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After-school Programming as Intervention for Students with Disabilities

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An Ed.S. thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Educational Specialist

Department of Graduate Psychology

August, 2015

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Abstract

After-school programs are increasing in popularity, with an estimated 6.5 million

students attending organized after-school programs (Harvard Family Research Project,

2008). With the continuing rise in popularity of these programs, more students

(including students with disabilities) have access to after-school programs. The purpose

of the current research was to discover what current practitioners of school psychology

recommend in regards to after-school programming for students with disabilities. All

participants were school psychologists or staff members at after-school programs located

within either the Richmond, VA region (including the City of Richmond, Chesterfield

County, and Henrico County) or the Harrisonburg,VA region (including the City of

Harrisonburg and Rockingham County). Participants completed an individual interview

with the researcher. Overall, it was found that the majority of school psychologists were

aware of after-school programs in their areas, but the majority did not recommend these

programs for students with disabilities as part of their practice. After-school program

staff reported low levels of communication between their programs and the schools.

School psychologists did, however, express willingness to share information with after-

school programs to help these programs better serve students with disabilities. Further

results are discussed as well as implications for future research.

After-school Programming as Intervention for Students with Disabilities

In recent years, school systems have increasingly been utilizing after-school programs in order to help students, particularly those from low income areas, increase their achievement, participate in enrichment activities, and have a safe place to be in the after-school hours. After-school programs can be broadly defined as "an array of safe, structured programs that provide children and youth ages kindergarten through high school with a range of supervised activities intentionally designed to encourage learning and development outside of the typical school day" (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008). After-school programs tend to offer activities such as academic enrichment, tutoring, mentoring, homework help, music, drama, visual arts, technology, science, reading, math, civic engagement, sports, and other activities to promote healthy social/emotional development. Estimates suggest that approximately 6.5 million children in grades K – 12 participate in after-school programming, with nearly 1 million participating in 21st Century Community Learning Center programs. These programs receive federal funding in the form of grants, and place an emphasis on educational enrichment for students who attend low-performing schools in high-poverty areas. The 21st Century Community Learning Center programs are currently active within in 9,364 school and community-based centers across the country (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008).

In the current paper, the researcher reviews the literature pertaining to after-school programs, the role of the school psychologist with regards to after-school programs, and the inclusion of students receiving special education services in after-school programs. The researcher proposes that after-school programs are being recommended by school

psychologists and other school personnel in order to help students, particularly those with identified disabilities, be more successful academically, socially, and emotionally. These recommendations may be made at the secondary level of a Response to Intervention (RTI) system, or they may be made after special education eligibility has been determined. Additionally, the researcher proposes that there currently exists a substantial lack of communication between the special education personnel within the school system and the after-school program coordinators and staff. Finally, the researcher proposes that potential collaboration between afterschool programs and school psychologists is perceived to be highly valuable to all stakeholders, regardless of the current level and quality of communication.

History of After-School Programming

After-school programs have been an institution in America for over 100 years, with the first known programs run by individual men and women with the intent of providing a safe area for children in immigrant neighborhoods of major American cities (Halpern, 2002). These early examples of after-school care focused on physical safety as the main priority, with education and recreation being an afterthought. In the early 1900's, these early incarnations of after-school had many of the same identity challenges still faced by after-school programs today. After-school programs were caught in a middle ground of trying to be "school-like" without having all of the negative associations of schooling at the time, which included rigid learning experience, and little to no experiential learning.

In 1959, there were 550 after-school programs in the United States (Halpern, 2002), all operating locally with autonomy and serving their neighborhoods while being financed privately. After seeing incredible expansion over the previous sixty years, after-school programs still struggled to identify what their primary goals were. Some after-school programs argued that children needed guidance, while others believed that children needed a break from the demands placed on them by school and family, and still others believed that children needed to hone useful skills in hands-on tasks (Halpern, 2002).

In the 1960s, demographics in inner-city neighborhoods began to shift; resulting in neighborhoods that were considered less supportive and more toxic for child development (Halpern, 2002). Despite President Johnson's "War on Poverty" initiative, after-school programs still did not receive significant federal funding, as most funds went to early childhood programs and schools (Halpern, 2002). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, rising employment rates by mothers placed an emphasis on quality after-school care. For the first time, after-school programs became a fixture of both the suburban middle class and the urban populations. The concept of the "latchkey kid", a child with two working parents and therefore lacking in adequate supervision, became a focal point of both popular media and politics. So-called "latchkey kids" were thought to be more likely to take risks, become angry more quickly, and have more family stress and conflict (Dwyer, 1990). In the early 1990s, public funding was, for the first time, being directed towards after-school programs in low-income neighborhoods. This was made possible through the federal Child Care and Development Program (Halpern, 2002). This

additional funding allowed for more programs to be able to afford after-school programming, especially to at-risk children in low-income neighborhoods.

In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) built on previous federal legislation about after-school programming. Before and After-school programs that qualified as "21st Century Community Learning Centers" would become eligible for federal grants in order to help support the goals of NCLB (Bush, 2001). This legislation created a dramatic shift in after-school programming, turning the focus away from community-centric learning and turning it towards academic enrichment, literacy and related educational services (Weiss, 2009). The NCLB Act provided funds for after-school programs that were providing academic support to students, with the goal of increasing scores on state proficiency tests.

After-school programs have seen a surge in popularity in more recent years. In addition to the traditional, neighborhood run after-school programming offered by groups such as the Boys and Girls Club, after-school programs offered by public schools has increased from 16 percent in 1987 to 47 percent in 1999 (James-Burdumy, 2005). Additionally, pressure to raise academic achievement, growing employment rate of mothers, and concerns about at-risk behavior occurring in an unsupervised environment have all contributed to the rise in after-school programs. According to the Afterschool Alliance (2009), approximately 6.5 million children in K-12 participate in after-school programs.

Most after-school programs share common elements, with a mix of activities that tend to include: art, recreation, snacks, and homework help. However, despite the

commonalities shared by after school programs, there is significant variety in after-school programming. Some after-school programs emphasize academics; others emphasize recreational activities, arts, or science. Some programs emphasize having a safe place for children to be, while other programs emphasize enrichment activities (Halpern, 1999).

Ultimately, Halpern (1999) argues that no one institution is wholly responsible for the development of a child, and the best outcomes for children in poverty rely on the interaction between the institutions in their life. Different children are able to get what they need from different developmental resources (Halpern, 1999), and after-school programs provide resources that can be integrated within the school, family, and community systems in a child's life.

After-school Programs and Special Education

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, all students receiving special education services must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). This program explicitly states which services are being made available to the student in order to help them better succeed in the classroom. After-school programs can be used to provide additional educational support to all students, including those students receiving special education services. However, not all students with disabilities feel that they are able to receive the same quality of program as other students.

According to the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council (2012), which surveyed 450 families and 480 child care providers, there are significant difficulties involved with finding suitable accommodations for students with disabilities during their out of school time. Of the families that responded to the survey, 72% have had difficulty

finding, obtaining, or keeping child care, with 53% of respondents reporting that they had previously removed their child from child care or out of school time programs because the provider was not adequately trained to support their child. Furthermore, 82% of respondents indicated that they need support for their child before and after school, but only 36% responded that they knew of programs that would accept their child. Of the providers who responded to the survey, 73% had previously asked a child to leave the program due to behavioral concerns. However, 92% of respondents said they were willing to receive additional training to help them serve a child with a disability. These survey results demonstrate that both parents and service providers are often placed in difficult circumstances, and that finding or providing the best possible service for their child is of paramount importance. These findings also support the idea that more collaboration and communication between the school psychologists and after-school programs may help both the students, their families, and the programs be more successful in achieving their goals. While this research does the preliminary work, there does appear to be a need for further, more specified research in this area.

Quality of After-school Programming

Research conducted by Halpern (1999) suggests that there are specific features of after-school programs that are widely considered to act as a baseline in order to ensure that an after-school program can be considered successful. These include: adequate number of staff, adequate level of staff literacy, adequate facilities, warm and supportive staff, a flexible schedule, a predictable environment, the opportunity to explore new ideas, feelings, and identities, avenues for self-expression, exposure to one's own heritage in addition to the larger culture, and time for unstructured play and simple fun. When

assessing nine programs serving low-income children in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle, Halpern (1999) discovered that two-thirds of the programs rated fair to poor on the majority of the aforementioned program attributes. A common problem observed within programs was that programs that were understaffed, not allowing the adults to give proper attention to the students' needs. Other times, staff lacked the knowledge to know how to gauge children's interests in activities, nor did they know how to properly facilitate activities in order to cultivate interest in a topic, suggesting improper or inadequate staff training. Ultimately, though a substantial number of programs may present concerns regarding the quality of the program, they still represent a better alternative for at-risk students than wandering the streets, or being home alone.

More recent research suggests that the quality of after-school programs is heavily dependent on the following features: access to and sustained participation within the program, appropriate supervision and structure, well-prepared staff, intentional programming with opportunities for autonomy and choice, and strong partnerships between home, schools, and the programs (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008). These findings appear to build upon Halpern's earlier after-school program research, and emphasize that a quality program is one that is able to create and maintain relationships between the various institutions in a child's life.

Although many different programs exist in both school-based and community-based iterations, Davies (2012) argues that school-based programs have a greater impact on student achievement due to the closer collaboration with the school district, and the use of the same curriculum. Further, school-based programs that are staffed by teachers can help alleviate the problem of teachers feeling disconnected from the students family

and culture by strengthening the role of the school as a community center. Additionally, school-based programs are eligible to receive Title I funding or grants, allowing them to hire more support staff and tutors. If a school-based program is infeasible, or if there are existing community-based programs, Davies (2012) recommends that school administrators form a partnership with community-based programs in order to best serve the students. The partnership between the school and the community program can be enhanced by: sharing the school's core curricula, referring students, and facilitating a direct line of communication between teachers and program staff members. Furthermore, school administrators can encourage teachers to send the program staff information about the students' current levels of academic performance, subjects where more academic support is needed, and to keep the program staff up to date on any tests or projects that are forthcoming.

This two-way collaborative relationship that is recommended for quality after-school programming is central to the proposed study. Although there is some research to guide the development and implementation of high quality programming for certain populations of students, there exists a need to further explore after-school programs with regards to students receiving secondary level interventions within a RTI framework, as well as those students who receive special education services. The purpose of the proposed study is to examine how frequently school psychologists recommend after-school programming as intervention, which steps within the special education process these recommendations are made, what factors guide these recommendations, and what level of communication exists between the after-school programs and the schools themselves.

The researcher predicts that the majority of school psychologists will have recommended after-school programs to students who are currently receiving targeted intervention within a RTI system, or who have been found eligible for special education services.   Additionally, the researcher predicts that most school psychologists would be willing to assist after-school programs by providing consultation and training on specific types of disabilities and behavior management skills. The researcher predicts school psychologists frequently attempt to base their after-school program recommendations on specific IEP goals or student weaknesses, rather than general recommendations of extra instruction. Based on current literature concerning after-school programs and special education, the researcher predicts that school psychologists will report that there is a current lack of communication between after-school programs and special education staff regarding specific remediation strategies, progress monitoring, and IEP goals. From an after-school programming perspective, the researcher predict that after-school staff will indicate a desire for assistance from school psychologists and other special education personnel in the form of staff training and assistance with progress monitoring.

Study Design

For the purpose of this study, the researcher interviewed select school psychologists and after-school program staff in the greater Richmond, Virginia and Harrisonburg, Virginia areas. These regions were selected in order to gain more insight regarding possible regional differences in the referral questions. Furthermore, these regions were selected due to differences in school district size and area classification. The Richmond region includes Chesterfield County (approximately 58,000 students), Henrico County (approximately 51,000 students), and Richmond City (approximately

23,000 students). This area is considered largely suburban, with a dense urban population as well. The Harrisonburg region includes Harrisonburg City (approximately 5,600 students) and Rockingham County (approximately 11,000 students). This area is considered largely rural. These interviews attempted to gather in-depth information regarding current levels of collaboration between these programs and special education staff. These interviews were open-ended in format, and attempted to gain an understanding of current practices within each region. As part of the interview process, the researcher attempted to assess the school psychologists' current level of familiarity of after-school programs in their area, to what extent they recommend after-school programs as resources for students, what criteria they use to select the after-school programs, and how they perceive the amount of communication that takes place between the after-school providers and the school system as it relates to serving students within the RTI or special education process. Additionally, the researcher discussed what additional consultation and/or training after-school providers may need in order to successfully work with students with disabilities. Finally, the researcher inquired about perceived obstacles to students with disabilities successfully participating in and benefitting from after-school programs. These survey data were collected via interview, and analyzed qualitatively.

Method

Participants

Participants included twelve school psychologists and five after-school programs within the Richmond, Virginia region, as well as three school psychologists and one

after-school program within the Harrisonburg, Virginia region. All Participants were recruited via email messages sent to publically available email addresses. Participants were not compensated.

Materials/ Apparatus

School Psychologist Interview. Participants responded to questions related to their awareness of after school programming in their communities. Participants disclosed their own opinions in regards to after-school programs, and how these programs could be effectively utilized in order to help students with disabilities meet IEP goals, learn and apply new skills, and receive additional academic, behavioral, and/or emotional support. Additionally, participants disclosed their current level of involvement with after-school programming, their rationale for after-school recommendations, and their current perception of their effectiveness. See Appendix A for specific questions.

After-school Program Interview. Participants responded to questions related to their program's role in the community, their familiarity in working with students with identified disabilities, and their current level and quality of communication with special education staff in a student's home school. Additionally, participants discussed their perceptions of school/community partnerships in supporting students with disabilities, as well as any obstacles related to these partnerships. See Appendix B for specific questions.

Procedure

Participants' identities were kept confidential during collection of data. After gaining informed consent from participants, the researcher conducted brief interviews

relevant to after-school programming for students in special education. There were twelve interviews with school psychologists and five with staff members at after-school programs in the Richmond, VA region, and three interviews with school psychologists and one interview with after-school program staff in the Harrisonburg, VA region. As there existed little to no previous research on this specific topic, the interview format was chosen due to the exploratory nature of this research. By using the open-ended interview format, the researcher was able to allow participants to include information that was personally relevant and was then able to identify common themes across participants and groups of participants.

Data were analyzed using the Cut and Sort method. This method requires the researcher to identify quotes or ideas from the interview data, and then group similar ideas or quotes together (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). These groups were expressed as common themes, which were reported.

Results

School Psychologists

All participating school psychologists were asked "Do you think that after-school programs are beneficial for students who have IEPs, 504 plans, or who are currently involved in an RTI (Response-to-Intervention) process?" Within the Richmond, VA region, three of the twelve participants (25%) indicated that they felt that after-school programs were beneficial for these students, and nine participants (75%) felt they did not know enough about the programs and their outcomes to be able to answer the question. Within the Harrisonburg, VA region, all three participants (100%) indicated that they felt after-school programs would be beneficial for students identified as having disabilities.

Of the twelve Richmond area school psychologists who were interviewed for this study, seven (58%) were aware of at least one after-school program available to the students in their area. Of these, only three (25%) responded that they recommend specific after-school programs for students with disabilities as part of their practice. Nine Richmond area school psychologists interviewed (75%) indicated that they do not recommend after-school programs. Of the three Harrisonburg area school psychologist participants, two (66%) were aware of at least one after-school program available to the students in their schools. One Harrisonburg area school psychologist (33%) indicated that they currently recommend after-school programs for students who are identified as having a disability. Those school psychologists that do recommend after-school programming were asked "How do you determine what after-school programs to recommend for specific students with disabilities?" Common themes from these answers

included: past positive experiences with similar students and word of mouth. One Richmond area school psychologist responded that the after-school program actively recruits members within the school, and that some of the teachers at the school work at the after-school program as well. One Harrisonburg area school psychologist indicated that their recommendations for after-school attempt to address specific needs within the individual student, and that their team specifically avoids recommending after-school programs "just for the sake of doing something." These responses from school psychologist participants in both regions suggest that although some school psychologists recommend after-school programming to the parents of students with disabilities, the majority of those interviewed do not. When asked why they do not recommend after-school programming for students with disabilities, the most consistent theme reported across both regions was that the school psychologists did not feel that they knew enough about programs in the area to feel comfortable recommending them. Other common themes reported included: not feeling it was appropriate to recommend after-school programming due to possible costs associated with these programs, and not feeling that it was their job to recommend after-school programs to parents of students with disabilities. One Richmond area school psychologist expressed reservations about recommending after-school programming that cost money, as they felt the school may be responsible for any possible payments if the school psychologist made an official recommendation.

All school psychologists were asked "In your opinion, what should after-school programs emphasize in order to best serve students with disabilities (i.e., staff training)?" Due to the open-ended nature of this question, responses varied significantly from one another. Despite this variability, six of the twelve (50%) Richmond area school

psychologist responses indicated that behavioral management skills were among the most important aspects of successfully working with students with disabilities. Other themes that were present in the responses included: collaboration with school and parents, determining academic strengths and weaknesses in a student, staff being trained to work with students with specific disabilities, understanding students individual needs, using more individualized instruction, modifying activities or instruction to be inclusive, and using understanding and patience when working with students identified as having disabilities. Within the Harrisonburg region, two of the three (66%) school psychologists mentioned behavioral management as being an essential component of working with students with disabilities. One Harrisonburg area school psychologist indicated that their ideal after-school program for all students, including those with disabilities, would include a clear structure, low adult to student ratio, rules, and data monitoring to demonstrate student growth and progress. Furthermore, a school liaison would be important to help link the after-school academic time with the school day's lessons.

All participants were also asked "With parental consent, would you be comfortable discussing or facilitating discussion between school and after-school personnel in regards to specific students and IEP goals? Why or why not?" All twelve Richmond area school psychologists interviewed responded that they would have no issues discussing a particular student and their goals. Five of the twelve (42%) respondents indicated that they had previously discussed assessment results and recommendations to outside personnel who were present at an IEP or eligibility meeting within the school setting. Of the three Harrisonburg area school psychologists, all three

responded that they would have no issues sharing information with outside agencies if parental permission were obtained.

Finally, all participants were asked "What do you perceive to be the current level of communication between schools and after-school programs, specifically in regards to students with IEPs, 504 plans, or those involved in an RTI process?" Ten out of twelve Richmond area respondents (83%) indicated that they felt there was little to no communication between the schools and outside programs, regardless of whether the students being served were identified as having a disability. Although multiple respondents indicated that they did not know for sure whether or not there was communication between the outside programs and the school, they indicated that their perception was "little" or "no" communication occurred. Two out of the twelve school psychologists (17%) interviewed indicated that there was "some" or "occasional" communication between the school and after-school programs. One respondent indicated that one after-school program serving their area has multiple staff members who are also school personnel, therefore the communication between after-school and school personnel happens fairly regularly, but occurs through informal channels.   Of the three Harrisonburg area school psychologists, all three indicated that they perceived little to no communication between the school personnel and after-school programs. One school psychologist indicated that they have not, to this point, heard about case managers, special education staff, or other school personnel being actively involved in any after-school programming.

After-school Program Staff

Staff members from after-school programs were asked "What would you describe as the main emphasis of your program?" Two out of five (40%) Richmond area programs described their program as having primarily an academic focus, with enrichment activities being a secondary focus. These programs described their students as being predominantly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and provide homework help, tutoring, and additional academic lessons. One program (20%) responded that their program was strictly academic, and the students completed homework before receiving remediation in specific areas for the entire duration of their time attending the program. Two programs out of five (40%) were focused primarily on the arts. One of these programs was performance arts based, and one was based more on visual art lessons. However, in both programs, students complete their homework when they first arrive prior to any other instruction or activities. Within the Harrisonburg region, only one after-school program participated in this study. This program is part of a nationally recognized after-school program, and described their main emphasis as character building through enrichment programs focusing on the arts, conflict resolution, career planning, and education.

Participants were asked "How are students referred or recruited to your after-school program?" Four of the five Richmond area participants (80%) indicated that the majority of parents inquire about the programs either by phone or in person after hearing about the programs via word of mouth. All five participants responded that they do attempt to recruit students at schools, but only one of the five participants indicated that their program gets the majority of their students from school referral or

recommendation. Common themes regarding recruitment included: flyers and posters in the front office of schools, and tables/booths set up at school functions such as "back to school night". The one program that receives the majority of their students through referral or recommendation shared that the classroom teachers recommend their program to parents for students who are struggling academically. The Harrisonburg area program's spokesperson indicated that they do significant outreach programs in local neighborhoods, hang flyers, and have cookouts and other community events. In addition, they utilize recruitment flyers and posters in local schools. As with the majority of the Richmond area programs, the Harrisonburg area program's spokesperson indicated that they receive a significant number of inquiries about their program via word of mouth.

Participants were asked "Approximately how many students (or what percentage) that attend your program are identified as having a disability?" Four out of the five Richmond area programs (80%) did not know "officially" whether their students were receiving special education services at their school. One Richmond program spokesperson responded that about ten percent of their students had IEPs that they were aware of. When asked "How are program staff made aware of a student's disability?" the participant indicated that the program relied on the parents to indicate upon registration whether the student had an IEP or not, and to provide any information that the parent feels would be relevant in regards to that disability. Once registered, the parent would sign a release form and allow the after-school program to contact the school and receive the student's grades and IEP information. One Richmond area program spokesperson indicated that they did not feel it was important to know whether their students were receiving special education services during the school day. The Harrisonburg area

program's spokesperson indicated that they had no official way of knowing, and that it was their program's policy that they did not ask parents for that information upon registration. Any information regarding student disabilities was obtained from either the student themselves or through unofficial channels (such as knowing the student's teacher by chance). Furthermore, the Harrisonburg area program's spokesperson indicated that they often have no or very little contact with parents of students who attend their program.

When participants were asked "Do you feel your program is appropriate for students with disabilities?" Six of the six (100%) Richmond and Harrisonburg area after-school programs responded yes, depending upon the severity of the disability. All participants were asked "What obstacles, if any, do you perceive to be in place that may prevent a student with a disability from being successful in your program?" Common themes in the answers included: inadequate staff training, inadequate resources, and difficulty giving truly individualized attention to a student with a disability. One Richmond area after-school program's spokesperson indicated that a lack of human resources (i.e., staffing) may be a reason why a student with a disability would not be successful in their program. They further clarified that certain students may need one-on-one attention and supervision and that their program may not always have enough supervision to provide that one-on-one support. The Harrisonburg area program's spokesperson indicated that students with disabilities may face social challenges in their program from other students, depending on the nature and severity of their disability.

All participants were asked "Has your program ever been unable to accept a particular student dude to behavioral, emotional, or physical issues arising from the

child's disability?" Four of the five (80%) Richmond area participants indicated that they have previouslyremoved students from their program due to behavioral issues. Common themes among reasons for removal included: emotional dysregulation/instability, defiance of staff members, and discipline procedures being ineffective to stop/reduce certain behaviors. The Harrisonburg area program's spokesperson indicated that they have had numerous instances where a student has been removed from their program due to behavioral issues.

All participants were asked "Who provides training for your staff in how to best serve students with cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or physical disabilities?" Three of the five (60%) Richmond area program participants indicated that they did not receive any training related to working with students with disabilities. One program spokesperson indicated that their program director delivers all training related to behavioral management, and that they partner with community agencies to provide staff training on working with students exposed to trauma, students with emotional concerns, and students with extreme behavioral concerns. One program spokesperson reported that the majority of their staff are teachers during the school day, and receive their training through the school system. The Harrisonburg area program's spokesperson indicated that their staff is largely comprised of students and volunteers, and they have significant employee turnover. Due to these issues, formal training related to working with students with disabilities is not provided.

All participants were asked "Currently, how would you describe the frequency and quality of communication between your program staff and the staff of the local schools?" Four of the five (80%) Richmond area participants described their level

of communication with school personnel to be little or nonexistent. One program

spokesperson described the communication as being adequate. When asked who the

point of contact was within the school building regarding students with disabilities, the

program spokesperson stated the assistant principal was the contact person for all

students attending the program. One program spokesperson responded that although they

have no communication with the school, they do not feel it would be relevant to the goals

of their program.   The Harrisonburg area program's spokesperson described their

communication with the local schools as "completely nonexistent". When asked to

elaborate, the program spokesperson shared that there is not currently an infrastructure

that would facilitate communication between their program and the school system, but

that they are hopeful that they will be able to develop a communication system to be able

to share information between the schools and other programs that serve the same

students.

All programs were asked "How do you feel the special education staff of

local schools could better assist your program in meeting the needs of students with

disabilities?" The most common theme among the Richmond area program responses

was increased communication between the school, parents, and after-school programs.

One Richmond area program's spokesperson suggested that inviting after-school program

staff to meetings regarding the students at the school would be beneficial to help serve

the students, particularly those students who are identified as having a disability.

Another program spokesperson suggested that along with increased communication, the

sharing of data between the two entities would help both school and after-school staff

coordinate their service delivery to all students, particularly students with disabilities.

Another Richmond area program spokesperson shared that after-school program staff could be invited to trainings and other professional development opportunities that occur within the school in order to be better equipped to serve students with disabilities. The Harrisonburg area program spokesperson shared that simply having a relationship with the school system and opening the lines of communication would be extremely helpful in serving all students, including those with disabilities. In regards to serving students with disabilities specifically, the staff member shared that although they may know some broad information about certain disabilities, they would much prefer to have some insight into specific students and learn what works for them best. By being in communication with the school staff, the program would be better able to stay in the loop, and would gain valuable information from school staff regarding working with individual students.

Discussion

The results of the interviews suggest that although the majority of the participating school psychologists are aware of at least one after-school program that currently serves students in their area, most school psychologists are not currently recommending after-school programs for students with disabilities. These responses appear to be largely consistent in both the Richmond and Harrisonburg regions. Those that do recommend after-school programming tend to do so based on previous personal experience recommending these sites to parents and students, as opposed to research and empirical data regarding effectiveness. The majority of school psychologists who were interviewed for this study indicated that they did not know enough about after-school programs in their area to

recommend them to parents of students with disabilities. Furthermore, the majority of school psychologists did not feel they knew enough about after-school programs in general to answer whether or not they were beneficial or appropriate for students with disabilities. These results may suggest a lack of research related to after-school programs and how they can be used to serve students with disabilities. Furthermore, the data suggests that school psychologists in both regions are generally aware that after-school programming is available to their students. Being aware of these programs, however, does not appear to necessarily lead to more school psychologists recommending these after-school programs for students with disabilities. During the interview process, one Harrisonburg area school psychologist shared that they had "fallen into the mindset of thinking about IEP goals in terms of just the seven hour school day, but they certainly can be addressed in after-school programs." As after-school programs grow more commonplace throughout the country (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008), it will be increasingly important that school psychologists and other IEP team members are familiar with these community resources, and are utilizing these available resources in order to ensure the best possible service delivery for students with disabilities.

Although the majority of school psychologists felt that they did not know enough about after-school programs, all of the participants in this study indicated that, with parental consent, they would be comfortable discussing individual students with after-school program staff. Because many school psychologists engage in this consultative relationship with teachers and administrators within their schools, expanding this role to engage community partners would seem to be a natural fit. This collaboration between school and after-school programs would have the added benefit of allowing school

psychologists to better familiarize themselves with after-school programs in their area, which could possibly lead to better and more frequent recommendations. During the interview process conducted for this study, one Richmond area school psychologist shared that "maintaining consistency [in service delivery] across settings is in the best interest of everyone". By engaging outside agencies in this collaborative and consultative relationship, consistency of service delivery to the student would appear to be far more likely.

In regards to the training that after-school programs would require in order to best work with students, many school psychologists in both the Richmond and Harrisonburg regions suggested that behavior management is among the most important aspects of successfully working with students with disabilities. The majority of after-school program staff in both regions shared that they have previously removed students from their programs due to behavioral issues that their staff was unable to handle. These responses are consistent with previous literature that suggests families with disabilities often have difficulty finding and maintaining adequate after-school programming for students with disabilities (Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, 2012). This, too, demonstrates the need for consultation and collaboration between school personnel and after-school providers. Another frequent theme that appeared in the responses was the idea of determining strengths and weaknesses within the student. One Richmond area school psychologist shared that, with the school's assistance, "after-school programs could tailor interventions and remediation to address specific issues". This response and other similar responses appear to suggest that with responsible and timely data sharing,

those after-school programs with academic focuses may have enough flexibility and information to implement targeted interventions for students with disabilities.

Based on the results of the after-school program interviews, the majority of after-school programs in both the Richmond and Harrisonburg regions feel there is a lack of communication between their program and the school system in regards to meeting the needs of their students. One Harrisonburg area after-school program staff member remarked that their program has "a better relationship with the local police department than the local school system." This lack of communication between school and after-school programs is especially troubling for students who are identified as having a disability, as they may have IEP goals, behavioral systems, and other special considerations that could be addressed during their time at the after-school program. School psychologists in both regions overwhelmingly agreed with the after-school program staff that there is a significant communication gap between these community-based programs and the schools themselves. This lack of communication between after-school programs and schools may be problematic for successfully serving students with disabilities. Students with disabilities may be more or less responsive to certain instructional methods, may need specific behavioral interventions, or may need modified discipline procedures. Without open lines of communication between school and after-school, the probability that similar methods are being used across settings is significantly lower. As stated previously, many school psychologists frequently engage in consultative roles within their schools, so expanding that role to include outside agencies makes sense for the after-school program, the school, and ultimately, the student.

In regards to how the special education staffs of the local school districts could better assist after-school programs in meeting the needs of students with disabilities, the majority of the after-school programs in both regions indicated that more communication with the individual schools is something that would allow them to better serve all their students, including those with disabilities. One Richmond area after-school program staff member shared that "any form of communication would be massively beneficial to serving all of our students, but particularly those students with unique challenges".

As far as the researcher is aware, this study was the first to interview both school psychologists and after-school programs in order to determine whether students with disabilities were being referred to and appropriately served by after-school programs. This study's intent was to identify common themes related to the recommendation of after-school programs by school psychologists, as well as gain perspective from after-school programs in regards to serving students with disabilities. Furthermore, this study was intended to examine two separate regions within the same state to determine whether there were significant differences between the selected school districts in regards to the research questions.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. Several school psychologists felt that it was not their place, or that another school employee should be the person to recommend after-school programs, as well as initiate and maintain contact with these programs. Therefore, the population that was interviewed may have been too specific to get a true sense of how frequently after-school programs are recommended for students

with disabilities. Furthermore, there were time constraints that led to fewer participants

than anticipated, particularly within the Harrisonburg region.

Suggestions for future research

Future research on this topic should be less focused on school psychologists

specifically, and be more focused on all eligibility and/or IEP team members. As

different schools and different school districts have unique roles for school psychologists,

the data from interviewing just school psychologists may be an incomplete view of the

research questions. Furthermore, national research data on this particular topic would be

useful to demonstrate possible differences in recommendation rates and outcomes of

students with disabilities participation in after-school programming.

Eligibility and IEP team members routinely make impactful decisions about a

student's life, and while doing so need to keep the parents and other stakeholders

involved and up to date. By utilizing after-school program resources effectively, the IEP

team can ensure that home, school, and community are delivering services to the student

in a consistent way. Communication between these three stakeholders is vital to ensuring

fidelity in the delivery of services, and can help eliminate redundancies or conflicts in the

delivery of instruction, the implementation of behavioral systems, or remediation.

It is important for school psychologists and other school personnel to be aware of

after-school programming in their community, and to be willing to provide information

(with parental consent) that will help an after-school program best serve a student with a

disability. Although it is not always practical to be in frequent communication, the IEP

team should include a representative who works with a particular student from an after-

school program. By collaborating in this way, the school is able to share the vast amount of data that it collects on a particular student with the after-school program. The after-school program, which is frequently able to provide more individualized attention to a particular student, will consequently be more informed regarding a student's ability level, behavioral needs, and remediation needs (if applicable). If IEP goals require a behavioral plan during the school day, keeping the after-school program informed of the plan will allow for seamless transitions between the school and after-school environments.

As school psychologists, it is important that further research be conducted regarding the effectiveness of after-school programs and students with disabilities. Further research is warranted to better understand which programs best serve students with disabilities and if those students make better progress on IEP goals with continued intervention during the after-school hours. As data-based decision makers, school psychologists and other IEP team members could use further research on after-school program efficacy to help guide recommendations for after-school, rather than relying on anecdotal evidence or simply avoiding recommendations altogether. Currently, there exists a dearth of research related to effectiveness and appropriateness of after-school programming for students with disabilities. This may be due to the extremely variable nature of after-school programs, which may be disparate from one another in mission statement, size, emphasis, student-to-teacher ratio, available resources, physical environment, and countless other variables.

The results of this study suggest that although school psychologists are frequently aware of after-school programming within their areas of practice, they, generally speaking, do not feel familiar enough with these programs to recommend after-school

programs to parents of students with disabilities. However, if requested, participants

indicated a willingness to share information from the school to after-school programs.

Generally speaking, after-school programs currently feel a lack of support from the

schools, and do feel that further collaboration and communication between their

programs and school personnel are needed in order to best serve all students, particularly

those with disabilities. Further research is required in order to examine what impact

increased communication and collaboration between schools and after-school programs

has on student achievement.

Appendix A

school psychologist Interview Questions

1. What grade level of students do you primarily work with?

    a. How would you describe the population of students you primarily work

       with (Rural, Suburban, Urban, etc.)

2. How long have you been practicing School Psychology?

3. In your school district, are there after-school programs available to students?

    a. How would you describe your level of familiarity with these programs?

4. Do you refer students to outside agencies (including after-school programs) for

   mental health, behavioral, emotional, or academic support?

5. Do you recommend after-school programs to parents of students with disabilities?

    a. Do you recommend after-school programs as intervention part of a RTI

       process?

6. Do you think that afterschool programs are good for students who have IEPs, 504

   plans, or who are currently going through an RTI process?

    a. If so, what components does the after-school program need to emphasize?

       (e.g, academic, homework help, recreation, art, etc.)

7. How do you determine what after-school programs to recommend for specific

   students with disabilities? (e.g., previous experience with similar students,

   research, recommendations from teachers, etc.)

8. What specific areas of training do you feel are most important in order for after-

   school programs to successfully serve students with disabilities?

9. With parental consent, would you be comfortable discussing or facilitating discussion between school personnel and after-school personnel in regards to specific students and IEP goals? Why or Why Not?

10. What do you perceive to be the level of communication between schools and after-school programs in your district, specifically in regards to students with IEPs, 504 plans, or those involved in a RTI process?

Appendix B

After-school Program Survey Questions

1. What is the mission statement of your after-school program?

    i) What age ranges do you serve in your after-school program?

    ii) How would you describe the population of students that you serve (Rural, Urban, Suburban, etc.)?

2. What would you describe as the main emphasis of your program? (e.g., Reading focused, homework help, recreation, etc.)

3. How are students referred to your program?

4. Approximately how many students (or what percentage) that attend your program are identified as having a disability?

5. How are program staff made aware of a student's disability? (e.g., data shared between schools and outside program, parent report, student self-advocating, etc.)

6. Do you feel your program is appropriate for students with disabilities?

7. What obstacles (if any) do you perceive to be in place that may prevent a student with a disability from being successful in your program?

8. Has your program ever been unable to accept a particular student due to behavioral, emotional, or physical issues arising from the child's disability?

    i) Has the program ever needed to remove a student from the program due to the above issues?

9. Who provides training for your staff in how to best serve students with cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or physical disabilities?

10. Currently, how would you describe the frequency of communication between your program staff and the special education staff of the local schools?

     i)   Who is the main point of contact within the school building in regards to students with disabilities?

11. How do you feel the special education staff of the local school districts (school psychologists, special education teachers, etc.) could better assist your program in meeting the needs of students with disabilities?

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