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Programs That Work

The Academic Cultural Enrichment Mentorship Program: An Innovative Approach To Serving African American Youth

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to evaluate an after-school program that is designed to meet the specific needs of African American youth. The program is called the Academic Cultural Enrichment (ACE) Mentorship Program and is sponsored, in part, by the Champaign Park District. The purpose of the program is to provide students with the competencies and skills needed to be involved, resilient, and successful. The program seeks to foster positive Black identities in the participants, and to develop strong math, reading, oratorical, and analytical thinking skills. The program has a strong African cultural component, as well as academic and recreation components. Three research questions guided the evaluation project: 1) Are the program's goals being achieved; 2) Do the parents and leaders perceive a positive change in the participant's behaviors and attitudes as a result of their participation in the program; and 3) What are the salient program aspects of the ACE Mentorship Program. The evaluation took place over a two-year period. Pretest and posttest survey data were collected from the participants for two consecutive years. Additionally, at the end of the second year, interviews were conducted with leaders, parents, and participants. The participants' academic grades were also examined. The information collected from the surveys indicated that the pretest and posttest scores on the Protective Factors Scale and Harter's Self-Perception Scale were not significantly different. The academic grades did indicate positive changes for most of the participants. Further, the information received from the interviews with the parents, leaders, and participants consistently indicated that the program is meeting its goals and is having a positive impact on the children. The salient program elements that seemingly contribute to the positive outcomes include effective and consistent leadership, parental involvement, and innovative programming.

KEYWORDS: youth, mentorship, protective factors, after-school care, programming

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Despite fears about violence in schools, the number of kids committing and falling victim to crime has been dropping since 1994 (Witkin, 1998). A recent government report ("Kids crime declines," 1999) on the state of American children painted "an improving and mostly hopeful" picture of children and teens. For example, this report found that the number of high school students smoking cigarettes dropped in 1998 after gradually increasing since 1992. Additionally, the birth rate for girls ages 15 to 17 fell from its peak of 38.7 live births per 1,000 teens in 1991 to 32.1 in 1997. Despite these improvements, child advocates respond by indicating that more needs to be done and that "we're not where we should be." For example, there has been little or no progress in many areas, such as child and teen alcohol consumption ("Kids crime declines," 1999).

Several innovative programs have been developed for children as society continues to struggle with the issues facing today's youth. After-school recreation programs are believed to help address some of society's problems, such as lack of home supervision during after-school hours, lack of positive adult role models and mentors, and lack of community opportunities (Colston, 1994; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Witt & Crompton, 1996). Recreation, in particular, is viewed by many as an important component of these intervention programs (Grossman & Shigaki, 1994; Kunstler, 1993; McCall, 1994). According to Witt and Crompton (1996), recreation is used to attract youth to the program, which subsequently provides them with a safe environment to participate in structured activities during their free time.

In her book *Adolescents at Risk* (1990), Joy Dryfoos spoke of the serious nature of the problems facing today's youth. Dryfoos wrote:

Many children are growing up in the United States today without a hope of enjoying the benefits that come with adulthood. They are not learning the skills necessary to participate in the educational system or to make the transition into the labor force. They cannot become responsible parents because they have limited experience in family life and lack the resources to raise their own children. The gap between achievers and non-achievers is expanding. A new class of "untouchables" is emerging in our inner cities, on the social fringe of suburbia, and in some rural areas: young people who are functionally illiterate, disconnected from school, depressed, prone to drug abuse and early criminal activity, and, eventually, parents of unplanned and unwanted babies. These are the children who are at high risk of never becoming responsible adults. (p. 3)

Today's youth need to be taught the necessary skills to deal with the pressures and temptations of everyday life. Jessor (1992) stated that, "Behaviors such as illicit drug use, school dropout, unprotected sexual intercourse, encounters with the criminal justice system, or others, can compromise successful adolescent development and jeopardize the life-

chances of youth." (p. 25). However, not all youth succumb to the pressures they face on a regular basis. It is believed that some youth have benefited from the development of protective factors. Jessor (1992) concluded that protective factors moderate, buffer, and insulate against and thereby, mitigate the impact of risk on adolescent behavior and development. Protective factors assist youth in the development of resiliency, which refers to those skills and behaviors that help youth cope and adjust to the pressures and circumstances of their every day environment (McMillian & Reed, 1994). Allen, Stevens, and Harwell (1996) stated that resiliency should be one of the desired outcomes of after-school programs.

The interest in assessing the outcomes of youth programs has increased in recent years. Many studies have been conducted to evaluate program effectiveness (e.g., Allen et al., 1996; Baker & Witt, 1996; Scott, Witt, & Garteiser Foss, 1996). However, as stated by Scott et al. (1996), in order to facilitate service delivery and to ensure the future funding of programs that are targeted to meet the needs of youth, additional program evaluation research is needed. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to evaluate an after-school program that is designed to meet the specific needs of African American youth. The purpose of the program is to provide children with the competencies and skills needed to be involved, resilient, and successful. The program seeks to instill a positive Black identity in the participants, and to develop strong math, reading, oratorical, and analytical thinking skills. Thus, the program has a strong African cultural component, as well as academic and recreation components. The program, the Academic Cultural Enrichment (ACE) Mentorship Program, is sponsored, in part, by the Champaign Park District and has been in existence for three years. Previous studies have provided feedback on the benefits of other after-school programs. A review of some of this research is summarized below.

Related studies

Community leaders are searching for remedies to substance abuse, withdrawal from school involvement, juvenile crime, teen pregnancy, and overall behavior problems. Many educators, city officials, and park and recreation professionals have determined that after-school recreation programs have the potential to address some of these issues (Witt & Crompton, 1996). Over the past decade, researchers have examined the impact that these programs have on their participants, resulting in several studies that have demonstrated positive results. Furthermore, there has been an effort to determine the salient program elements that appear to contribute to positive outcomes (Henderson & King, 1999; Scott et al., 1996; Shinew, Norman, & Baldwin, 1997; Wright, Harwell, & Allen, 1998). For example, Shinew et al. (1997) found that salient program elements that seemingly contributed to positive outcomes include caring, supportive, and well-trained leaders; structured, challenging quality programming; participant involvement in choice of activities; and, opportunities for social interaction.

Researchers have examined the impact of different types of care during the 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. time frame that Goodman (1997) indicated was the prime time for most juvenile delinquent behavior to occur. For

example, Vandell and Ramanan (1991) conducted a study to examine the association between the type of after-school care (latchkey, mother-care, and other-adult care) and children's social, emotional, and cognitive development in a predominantly low-income, minority, urban sample. The study investigated whether latchkey care was associated with increased behavior problems, lower self-concepts, or poorer academic performance, as suggested by Woods (1972) and Long and Long (1983). The study also examined the characteristics of families who use latchkey care as opposed to other types of after-school care. The sample consisted of 390, 3rd through 5th graders (199 girls and 191 boys). The racial breakdown was 73 Hispanic children, 159 Black children, and 158 White children. Also, 47.3% of subjects lived in households where the income fell below the poverty line, and 52% were living in a single parent household. Most of the children were born to adolescent mothers; the mothers' average age was 17.

The study concluded that families using mother-care had lower incomes and were more likely to be living below the poverty line. Further, the families using mother-care appeared to offer less emotional support (as measured by the HOME-SF scale) than the families using latchkey or other-adult care. Additionally, the children who returned home to their mothers after school appeared to be more anxious and antisocial, had more peer conflict, and had lower Peabody Picture Vocabulary test scores. Latchkey care was also associated with behavior problems. However, follow-up analyses indicated that after controlling for family income and emotional climate, no significant differences were found in children's functioning and type of after-school care. Thus, the authors postulated that type of after-school care per se is less important than the quality of children's experiences in their families. Moreover, there is a common assumption that a child returning home to his or her mother is the ideal after-school care scenario. This study illustrated that this form of after-school care is less than ideal for some families. The findings of the study also demonstrated the intense need for quality after-school care for youth.

A similar study, conducted by Posner and Vandell (1994), examined four types of after-school care (formal after-school programs, mother-care, informal adult supervision, and latchkey care) for 216 low-income children. After controlling for maternal education, race, and family income, attending a formal after-school program was associated with better academic achievement and social adjustment in comparison to the other types of after-school care. Children's activities and experiences also varied in the different settings. Children in formal programs spent more time in academic activities and enrichment lessons and less time watching television and playing outside unsupervised than did the other children. They also spent more time doing activities with peers and adults and less time with siblings. The time that children spent in these activities was positively correlated with their academic and conduct grades, peer relations, and emotional adjustment. The authors concluded that the study documented the potentially positive effects of formal after-school programs for low-income children.

Scott, Witt and Garteiser Foss (1996) conducted a study to evaluate the impact of a specific program, the Dougherty Arts Center's Creativity Club for at-risk youth. This program is operated by the Austin (TX) Parks and Recreation Department and has a cultural art programming focus. The researchers concluded that the parents were highly enthusiastic about the program. They supported the idea of a structured, goal-oriented program and felt that the program was a positive alternative to the children being home alone. The authors found that parents enrolled their children for distinct reasons and that the children received many benefits as a result of their participation. Primary program benefits identified by the parents and leaders included developing and channeling the children's creativity, building self-confidence, gaining knowledge and appreciation of the arts, learning to get along with others, and developing friendships. The authors offered several suggestions for future research in this area. They suggested that research questions should relate to both outcomes and process. Studies must continue to identify the types of benefits sought by youth, parents, and leaders and then efforts need to be made to determine whether these benefits are actually being achieved. With regard to process, studies need to focus on the salient program characteristics that help participants achieve the benefits being sought.

In order to gain insight into how large municipalities are dealing with the youth issues, Mentiel, Hultsman, and Martin (1996) surveyed 177 senior administrators of U. S. cities with populations over 100,000. Sixty-seven (67) responses were returned for a response rate of 37%. Two questions were addressed in the survey. The first question asked, "What do you perceive as the major issues municipal governments will face in dealing with at-risk youth during the next few years?" The second question asked, "How do you think municipal governments should respond to those issues to deal most effectively with problems facing youth?" Administrators responded to the first question by stating that they need to address the risk factors youth face such as violence and gang-related behaviors, substance abuse, sexual behavior, school drop out, and lack of goals. They responded to the second question by indicating that collaboration across a wide array of organizations and stakeholders is needed. More specifically, they mentioned that better coordination is needed among municipal departments, greater involvement is needed on the part of citizens, parents, and youth, and that prevention/intervention programs rather than correction programs are needed. The city administrators viewed recreation as one means of addressing youth problems, although it has become increasingly apparent that other environmental influences can also be effective, such as churches, peer groups, community organizations, and youth clubs. The leaders felt that a collaborative effort between and among social service providers is desperately needed.

A similar study was conducted among individuals working in leisure services. Hultsman and Little (1995) asked members of the American Academy for Parks and Recreation (Academy) what the recreation and parks profession should be doing for, with, and about at-risk youth and how

the profession should address these issues. Their paper interpreted, from a naturalistic perspective, the responses, and then rather than attempting to provide definitive policy directions, they generated baseline perspectives on key issues. The authors did not attempt to define "at-risk" youth, which allowed Academy members the flexibility to discuss issues relevant to all youth. There were 115 Academy members polled and 40 returned their questionnaires for a response rate of 32%. They were asked the following question, "What do you see as the major trends related to youth-at-risk issues for the next five to ten years?" The themes that emerged included support and awareness, dangerous behaviors by youth, quality of life issues affecting youth, and judicial issues affecting youth. Many realized that as our society changes, so must the methods and means of delivering services to youth. The Academy members expressed a sense of urgency and concluded that we must make greater efforts to not only support, but save American youth by making a full commitment to youth services.

A second question asked, "How should public recreation agencies respond to these major trends?" The overwhelming theme in response to this question was that park and recreation professionals must take the lead in providing services to youth and facilitate collaboration with other agencies. There was consistency in the response to the question, "How can the private/corporate sector best assist public recreation efforts to respond to these major trends?" Their responses were as follows: employment-collaborative opportunities, financial support, programs and program resources, and leadership roles. The Academy members clearly expressed the need for the private sector to be involved, and suggested that this involvement be facilitated by the public sector.

The final question asked, "How should college and university curricula respond to these major trends?" Their responses were as follows: provide first-hand experiences for students, develop/train students in particular skills, develop in students a broad, general understanding of youth issues, and take a leadership role in youth initiatives. The Academy members expressed a need for colleges and universities to teach aspiring professionals practical skills that they can use immediately in addressing at-risk youth issues. These skills would include communication, conflict resolution, leadership, counseling, and group dynamics. Furthermore, it was indicated that schools must make a commitment to educate students concerning this target population. An example of such a commitment would be to develop a course that would emphasize programming strategies for working with youth at-risk.

It has become increasingly apparent that the leisure field, as well as society in general, has acknowledged the urgent needs of American youth. The study conducted by Hultsman and Little (1995) helped to clarify the diverse ideas within the leisure services industry concerning the problems, meanings, and solutions concerning youth issues. However, all agree that there is an urgent issue at hand, and that it will take collective efforts to resolve these complex issues.

The value and need for innovative community youth programs is clear. Moreover, assessing the effectiveness of these programs is needed to assure both quality programming and continued funding. Given this, the purpose of the current study was to conduct a program evaluation of a specific after-school program. The program that was evaluated is the Academic Cultural Enrichment (ACE) Mentorship Program, a program designed to meet the specific needs of African American youth. The three research questions that guided the evaluation project were: 1) Are the program's goals being met; 2) Do the parents and the leaders perceive a positive change in the participants' behaviors and attitudes as a result of their participation in the program; and 3) What are the salient aspects of the ACE Mentorship Program.

Methods

Community Setting

Champaign is a city of 65,000 residents with a neighboring city to the East, Urbana, having a population of 35,000 residents. The two cities are also the home of the University of Illinois with an enrollment of approximately 35,000 students. The two cities are typical of a middle class American university community and have a mean family income level of \$36,950 ("Destination Champaign," 1997). Currently, the African American population is approximately 10.6%, the Asian population is approximately 5.8%, and the Hispanic and Native American population is less than 2.1%. The remainder of the population is European Americans (81.5%).

The ACE Mentorship Program operates from the Douglass Community Center located in the Northeast section of Champaign, Illinois. Historically, this section of the community and its residents have been considered "at-risk" due to the high concentration of minority residents combined with the lower economic status of the area compared to the remainder of Champaign. This perception is supported by Champaign Police Department's crime density reports that indicate that the majority of Champaign's violent and drug-related crimes take place in this area of town. According to the City of Champaign's city report, more than 30% of Champaign's African American families are living below the national poverty level as opposed to 4.8% of Champaign's European American families. In fact, the City of Champaign reports that numerically, African American families living below the poverty level exceeds all other racial groups combined. Many of these families live within walking distance of the Douglass Center. Also, according to the ACE Mentorship Program Coordinator, over 50% of the children participating in the program reside in an African American female-headed household, as opposed to 17.7% of all female-headed households reported by the City of Champaign.

Program Information

The ACE Mentorship Program is designed to provide African American youth between the ages 6 to 14 with an opportunity to spend their after-school free time in a structured setting while learning a variety of new skills.

The hours of operation are from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturday. The Champaign Park District (CPD) and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) jointly operate the program. The AFSC provides the mentors for the program. Currently, there are approximately 50 students enrolled in the program and the program is offered free of charge. Depending on the day's scheduled activities, there are approximately 5-10 mentors each day to oversee the program. The mentors voluntarily give their time to the program.

The overall purpose of the ACE Mentorship Program is to strengthen and develop the youths' analytical thinking skills, oratorical skills, and their basic reading and math skills. Through developing these skills the staff's goal is not only to improve participants' academic performance, but also to improve their overall ability to excel in the educational system and in society in general. Three methods are utilized to meet the program's goals. First, traditional classroom style instruction is applied to allow youth to work on targeted academic skills in a small group setting. To complement the classroom instruction, the youth are given one-on-one sessions with mentors who provide personalized instruction. Finally, there is a Black cultural component that is used to help provide the youth with a positive Black identity. The program leaders select a theme each week and then all scheduled activities revolve around this theme. Some of the themes that have been used in the past are family trees, personal safety, community responsibility, and effective communication skills.

The program structure follows a regular schedule. Two days a week the focus is on academics, which includes both the group instruction and one-on-one sessions. Within the group instruction, the youth work on science projects, participate in word finds, solve puzzles and riddles, and analyze movies and videos. These different activities are used to get the youth accustomed to using analytical thinking skills. The one-on-one session is used to give the youth more personalized attention. Participants are also given time to work on homework and to get assistance when needed.

Some days have more of a recreational focus, but continue to stress the development of analytical and oratorical skills, as well as math and reading skills. One day a week the activities focus around cooking, which is taught by one of the parents and another day the focus is on arts and crafts. Recreational games include the traditional games like softball and tag, but also strategy-focused games such as chess and checkers. They also learn new skills, like how to play golf or ski.

The African cultural component serves as a tool to increase the youths' self-esteem. They learn the history of their culture, including such things as historical figures and traditional clothing and customs. Field trips are used to expose the children to different aspects of their culture. For example, the program participants recently went to St. Louis to see an African drum and dance show.

The Douglass Community Center and Park

The ACE Mentorship Program takes place at the Douglass Community Center that is located in Douglass Park. The park contains a playground

area, a picnic area, one-lighted ball field, and two-lighted basketball courts. The Douglass Center is a multi-purpose facility and is equipped with a full-size gymnasium that includes six basketball goals, a stage, a weight training room, locker rooms and showers, and a learning area. The Douglass Annex is located next to the Douglass Center and is equipped with a large activity room, kitchen, lounge and craft room, television, and piano. Also located in the park is the Douglass Library, which is equipped with computers for the children to use.

Administrative Information

The program advertises for youth and volunteers through a variety of channels. Flyers are distributed at churches, schools, community organizations, special events, and campus organization. The program is also advertised in the Douglass Park weekly newsletter, *The Douglass Star*. Each week the newsletter dedicates one page to the ACE Mentorship Program. Monthly program information is included in the Douglass Community Calendar of Events. Additionally, program information is included in the Champaign Park District's seasonal brochure and the AFSC's African American Community Empowerment Program's pamphlet.

The Douglass Park Program Coordinator supervises the ACE Mentorship Program. This individual oversees a youth program site supervisor and all the volunteers who coordinate the program's activities. This individual communicates with the AFSC staff regarding mentor training, volunteer recruitment, special trips, and curriculum issues. The ACE Parent Group and the Douglass Community Center Advisory Board serve in an advisory role for the program.

The budget for the ACE Mentorship program is fairly small (approximately \$23,000). This is due, in part, to the program's leadership consisting primarily of volunteers. The majority of the program's expenses include transportation and field trip costs. The program receives almost \$10,000 a year in donations, and this comes in the form of in-kind and cash donations from area businesses and organizations.

Data Collection Procedures

The data was collected in two phases, with both phases involving pretest and posttest data collections. The first year the pretest data was collected during September/October of 1997 by utilizing on-site questionnaires. The program staff indicated that typically enrollment is not stable until the second week of the program, and therefore, data collection did not occur until after this period. The subjects were given a paper-and-pencil survey instrument in four 15-minute increments over a 2-day period. Half of the surveys were completed each day in an effort to maintain the children's attention. The program leaders, who work with the participants on a daily basis and who administered the surveys to the children, received verbal and written instructions concerning survey administration prior to data collection. Posttest data was then collected in May/June of 1998.

The same data collection procedure was followed the second year. Pretest data was collected in September/October of 1998 and posttest data

was collected during May/June of 1999. In addition, at the end of phase two, personal interviews were conducted with children, parents, and leaders. These semi-structured interviews were conducted in an effort to gain greater insight into the effectiveness of the ACE Mentorship Program.

Sample

The participants of the program are African American children between the ages of 6 to 14 years old. The current enrollment is approximately 50. All children were eligible to participate in the study. Consent forms were distributed to all parents and guardians. The first year of the evaluation 23 children completed both pretest and posttest surveys. The average age was 7.69 years ($SD=1.6$) and 60.9% were girls. Of those who participated in the study, 52.2% had been involved in the ACE Mentorship Program the previous year. Nine different schools were represented among the study's participants. The second year of the evaluation, 50 students completed pretest surveys, but only 39 students completed both pretest and posttest surveys. The average age was 7.72 years ($SD=1.8$) and 50% were girls. Twelve different schools were represented. Once again, almost half (46.7%) of the study's participants were involved in the program the previous year. Eight children participated in the evaluation both years.

Measures

The survey that was given to the children included four sections: satisfaction with the program; motivations for participation; Harter's Self-Perception Profile of Children (1982); and the Protective Factor Scale (Witt, Baker, Scott, 1996). The decision to utilize Harter's Self-Perception Scale was derived from its ability to tap children's domain-specific judgments of their competence, as well as a global perception of their worth or esteem as a person (Harter, 1982). The five specific domains in addition to Global Self-Worth that were included were scholastic competence, social competence, athletic competence, personal appearance, and behavioral conduct (Harter, 1982). All of these domains seemed relevant to the program's overall goals. Each of the six subscales contains six items, constituting a total of 36 items. A four-point scale was used with the anchors of "doesn't sound at all like me" to "sounds a lot like me."

The Protective Factors Scale (Witt, Baker & Scott, 1996) was utilized to measure the program's ability to develop protective factors in youth. The Protective Factors Scale is based on the earlier research of Jessor (1992) and was developed to measure program outcomes in various areas. These areas include such factors as knowledge of neighborhood resources, access to interested and caring adults, a sense of acceptance and belonging, a positive attitude toward the future, ability to work out conflicts, and ability to work with others. In short, protective factors counter or balance the risk factors faced by youth (Jessor, 1992). Again, given the program's overall goals, this was an appropriate measure to include in the study. The scale included 36 items, and the participants were asked to judge how much they either agreed or disagreed with each statement by circling strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree on a five-point Likert Scale.

Academic grades were collected for the study's participants. Grades were obtained from the Champaign and Urbana School Districts. Grades were collected for the year prior to participation in the program as well as the year of participation. Permission to access the grades was obtained from parents and guardians, as well as from school officials.

Findings

Program Motivation and Satisfaction

The participants of the program were asked, "If you were involved in the program last year, what did you like about it?" For the first year of the study, the most popular choices were "the leaders," "learning new things," "it was a safe place to be," and "it keeps me out of trouble." The least popular choice was "the activities." The findings for the second year were different. The most common choices were "the activities" and "learning new things." Other common responses were "the leaders," "being with friends," and "it was a safe place to be." The least popular choice was, "it kept me out of trouble."

The participants were also asked, "Why did you decide to participate in the ACE Mentorship Program this year?" The first year, common choices were "I didn't have anything else to do," "I wanted to learn to do different things," "it was a safe place to be," and "to meet new people." The least common responses were "my friends were doing it" and "my parents made me." The second year, the most popular response was "to meet new people." This was followed closely by "my friends were doing it," "I wanted to learn to do different things," and "it was a safe place to be." The least popular choice was "to get away from home."

Self-Perception Profile

Scores on Harter's Self-Perception Scale and subscales were computed and analyzed for each participant for both years of evaluation. No significant differences were found between the pretest scores and the posttest scores. However, the mean scores revealed that some positive change had occurred, but not to the level of statistical significance. For example, there was a notable difference the second year of evaluation for three of the six competency areas including scholastic competence, behavioral conduct, and global self-worth. In all three areas, the level of significance was just over .10.

Protective Factors

Overall scale and subscale scores for the Protective Factors Scale were computed and analyzed for each participant. The analyses examined whether the pretest scores and posttest scores were significantly different. No significant differences were found either year for the overall protective factor scale or for the scale's subscales. Careful examination of the data revealed that some "improvement" had occurred, but given the small sample sizes, the differences were not statistically significant.

The Interviews

As mentioned, interviews were conducted with parents, participants, and leaders. The interviews were conducted after the second year of evaluation. The purpose of these interviews was to ascertain how those involved in the program perceived its overall impact on the children. Analyses of the transcribed interviews revealed several themes, with the overall theme being that all those involved were very satisfied with the program. In fact, one of the leaders stated that the program, "has gone beyond what I ever imagined." The three primary themes that emerged were 1) the program's positive impact on academic performance; 2) the effectiveness of the program's leadership; and 3) the importance of the African cultural component of the program. Pseudonyms have been used in the responses.

The parents felt that the program was having a positive effect on their children's academic grades. A statement made by a mother with three children in the program can summarize the impact:

I think it has because they have the tutoring, they help them with their homework, and if they have problems.... Jim was having problems with math, I believe, and I mentioned it to one of the leaders or mentors, and I told him...ya know...when Jim has math homework could somebody help him with it cause he got him some problems with it, and they were fine with it.

A father with two children in the program also indicated that he thinks the program has had a positive effect on his son's grades. He stated that:

I think the mentor will correct you if you can't pronounce a word straight like my youngest son, Marc. He'll say certain words and they'll correct him, then he'll take information and apply it to school once he gets back.

The leaders also felt that improved academic performance was an important component of the program. One of the leaders stated:

We work on them developing confidence in themselves...through critical thinking...a major focus of the program....that helps them translate what goes on in ACE to what goes on at school and at home...developing consistent behavior across all environments...that's what's important...because that translates into confidence, which translates into better behavior and better grades

A second theme that emerged from the interviews was the effectiveness of the program's leaders. The parents felt that the mentors provide their children with a quality learning environment. They feel that the mentors truly care about their children, and are willing to do whatever it takes to meet their needs. A mother with one daughter in the program was asked if the program has good leaders. Her response was:

Definitely...definitely...I see um sometimes and I wonder whether they sleep...I see Sharon and the others putting in a lot of

hours, a lot of time, not only trying to create programs of interest and stuff, but going beyond that..., and I really doubt that the Park District is paying them for that extra time...um...the cheer/pom program is a ...to me is an excellent example. It doesn't cost that much to sign your child up for, but I look at the hours of practice that they work with the girls, I look at them going out and trying to make arrangements for them to go different places and see things, and it's the same thing... I mean they could very easily just do... this is a class...meet here once a week...boom and that's it. No, they go beyond that.... so even this cheer/pom program that's supposed to jump up and down and do cheers, but if you go to practice, you will hear Sharon saying things to the girls about the way they talk, the way they carry themselves, the way they should behave. So, it's a constant, there's a constant teaching that's going on there and if that's leadership...yes.

Another parent commented on the individualized attention that the leaders give her child. The example that she gave involved her daughter's dietary needs. Her daughter is diabetic and the leaders make certain that her needs are met, including, "if she forgets her snack, he'll give her 50 cents to get her a snack out of the machine or something." The parents recognize the constant teaching that takes place in the program. The importance of names, and how they are used is just one example. One parent gave the following response when asked if the leaders are really impacting the children's lives:

I think so, my kids look up to them, a lot of them, and they respect them and a couple of them have Muslim names and they tell the kids what their names mean and what certain things mean...I think they're role models for the children.

The importance of having African American leaders was also clear. For example, one parent commented:

I think the best thing is...ya know...they talk a lot about role models, and when my son and daughter can see young Black men coming back and forth and not cursing, carrying books constantly. It's rare that I see anyone go in the center that's involved that doesn't have a book, doesn't have some kind of briefcase or knapsack....they're constantly getting a positive image

A third theme that emerged was the importance of the African cultural component of the program. This was mentioned by several individuals, including leaders, children, and parents. One parent mentioned that this is what impressed him most about the program. He stated, "...they are learning more about their culture and themselves." Another parent mentioned that, "...if you don't know your past, you don't know your future." Further, one of the participants indicated that "Black history" was the thing that he had learned most from the program. A leader stated that,

“learning different parts of African American history helps them build a better self-image.” This point of view was also voiced by one of the parents:

We live in a neighborhood that’s not ethnically balanced, and I really wanted her to be more exposed to the African American culture. Period. You know, and I don’t care how that sounds, because out in Southwest Champaign she wasn’t necessarily getting it, and it goes beyond what you teach at home. The exposure has to come from elsewhere, so I came over to Douglass and I watched a little bit and I talked to people.... and I liked what I was hearing, what I was seeing.

Finally, a consistent theme from the leaders of the program was the importance of parental involvement. A leader mentioned that one of the parents had taken over most of the cooking instruction. The leader stated, “She’s a school teacher, so after school she comes to ACE and essentially leads the cooking class for that day”. Another leader stressed the importance of the parent support group:

We started having monthly meeting with the parents to keep them informed, you know, on the activities and stuff...and then they took it on themselves to organize the meetings...and now...it’s like...I go to their meetings...they have really taken the initiative.

The parents have also taken over the snacks that the participants receive each day. In the beginning, the program was providing the snack, but because of limited resources, they asked the parent support group to take this over. Now, parents bring snacks everyday for all the program participants. One of the leaders revealed:

...they take turns, so no one has to do it all the time...my guess is that each parent does it once every two months or something...it has helped us a lot and since it’s spread around, it’s not that big of a burden to them either. It works great.

Academic Grades

Academic grades for 15 participants from 1996-1997 and 1997-1998 were analyzed. Thirteen of the students showed improvement in at least one subject from one year to the next. Nine participants had improved grades in language arts, six had improved grades in math, four had improved grades in physical education, two had improved grades in science, and two had improved grades in social studies.

The second year of evaluation, grades for 13 participants were collected (1997-1998 and 1998-1999) and eleven of the students showed improvement in at least one subject. Seven participants had improved grades in language arts, five had improved grades in both math and science, and three had improved grades in physical education and social studies.

Conclusions and Implications

Conclusions

This study of the ACE Mentorship Program examined the following: 1) Are the program's goals being achieved; 2) Do the parents and leaders perceive a positive change in the participants' behaviors and attitudes as a result of their participation; and 3) What are the salient program elements that appear to be related to positive outcomes. The information received from the interviews with the parents, leaders, and participants consistently indicated that the program was meeting its goals and was having a positive impact on the children. The parents and leaders felt that the program was having a positive affect on the children's academic grades, and this was supported by the information obtained from the school districts. Moreover, the parents and leaders felt that the program was helping the children build positive Black identities due to the strong African cultural component of the program. The salient program elements that seemingly contributed to the positive outcomes include effective and consistent leadership, parental involvement, and innovative programming.

The information collected from the surveys indicated that the pretest and posttest scores were not significantly different for the protective factors or self-concept. There are several potential explanations for this lack of significance. First, the sample size was fairly small; a larger sample size might have produced different results. Second, the instruments might not have been appropriate given the age of the sample. The age range for the program is 6-14 years, and that is within the appropriate age parameters of the instruments. However, the average age of the respondent was just over 7 years, and that is quite young for this type of assessment. The leaders helped the participants complete the surveys and they indicated that often times that had to interpret the questions for the children.

The directors of the ACE Mentorship Program were able to provide some insight into outcomes fostered by the program that were not identified through the survey data. One of the most significant outcomes of the program is that the program has positively affected the recreation opportunities of the children in this area of Champaign. Crediting the consistency and quality of the ACE Mentorship Program, the directors reported that both parents and children now have a positive view of Douglass Park and its other programs. The park and facilities have become safe havens. In recent history, the park and the programs associated with it were viewed negatively. Crime is high in the area and programming was sporadic due to a lack of consistency in staffing. Today, the parents and children view the program as a safe place where there are adults who care about the children.

As a result, many parents are enrolling their children in the other programs that are offered at Douglass Park. Instead of going elsewhere for their recreational needs, the families are now investigating the programs that are offered at the Douglass Center, and that has led to a growth in

programming for the area. The directors pointed out that programs such as a youth basketball league, a pom-pom program, and day camps have grown in size and increased in quality as a direct result of the success of the ACE Mentorship Program. Many of the parents are so pleased with the programs that they have started volunteering their time to teach different classes during the ACE Mentorship Program, as well as during the summer day camps. Moreover, the directors suggested that the families have started to feel like they are more a part of the entire Champaign-Urbana community, a feeling that is new and appears to be a result of their increased involvement in the park district and community.

Although survey results did not indicate statistically significant changes in self-concept, the program directors believe that the participants are becoming more self-assured and are developing leadership abilities as a result of their involvement in the program. Many of the older children have taken on the role of mentor to the younger youth through engaging in program development and assisting with homework and games. Interestingly, one of the directors pointed out that many of the older youth are developing an interest in exploring different types of careers, particularly within parks and recreation. One of the leaders commented that he is now hearing fewer participants say, "I'm going to be a pro basketball player" as their career aspiration. Rather, they are asking questions about what his job entails as well as other jobs in the park district, and how one would go about getting that type of job.

Implications for Practitioners

The ACE Mentorship Program appears to have several key components that make it a successful program. First, the program offers consistency for the youth. The consistency has not only helped build a quality program, but it has helped both parents and children feel more secure in their involvement with the program as well as other programs being offered at Douglass Park. Parental involvement has also been an important element of the ACE Mentorship Program. By involving the parents in feedback sessions, regular meetings, teaching, and programming, the program has been able to better meet the needs of both the children as well as the families. Not only has the parental involvement helped with retention rates, but it also helped in recruiting new children. Supportive parents are effective in relaying the benefits of the program to other interested parents.

The importance of partnerships and collaborations with other organizations was emphasized by Mentiel et al., (1996) and Hultsman and Little (1995). The ACE Mentorship Program is an excellent example of a partnership between the Champaign Park District and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). The AFSC is an international peace and justice human rights organization. The AFSC has offices in every major city in the United States, and in 120 different countries throughout the world. One of the programs within the AFSC is the African American Community Empowerment Program. It is through this particular program that the ACE Mentorship Program receives its mentors. This program

trains mentors in conflict resolution, program structure, and discussion techniques. Without the assistance of this program, the ACE Mentorship Program would not exist. The volunteer efforts of the mentors are crucial to the success of the program. The commitment of the mentors is clearly evident by the time and effort that they devote to the children and the program. They are completely responsible for the program content and structure, and work collectively to assure its quality. The mentors have extensive experience in other youth programs, and bring that expertise to the ACE Mentorship Program. Further, having African American role models is crucial to the success of the program. For many parents, this is an attractive and fundamental component of the program.

Innovative programming is another important aspect of the program. A result of the growing sophistication of our society is the increased expectations young people have for programs and service providers. There is a general feeling among many children that youth programs and centers are too structured, and thus unappealing. Previous studies (e.g., Kleiber, Larson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 1986; Larson, 1994) have concluded that activities that are challenging, meaningful, and intrinsically motivating assist children in their developmental processes. However, programmers must remember that the activities must also be fun for children, otherwise they will lose interest in the program. The ACE Mentorship Program has been successful in weaving structure and fun into its program content. Although the program has a strong focus on African culture and academics, the leaders have been able to stress these components in an enjoyable, entertaining format that is pleasurable for the children.

The ACE Mentorship Program is an example of an innovating program that has been developed for African American youth. Careful attention has been given to leadership, programming, structure, and parental involvement. As a result, the program is successfully meeting its goals and is providing children with a positive after-school experience. The program is also helping to develop a strong, positive Black identity in the program participants by providing the children with effective African American mentors and by emphasizing an African cultural component in the program structure.

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