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Quality and Attendance in After-school Programs:  
Relationships and Training Procedures

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## Abstract

The quality of an ASP (after-school program) has a great effect on the development and academics of a student, and ways to improve the quality include continual training for staff, positive student-leader relationships, and frequent participation by family in the ASPs. ASPs consist of students and staff members, and their goal is to increase academic success and social development while decreasing delinquency. ASPs have a wide appeal because they keep students away from potential harm after school, help mentor students, and let students participate in projects that have personal meaning to them. Students from a lower SES (Social Economic Status) tend to benefit most from after-school programs. Those who attend after-school programs tend to improve academic grades and social and psychological development, but after-school programs also have issues involving delinquency and ineffectiveness. The most important factor in ASPs is the quality of the relationships between students and the ASP volunteers. Three site evaluations discuss the importance and effect of quality on the development and success of students in such programs. While quality is always beneficial, several problems exist regarding program barriers and achieving quality. Future changes to improve quality of the programs include teachers working at schools at after-school programs, focusing on smaller sized programs, and improving the quality of the staff.

*Keywords:* attendance, quality, after-school program

## Quality and Attendance in After-school Programs: Relationships and Training Procedures

An abundance of studies debate the usefulness of after-school programs (ASPs) in helping students with academics, school attendance, delinquency, and even emotional and social development. While some aspects of ASPs are beneficial, some aspects are not. A majority of studies on the subject agree that the quality of an ASP is the most obvious indicator of improvement. For the purpose of this paper, quality in an ASP refers to how well the staff members interact, work, and develop relationships with the students. The premise of ASPs is to entertain children and help them academically during after school hours. However, while there are certain problems with attendance and quality, there are also certain benefits like psychological and social development. The quality of an ASP has a great effect on the development and academics of a student, and the two most effective ways to improve the quality include continual training for staff and optimistic student-leader relationships.

**Rationale for Quality After-school Programs**

Students should participate in quality ASPs because they stay occupied and productive by learning through projects. According to Hirsch, Mekinda, and Stawicki (2010), quality ASPs are attractive because they help keep students occupied during the times when crime rates are the highest, help parents who work with supervising their children during after school hours, provide students with capable individuals who can mentor them, and allow students to be part of something they enjoy where they can be themselves. Students can also focus on larger projects instead of busywork through project-based learning (Hirsch, 2011). While some schools may attempt to focus on large projects during school hours, the amount of time available during school hours is

inadequate and the projects are broken up into blocks where transition time delays work.

In less structured environments, like the ones at ASPs, students can spend much more time on projects (Hirsch, 2011). Focusing on projects gives students a productive learning activity to complete during hours where unsupervised time is dangerous.

To keep students occupied with more interesting topics, some quality ASPs help students with foreign languages and arts, rather than core subjects alone. While help with homework is still on the list, Lee, Yang, and Lin (2012) note several other abilities of ASPs: participation in extra-curricular activities, lessons in other languages, monitored use of computers, participation in cooperative projects, artistic learning, and learning about other cultures. These aspects enrich a student's education through the use of other mediums and subjects, rather than core subjects alone. This is important because these enrichment classes can help students understand schoolwork and bridge an achievement gap. Some students succeed more than others, and there seems to be an achievement gap between different students, so ASPs seek to teach different students through different learning and teaching approaches (Lee et al., 2012). As a result, students who are at different academic levels receive aid for something they may not have received help with at school.

Another reason a child should participate in quality ASPs is their ability to work and communicate with schools. Teachers and administrators can coordinate this type of work, especially if they work with students in both settings, which is recommended. In addition to the benefit of developing relationships between the student and the teacher combining student information from schools and ASPs would also allow the teacher to pursue other projects or ideas that teachers may have been unable to try at school because

of time constraints or national standards. Especially because curriculum standards are more relaxed in ASPs, both teachers and students are able to pursue other educational topics (Hirsch, 2011). Thus, the ability for schools and ASPs to work together allows for more accurate monitoring of student development and education and the ability to pursue additional topics of interest.

### **Positive Results of Quality After School Programs**

One thing that students and parents share in regards to quality ASPs is feeling positively about time out of school. In fact, students who spent time during the week at an ASP felt happier with how they spent their after school time than students who did not participate in an ASP at all. This is especially significant because almost 67% of parents say they work during the time that their children are out of school (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). ASPs have the clear benefit of ensuring students and parents both feel good about the student's time outside of school.

Not only does satisfaction with time contribute to positive results of quality ASPs, but relationships are also a benefit. To create an improved program, and to create effective learning environments, educators should work on having more positive interactions with students. Apsler (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of ASP literature and indicated that effective programs resulted from positive actions that included targeting specific personal and social skills, learning through activities, and encompassing structured procedures. These benefits were a result of specific goals, a structured program influenced by effective education, and higher levels of attendance by students (Apsler, 2009). To create these beneficial results, active engagement with the student and the

planning process are necessary, and require hard work on the part of the leader and student.

Relationships in ASPs improve the quality of student behavior as well because if a student develops relationships with leaders, the students can improve psychosocial skills and school grades and decrease negative behavior. For instance, if students have a good relationship with a leader or staff member, the students improve their assertion levels and self-control levels (Wade, 2015). This indicates that a positive relationship with a staff member can help students with the display of negative behaviors in the ASP. Lee, Yang, and Lin (2012) cite Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) to show that other benefits of ASPs include increased self-esteem in relation to school, better social skills, and higher grades. The amount of negative behavior also decreased (Lee et al., 2012). As noted by Wade (2015), relationships are a large factor in the improvement of behavior, so it is a likely reason that relationships improve the other factors noted by Lee et al. (2012). If students develop positive relationships between themselves and leaders, behavior can improve.

Other positive results of relationships between leaders and students in quality ASPs include the help students receive with their developmental needs. Changing specific details of an ASP can help volunteers and leaders with their student relationships and, as a result, can specifically target the developmental needs of students. A program that focuses on students and their relationships with leaders can help students with developing their identity and social skills (Jones & Deutsch, 2013). Developmental needs are met through the changing of program details and a focus on positive relationships.

Students can also develop psychologically and psychosocially in ASPs if the student has a constructive relationship with a leader. In a study that studied positive relationships between students and leaders, Wade (2015) found that the level of student behavior problems decreased and their ability to have self-control increased. In this study, boys' levels of self-control improved more strongly (Wade, 2015). This study also found that the amount of problems with behavior a student had previously had no effect on the benefits that resulted from a positive relationship with a leader (Wade, 2015). Thus, if a student had many behavior problems before the ASP, once the student developed relationships with the leaders of the program, the benefits of a positive relationship were the same as those for students who did not have previous negative behavior problems. As mentioned by Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, and Connell (2010), the quality of leaders has a huge factor on the quality of the ASP, and so Wade (2015) found that having a negative relationship with a leader actually had more of a negative effect on the student than not being present in the program at all. Real social improvement is a direct result of positive relationships with leaders (Wade, 2015). Relationships perpetuate the positive results of the ASPs, including psychological and psychological development.

An increase in academic success is another indicator of quality in an ASP. Most notably in the meta-analysis completed by Durlak et al. (2010) was the increase in test scores between individuals in a regular ASP and those in an ASP that had recently been through a psychological intervention. This intervention served to improve the quality of the program, and the improved program showed a difference of 12% on test scores than those who were in the lower quality program (Durlak et al., 2010). The positive results of ASPs seem to coincide with the hope for ASP achievement noted in ASP rationales.



### **Current Trends in Quality After School Programs**

Recently, however, quality ASPs have established a focus on academics, shifting from a focus on leisure activities. While ASPs used to focus more strongly on music, art, and sports, a shift towards showing evidence of student achievement has become more prominent (Coates, 2008). This could, in part, be due to the fact that ASPs have been working to prove they have been helping students academically (Sheldon, Arbreton, Hopkins, & Grossman, 2010). Part of this pressure could be because the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 put in place fines that charge schools that do not show any positive academic achievement for three consecutive years (Sheldon et al., 2010). Because schools and ASPs work so closely together, sometimes even with the same staff, they feel the need to focus on academics most of the time, even if it is not necessarily what a student or parent wants or needs.

Academics are an important pursuit of quality ASPs because surveys show miscommunication between children and their parent(s) about homework. Apparently, 71.9% of students say they have trouble with completing their homework while only 39.1% of parents say their children have trouble with their homework (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). So while ASPs are feeling pressure to compete academically (Sheldon et al., 2010), ASPs can help students, seeing as nearly three quarters of them struggle with their homework. Because such a large percentage of students have homework difficulties, the recent shift to proving academic achievement is an appropriate endeavor for both the student and the institution.

While improving academics is crucial, focusing on relationship building and other extracurricular activities in a quality ASP is also important and can influence students to

be active in the community. A dropout prevention center in Tel Aviv, Israel, developed several ways to help students in Beit Dani, the location with the highest drop out rate in Israel. The first is individual and small group tutoring that helps reinforce school lessons like math and English. Volunteers also work one-on-one with the students, but the relationship that has the most impact is between the program leaders and the leaders of the school as they encourage educational gains and self-esteem (Sela & Cooper, 2014). The encouragement between the students and the volunteers can help the students excel more than they would in a larger group setting, possibly because it is easier to keep the student's attention. The second characteristic of their program is a computer program through Tel Aviv University for students aged 13-15. This helps students fulfill potential, act as role models, and create an environment of learning (Sela & Cooper, 2014). Because technology is often engaging and specific, students can learn advanced concepts that are applicable to their lives. They also learn independence to manage time and set goals to boost the amount of learning they do in classes (Sela & Cooper, 2014). While this can help academically, it also helps students with setting priorities in their daily lives. The fourth goal of the ASPs is to provide counseling for parents and children. More on the psychological side, this focuses mostly on the child's home environment to ensure that no problems will arise that could prevent academic success or learning (Sela & Cooper, 2014). This is an interesting aspect of the program because it identifies how problems at home can affect life at school for a student. Closely related to the above principle, the fifth aspect helps parents learn how to be involved in their child's education through parent meetings. At these meetings, parents can discuss academic success and progress with leaders and volunteers and learn about financial awards that can help the

students pay for university and school supplies. Lastly, many students graduate from the program with a desire to follow other studies so they are provided with sponsorship that includes scholarships, counseling, and other academic preparations like SAT courses (Sela & Cooper, 2014). This trend of focusing on relationship building and long-lasting effects of ASPs helps students achieve both short-term and long-term improvement.

Another current trend indicative of quality in the Israeli program is a heavy focus on lifelong effects in students. Participation in this program has encouraged these students to work in the community, as many of them join Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, or other community organizations (Sela & Cooper, 2014). The lifelong aspect of learning is encouraged for the student through financial rewards, individual tutoring, and future preparations. Instead of focusing solely on academic achievement in the present to prevent dropping out or delinquency, the leaders focus on the future and the community in which the students live. The ASP's trend of focusing on the future allows students to see the effect of their current learning on the rest of their lives.

### **Demographics of Student Participation**

Because attendance and participation vary based on ethnicity and social economic status (SES), and because it is often those of a lower SES who benefit the most from ASPs, program directors should establish a quality program that aids those of a lower SES most effectively. Bouffard, Wimer, Caronongan, Little, Dearing, and Simpkins (2006) note that children from higher SES families tend to participate more in ASPs, even though Bae, Oh, Kim, Lee, and Oh (2010) note that children from lower SESs attend more often. Interestingly, ethnic minorities tend to participate in ASPs more often than ethnic majorities. Hispanic and Black students were more likely to partake in

activities at the programs, but less likely to join in lessons. Because minorities need to participate more in educational activities at ASPs, volunteers should attempt to make lessons more effective and exciting, since that is where minorities need to improve most substantially.

A Korean study shows that ASPs are most effective for students of a lower SES and that ASPs can even work to reduce the achievement gap. Bae et al. (2010) found that after attending an ASP, parents had reduced costs for private tutoring. The concept of ASPs can help create educational equality and bridge the achievement gap because it seems that students from higher SES levels benefit more from private tutoring while students from lower SES levels benefit more from ASPs (Bae et al., 2010). In Korea, students spend much more time in ASPs than American students. Two percent of American students spend more than three hours taking extra lessons while 14% of Koreans do. Below that, 8% of American teens spend one to two hours taking extra lessons while an additional 24% of Korean teens do (Lee, 2007). The culture differences between Korea and the United States could account for the different amounts of time spent taking extra lessons, but because so many students take extra lessons, parents should account for their SES and utilize the type of ASP that will be most effective for them. Overall, encouraging students from lower SES levels to attend ASPs can be beneficial and help bridge the achievement gap.

The demographics of lower SES students tend to coincide with many rationales for ASPs, which is why quality ASPs can help benefit students and families from lower income neighborhoods. The appeal to families largely rests on preventing students from wasting their time outside of school and from keeping them out of bad neighborhoods

after school hours. Many from low SESs live near these areas and while ASPs weaken negative effects, they also perpetrate positive effects like those established through mentors. Because ASPs keep students busy, they also help prevent negative influences from neighborhoods in the area (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connel, 2010). As a result, children from lower income areas are able to receive education during an important time of the day by people who care about them as students.

Participation levels of students in ASPs are improved by the amount of education the parent or parents have, which is why quality ASPs are so crucial to lower SES students. This is most likely due to the fact that parents are more able and qualified than less educated parents to help their children with homework (Bae, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2009), but it could also insinuate that there is some form of value influence on the children. Higher educated parents are better able to help their students while students from a lower SES have to seek help elsewhere, like at ASPs. However, those from lower SES levels are also less able to afford higher quality education, so parents who are less educated are unable to afford higher education for their children. Leaders should more prominently focus on the learning of students from a lower SES to establish a more quality ASP.

### **Problems with After School Programs**

No ASP is perfect, just as no school, classroom, or curriculum is perfect: it requires an expertly crafted curriculum with an effective learning space and leaders and teachers that genuinely care about the student. However, even with those aspects, problems can still be present as a result of negative association of vulnerable peers with those who are delinquent. Some programs are ineffective because they focus too heavily

on attendance or because they do not model quality aspects. Problems with curriculum and leaders can hinder quality in ASPs and this can result in delinquency and ineffectiveness.

Parents hardly agree with their children on what should occur at ASPs, which is why ASPs should implement curriculum that balance the ideals of both parties. ASP leaders and staff should develop balance in the areas of activities and project-based learning, since they are a vital part of ASPs (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). Students are three times more likely to select field trips as an activity than their parents because they enjoy learning new things and physically exploring a new place. However, parents were three times more likely than their children to choose academic help in the form of tutoring. Though parents also describe this as learning new things, they are more concerned about their children receiving help with completing their homework (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). Student and parent ideas for ASPs should be combined so there is both a heavy focus on homework help and activities in the future.

A negative relationship between students and leaders is indicative of a low quality program and can have a worse result on the student than no relationship at all. If a student has negative rapport with a leader, he or she develops higher levels of negative behavior than students who did not participate in ASPs at all (Wade, 2015). This indicates that a negative relationship can perpetuate problems in an ASP. As a result, leaders and volunteers should take care when helping students with activities and homework, so as to help them improve their assertion levels and self-control levels, which is a benefit of a positive relationship (Wade, 2015). Leaders should take care to influence students positively through relationships instead of treating student carelessly.

**Delinquency**

When discussing ASPs, delinquency is not an advertised topic because it can sometimes be perpetuated by ASPs. Delinquency can result from a diverse group of deviant and non-deviant students meeting together for an extended period of time (Capaldi, 2009). A result of this time together can result in negative behavior patterns and substance abuse that includes alcohol and tobacco (Capaldi, 2009). Students often have more unstructured time in ASPs and non-deviant students can be easily and negatively influenced by more deviant students, suggesting that quality programs implement delinquency prevention strategies.

Delinquency is a major issue for ASPs because many adolescents are susceptible and in the midst of many changes, but supervising youth and diluting concentrated groups of deviant students may help the problem. Capaldi (2009) notes that it is extremely important to guard students during their middle and high school years because they are most vulnerable around this age. One thing that can help them during this time is having their parents observing and staying knowledgeable about the benchmarks of development, watching the relationships their children have with other students, and then modeling their parenting practices after what they see (Capaldi, 2009). They are more at risk for becoming deviant by associating with students who already have such behavior patterns (Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006). This problem can be diluted by having a higher ratio of students who are not delinquent to those that are. This reduced the negative influence on the students who do not have negative behavior patterns. Another way to reduce such behavior issues is to include the family in treatment programs, which has resulted in positive outcomes (Dodge et al., 2006). Decreasing levels of delinquency

by placing delinquent students in groups with lower delinquency can be one way to shelter the vulnerable youth from negative influences that are too strong.

Students who attend larger programs are more at risk for negative influences, but increasing structure and hiring dedicated leaders can help prevent negative behaviors while also improving quality. It seems that students who attend smaller sized programs come into contact with less victimizing behavior while children in large programs experience more of these issues (Gottfredson, Cross, & Soulé, 2007). This is consistent with the finding that lowering levels of unstructured discussion time led to more harassment. When programs are more structured with rules and schedules, there also tends to be slightly lower levels of these problems (Gottfredson et al., 2007). As for the use of substances, Gottfredson et al. (2007) found a published program for lessons decrease the use of substances. Hiring leaders with higher levels of education can help prevent delinquency. A higher level of male leaders also seemed to lower levels of negative behavior; especially regarding male college students, a future plan for hiring could involve this group as it capitalizes on the ideals of higher education levels and male staff, which could help reduce delinquency (Gottfredson et al., 2007). Maintaining an ASP with high levels of education and structure, as well as hiring prepared leaders, are other ways to decrease deviant behavior and the use of substances and alcohol.

### **Ineffectiveness**

Structure, leaders, students, and families can lead to ineffectiveness in ASPs as well. Ineffective programs tend to lack structure and specific goals. This is perhaps because relationships are built over time and students learn and function best when they have specific goals and boundaries to help them do so (Apsler, 2009). It is difficult to



enroll students in programs and to properly understand and fulfill the needs of everyone involved (Cross et al., 2010). However, training and retaining competent staff is even more difficult (Cross et al., 2010). Because leaders have such an enormous effect on the benefits of students at programs, the leaders must have a low turnover. The final problem relating to ineffectiveness involves the family because the family identifies several barriers to programs that include difficulty completing family responsibilities, like babysitting and transportation, and a lack of access to information about ASPs (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). These problems could prevent students from attending programs in the first place, which obviously contributes to their ineffectiveness.

A heavy focus on monetary funding also diminishes the effectiveness of programs. Some program leaders believe that program quality and attendance can be improved at the same rate (Holleman, Sundius, & Bruns, 2010), which contradicts the idea that smaller programs are the most effective programs (Gottfredson et al., 2007). Holleman et al. (2010) note that their attempts to improve quality have been difficult. This could be due to their focus on attendance or monetary funding, or it could simply be too difficult to improve quality while also focusing on those areas. If program directors desire a larger program, a focus on monetary funding must decrease so quality can be improved at a healthy rate.

### **Barriers to Program Productivity**

On the academic side of productivity, studying the effects of ASPs on students can be difficult. Whenever there is a study going on and students fail to attend or they drop out, it immediately creates a level of selection bias. As a result, the study is only finding results from the people who stayed, which are not always high risk or low SES

students. While studies will still analyze the results of the ASPs on academics and development, the results may be skewed because those who drop out from the program do not match the samples of students that were attained in the beginning (Apsler, 2009). Because results will be skewed, it can be difficult to create an effective program for all students. Researchers have little chance to study those who drop out from programs simply because they do not attend.

### **Attendance**

Attendance is necessary for students to experience positive effects of a quality ASP, but the amount of attendance needed does not matter. While the quality of a relationship with a leader does affect a student's social and psychological development, the amount of time a child spent at the program did not affect the development at all (Wade, 2015). According to Roth, Malone, and Brooke-Gunn (2010), resulting developmental effects in students had little to do with the amount of participation a student had in an ASP. However, their definition of participation had little to do with attentiveness or engagement and much to do with frequency of attendance. While saying that other articles are incorrect about participation affecting outcomes, they also note that the type of participation relates to different developing characteristics (Roth et al., 2010). This suggests that the relationships and other activities contribute to development immediately.

Attendance correlates with positive results in ASPs, such as development, and even perpetuates attendance at school. One observation noted by Roth, Malone, and Brooke-Gunn (2010) was that high attendance levels at ASPs resulted in higher attendance levels at school. This was especially the case for middle school students. So

while attendance is obviously necessary for participation, it is not enough to ensure *quality* participation (Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawicki, 2010). Attendance at ASPs could encourage students to work harder at school and motivate them to participate there more frequently.

While *length* of attendance is correlated with better English grades and social competence, the most important factor is the quality of the program attended. For example, Shernoff (2010) found that students who participated in an ASP for a total of a year had higher English grades than those who did not participate in the programs. They also had higher social competence (Shernoff, 2010). However, Shernoff concluded that the frequency of attendance was not the driving factor behind success at ASPs but the quality of the experience was (Shernoff, 2010). The reason grades can increase after frequent attendance is because of the association with a quality program.

### **Importance of Program Quality**

Program quality has a lot to do with the successes or failures of an ASP. In particular, the quality of relationships that volunteers and staff members have with the students tends to have the largest effect on psychological and academic development. Higher quality aspects of programs, including parent and family involvement in the program, tend to predict successes. Program application has a large effect on the quality, because quality implementation also results in higher levels of social competence in students. Staff training is important because well-trained staff increase the quality of programs as well as student achievement because of the relationship development that occurs. If an ASP can strive to achieve high levels of quality, student success should be a common result.

Twenty-first Century Community Learning Centers are a popular type of ASP and their program shows the importance of youth development and parent and family engagement on quality. Paluta, Lower, Anderson-Butcher, Gibson, and Iachini (2016) noted that in the centers, youth development was the most favorably rated quality indicator. This means that those who worked at the centers shone in the areas of developing relationships with students, fostering good social normalcies, and enhancing the life skills of the participants. However, one of the lowest quality indicators involved parent and family engagement. This means that the staff in the ASP had a difficult time supporting the children's guardians and continuing the influence to the home environment (Paluta et al., 2016). Based on this information, the program should continue to develop relationships with students, but should also invest more heavily into relationships with other family members.

The strongest link between the quality of the program and the outcome of the program is the amount of parent and family engagement (Paluta et al., 2016). This is one of the most important factors of effectiveness and quality in ASPs, so encouraging families to participate in significant ways will result in higher perceived outcomes (Paluta et al., 2016). In other words, if the parent is involved in the program and seeing the results themselves, they will think the program is a quality program and thus, ASPs should work to include parents in more meaningful ways (Paluta et al., 2016). While academic elements and youth development are important for the success of ASPs, the programs should seek to apply other functions, like parental or guardian involvement, to make the impact of the program go farther than solely creating a safe and comfortable

place for students (Paluta et al., 2016). Parents are the link between the student and quality outcomes of a program, so their participation is needed for students to improve.

A positive environment is indicative of the quality of a program, and this helps forecast a student's improvement. It is likely that quality experiences in programs are a better predictor of academic successes and social competence (Shernoff, 2010). However, for elementary aged students, the participation rates are less affected by the quality of the program, but a positive environment affects these young students through higher test achievement levels (Leos-Urbel, 2015). Most importantly, the quality of ASPs is associated with student maturity and success in schools. Things that ASPs should consider for the student are the benefits of the programs and the needs of the students, which can influence leaders to help the students prosper in the future (Leos-Urbel, 2015). Because positive environments in a quality program benefit students so positively, leaders should focus on how students can be affected by their environment.

Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, and Connel (2010) completed a particular study over several sites to assess the importance of quality on ASPs. They noted that sites E and B were successful and sites A and D were incompetent (Cross et al., 2010). While many of the students at site E discontinued the program, the two factors that increased the quality were the strong relationships between students and leaders and the efficacy of the leaders. Site B also did well because it fostered good relationships with the students who were excited to be there (Cross et al., 2010). Strong student leader relationships are important as well as enthusiasm on the part of the leader. The successes of sites E and B are attributed to relationships with students and the pitfalls of A and D are a lack of relationship, structure, and frequent staff turnover. Site A did not have a structured

program and many of the students were not happy to participate in the program. Another problem at Site A was a frequent change in program leaders, with two directors changing within two months. Even the staff that did not quit often did not show up because they had other things to do. At site D, the leaders enjoyed talking with each other more than with the students (Cross et al., 2010). The drastic differences between staff types contributed to student retention and program.

They concluded that most likely, the most important quality indicator of an ASP is the staff. This is because the leader quality seemed to affect every other level of curriculum and activity application. Good staff members were able to do three things: direct the students, create a respectable environment, and give the students work and activities that they enjoy and participate in (Cross et al., 2010). When the staff works to create a positive environment and influence the students for future success, staff members create an effective program.

Programs are only as good as their application, so staff should be continually trained to improve program application. Over time, an effective way to improve program application is continued leader training because it results in improved procedural familiarity and the ability to create plans and anticipate solutions for youth reactions (Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawicki, 2010). Findings for this technique are encouraging, but these ASPs require leaders on-site to facilitate and oversee training to ensure its effectiveness (Hirsch et al., 2010). If all of these ideas can be taught to leaders and volunteers and effectively applied, student achievement and development can be specifically targeted and researched thoroughly.

### **Site Evaluations**

CORAL, SAFE, and REDI are all site evaluations that focus on specific facets of quality in an ASP and how to achieve it. The CORAL study was completed by Sheldon, Arbreton, Hopkins, and Grossman (2010) and concluded that continual leader training was the most effective way to create and implement a quality ASP. The study on the REDI program was completed by Bierman et al. (2008) and even though it was not a study on an ASP, it looked into school readiness for those involved in Head Start, a program for pre-school children. They concluded that leaders in instructive programs should constantly research best practices and meet with mentors in order to help students. While this study does not involve ASPs, it still looks at the effectiveness of the program and what similar programs could change. Finally, a meta-analysis completed at certain sites completed by Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) concluded that the most effective ASPs were sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. While the REDI program is an actual program, the CORAL and SAFE analyses are acronyms created by the authors that discuss the utility of ASPs. The most useful ASPs incorporate specific training policies, include instructor research and ongoing training, and use strategies to focus on student social and academic development.

#### **CORAL Sites**

Certain sites tend to focus on different aspects of quality, depending on the benefits it has seen or the research it has compiled. Sheldon, Arbreton, Hopkins, and Grossman (2010) completed a study on ASPs in California at CORAL (Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning) sites. They introduced a cycle that focuses in program improvement throughout the year and involves constant training instead of

one time training at the beginning of the year. The three stages in this process are continual training sessions, observations in school programs resulting in improvement goals, and data collection and analysis involving attendance records and surveys that help the senior staff address any program weaknesses. These three processes continue throughout the year to ensure constant staff improvement rather than one initial training program. This improves program quality (Sheldon et al., 2010). The logic behind this type of training is simple: leaders should participate in ongoing training so they can maintain skills, develop new skills, and be continually mindful of the practices they are performing. Ongoing training helps the leaders remain focused, vigilant, and well-informed about policies, learning styles, teaching styles, and other ideas or skills that might help children in the program learn more effectively or efficiently.

The results of a restructured training program were positive. The results from Sheldon et al. (2010) indicated greater literacy gains, even though ASPs have a difficult time helping students increase their literacy competency. Average students in regular ASPs gain 0.22 grade levels in literacy. However, a student's exposure to consistent literacy strategies showed that after the first five months of this new training program, students gained 0.45 grade levels in reading (Sheldon et al., 2010). Most importantly, the students that gained fewer grade levels of reading ability were able to improve in the future. After the program had progressed into its second year, the students who had previously been under the lower quality literacy strategies, and without leaders in constant training, participated in the new program and their reading levels rose 0.44 grade levels, which is similar to the reading levels of the students already learning from high quality literacy training strategies in the first year (Sheldon et al., 2010). The conclusion



was that the CORAL sites' results of continual training programs and quality literacy strategies created strong academic progress. As such, the quality of the program, improved through the ongoing training of the leaders, is strongly correlated with student outcomes (Sheldon et al., 2010), suggesting that the quality of the programs can be improved through encouraging leaders to participate frequently in professional development opportunities.

### **REDI Sites**

Mentoring teachers and encouraging them to use more research based exercises were two practices that aided teachers in delivering quality instruction. Instead of telling the teachers to do so and expecting them to do all the work, the REDI program supplied additional materials to help the teachers be more helpful (Bierman et al., 2008). The program also encouraged teachers to participate in workshops to help improve their own teaching by learning about more current and useful research-based practices. This helped teachers influence their students towards emotional development and social development. To help them implement these new practices, the program provided teachers with a year of professional development in the application of the strategies (Bierman et al., 2008). A continual training approach for teachers seems to be effective in reaching students beneficially.

The development of relationships between leaders and students also seems to be an effective way to encourage development. One way teachers encouraged development was through responding more considerately to student speech (Bierman et al., 2008). Also, lessons about social and emotional skills used problem solving conversations and encouragement in managing and expressing emotions (Bierman et al., 2008). The

teachers were only able to accomplish this goal satisfactorily and with quality with the aid of their mentors (Bierman et al., 2008). Continual training in this area, between teachers and their mentors, had a positive effect on the teacher's interaction with the students as well as the emotional and social development of the student.

Children benefit most from programs where teachers have been participating in continual training and where a good curriculum is already established. Bierman et al. (2008) also note that the modifications in instruction are the likely reasons for benefits in children effects. They suggest that refining teaching procedures is what helps students with school (Bierman et al., 2008). Parents have even noticed positive results in their children at home including better participation with reading and at minimizing behavior issues. Their final suggestion is that to improve the quality of programs, implementing continual research-based training for teachers and combining it with effective curriculum is a successful way to run a program. These two things help students learn more effectively because their teachers are constantly up to date with the most effective practices.

While the REDI program is a preschool program, its principles for success relate to the types of improvements that ASPs can make. First of all, teachers can meet with a mentor for a year to help them apply educational principles and teach effectively. This is especially helpful with social and emotional development in students. Teachers can also be researching educational principles and practices to help them in their teaching regardless of the age group. Effective teaching can be a result of mentoring and research, and can have a massive influence on the students that teachers are trying to reach.

**SAFE Sites**

Many ASPs have little impact on students because they are of a lower quality than other programs. This is unfortunate because ASPs model a positive community setting to help students develop personal and social skills (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Durlak et al. (2010) completed a meta-analysis on ASPs that showed how quality programs could improve test scores by 12 percentage points. However, the programs that he investigated followed his criteria for a SAFE program: sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (Durlak et al., 2010). They decided that the data was indicative of positive impacts on students and substantial improvements. Improvement areas included feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral regulation, and performance. In addition to these positive effects, students had more positive self-worth, relationships with school, interpersonal actions, and academic grades (Durlak et al., 2010). Sites and centers with sequenced, active, focused, and explicit features impact the entirety of the child, not just his or her academic performance. This could be related to relationships built with the student during the process or the amount of structure in the program. ASPs should focus on these four aspects of SAFE sites to influence the whole child, rather than specific aspects of personality or academic performance.

**Problems with Achieving Quality**

Problems with achieving quality are largely related to the staff because they are a strong indicator of program quality. It can be difficult to maintain staff for longer periods of time especially if the students are not excited to be at the program or if the staff members are not involved with the students (Cross et al., 2010). Because many programs require additional funding, it can be difficult to increase attendance to receive the desired

amount of funding while also trying to increase the quality (Holleman et al., 2010).

Another difficult aspect to achieving quality is facilitating staff training frequently throughout the year, which is an effective way to help students with their schoolwork (Sheldon et al., 2010). Continual training might be difficult to schedule, but the positive benefits resulting in the student's grades and development is worth the time it takes to train quality staff.

### **Future Continuations and Changes**

Many students and parents have divergent desires for what should be core tenets of a program, so ASPs should combine these ideas to form a quality program that is suitable for both groups. Thus, a program should implement a combination of social activities, student-desired recreational activities and parent-desired academic activities. To succeed, future ASPs should take advantage of areas of consensus between parent and student like music and computer education. Another tactic to appeal to parents and students is combining social and recreational activities. Nevertheless, while student involvement and interest is important, the support of the parents is essential for enrollment and participation (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). Encouraging families to spend time helping their student, rather than sending them to other programs for hours each week, could be a more effective option (Paluta et al., 2016).

Specific changes for parents that programs can focus on in the future involve how children are cared for and how the program communicates with parents about a student's learning, the quality and qualification of the teachers, and the physical location of the program. Teachers can take care of parental concerns through regular contact with parents. This will help the parents know how their children are doing academically.

Secondly, teachers should act in such a way as to instill confidence; this must often be done while maintaining steady and adequate qualifications. As far as physical location goes, this is something that ASPs cannot always change, but if location is reevaluated at a later time, parent concerns should be considered (Lee, Yang, & Lin, 2012). For parents to want to bring their children to a quality ASP, it first has to meet the criterion that most parents want.

Because the quality of a relationship between a student and a leader is so influential, leaders should take steps to improve the relationships. Things that affect not only the quality of the relationship, but also the development of the student include the amount of familiarity a leader has with the job and the amount of money the leader made at the program. The more often a student was able to work with or have an individual conversation with a leader, through the reduction of leader to student ratios, the more the social skills of the students improved (Wade, 2015). Relationship building is key to student development.

In the future, ASPs can improve the amount of job training offered to students because those students from higher-risk backgrounds often have little to no job training. Related to this is the number of employment problems people from these backgrounds tend to have. Since Capaldi (2009) focused more on adding parental support to programs including job training and preventing delinquent behavior, it is recommended that ASPs be funded only if they can prove they have positive effects and no negative effects. The author also suggests that in programs where delinquent and problem behavior is present, funding should be gradually eliminated (Capaldi, 2009). Funding should be eliminated in

ASPs that show no improvement in student behavior problems or practical training opportunities for the future.

Teachers and parents should also be more available in ASPs. Teachers in schools should work with the same students in ASPs because they can more easily help with meeting the specific needs of students as well as help other leaders know how to help a particular student more effectively. Whether it be in the area of academic aid or social development, discussing how to help the child will reduce the amount of time it takes to find solutions that work (Coates, 2008). Teachers should not be the only outside individuals to work with ASPs because parents should help as well. Capaldi (2009) also cites problems with focusing only on the students when trying to prevent behavior problems and delinquent behavior, and suggests that parents be involved in these areas as well. Several benefits result from including parents in ASPs, including more guidance, a more efficient use of time, the parent's ability to be more informed about their students, and more cohesive relationships. If a student did not have a parent, they would have the ability to have another guardian there instead. With the involvement of such close relatives in the process, community groups could potentially meet together in monitored groups, and the groups could relax rules slightly to potentially increase the amount of participation as a result of more time spent out of structured activities (Capaldi, 2009). Parents and teacher spend a large amount of time with a student, which is why they should participate in other areas of a student's life as well.

ASPs have a lofty goal of striving to help children improve nearly every aspect of their lives. Leaders in ASPs should be encouraged because improving program quality can improve many aspects of students' lives without having to worry too heavily about

delinquency or attrition. Taking a step back from a heavy focus on funding and academic requirements to working on improving staff quality and staff relationships with students is effective in improving academic, social, and psychological development in students. Striving for quality is an unending process. To improve quality, staff should be enrolled in a continual training program that exists to observe students in classrooms, improve methodology, and implement practices to make practical and effective changes. Other changes should also be implemented to improve program quality continually, including involving parents in ASPs, involving schoolteachers in ASPs, and working to remove barriers by making access to information and location simpler for families. While a perfect ASP will never be achieved, quality can be attained through continual training of staff, positive relationships between leaders and students, and consistent attempts to involve families in the learning and developing process.

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