategic mix of teachers, principals, and counselors—based on their established knowledge about and involvement in the OST programming in their schools. We emailed or telephoned the seven staff members to ask them to participate in the interview.

The CBO's program evaluation team conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the seven respondents about their experiences with and perspectives on the OST programming. Participants were asked open-ended interview questions concerning the nature of their school's partnership with the CBO, whether they found the partnership beneficial to students, how the partnership fit in with their school environment and culture, how they determined whether the partnership was successful, and whether the school or CBO assessed students' need for the OST programming. The interview questions were influenced by Epstein's (2018) work on how school collaboration with community partners and use of community programming should be carefully considered and incorporated into the school to address students' needs.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), whose purpose is to provide insight into the realities of participants who share a common lived experience and to examine meaning as it pertains to specific groups of people (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). RTA involves "identifying patterns across data in relation to specific research questions"; it is particularly suited to communicate study results in a way accessible to people outside of academia (Braun & Clarke, 2014, p. 2)—in this case, school and CBO staff. To address research question 1 about the perceived benefits to students, we used RTA's inductive approach, which aims to uncover deep meanings in study participants' responses. For research question 2 about how the school determined fit and need, we used the more specific semantic approach of RTA, which involves analyzing participants' explicit responses.

We began by familiarizing ourselves with the data by reading through the interview transcripts. Then we coded the transcripts, generating initial themes and patterns of meaning and using the constant comparative method to uncover specific categories of "conveyed meanings" in participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Specifically, we completed a multilevel coding process in Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software package. We initially used an open

or "in-vivo" coding method, using participants' words to describe their perceptions of the benefits of the CBO partnership for students and of how or why the partnership was chosen. These data were grouped into early categories of "characterized concepts" or conveyed meanings (Oktay, 2012, p. 54). We used axial coding to determine how concepts identified in the primary stages of coding could be grouped into categories that identified new ways to understand interviewees' perspectives. Finally, we used selective coding (Oktay, 2012) to sort existing codes into final categories and identify themes central to the described perspectives of the seven participants. During this final phase, theoretical saturation was met: Two major codes applied to the data most frequently, with no new information presenting itself.

School Staff Perceptions of the Partnership

Two central themes emerged from the data. School staff reported that:

- Students in the CBO's OST program developed social and intrapersonal skills
- The CBO, rather than the school, shouldered the responsibility of determining program fit for the school and its students' needs

The OST Program Developed Social and Intrapersonal Skills

Social and intrapersonal skills are essential "competencies, behaviors, and attitudes" that enable people to navigate the environment, develop healthy interpersonal relationships, and increase their employability (Lippman et al., 2015, p. 4). Lippman et al (2015) identify five critical skills that increase the likelihood of achieving workforce success: higher-order thinking skills, social skills, self-control, positive self-concept, and communication. When asked about the benefits to students of the OST programming in their school, all seven respondents stated that these programs improved students' abilities in three of these five skill areas. Interviewees did not explicitly say that the OST programming helped students develop self-control or improve communication skills. The programming may have accomplished these goals, but our respondents did not mention these skills. They were enthusiastic and loquacious about the program's effectiveness in helping students develop higher-order thinking skills, social skills, and positive self-concept.

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Higher-Order Thinking Skills

All seven participants stated that the most beneficial outcome of the OST programming was that students developed higher-order thinking skills. Defined as an ability to deconstruct information from numerous sources with the goal of developing a "deeper, conceptually driven understanding" of an issue (Schraw & Robinson, 2011, p. 2), higher-order thinking is one of the most essential skills employers look for (Lippman et al., 2015). Interviewees stated that the CBO's programming enabled students to practice and sharpen their decision-making skills, a major component of higher-order thinking. One participant said:

> So far, the [OST] partnership has shown students how to reason with the actual decisions that they are going to have to make.… [The program] helps them develop into people, teaching them the rights and wrongs and ... how to understand consequences to the decisions they make.

Another participant reported that the OST program provided out-of-classroom experiences including trips to local art and science museums, libraries, and businesses that enabled students to develop and hone the ability to think critically rather than simply regurgitate facts they learn in the classroom—that is, to focus on what Tankersley (2005) called depth of knowledge over breadth of previously identified subject matter. This type of higher-order thinking enables students to consider multiple perspectives surrounding an issue and to develop judicious opinions based on empirical evidence, reason, and context (Tankersley, 2005). This respondent said:

> The children are all benefiting from the program, because these kids are being exposed to different things and different perspectives, [and] it really

helps them. Education is not just what is learned in the classroom and in a textbook, and [the program] allows them to get a greater sense of who they are in reference to their community around them and in reference to a more global setting as well, which is hard to do in a classroom setting, so it's really a benefit.… Inside of a classroom, especially here, it is a struggle to get that community perspective and that understanding of "It's not just about you." [Students] are learning that it's about things on the outside as well, and … this is hugely beneficial to the kids. They seem to enjoy the mix up and a step out of the classroom. I've noticed that [the students] are more open and … showing a lot of empathy toward others as well.

Social Skills

Social skills are universally essential and can predict future youth outcomes, particularly in future employability and workplace performance, entrepreneurial success, and future income (Lippman et al., 2015). Further, studies have found that children who learn social skills in school are less likely to encounter discipline problems in school, to become incarcerated, or to abuse drugs (Jones et al., 2015). In one study, almost 60 percent of children who attended afterschool programs had better behavior both in and out of school compared to children who did not participate (Durlak & Weissberg, 2010, as cited in Berg, 2020). OST programs can also keep children on a positive path away from crime (Berg, 2020).

Interviewees reported that the CBO program was highly beneficial in developing students' social skills. One school staff member cited skill development in the area of conflict resolution:

> Emotionally, [the OST program] spends more time here working with kids on conflict resolution and making better decisions more than any other areas of their development.… [Working on] social skills is at the top of the list because most of our kids come in thinking, "If there's a problem, you gotta fight," and we are trying to show them that there is another way.

Other teachers also expressed appreciation for the program's support in teaching conflict resolution. One described how everyone in the school benefits, including students not enrolled in the OST program:

> The students [benefit] and then, in turn, the teachers [benefit]. All of us [benefit].... Everyone who is involved is benefiting from the programming because, as the students learn to … handle different problems … with conflict resolution, they learn better ways to deal with things. That is going to affect them and then it's going to affect their peers.... That will also help the teachers in the classroom while we are trying to teach. I think it's an overall benefit for all of us here at the school.

Another participant explained that they were grateful that the OST program focused on social skills because teachers and other school staff may not have the bandwidth to work on social skills in their classrooms every day. Another respondent said that having an OST program that corroborated what school staff were teaching about social skills was helpful. Another participant reported that they appreciated the CBO programming because:

> [T]here aren't a whole lot of other programs that are offered to our students, other than [this program] and what I teach them in my classroom.... I will make comments when they cut up too much or talk back to me. I say, "Well, remember, you know your first job is in a couple more years, and if you do that to your boss, you are gonna be walking out the door." … [The program] is beneficial to them.

The finding that the CBO partnership developed social skills was particularly salient because social skills are connected to the ability to obtain and keep gainful employment (Lippman et al., 2015).

Positive Self-Concept

Positive self-concept involves self-efficacy and self-confidence across multidimensional domains—such as intellectual ability, athletic competence, social acceptance, and behavioral conduct—as well as healthy levels of self-esteem and an overall sense of well-being and pride in accomplishments (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; Lippman et al., 2015).

School is a crucial space for programming to build positive self-concept. Having a healthy view of themselves helps students succeed intrapersonally and socially (Zhao et al., 2021). Programming intended to increase students' positive self-concept, no matter their scholastic skill levels, interests, or academic standing, is particularly important, as students with a negative

self-concept are less likely to attempt academic tasks (American Psychological Association, 2021). The fewer academic tasks students attempt, the more negative their self-concept can become; thus begins a cycle of negative self-talk, negative beliefs about oneself, academic underachievement, and, eventually, lack of workforce success or employment opportunities (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; Myers-Walls et al., 2015).

All seven school staff reported that the CBO programming exposed students to, as one put it, "new and different activities, topics, and skills" they would not otherwise experience. Respondents agreed that these activities instilled "curiosity" in students and "confidence" that they can learn and excel at new things. Speaking of a CBO program centered on grooming students to become leaders, an interviewee stated:

> There has been a positive influence in that [the students] will ask me, "When are we doing that again?" This is something that they look forward to. They talk about it [being] just that positive influence.… For the kids to have something that's uplifting and different to talk about is definitely a benefit.... It allows the children to understand their strengths and ... interests from a different angle.... Education is not just what's learned out of the textbook. This is something that allows them to get a greater sense of who they are, who they are in reference to their community, who they are in reference to a more global picture, which is hard to do in a classroom setting.

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Another respondent stated that the OST programming at their school focused on entrepreneurship, business development, and financial literacy. She said that this program increased students' positive self-concept by empowering them to develop skills in previously unexplored domains:

> [The program] got them thinking about bigger-picture type things. We have had several kids after the program come back and tell us about how they are now going to start their own businesses, getting into selling [their products]. I don't think they would have come up with [those ideas] if it wasn't for ... the projects [in the program] and getting those skills ingrained in their heads. It was just exposing them to knowledge that they didn't know about before! ... We have a lot of go-getters [in the program]. Once they got that knowledge, they were going to do something with it!

Students who have social support from peers, teachers, or OST educators have a more positive self-concept than students without social support (Beer et al., 2013; Kloomok & Cosden, 1994). Further, trying new activities that incorporate support and social interaction increases students' self-esteem and enhances their beliefs about their abilities and overall value (Dagaz, 2012). According to one school staff member, exposure to "people outside the school" encouraged students to try new activities in a safe environment:

> [This program] is a great asset to these students. They are able to try different things ... and [learn new] skills. For instance, they might have drama, they might have dance, they might have art or music. They're able to do that and to present that [to us] later. So, they'll learn a performance to go along with that.... Our students are able to showcase … their talents, and people in the community are able to come see the showcase to see what students have learned, how they are benefiting from the program. And it also transfers over to the classroom, because when they're in the classroom, the teachers are able to see the [benefit] from [the program] ... to see their growth.

The CBO Determined the Program's Fit, Relevance, and Effectiveness

To answer research question 2, we asked school staff a series of questions related to the need for the OST program in their school, for example, "Is there a need for this program for your students?" and "How do you identify what needs should be addressed via community programming?" We also asked specific ques-

tions related to the fit and relevance of the program: "How does this program fit in with the other activities, programs, and partnerships that you offer your students/community/school?" "Who benefits from this program?" and "How do you determine whether or not a student benefits from the program?" Interviewees reported that the school generally left it up to the CBO to determine the fit between the school and the CBO and the school's need for the OST program. They said that their school conducted no formal needs assessment to determine the appropriateness of the school–CBO partnership.

Informal Assessment of the Need for the Program

Although all interviewees said that the school–CBO partnership benefited their students, five of the seven reported that the selection of specific programming was "informal" and seemed to be based on the type of programming the CBO had available. Some respondents reported that the CBO initiated contact the school to offer services or that the school had always partnered with the CBO, so that the OST program simply continued each year. When asked why the specific OST programs were needed at their schools, many participants cited broad—and somewhat platitudinous—explanations. For example, one interviewee stated:

> [The program] ... is beneficial to the kids because they need certain guidance, because, in a lot of cases, they don't necessarily get it from home. [Students'] home life, in a lot of cases, is less than perfect, let's just say it that way. So guidance from anybody is helpful.

Other participants' statements about reasons for OST programming were often unrelated to specific program goals or functions. Five of the seven participants stated that they appreciated the program's "academic support" and "tutoring," though these services were not part of the CBO's programming.

Informal Assessment of Program Outcomes and Effectiveness

When asked how their school assessed the effectiveness of the OST programming, some respondents reported that, as one put it, that they "thought the program was great," but they did not say how the school tracked program outcomes or effectiveness. Others stated that the school tracked outcomes like "report cards," "grades," or "academic growth in students"; however, these outcomes are not directly related to the CBO's program goals, which are to increase student empowerment through facilitation of life skills and promotion of social responsibility. Other respondents said that they simply have a conversation with the CBO program director to determine whether the program was successful. One stated:

> [The assessment of program effectiveness] has been informal.... We just leave that to [the CBO] employees, and I talk to the director of their program, and we talk about how it went last year. But it's really more informal how we as a school evaluate [the program]. It's kind of, "How did this go last year, or not?"

Such one-on-one conversations between the school leaders and the CBO director regarding program execution can be valuable. However, this respondent's comments show no evidence of true criteria for evaluating program success from the perspective of either the CBO or the school. This finding was consistent among respondents. It demonstrates the importance of schools taking an active role in determining student needs and then in evaluating whether the program addressed those needs.

Our findings illustrate the divide between a theoretical foundation outlining how best to incorporate a CBO's OST programming into schools and the on-the-ground realities of how school and CBO partnerships are formed and maintained.

Disconnects Between Theory and Reality

Our findings illustrate the divide between a theoretical foundation outlining how best to incorporate a CBO's OST programming into schools and the on-the-ground realities of how school and CBO partnerships are formed and maintained. The school staff we interviewed were unanimous in reporting that the students in the OST programming developed higher-order thinking skills, general social skills, and positive self-concept. However, interviewees' descriptions of the benefits for their students were anecdotal, vague, and nebulous. This finding is consistent with the insight of Anthony and Morra

(2016), who found a "disconnection between school and afterschool" when it came to understanding the programs that are offered (p. 36). Some respondents struggled to identify clear advantages of the social and intrapersonal skills students learned in the OST program, making superficial, deficit-based generalizations about students' families and home environments that were informed by assumptions rather than by any formal assessment. Schools are missing the potential to tailor programming to students, their families, and their unique environment.

We also found that the CBO shouldered the responsibility of determining program fit, relevance, and effectiveness in each school. None of the schools conducted a formal needs assessment on the front end to determine the appropriateness of the school–CBO partnership. Collaboration and decision-making are critical components that were missing from these schools' approach to OST programming. A formal need assessment and formal agreement could have provided the partnership with a tangible guide to meet mutual objectives (Olson, 2018). Working from only an informal arrangement based primarily on the CBO's current programming means that schools could not coordinate resources and services to meet student needs. Further, interviewees reported that the schools either did not attempt rigorous evaluation of the OST program or relied on the partner CBO to evaluate program success.

Coordination of resources and services was further complicated by the finding that the school personnel responsible for coordinating between the school and the CBO held a variety of positions: teacher, principal, or guidance counselor. Staff in these positions have varying degrees of institutional knowledge and decision-making power, a fact that could affect the formation and maintenance of the school–CBO partnerships.

Because the way in which children spend time out of school is essential to social-emotional development and educational outcomes (Jordan & Nettles, 1999), how OST programming is selected is highly relevant to schools and community partners alike. School–CBO partnerships should be determined by assessing the specific needs of students in each school and then determining what programs would best address those needs (Roche & Strobach, 2019).

Schools should spend more time engaging with CBOs about the OST programming they offer.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study has several strengths, but it also has limitations. The first is the small sample size of seven interviewees. However, small samples are not uncommon in qualitative research, and theoretical saturation was reached. The sample included school staff in three different roles—principal, guidance counselors, and teachers—rather than just in one role. One recommendation for extension of this study would be to connect a group of programs across cities or states. The Utah Afterschool Network (2018) has an Align for Success toolkit worth reviewing as it highlights the benefits of collaboration between schools and OST programs. It also has data to show the impact of collaborative efforts between school and afterschool (Utah Afterschool Network, 2018).

A second limitation is that we did not receive responses from every school where the CBO implemented its programming. Some perspectives therefore may have been missed. Though generalizability is not a significant goal of qualitative research, a larger sample size may have resulted in more diverse and generalizable results.

Another significant limitation is that no CBO staff were interviewed for this exploratory analysis. This research focused on the perspectives of school staff on the school–CBO partnerships. Still, future researchers could seek out diverse perspectives by interviewing both school staff and CBO program staff to understand how to assess student needs, how to structure the school–CBO partnership to meet student needs, and how to make partnerships work.

Implications for Practice

This exploratory analysis revealed that school–CBO partnerships provide invaluable benefits to students when OST programs develop crucial social and intrapersonal skills, including higher-order thinking skills, social skills, and positive self-concept. It also revealed that, too often, these partnerships are informal and continue year after year just because they have always been. Although frameworks and best practices for successful school-community agency partnerships have been published (e.g., Casto, 2016; Haines et al., 2015; Stefanski et al., 2016), adherence to those guidelines does not always happen

in real-world, day-to-day settings. Passivity is not in the best interest of students, so school staff must take action to change the status quo of how partnerships are formed and maintained.

Epstein (1987) notes that community resources and services should be coordinated with businesses, agencies, and other groups, as well as students, families, and the school. Students and families can be involved in school–CBO discussions (Roche & Strobach, 2019). Schools should spend more time engaging with CBOs about the OST programming they offer. They might also create a school–community liaison or school social worker to build partnerships with CBOs, conduct formal needs assessments in their school and school community, and recruit CBOs with OST programming that is explicitly aligned with student need. Best practices dictate that, once a program is thoughtfully selected and implemented, schools should also to work with their CBO partners to select a rigorous evaluation process that accurately measures program effectiveness in addressing the previously identified student needs (Roche & Strobach, 2019).

In light of the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the educational divides among students that the pandemic is exacerbating (Holzer & Lanich, 2020; McBride Murry et al., 2021), school–CBO partnerships are needed now more than ever to help students thrive, especially those in disadvantaged communities like the school district we studied. To facilitate implementation of programming that is appropriate and beneficial for their student body, school staff must continually assess the specific needs of their students, determine what OST programs would best address those needs, seek out such programming opportunities in their community, and then consistently evaluate the success of the programming.

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