

**Relationship Building Between Staff and Students in YMCA Afterschool Programs**

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## ABSTRACT

Relationship building in afterschool programs occurs not only between students and staff, but between staff, staff and their supervisors, and staff and students' families. All of these relationships can help enhance student learning in afterschool programs. This study investigates how relationship building in afterschool programs functions, and if it is successful in promoting staff enjoyment and engagement in afterschool programs along with enhancing staff communication and trust with those they work with in the program. I explore this through a survey, which I created, with YMCA afterschool program staff members from across the U.S.. Findings indicate that relationship building is important to program success, to developing a sense of connection with others in the program, and that beliefs around the importance of relationship building are important factors that influence connections.

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## INTRODUCTION

My junior year of college, Fall 2022, I took a course with a practicum component working at an afterschool program in a local elementary school. For the practicum, I supported an afterschool art program for first and second graders. The instructor was a woman who was not a day school teacher and who purely taught drawing techniques to elementary schoolers in afterschool programs. From my observations, the instructor and many students struggled to have a positive relationship, and many students, perhaps as a result, appeared to be disinterested in art itself. In addition, several students struggled to master many of the art techniques the instructor tried to teach them. After participating in the practicum, I wondered what factors in educational settings outside of school (e.g., afterschool programs, camp programs) affect student learning.

During the Spring semester, 2023, I was enrolled in a research methods class at the University of Colorado Boulder and, based on my curiosities from the practicum, I conducted a study about the perceptions of parents of camper skill-building at Boulder's Rocky Mountain Day Camp. To conduct the study, I sent a survey to every parent whose child(ren) attended Rocky Mountain Day Camp during summer 2022. I had 64 respondents, and a key finding was that parents perceived that relationship building either with other campers or with staff was the primary way in which campers gained new skills. From this project, I became very interested in the role that relationship building plays in creating student success in such programs, and this interest led to this sociology Honors thesis project.

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent and effectiveness of relationships between students and staff in afterschool programs in terms of supporting students' learning and growth within these programs. Previous research has indicated that relationship building is a key factor to student success within these programs (Jordan 2014; Huang, Coordt, La Torre, Leon,

Miyoshi, Perez, and Peterson 2007; Rhodes 2004). There is a gap in the research, however, about how such relationship building occurs and functions in a wide variety of afterschool programs. Current literature mainly focuses either on how successful specific afterschool programs are (Huang et al. 2007; Policy Studies Associates, Inc. 2014), which may or may not include relationship building as a component of that research, or considers relationship building without specifically focusing on afterschool programming (Wenger 2000; Colistra, Bixler, and Schmalz 2018). Additionally, very little literature specifically focuses on how staff build meaningful relationships with the students. As afterschool programming continues to expand across the United States (Afterschool Alliance 2014), understanding how relationship building occurs in these programs more broadly, and how staff develop meaningful relationships, will be a crucial component to program success. Through this research, I provide insights as to how programs can be best structured to promote positive and effective relationship building between students and staff. This insight is useful for educators, policymakers, nonprofits and others focused on afterschool programming.

I developed research questions to guide me in learning more about the ways in which afterschool programs can best be structured to foster relationship building. A note that in my research questions, when I talk about structure, I am discussing components that can be put in place in an afterschool program (such as site directors promoting communication between students and staff) that can help promote student growth and development. My research questions and hypotheses are:

1. How does the structure of afterschool programs shape the development of relationships between students and staff?

Hypothesis: Afterschool program structure matters for the development of relationships between students and staff, and quality structures that improve communication and trust will promote positive relationship development between students and staff.

- 2. What aspects of the structure of afterschool programs are the most influential, especially for relationship building?

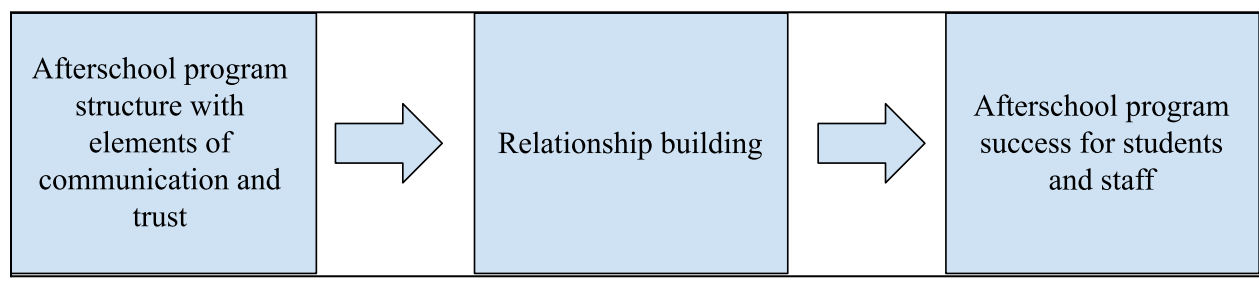
Hypothesis: A climate where bonding is encouraged between not only students and staff, but between the staff, the staff and administrators, and the staff and parents is the most influential structural component of afterschool programs for relationship building.

- 3. Is relationship building in afterschool programs important to their success, measured by staff engagement and enjoyment?

Hypothesis: Relationship building is crucial to the success of afterschool programs.

The research questions come together to form the conceptual framework presented below. In all, I examine the structure of afterschool programs as correlated to relationship building, and relationship building as related to program success.

Chart 1



This chart shows the conceptual framework that I use throughout this report. The framework is that afterschool program structure leads to relationship building which leads to program success.

In the remainder of this document, I provide background literature related to these research questions, review my data collection and analytical approaches, and present results. I conclude with a discussion of what my results could mean both now and for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review is structured around several themes as they emerged in the literature itself. These include 1. What are afterschool programs, 2. The benefits of afterschool programs, 3. Key factors for creating positive afterschool programs, 4. Factors that influence the development of relationship building between students and staff, 5. Structures for afterschool programs that influence relationship building, 6. Relationship building and afterschool program success (including case studies with specific afterschool programs) 7. Measuring relationship building within afterschool programs, 8. Theories surrounding relationship building, and 9. Gaps in the literature.

### *What Are Afterschool Programs*

Afterschool programs, which can also be called Out-of-School-Time programs, are for youth of all ages, and these programs can include topics such as academic support, mentoring, youth development, arts, sports and recreation, apprenticeships, and workforce development programs (Youth.Gov n.d.). Activities children engage in outside of school are crucial to their development, so it's important to have high quality programs that can help kids with their developmental skills. There are around 10.2 million children who participate in afterschool programs, highlighting the large demand for these programs (Youth.Gov n.d.).

### *The Benefits of Afterschool Programs*

There are 10.2 million children across the country who take part in afterschool programs (Afterschool Alliance 2014), which begs the questions, is there any merit to them?; if so what is that merit?; and how is value created from these programs? Literature on afterschool programs has found that such programs do typically have merit for the children that attend them (Afterschool Alliance 2014). Further, that value comes in many forms such as homework help

and programs that make learning more fun, opportunities to improve social skills and build confidence, safety, and supervision that the programs provide (Kelly 2023). These programs can also improve psychological and identity-related outcomes for marginalized, low-income, and youth of color, and have been associated with positive mental health outcomes, especially for youth from low-income families (Christensen, Kremer, Poon, and Rhodes 2023).

#### *Key Factors for Creating Positive Afterschool Programs in General*

There are many key factors for afterschool program success. These include structural features such as child to staff ratio, group sizes, program management, and staff qualifications, educational level, training, and length of time in service (Little 2007). Also important are process features including variety in program offerings, availability of activities that promote sustained cognitive engagement, opportunities for autonomy and choice, and organizational supports that enhance youth-adult relationships and interactions and are necessary to promote effective staff practices (Little 2007).

Additionally, an important aspect for afterschool program success is the relationships that are developed between staff and students, which is defined by Strawhun, Peterson, and Stein (2013:1) as “a feeling of kinship or a caring connection between a youth and a school staff member that promotes healthy ongoing communication”. Building relationships is important because they can provide students with an expanded network of adults and mentors (Huang et al. 2007), which was shown through a study with the Boys and Girls Club (Rhodes 2004) that will be discussed further in the case study section of this literature review. This factor – relationship building – is the focus of this research project.

#### *Factors that Influence the Development of Relationship Building Between Students and Staff*

Positive relationships between students and teachers are defined by Sinclair, Christensen, Lehr, and Andersen (2003:5), as “based upon mutual trust and open communication.” Relationships with these characteristics in afterschool programs have reported benefits for students such as increased motivation, higher academic competence, positive engagement, and increased school value (Huang et al. 2007). Relationship building in such programs are influenced by the fact that staff are often closer in age to the participants than parents or teachers. As a result, staff are often in a prime position to provide life advice and guidance to students (Rhodes 2004).

It is important to note that if done incorrectly, staff relationships with students can actually hinder learning (Grossman et al. 2002). While youth-adult relationships can be enhanced when adults give constant encouragement and positive feedback, if adults provide too much instructional support, then they actually decrease leadership opportunities for youth (Grossman et al. 2002). As such, there must be a balance between being supportive and providing too much support.

#### *Structures for Afterschool Programs that Influence Relationship Building*

There are five pathways through which positive relationships can be formed, including 1. encouraging positive relationships between staff and students, 2. connecting to the school-day staff, 3. supporting and training program staff, 4. engaging families to be part of their child’s afterschool educational experience, and 5. collaborating with community organizations to provide greater opportunities for staff and students (Jordan 2014). Some other important factors for strong student-staff relationships include the fostering of teamwork and communication, trust, bonding, and support (Huang et al. 2007). Youth programs can promote these factors because they often have a more relational climate that is less teacher-centered; they can be an

emotional safe space; students are given more autonomy; and the space itself provides many opportunities to talk (Griffith and Johnson 2019). While both youth and staff help to create a space where strong bonds can be formed, staff can especially help create this space in at least two ways. One way is through authentic conversations by checking in with youth, making themselves available, getting to know youth, and engaging in informal conversations (Griffith and Johnson 2019). Another way is by developing trust with students, which they can do by respecting youth, building rapport, being consistent, and taking a nuanced adult role in students' lives (Griffith and Johnson 2019).

An example of an afterschool program that has had a substantial amount of success, especially with relationship building, is The After-School Corporation (TASC). TASC is a nonprofit in New York City that was founded in 1998 to give kids more learning opportunities (Friedman 2013). TASC has helped more than 450,000 students by supporting afterschool programs in over 500 public New York City schools (Friedman 2013). TASC program components prompt students to have daily, friendly conversations with peers, which were modeled by the adult staff (Policy Studies Associates, Inc. 2014). The relationships that students developed with staff have been shown to be a primary way that students develop a sense of self-worth, sense of community, and mindfulness about their own future (Policy Studies Associates, Inc. 2014).

Another program that has had substantial success with student engagement is the LA's BEST afterschool program (Huang et al, 2007). LA's BEST is an afterschool program formed through a partnership with the Mayor's Office, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and the private sector to address the lack of adult supervision that elementary children have between



3-6pm (LA's BEST 2023). The program started in 1998 and serves over 200 schools (LA's BEST 2023).

In a study done with at risk 3rd-5th graders at the LA's BEST afterschool program (Huang et al. 2007), the researchers analyzed student engagement and measured if there was a correlation between student engagement and having a strong relationship with staff. Student engagement is important to measure because it has been shown to be a strong predictor of longevity in school (Huang et al. 2007). Afterschool program staff have the opportunity to help students' develop a positive perception of their learning environment and encourage their students to apply themselves in school.

The LA's BEST study (Huang et al. 2007) found that students who perceived strong relationships with staff were more likely to have higher engagement in the program. Additionally, students who felt encouraged and supported by staff were more likely to place a larger value on higher education and aspirations for their future. These outcomes are proposed to be linked to relationships between staff and students (Huang et al. 2007).

Another finding from the study was that staff perceived themselves as being able to make a difference in students' lives (Huang et al. 2007). Staff were found to support students in many different ways, not just academically, such as by helping students with issues that pertained to their family and friends. This bond influenced student engagement in both afterschool programs and in students' day schools as well. Ultimately, students' perceptions that staff cared about them and staff perceptions that they were able to make a difference in students' lives impacted their relationships and helped to increase student engagement (Huang et al. 2007). This suggests that perceptions about relationships are correlated with how strong those relationships are (for

example, a perception that there is a strong relationship could lead to citing having a stronger bond).

### *Relationship Building and Afterschool Program Success*

Here, I provide a few different case studies of relationship building and program success that helped to guide my research. First, I start by discussing case studies of the Boys and Girls Club, YMCA community school programs, and the Project DREAM afterschool program intervention. I focused on these case studies because they emphasized relationship building. Next, I discuss YMCA afterschool programs in general. These studies do not focus on relationship building, but instead highlight the structure of YMCA afterschool programs. It is important to understand how YMCA afterschool programs function in order to understand how relationship building can occur within this setting. I also want to note that there were no studies that I could find on relationship building specifically within YMCA programs, but combining the studies discussed in this section gives us a snapshot of what relationship building within YMCA afterschool programs may look like.

#### *Case Studies Focusing Specifically on Relationship Building*

There have been a number of case studies looking at relationship building between staff, students, and also students' families. One was conducted with Boys and Girls Clubs, a popular afterschool program in the U.S. (Rhodes 2004). The study found that the support offered by Club members was in-between the caring one might see from extended family and the skill-specific support that might be offered by a child's day-school teacher. These relationships involved adults mentoring students about skills and life lessons that ranged from academics, sports, health behavior, and the arts to more advanced topics such as conflict resolution, the avoidance of drugs

and pregnancy, the development of more positive body image, and the need to maintain lofty career goals and aspirations for the future. These strong youth-staff relationships helped to lead many of the youth to consider the Boys and Girls Club a second home (Rhodes 2004).

Another case study examined parental involvement in students' academic success within YMCA community afterschool programs (Burns 2000). Previous findings prior to the implementation of this program found that parent involvement was associated with increases in children's achievement test scores and grades, higher school attendance and lower dropout rates, and improvements in student motivation, attitudes, classroom behavior, and self-esteem. The researchers specifically looked at engaging parents at the Stevenson/YMCA Community School Program in Long Beach, CA, which consisted of activities such as parent training, homework helpers, family readings, and parent volunteering. When parents were engaged in the program, they were more likely to help their child(ren) with school-related activities and see themselves as involved in their child(ren)s' education (Burns 2000). Furthermore, additional research on school based programs that help low-income parents learn more about how to work with their children found that these parents tend to develop more positive attitudes towards school and school staff, become more active in the community, and go on to seek out more education for themselves as well (Burns 2000).

Additionally, a study on the afterschool program Project DREAM looked at an effort to facilitate interactions between youth and familiar adults (Hurd and Billingsley 2023). Project DREAM was an afterschool preventive intervention where the focus was to improve academic outcomes by improving students' social and emotional development and connectedness with adults who were not their parents. The program had adult-adolescent activities involving collaboration on development of shared goals and conversations about issues important to the

adolescents. The researchers found that the youth desired mutuality and reciprocity from the adults, and these factors have been determined to be critical in successful youth-adult relationships (Hurd and Billingley 2023).

#### *YMCA Afterschool Programs*

Little research has been done on relationship building in specifically YMCA afterschool programs across the country, or even on how YMCA afterschool programs across the country tend to be structured. However, there have been some. For example, there was a study on physical activity standards in YMCAs in the Midlands South Carolina area (Beets, Weaver, Moore, Turner-McGrievy, Pate, Webster, and Beighle 2014), and while the study doesn't focus specifically on relationship building, it does contain critical information about YMCA program structure in general. To start, the article explains that the YMCA is the United States' largest provider of afterschool programs and has afterschool programs in over 10,000 communities across the country (Beets et al. 2014). YMCAs in this study also all had some common components to their afterschool programs, as they all had a snack time, homework/academic time, enrichment, and indoor/outdoor opportunities for children to be physically active. However, the schedules that were used in these YMCAs only indicated the time allowed and general activity or location without clear indication of the specific activity, equipment, and staff that were needed (Beets et al. 2014). This suggests that although there are some common components to YMCA afterschool programs, there is no standardization for how each site program has to look each day, as there is nothing such as an official YMCA site guide that details the exact program and exact activities for each day that every single YMCA program has to use, which suggests that there is likely variation in activities and how those activities are conducted between various sites that have YMCA afterschool programs.

*Measuring Relationship Building Within Afterschool Programs*

A few studies have examined the relationships between students and staff in select afterschool programs, such as through relationships formed in TASC and LA's BEST (Policy Studies Associates, Inc. 2014; Huang et al. 2007). In this literature review, I focus on TASC and LA's BEST afterschool programs specifically because both have conducted studies evaluating relationship building.

In TASC, students' perceptions of their relationships with staff were examined through questions such as

evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following: 1. At the afterschool program, teachers can't be trusted, 2. At the afterschool program, teachers don't care what I think, 3. At the afterschool program, teachers punish kids without knowing what happened, 4. At the afterschool program, teachers get mad whenever you make a mistake (Policy Studies Associates, Inc. 2014:62).

In LA's BEST, both students and staff were asked questions to evaluate their relationships. Some survey questions measured how much students trust the staff they work with, including "I feel comfortable with the teachers", "I trust the teachers", "teachers here believe what students say", and "teachers trust me" (Huang et al. 2007:39). Some example survey questions to measure the support staff provide to students, an essential trait for relationship building, were "how often do you help students with problems they may be having in school?", "how often do you help students with problems they may be having outside of school?", "how often do you discuss the importance of education with students?", "how often do you encourage students to try hard in school?", "site staff say things that make students feel important", and

“site staff tell students they can accomplish anything if they work hard towards it” (Huang et al. 2007 p. 36).

### *Theories Surrounding Relationship Building*

Literature about relationship building details several relevant theories for how people build relationships in general, and they are important for understanding how relationships between staff and students in afterschool programs can be formed. Feld’s focus theory, explains that individuals who engage in activities that have a similar focus are more likely to develop an interpersonal relationship than those that do not (Colistra, Bixler, and Schmalz 2019). A focus can include a neighborhood, workplace, family, school, team, or organization and is an entity around which people or activities are organized. Relationship development quality depends on shared activity quantity, shared activity frequency, type of activity, and duration of focus (Colistra et al. 2019). For example, any specific YMCA afterschool program site could be a focus.

Another relationship theory is homophily, which says that people will bond with others who are similar to them (Colistra et al. 2019). Homophily can rest on shared statuses which include identities like gender, race, and age. Homophily can also rest on shared attitudes, beliefs, abilities, and aspirations; or geographic location (Colistra et al. 2019). When considering this theory, we might see students bond more easily with adults who live in the same geographic location, such as the adults they regularly see at afterschool programs.

Social capital theory is another example of relationship theory (Colistra et al. 2019). This theory argues that social capital can give someone access to both material and informational resources through social networks and relationships that allows for achievements not likely possible without those resources. According to this theory, relationships can be thought of as a

form of social capital and need to have the following: reciprocity, connections relying on investment strategies to establish or reproduce relationships, and active engagement and meaningful interactions over time. Additionally, trust, norms, and reciprocity in relationships tend to be higher for people who report having a greater availability of social capital resources (Colistra et al. 2019). An example of using this theory could be that students may be able to form relationships with more mentors if students attend afterschool programs whereas if they do not attend any programs after school hours.

Additionally, relationships involve belonging, especially belonging within groups. Wenger (2000) argues that there are different modes of belonging in groups, one of which is engagement. Through engagement, people do different activities together, which helps us “learn what we can do and how the world responds to our actions” (p. 227). Consider when children at afterschool programs do activities either with staff or each other, they are learning about their capacities and others’ reactions, both of which are important socioemotional skills. These modes of belonging also provide foundations for understanding communities of practice, which is where humans form communities that share cultural practices to reflect collective learning. In communities of practice, members come together over their shared understanding of the community, mutual engagement, and by interacting with each other (Wenger, 2000). I see it that afterschool programs constitute their own communities of practice where people share knowledge, such as how to behave in certain afterschool groups and settings and how to learn together, and staff and students working together can help to foster this.

### *Gaps in the Literature*

As most of the current literature examines specific programs, there is an important gap in the literature in terms of examining relationship building across a large range of afterschool

programs. There is also a gap in the literature looking at YMCA afterschool programs more generally, which is important because an estimated 500,000 students attend YMCA programs at an estimated 10,000 sites each year (YMCA of the USA 2024). There is also little examination of how staff, specifically, build relationships in afterschool programs and what structures afterschool programs should use to influence staff relationship building with students. Instead, most of the literature focuses on how students specifically build relationships with the staff around them (Huang et al. 2007; Policy Studies Associates, Inc. 2014). For example, the TASC afterschool program study only focused on how students build relationships with those around them, as the only relationship building questions asked were asked directly to students (Policy Studies Associates, Inc. 2014). In the LA's BEST program, while staff were asked relationship building questions, these questions centered around how staff could build relationships with students to help students with academic performance, and didn't focus on staff relationships with people other than students, such as other staff or students' families (Huang et al. 2007). Furthermore, much scholarship is based on theories of what would *hypothetically* work for relationship building in afterschool programs, as opposed to evaluating if relationship building, especially from a staff perspective, is occurring and how effective staff feel this relationship building is. This is problematic because sometimes what seems like it would work hypothetically doesn't actually work in reality, so it is important to measure what is occurring in actual afterschool programs to see if it matches with what theoretically is supposed to work.

To begin filling these gaps, I focus specifically on if and how staff in YMCA programs build relationships with those around them, including with students, other staff, supervisors, students' families, and day school staff. The only afterschool program measured is YMCA programs, however this study included staff from several YMCAs from across the country, such



as from Alabama, California, and Florida. In my survey, I not only measured staff relationships with students, but I also considered their relationships with others around them. Rather than considering relationship building as hypothetical, I looked at if relationship building from a staff perspective is occurring and the different ways in which relationship building occurs at these programs. Finally, I looked at if relationship building plays a role in afterschool program success, specifically in terms of staff enjoyment of working at the program and staff engagement.

## METHODS

To address the above gap in understanding, I developed a survey project to analyze staff's perceptions of the relationship building that occurs in YMCA afterschool programs. I chose to focus specifically on YMCA programs as they are the largest provider of afterschool programs in the United States, running 7,360 afterschool programs (YMCA of the USA 2024). In this section, I provide an overview of the measures, recruitment, quantitative data preparation, data analysis, and qualitative data and analytical approaches used in this study.

### *Measures*

I created a survey in Qualtrics to measure afterschool staff's perceptions of the quality of their relationships with students in afterschool programs. The project was approved by the University of Colorado Boulder's Institutional Review Board (Protocol #23-0493).

For my survey, I decided to ask both quantitative and qualitative questions. According to Verhoef and Casebeer (1997), quantitative research often helps to demonstrate correlational relationships, whereas qualitative research can help to interpret nonnumerical observations. In other words, qualitative data can help provide a more detailed description of the numerical data found from quantitative research (Verhoef and Casebeer 1997). For my survey, I wanted to know 1. If there was a correlation between afterschool program relationship building and factors that could help measure afterschool program success (such as staff enjoyment of the program), and 2. What factors contribute to that correlation if it does exist? A quantitative approach would help me discover if there was a correlation, whereas a qualitative approach would help me understand the details behind *why* there might be that correlation and what factors go into influencing that correlation. I therefore decided to use both quantitative and qualitative questions to help me answer my research questions.

To shape my quantitative questions, I used several examples from the LA's BEST survey about an afterschool program in California (Huang et al. 2007). Their survey measured communication, trust, and support, all key to my project. All questions were measured on a five-point Likert scale, which was the same scale used in the LA's BEST study (Huang et al. 2007). These questions and the corresponding Likert scale are shown in Appendix A.

I also added a number of quantitative questions to better align the survey with my specific research questions. The questions and statements that I added were measured on a five-point Likert scale and are shown in Appendix B. Additionally, I incorporated three open ended questions, which are included in Appendix C, and I describe coding of these responses in more detail in the "qualitative analysis" subsection of the methods section below. Finally, I included a number of contextual and demographic questions as well, which are shown in Appendix D.

### *Recruitment*

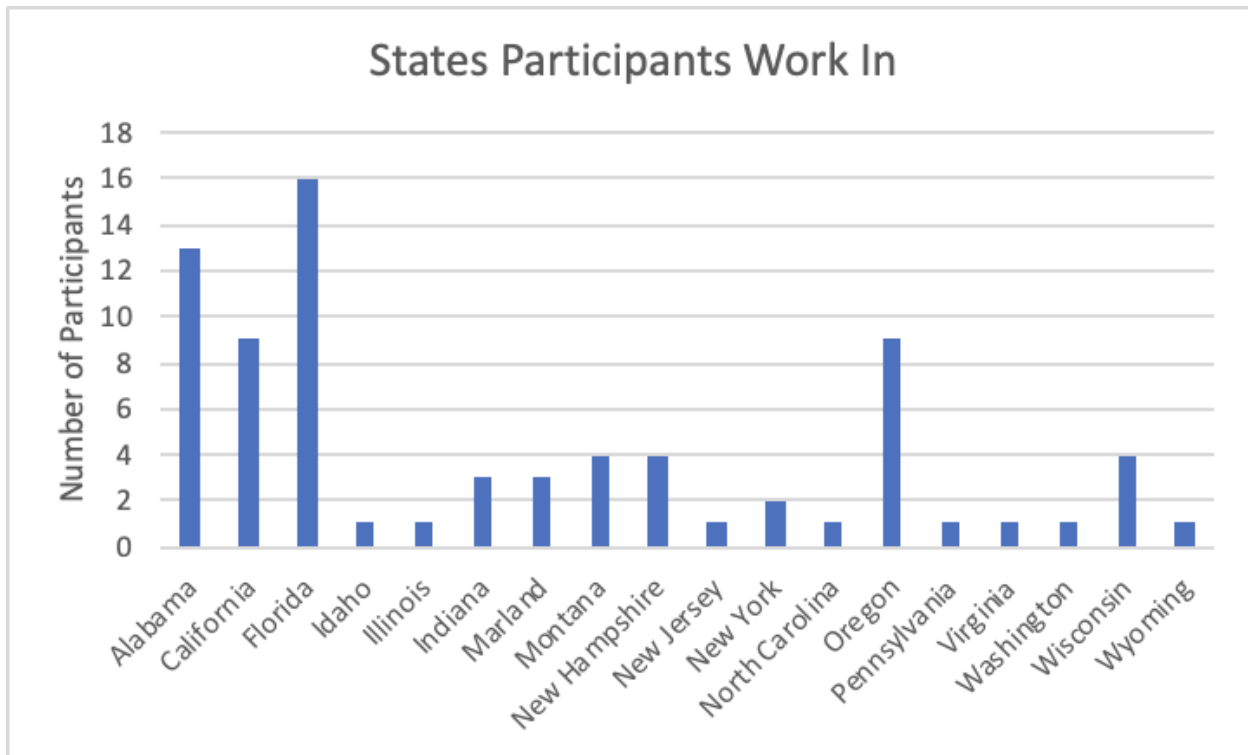
After obtaining approval from the IRB, in order to find staff to participate in my survey, I started by creating a list of YMCA websites in all 50 U.S. states, Washington D.C., and on U.S. military bases. I Googled YMCAs in each state and pulled the websites from the ones that showed up through my search. On each website, I looked for the name and email address of each program or site director. I gathered the names and sent an email to over 500 afterschool program directors to ask if they would be willing to share a short survey (5-15 minutes long) with their program staff. I also shared the survey link along with a consent form that further explained the survey. Since the survey was anonymous, it is hard to know the exact number of program directors that shared the survey with their staff, but out of the approximately 500 directors that I

emailed, 39 of them expressed interest in participating and at least 18 of those shared the survey with their site staff.

There were 105 people who consented to participate in the survey; I did not ask for any identifying information and all answers were anonymous. Of the 105, 77 (73%) actually answered the survey questions, and of those, 15 (19%) only answered a portion of the questions. All participants worked at YMCA afterschool programs, and responses came from 18 different states including Alabama, California, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. While these states do cover a wide geographical area, most of the states come from either the East Coast or West Coast, and there are not a lot of states and responses from the Midwest. There is also not representation from Alaska or Hawaii.

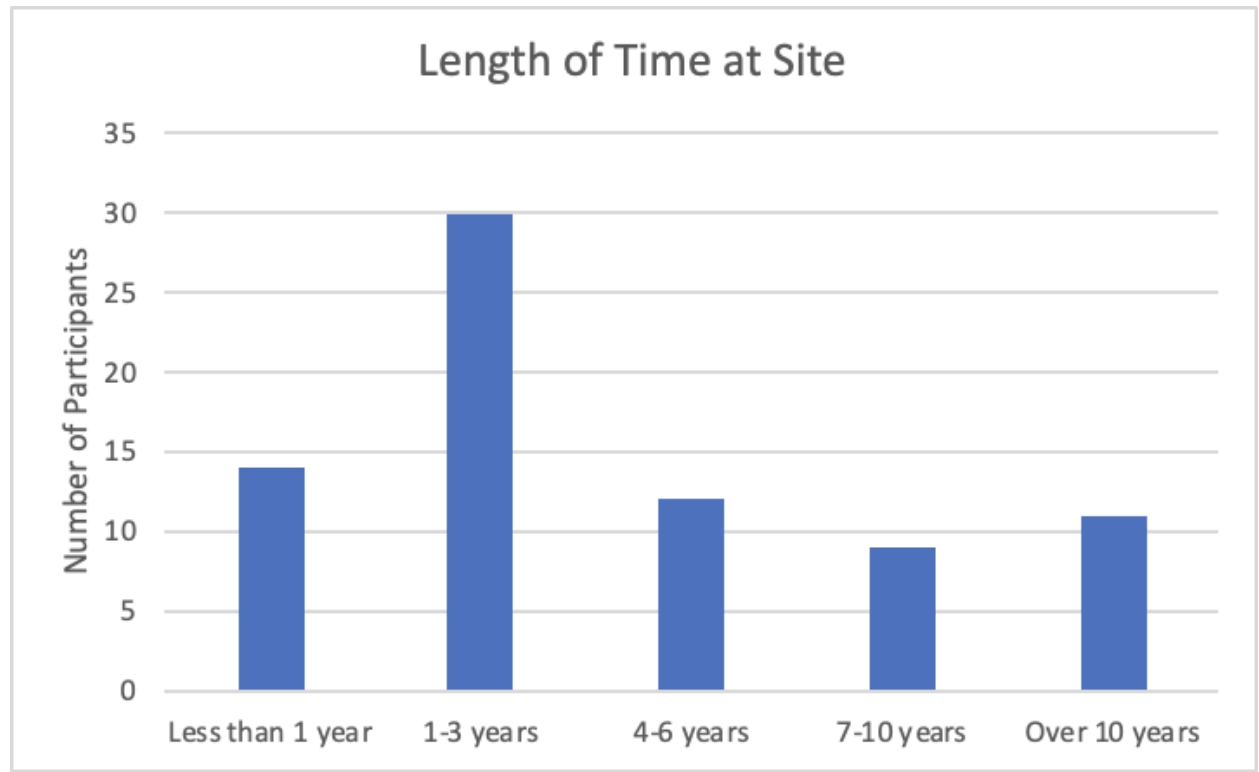
The breakdown of the participants' demographics are shown through the following charts.

Chart 2



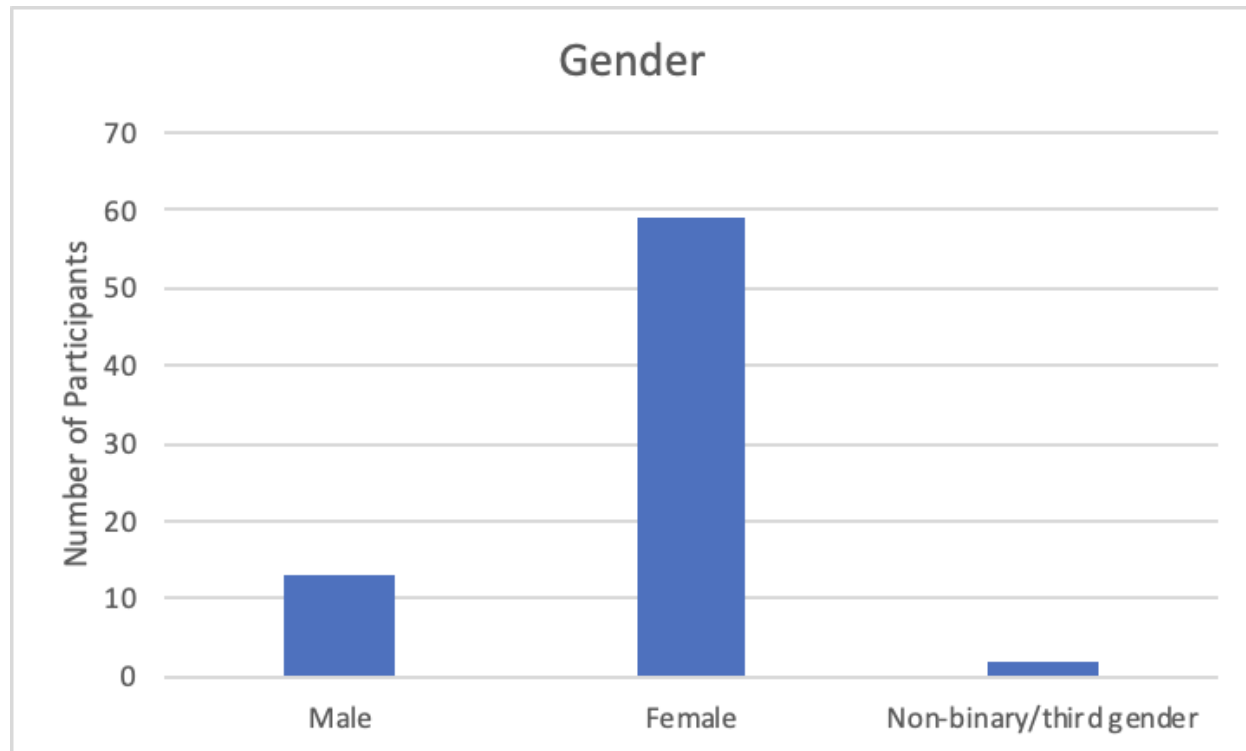
This chart shows the breakdown of states that participants work in. The states with the most responses are Alabama, California, Florida, and Oregon.

Chart 3



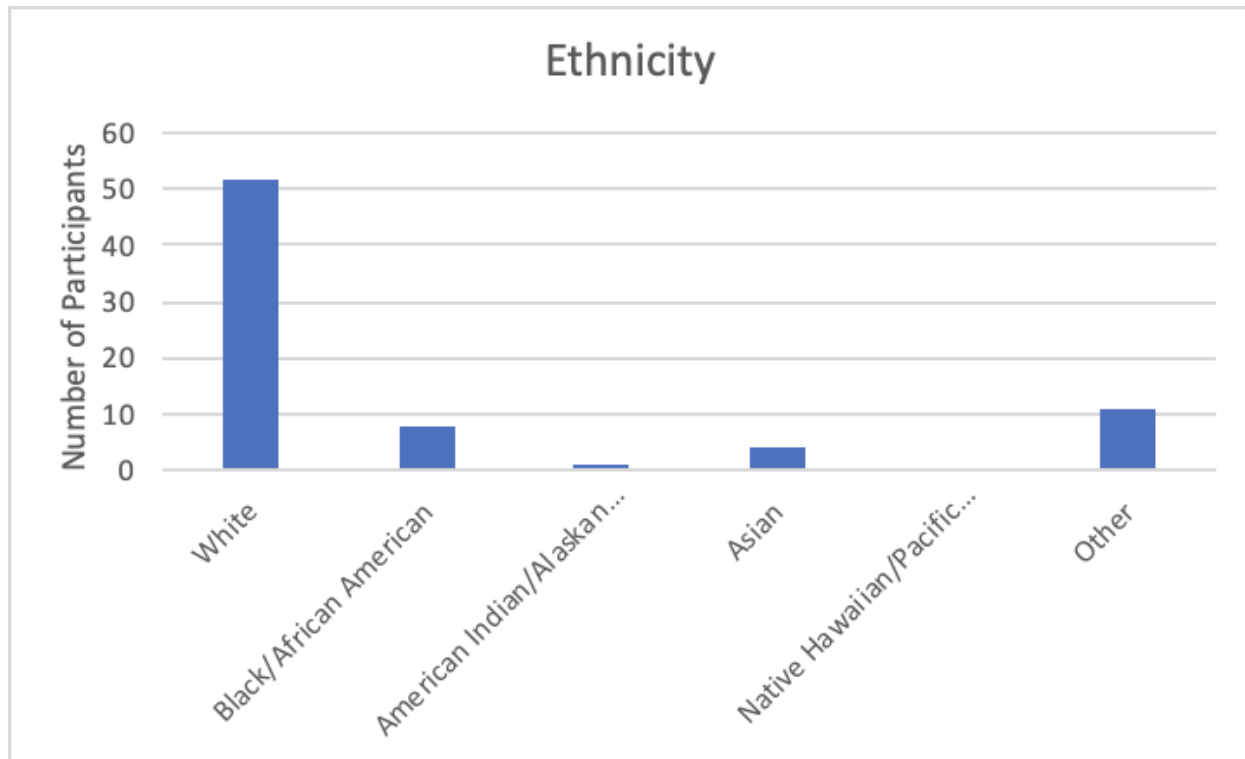
This chart shows the breakdown of how long staff have worked at their after school program. While staff range from having worked only a couple months to over 10 years, most staff have been working at their location from between 1-3 years.

Chart 4



This chart shows the breakdown of the gender of the staff who participated in the survey. The chart shows that most participants were female. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 89% of public elementary school teachers are female, and 64% of public secondary school teachers are female, leading to an average of 77% female teachers in the public k-12 education system (NCES 2023). 77.63% of my respondents were female, which correlates with the gender distribution working in education systems.

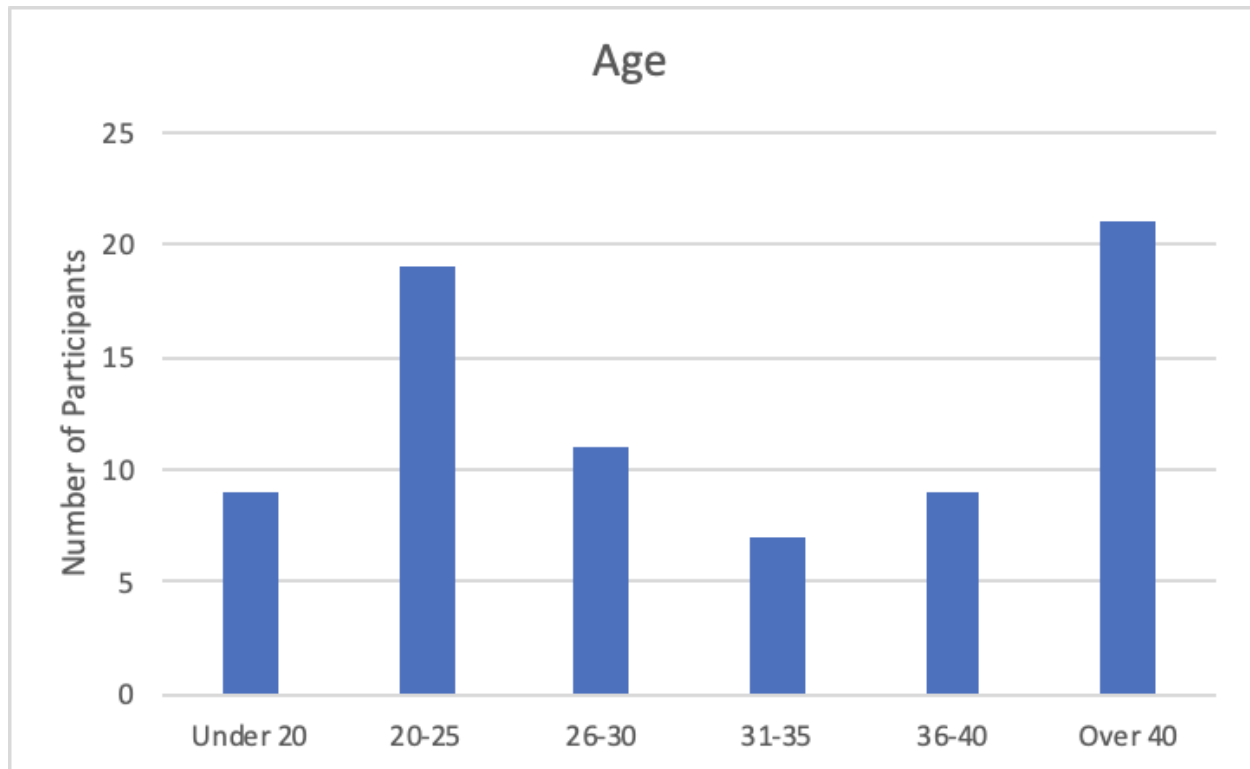
Chart 5



This chart shows the distribution of ethnicities of the staff who participated in the survey. The chart shows that most participants were White. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 80% of teachers in public k-12 schools are White (NCES 2023). 68.42% of my respondents were White, which is slightly less than the percentage of teachers in public k-12 schools.



Chart 6



This chart shows the breakdown of the ages of the survey participants. The majority of the participants were either under 25 or over 40 with the median age being between 26-30 years old. While there aren't many statistics on the average ages of people working specifically in afterschool programs, when measured in 2021 by the Bipartisan Policy Center, the average age of female childcare workers was 36 whereas the average age of male childcare workers was 32 (Smith et al 2021). This suggests that my sample was slightly younger than the national average for childcare workers.

#### *Quantitative Data Preparation*

I exported the data from Qualtrics to an Excel spreadsheet. I then converted each response to a numerical value corresponding with how the response fell on the five-point Likert scale. I gave each blank response a value of 999, which was counted as "no response" in the data

analysis. I then imported the data into the software SPSS, where I ran all of my data analysis. I also created a codename for each variable which I also put into SPSS to keep track of what data corresponded to which question. A table showing these variable names is provided in Appendix E.

### *Data Analysis*

To first develop a baseline understanding of responses to my key outcome variables, I present descriptive profiles and simple frequency distributions of these central measures. I then designed a bivariate analytical strategy to answer the research questions using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistical test since, according to Cardinal and Aitken (2006), the purpose of ANOVA is “to predict a single dependent variable on the basis of one or more predictor variables, and to establish whether those predictors are good predictors” (p.7). I chose to use ANOVA since I used a Likert scale when asking my research questions and comparing the means was a useful approach.

ANOVA compares the means of a continuous variable when there are two or more variables being compared (Sullivan n.d.). The statistic takes into account sample sizes, sample means, and sample standard deviations for each variable group (Sullivan n.d.). ANOVA ultimately measures how likely it is that the null hypothesis for the variables being compared is true. The null hypothesis is a hypothesis saying that there is no difference in means between the variables being compared, whereas the research hypothesis would say that there is a difference in means between the variables being measured (Sullivan n.d.). The p value in ANOVA measures how likely it is that the null hypothesis is true. Therefore, the smaller the p value, the less likely that the null hypothesis is true and the more likely it is that there is a statistically significant

difference between the means (Sullivan n.d.). The p value can be significant at three levels:  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , and  $p < 0.001$ .

I then also ran tests to determine the average level of select dependent variables by average levels of select independent variables to show directionality, as ANOVAs only show if variables are statistically significant and do not show directionality. I signify which variables had a statistically significant relationship in the charts showing average level of a dependent by an independent variable by using asterisks to highlight significance: \* means that  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* means that  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . However, when comparing the variable categories “staff connection with others (connection)” and “staff belief in the importance of the relationships around them (belief)” to analyze research question #2, I did a correlation test to figure out the correlation coefficient, which shows the directionality between each of these variables, as opposed to just looking at averages. I marked which variables had a statistically significant correlation using the same asterisks as above. A discussion of the meaning of the results of these tests is presented in the “Discussion” section.

### *Qualitative Data and Analytical Approach*

There were three open-ended questions in the survey:

1. If you feel comfortable communicating with other staff in your afterschool program, what is something that allows you to feel comfortable doing this? If not, why not?
2. If you feel you and the students you work with have a high level of trust, what is something that your afterschool program does well to help you develop that trust? If not, why not?
3. What is something that you like to do in your afterschool program to support students in their learning (if anything)?

For questions 1 and 2, there were 65 total responses, which was 62% of participants who initially consented to filling out the survey and 84% of participants who actually completed the survey. For question 3, there were 62 total responses, which was 59% of participants who consented to filling out a survey and 81% of participants who completed the survey. To analyze these questions, I first coded each question using qualitative content analysis, which is “a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data” (Schreier, 2013). To do this, I started by reading each response and writing a theme, such as experience, that I felt that response related to. Once I had read every question, I looked at all of the themes I had written, and I combined similar themes into one larger theme. I did this until I had between 5-8 main themes depending on the question. I then went back through and coded each answer choice into one of the main themes, and finally, I recorded the number of responses that fell into each code category. Each response was only coded into one theme.

The codes I used for each qualitative research question are shown in the tables below.

Table 1

| Qualitative Research Question 1 Codes  |
|--|
| 1. Staff experience/time working   |
| 2. Staff openness  |
| 3. Staff common goal/teamwork/being on the same page   |
| 4. Staff checking in/informal conversations (said something about talking and conversations) |
| 5. Environment   |

|   |
|---|
| 6. Staff building a relationship using relationship building techniques other than talking and communicating          |
| 7. Staff having a line of communication/communication in general (respondent only said something about communication) |

Table 2

| Qualitative Research Question 2 Codes   |
|---|
| 1. Staff initiated talking and communication with students  |
| 2. Staff making each student feel seen and heard, either through listening to them, checking on them, etc., and/or student driven conversations to indicate that they feel comfortable with staff |
| 3. Staff including students in decisions/leadership opportunities for students  |
| 4. Rewards  |
| 5. Open communication   |
| 6. For students --Consistency/expectations/following directions   |
| 7. Staff experience/time working  |
| 8. Staff not necessarily feeling a high level of trust  |

Table 3

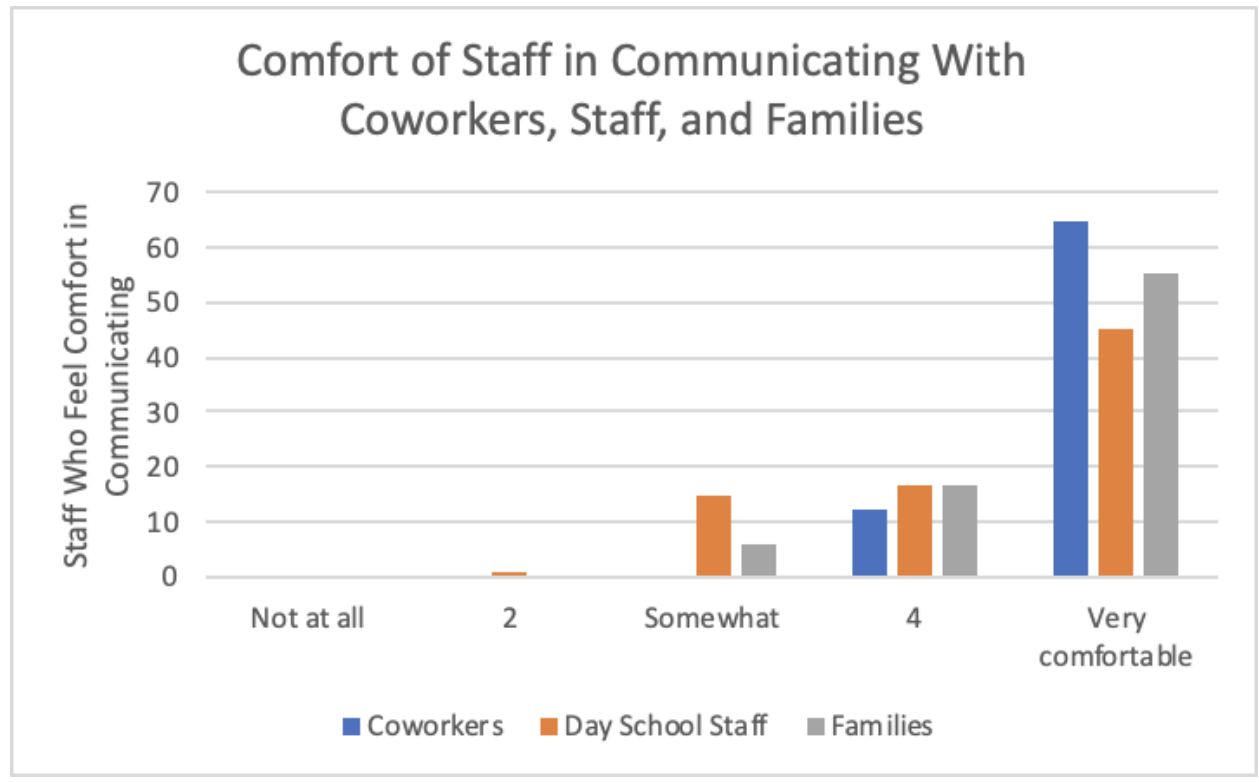
| Qualitative Research Question 3 Codes  |
|--|
| 1. Homework time and/or help   |
| 2. Staff offering educational resources outside of homework that correspond to school                |
| 3. Having rewards/positive reinforcement   |
| 4. Offering curriculum/learning opportunities/space for learning outside of those offered in schools |
| 5. Providing verbal affirmations/check ins/communication   |

## RESULTS

Here, I present my results as they correspond to each of my three research questions. It is important to note that the significance shown in charts describing quantitative data was measured by an ANOVA, with \* corresponding to  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* corresponding to  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\* corresponding to  $p < 0.001$ .

*Research Question 1: Does the structure of after school programs, measured through level of communication and trust in those programs, promote and/or impede the development of relationships between students and staff?*

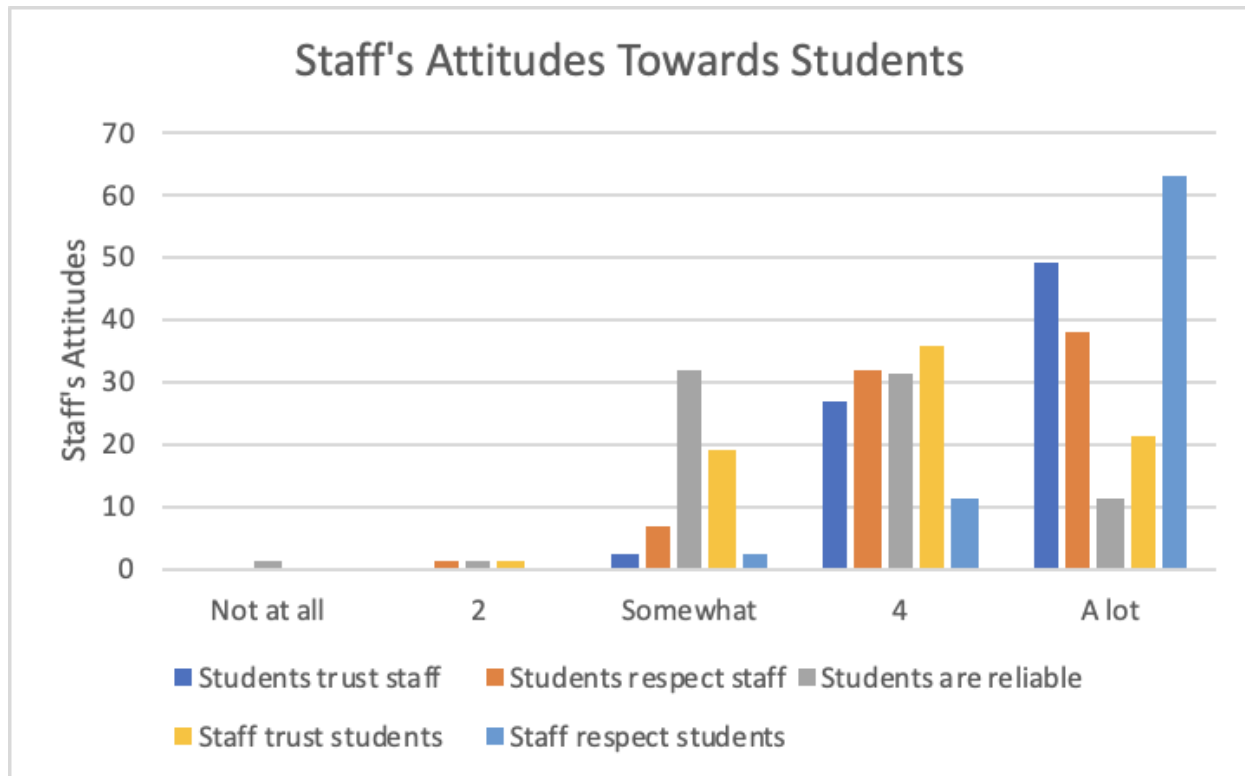
Chart 7



This chart shows the number of staff who feel comfortable communicating with their coworkers, day school staff, and families. Most staff were very comfortable in communicating with others around them, especially with their coworkers and families; however, the respondents were slightly less comfortable in communicating with day school staff.

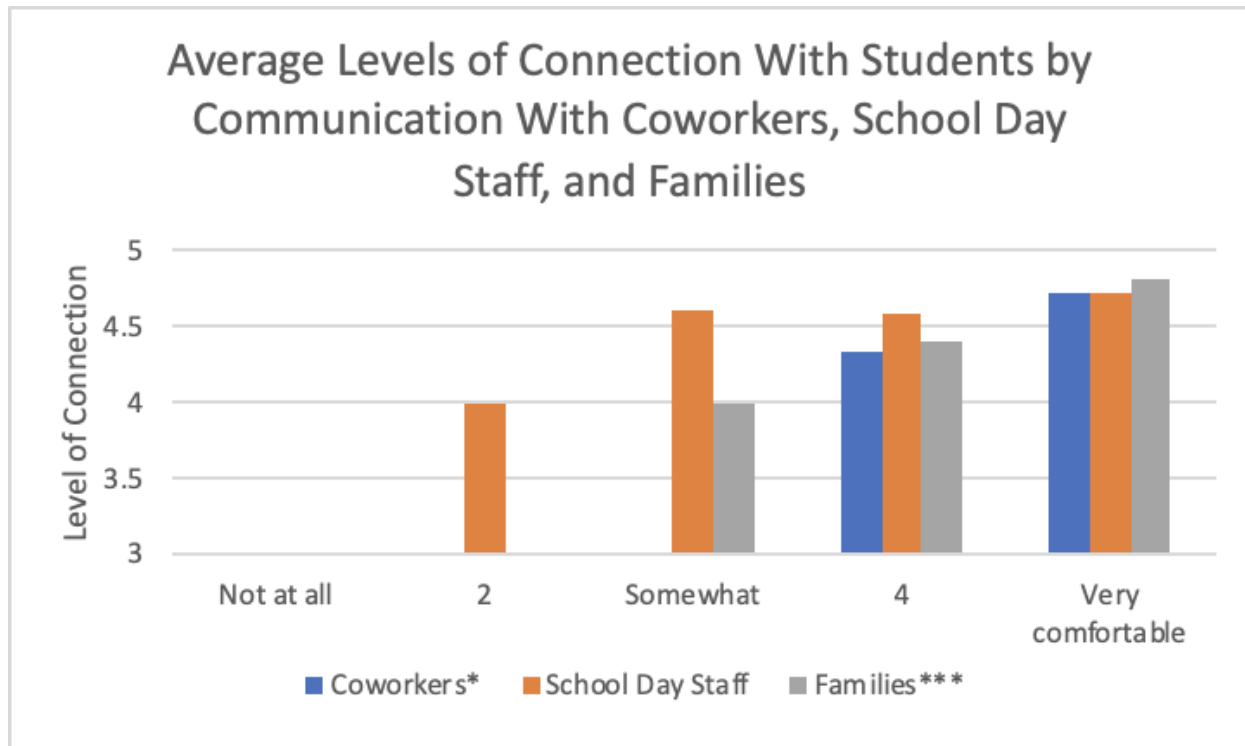


Chart 8



This chart shows how much staff feel that they trust and respect students and how much staff feel that students trust and respect them. The chart also shows how much staff feel that students are reliable. Most staff feel that students respect staff and that staff respect students either at a “4” or “a lot”. Staff also mainly feel that students trust staff at a “4” or “a lot”. Most staff didn’t trust students or find them as reliable to the extent that they respected students however, as many staff only trust students and only find them reliable “somewhat” or at a “4” as opposed to citing “a lot” as they did for the other measures.

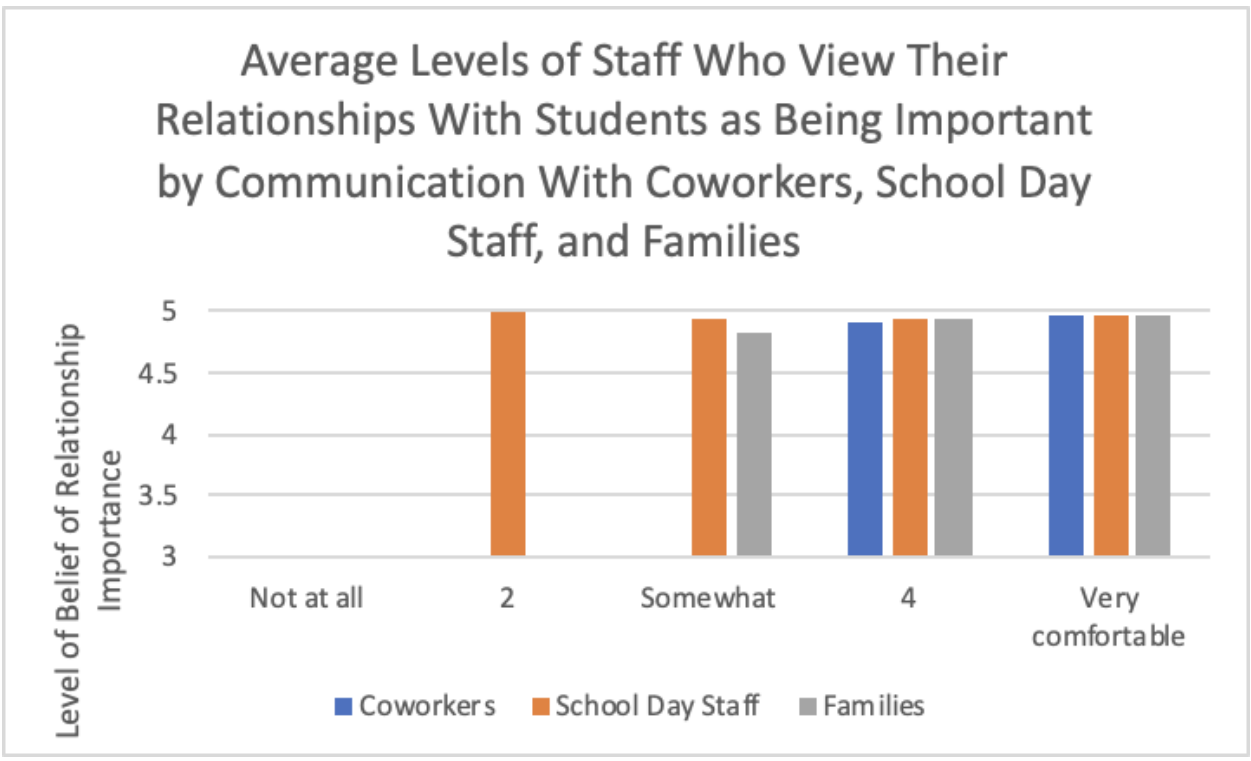
Chart 9



\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

This chart shows the average level of staff connection with students by staff communication with each other, school day staff, and students' families. Findings indicate that staff who feel more comfortable communicating with each other and with students' families will report having a higher connection with students.

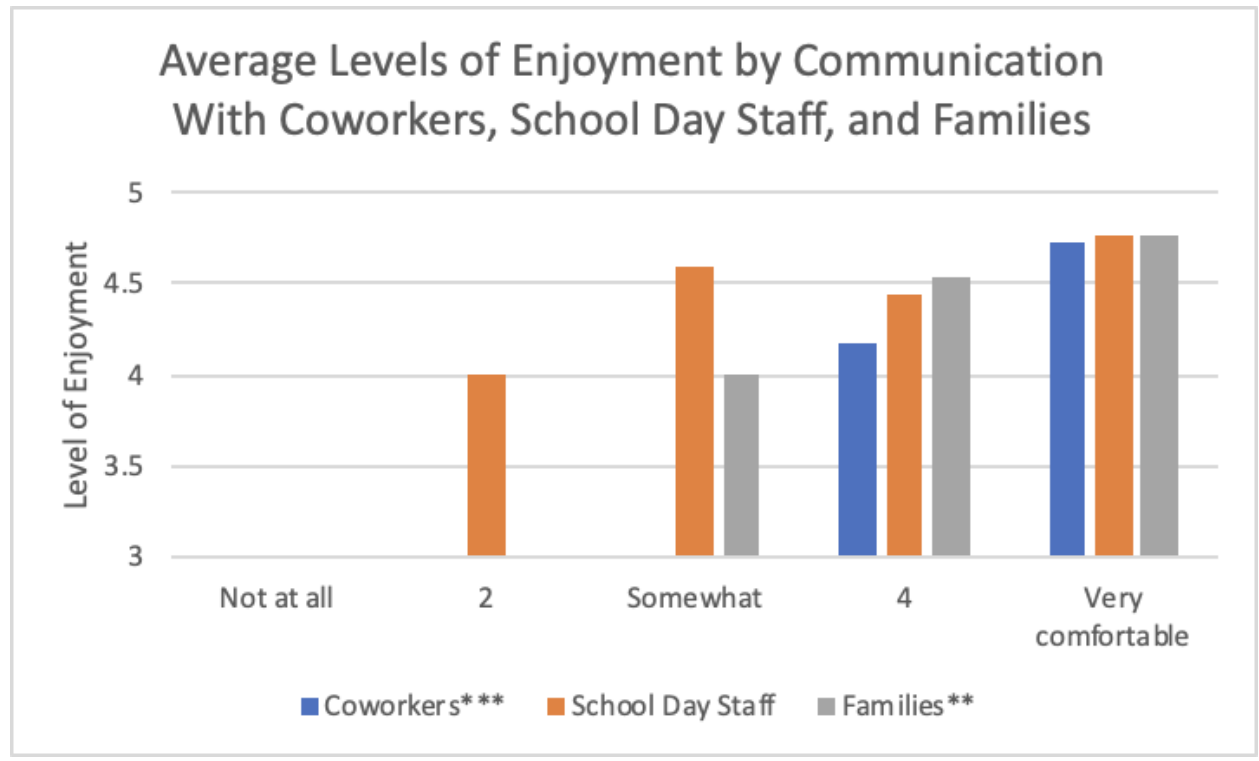
Chart 10



\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

This chart shows the average level of staff who view their relationships with students as being important by staff communication with each other, school day staff, and students' families. Findings indicate that these two variables do not have a statistically significant relationship.

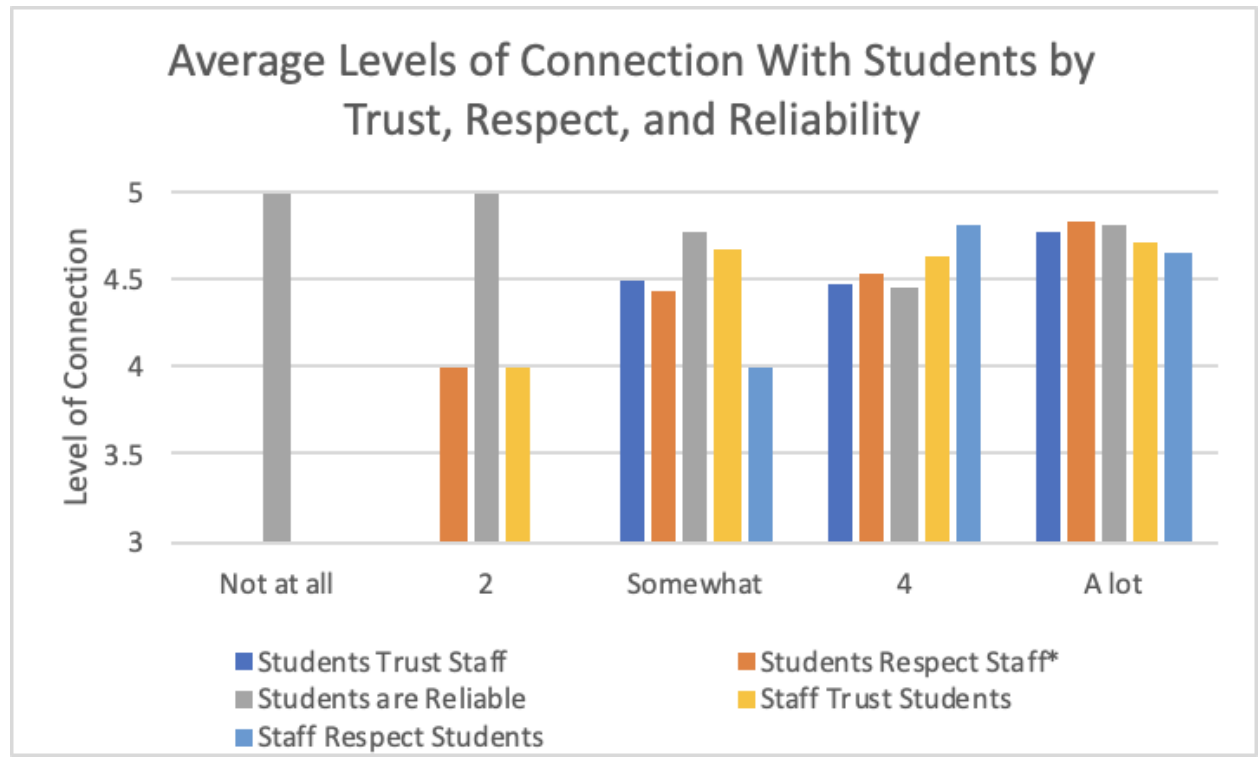
Chart 11



\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

This chart shows the average level of enjoyment by staff communication with each other, school day staff, and students’ families. Findings indicate that staff who feel more comfortable communicating with each other and with students’ families will report having a higher enjoyment of working.

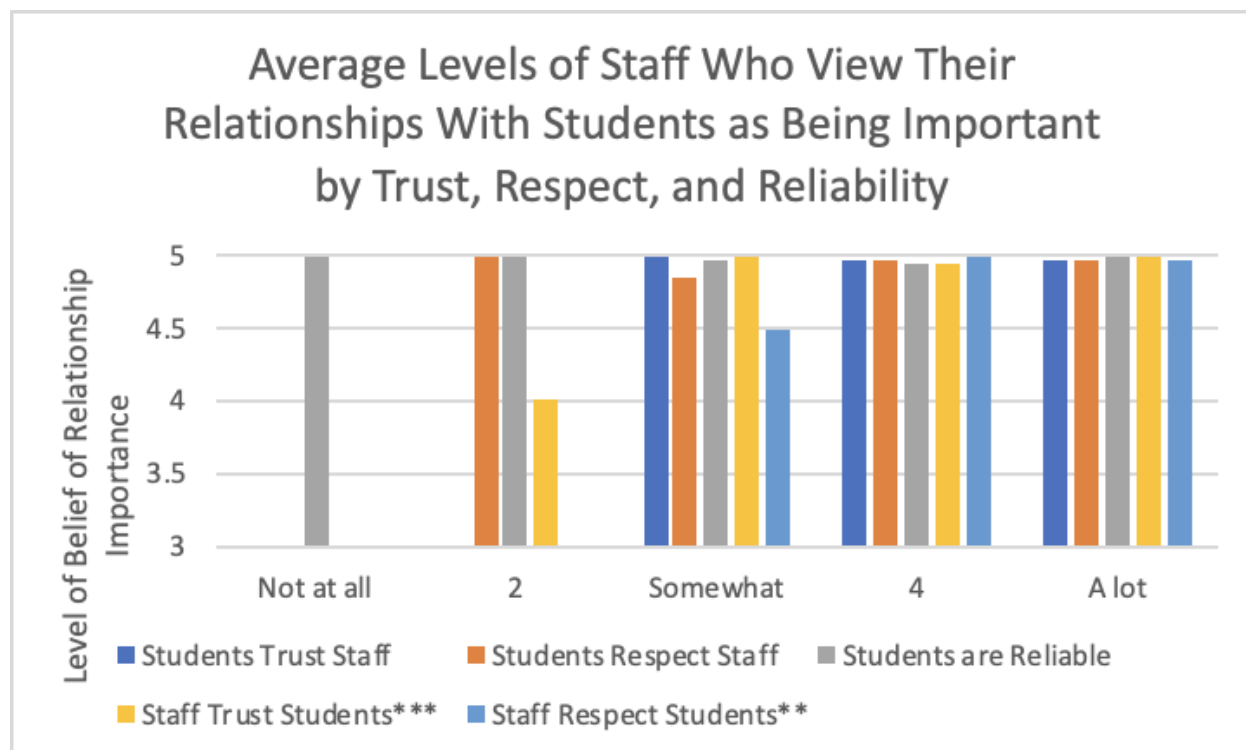
Chart 12



\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

This chart shows the average level of staff connection with students by measures of trust, respect, and reliability. Findings indicate that staff who cite that students respect them will report having a higher connection with students.

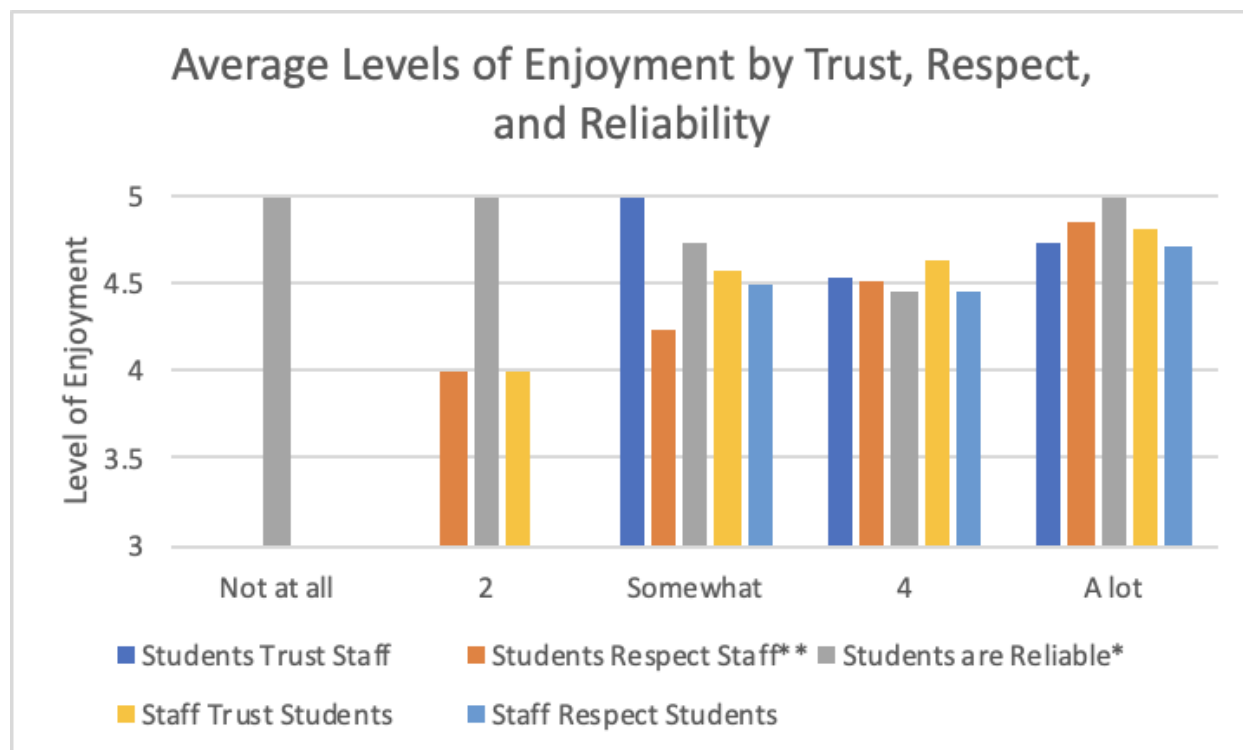
Chart 13



\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

This chart shows the average level of staff who view their relationships with students as being important by measures of trust, respect, and reliability. Findings indicate that staff who cite that they trust students and that they respect students will also report that they believe their relationships with students are important.

Chart 14



\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

This chart shows the average level of enjoyment by measures of trust, respect, and reliability. Findings indicate that staff who cite that students respect them and that students are reliable will also report that they have a higher enjoyment of working.

Table 4: Coding for Qualitative Question 1

*If you feel comfortable communicating with other staff in your afterschool program, what is something that allows you to feel comfortable doing this? If not, why not?*

| Code                          | Frequency |
|-------------------------------|-----------|
| Staff experience/time working | 11        |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Staff openness  | 7  |
| Staff common goal/teamwork/being on the same page   | 11 |
| Staff checking in/informal conversations<br>(said something about talking and conversations)                          | 13 |
| Environment   | 3  |
| Staff building a relationship using relationship building techniques other than talking and communicating             | 17 |
| Staff having a line of communication/communication in general<br>(respondent only said something about communication) | 3  |
| Total   | 65 |

This data table shows what staff cite as factors in their program that help them feel comfortable communicating. The biggest structures that programs can implement that help staff feel comfortable communicating are staff building a relationship using relationship building techniques other than talking and communicating (such as developing trust or having the same



major as another staff); staff checking in with each other and/or having informal conversations with other staff; staff experience/time working at that program; and staff having a common goal/teamwork/being on the same page.

Table 5: Coding for Qualitative Question 2

*If you feel you and the students you work with have a high level of trust, what is something that your afterschool program does well to help you develop that trust? If not, why not?*

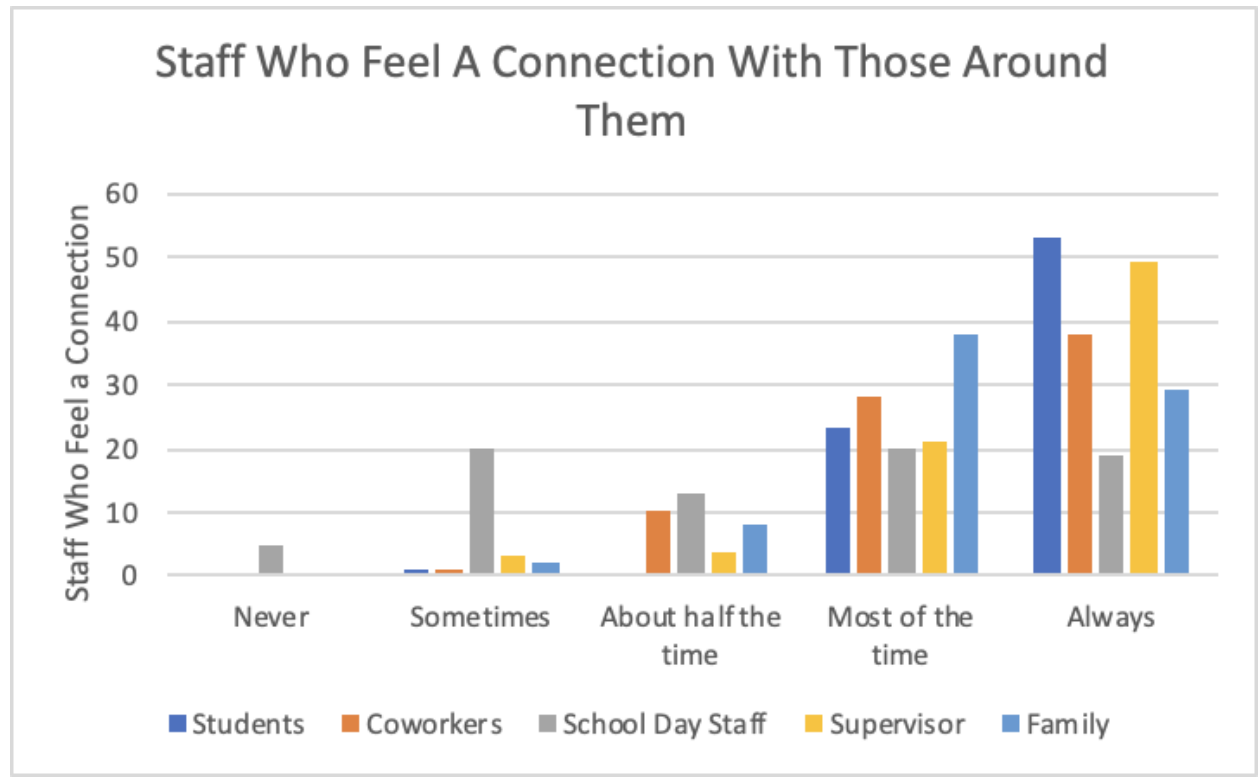
| Code   | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Staff directed talking and communication with students   | 17        |
| Staff making each student feel seen and heard, either through listening to them, checking on them, etc., and/or student driven conversations to indicate that they feel comfortable with staff | 23        |
| Staff including students in decisions/leadership opportunities for students  | 6         |
| Rewards  | 4         |
| Open communication   | 4         |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| For students<br>--Consistency/expectations/following<br>directions | 6  |
| Staff experience/time working                                      | 3  |
| Staff not necessarily feeling a high level of<br>trust             | 2  |
| Total  | 65 |

This table shows what factors staff cite as being influential in helping them develop trust with their students. The biggest structures that programs can implement to help staff develop trust with their students are staff making each student feel seen and heard, either through listening to them, checking on them, etc., and/or student driven conversations to indicate that they feel comfortable with staff, and staff directed talking and communication with students.

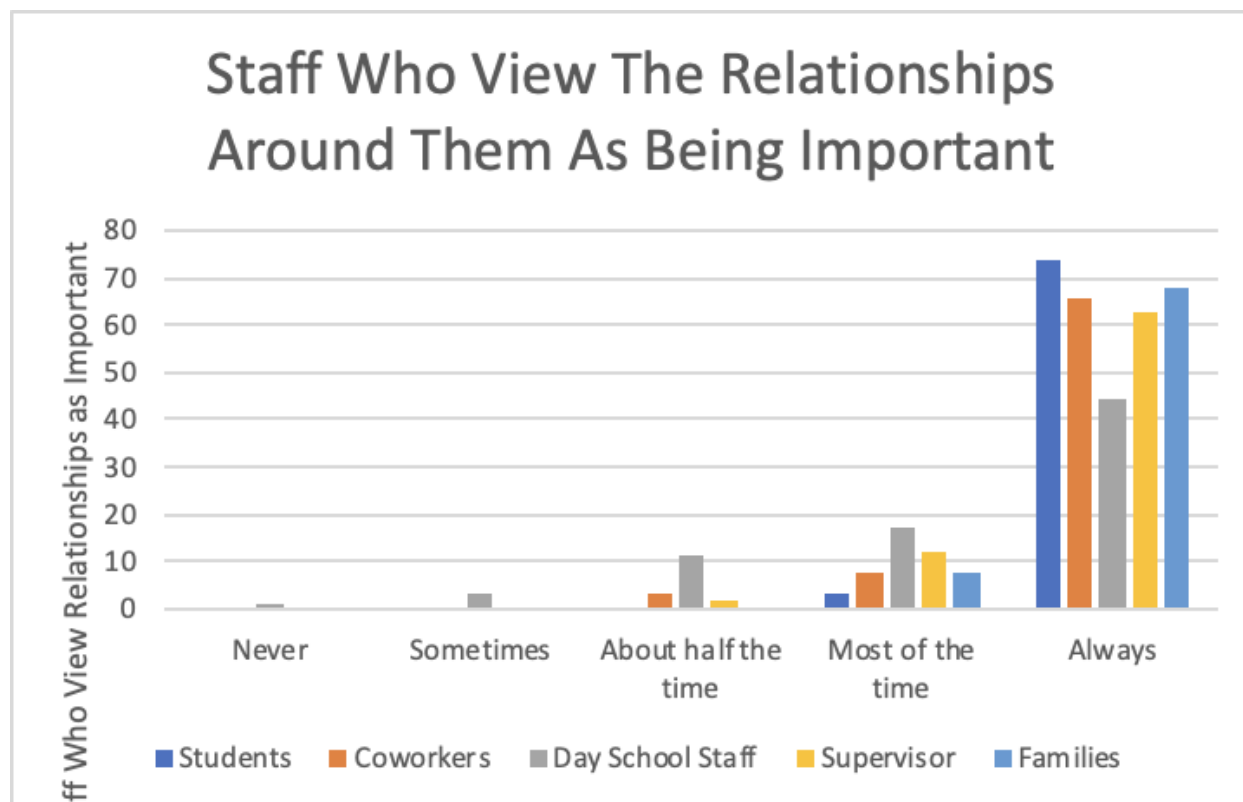
*Research Question 2: What aspects of the structure of afterschool programs are the most influential, especially for relationship building?*

Chart 15



This chart shows how connected staff feel with others in their after school programs. On average, staff “most of the time” and “always” feel connected with those around them. However, staff cite having less connections with school day staff than they do with students, coworkers, their supervisor, and students’ families.

Chart 16



This chart shows staff's beliefs about the importance of the relationships they have with others in their after school programs. On average, staff "most of the time" and "always" believe that the relationships they have with others in their programs are important. However, staff are less likely to believe that relationships with day school staff are important than the relationships that they have with their students, coworkers, supervisor, and students' families.

Table 6: Connection vs. Belief in the Importance of Relationships

|                           | Connection - Students | Connection - Coworkers | Connection - School Day Staff | Connection - Supervisor | Connection - Family |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Belief - Students         | 0.243*                | 0.270*                 | 0.110                         | 0.396***                | 0.152               |
| Belief - Coworkers        | 0.063                 | 0.500***               | 0.130                         | 0.288*                  | 0.190               |
| Belief - School Day Staff | 0.301**               | 0.197                  | 0.585***                      | 0.012                   | 0.332**             |

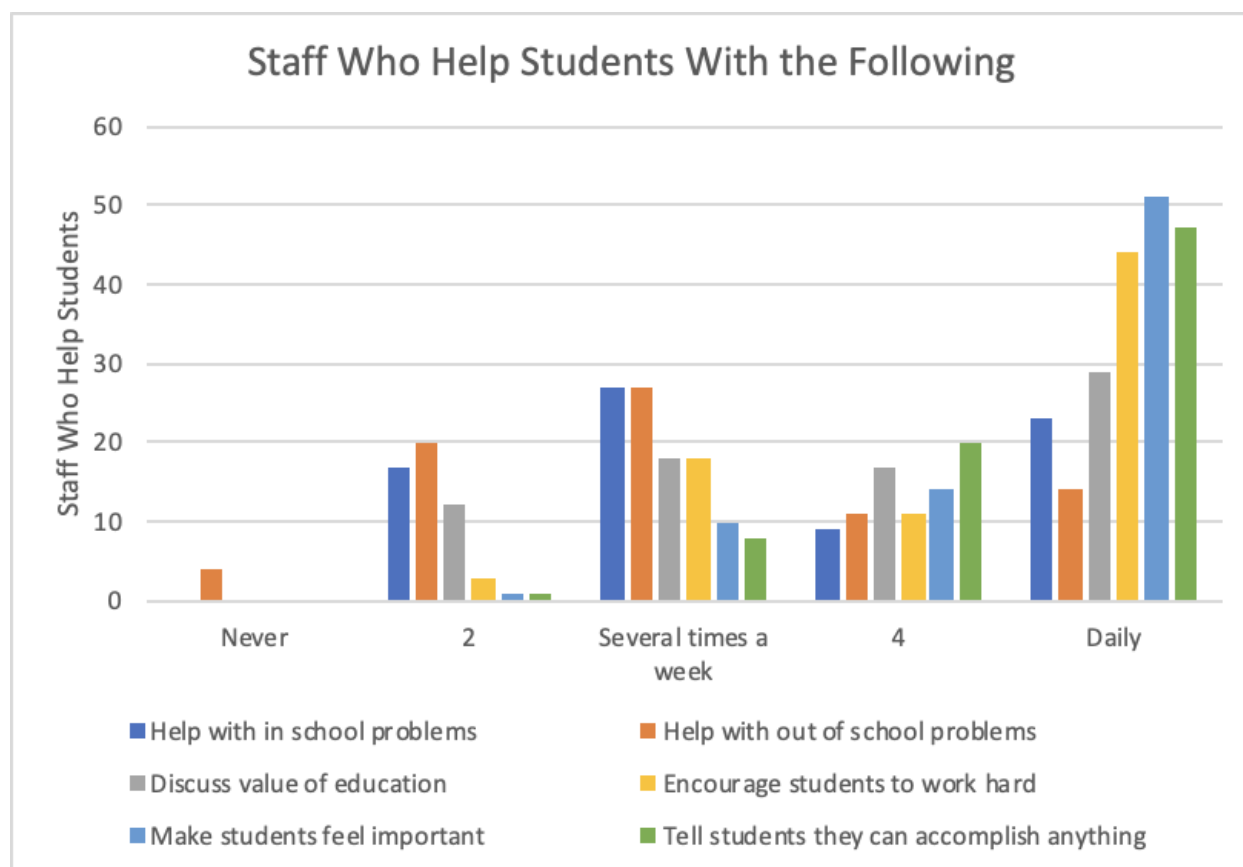
|                     | Connection - Students | Connection - Coworkers | Connection - School Day Staff | Connection - Supervisor | Connection - Family |
|---------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Belief - Supervisor | 0.386***              | 0.499***               | 0.258*                        | 0.441***                | 0.363**             |
| Belief - Family     | 0.176                 | 0.208                  | 0.227*                        | 0.167                   | 0.392***            |

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

This chart shows the correlation coefficient for connection variables vs. belief variables. Findings indicate that there is a statistically significant relationship between many connection variables and many belief variables, which is shown through the asterisks.

*Research Question 3: Is relationship building in afterschool programs important to their success, measured by staff engagement and enjoyment of working at the program?*

Chart 17



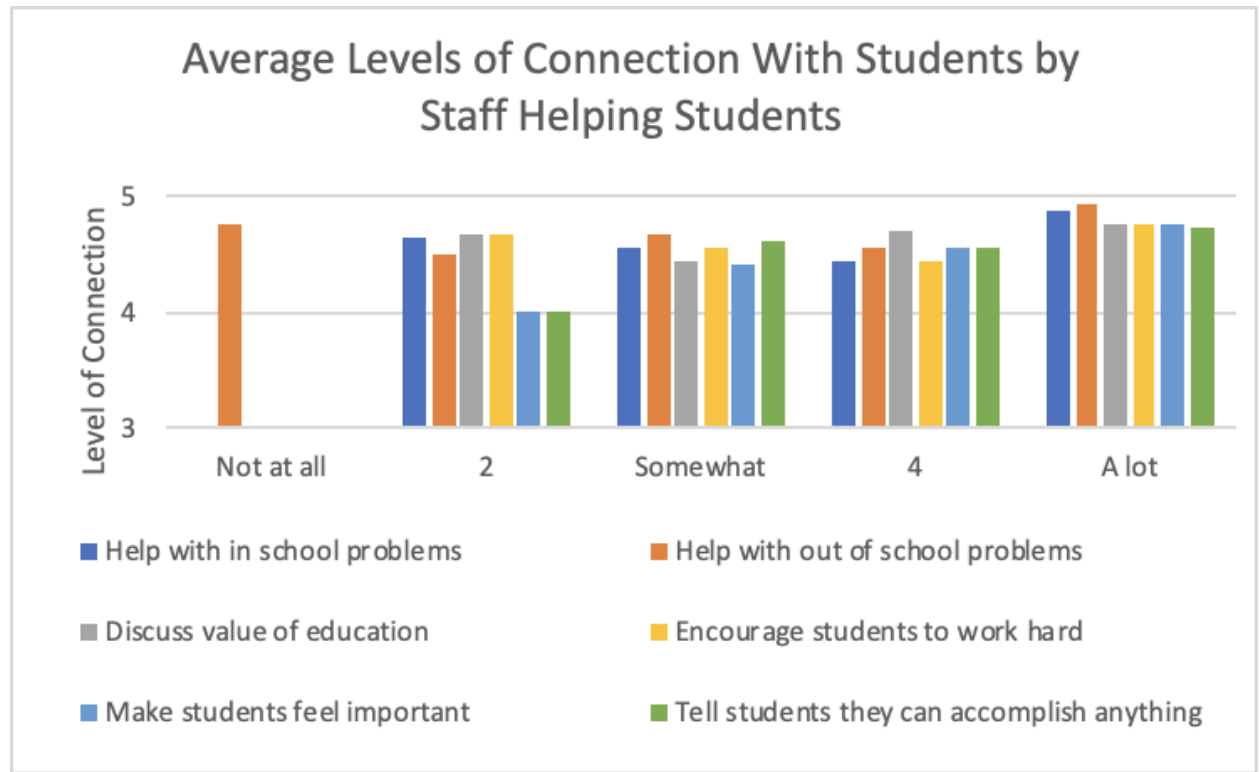
This chart shows the types of engagement that staff have with students. Staff on average “encourage students to work hard”, “make students feel important”, and “tell students they can accomplish anything” more often than they “help with in or out of school problems” and “discuss value of education”.

Chart 18



This chart shows how much staff enjoy working at their after school programs. Most staff cite that they enjoy working at their programs “most of the time” or “always”.

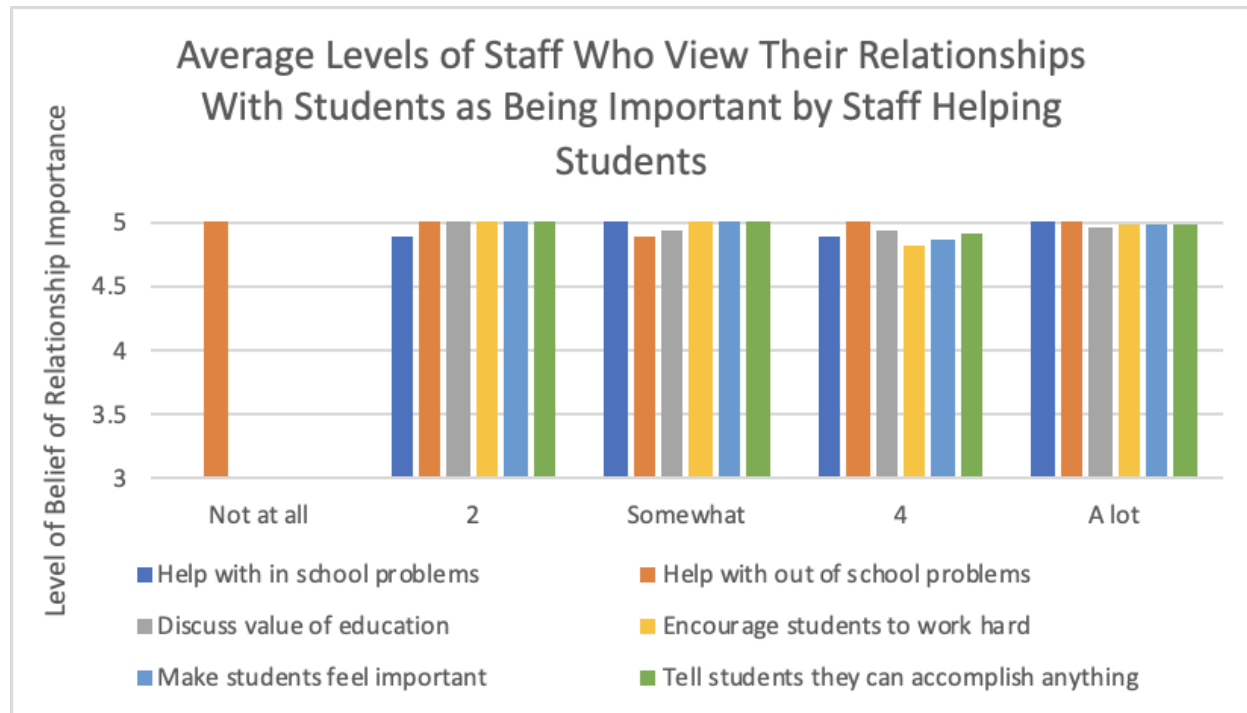
Chart 19



\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

This chart shows the average level of staff connection with students by measures of staff helping students. Findings indicate that there is no statistically significant relationship between measures of staff helping students and staff connection with students.

Chart 20

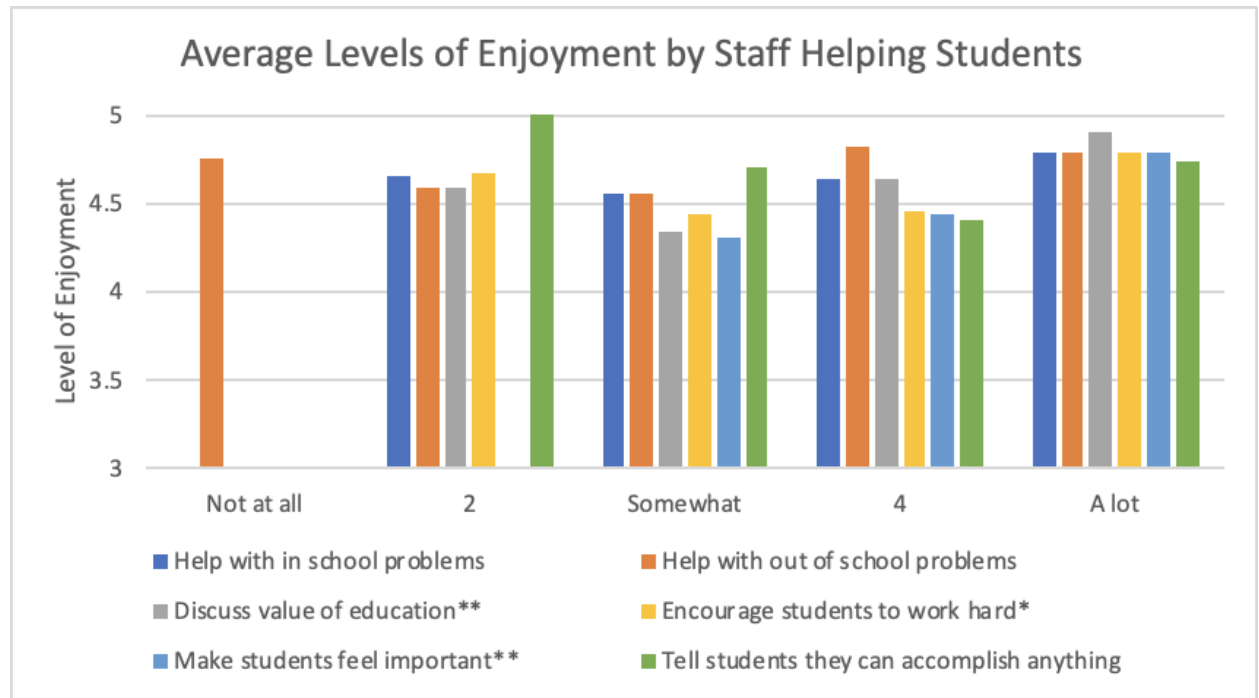


\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

This chart shows the average level of staff who view their relationships with students as being important by measures of staff helping students. Findings indicate that there is no statistically significant relationship between measures of staff helping students and staff who view their relationships with students as being important.



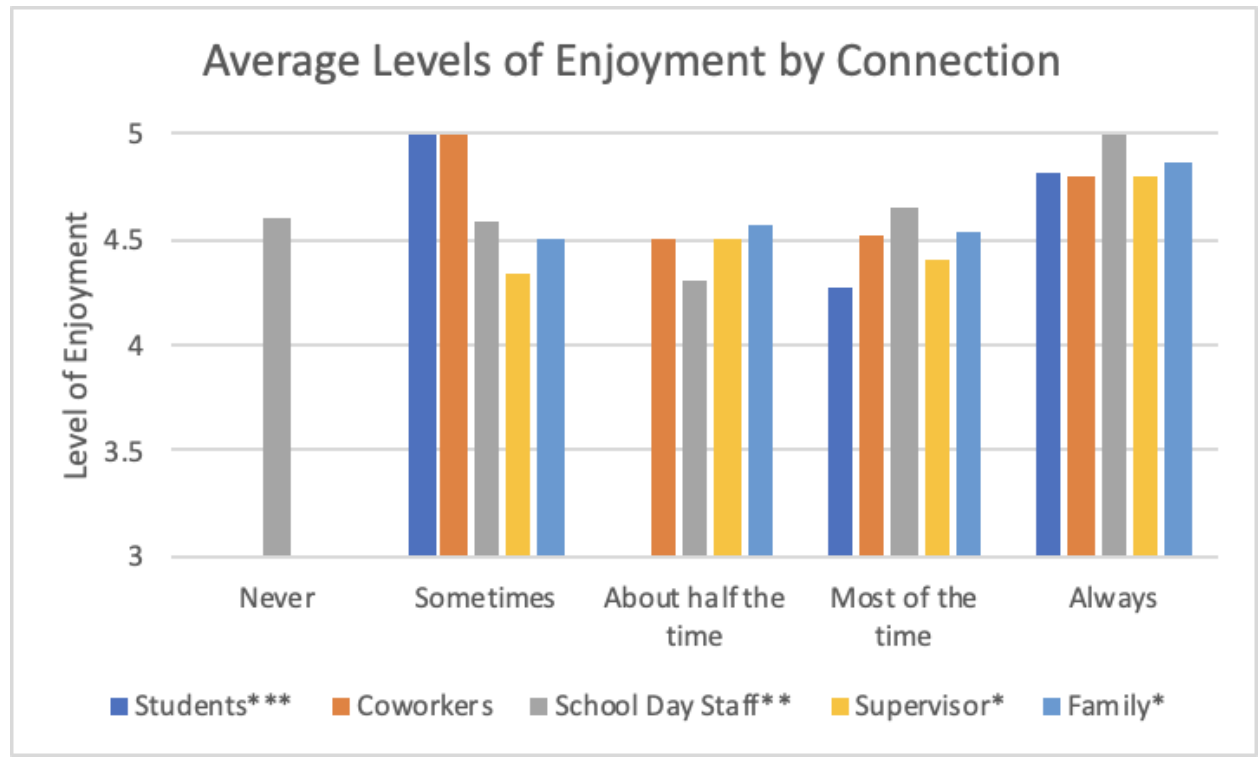
Chart 21



\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

This chart shows staff enjoyment of working by measures of staff helping students. Findings indicate staff who discuss the value of education with students, encourage students to work hard, and say things to make students feel important will also cite higher enjoyment of working.

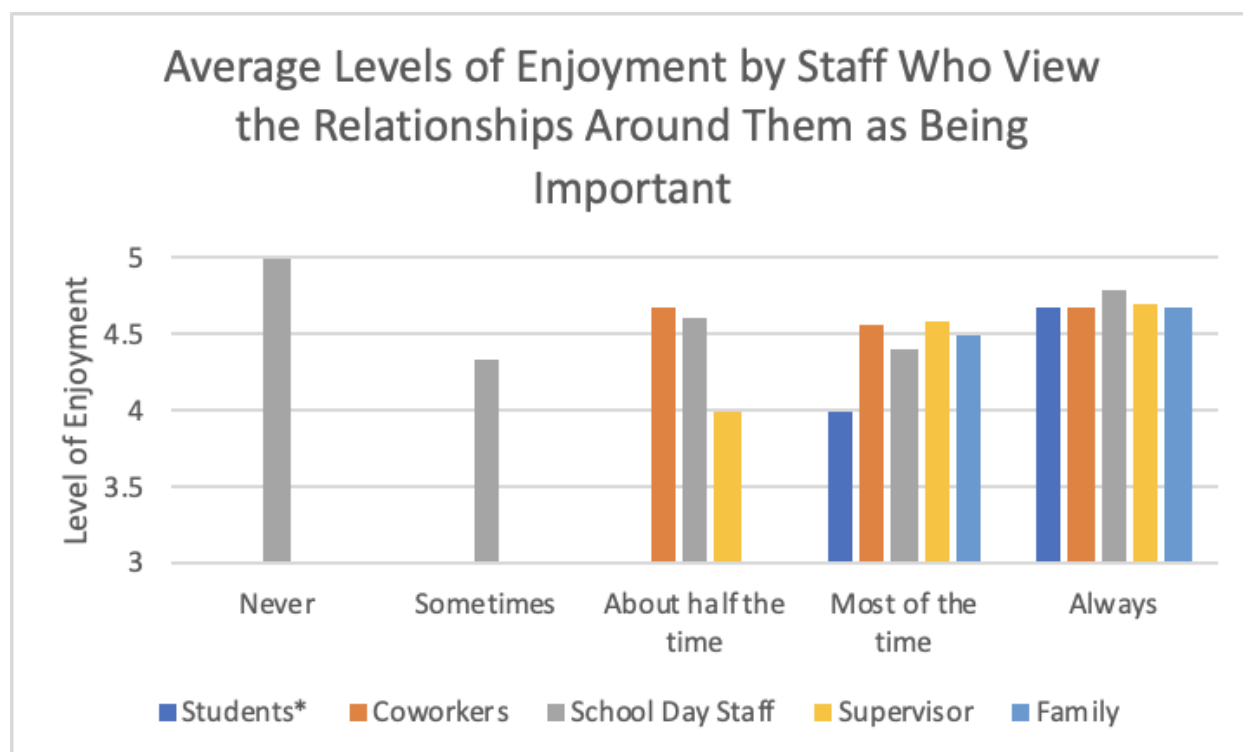
Chart 22



\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

This chart shows the average level of enjoyment by measures of connection. Findings indicate staff who have a higher connection with students, school day staff, their supervisor, and students’ families will have a greater enjoyment of working.

Chart 23



\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

This chart shows the average level of enjoyment by staff who view their relationships with others around them as being important. Findings indicate staff who have a higher connection with students will have a greater enjoyment of working.

Table 8: Coding for Qualitative Question 3

*What is something that you like to do in your afterschool program to support students in their learning (if anything)?*

| Code                      | Frequency |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| Homework time and/or help | 28        |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Staff offering educational resources outside of homework that correspond to school                | 9  |
| Having rewards/positive reinforcement   | 4  |
| Offering curriculum/learning opportunities/space for learning outside of those offered in schools | 10 |
| Providing verbal affirmations/check ins/communication   | 11 |
| Total   | 62 |

This table shows ways in which afterschool program staff support students in their learning. The main ways that staff claim to help students in their learning is through providing homework time/help, providing verbal affirmations/check ins/communication, and offering curriculum/learning opportunities/space for learning outside of those offered in schools.

## DISCUSSION

I now provide a detailed discussion of my results. I provide a discussion of each of my three research questions and then discuss limitations and directions for future research.

*Research Question 1: How does the structure of after school programs shape the development of relationships between students and staff?*

Having the right structures in place in afterschool programs promotes the development of relationship building between students and staff. For example, in the paper “Facilitating Student Engagement: Lessons Learned from Check and Connect Longitudinal Studies”, the authors cite communication and trust as being key elements of building relationships (Sinclair, Christensen, Lehr, and Andersen 2003:5), so having structures in place to promote these elements would likely increase the development of relationships between students and staff. Since communication and trust are known to influence relationship building, I’ve also considered the qualitative responses that address these factors. The first two qualitative questions asked in the survey addressed how communication and trust are built. Theoretically, if communication and trust help to promote relationship building, I would expect a high level of communication and trust within afterschool programs, and if these factors exist in programs, then I would expect there to be a high level of relationship building present. For the qualitative question measuring if staff felt comfortable communicating at their program, 100% of staff who answered the question listed a way in which they feel comfortable communicating with others. For the qualitative question asking staff if they had developed trust with those they work with, only 2 respondents did not list having trust with those around them. In other words, 96.92% of respondents listed ways in which their afterschool program facilitates trust, suggesting that promoting trust is a large factor in YMCA afterschool programs. Since there were high levels of communication and

trust present in the programs, this suggests that the YMCA afterschool programs studied promote communication and trust.

I then need to see if communication and trust do, in fact, correlate to relationship building. If I look at quantitative measures that discuss trust, having a high level of trust with students is statistically correlated with staff believing that relationships with their students are important at the  $p < 0.001$  level. Additionally, communicating with coworkers led to a greater enjoyment of working ( $p < 0.001$  level), and communicating with students' families led to a higher connection with students ( $p < 0.001$  level). Also, communicating with coworkers led to a greater connection with students at the  $p < 0.05$  level. This further suggests that the structure of afterschool programs promotes the development of relationships not only between students and staff, but between staff with each other and staff with students' families.

An important note though was that trust with students did not lead to staff having a higher connection with students. This suggests that there are other factors beyond just trust and communication that promote relationship building with students, which we will explore through the next couple of research questions.

My hypothesis for this research question was that afterschool program structure matters for the development of relationships between students and staff, and quality structures that improve communication and trust will promote positive relationship development between students and staff. My hypothesis was somewhat supported by this study. Communication with some parties, such as staff with their coworkers and families, was an important factor that led to staff having a greater connection with students. However, while staff having a high level of trust with students was correlated with staff believing that relationships with students was important,

trust was not correlated with staff developing deeper connections with students or with others around them. This suggests that communication may be a more important program structure than trust for promoting positive relationship development between students and staff.

It is also important to note, however, that there could be reverse causality here, where instead of trust and communication shaping connection in afterschool programs, it could be that connection facilitates communication and trust. Further research would be needed to examine if there is a relationship between connection leading to communication and trust and to see if this is a stronger relationship than communication and trust leading to connection.

*Research Question 2: What aspects of the structure of afterschool programs are the most influential, especially for relationship building?*

A study by Jordan (2014) suggested that five key factors for afterschool programs to promote positive relationships were 1. Encouraging positive relationships between staff and students, 2. Linking to the school-day staff, 3. Supporting and training program staff, 4. Engaging families, and 5. Collaborating with community organizations. Let's discuss what the most influential factors for relationship building were in my study and if they line up with those in the Jordan (2014) study.

Looking at the main factors that influenced relationship building on the quantitative side, there were two main factors that influenced relationship building:

1. Staff feeling a connection with those around them at the afterschool program
2. Staff believing the relationships with those around them are important

Looking at the main factors that influenced relationship building on the qualitative side, using the first two questions about communication and trust, the following factors were cited the most as promoting relationships between staff and those around them:

1. Building relationships with people using techniques other than verbal communication (such as listening to the stories of others)
2. Informal conversations both with students and other staff members
3. Having a common goal
4. Experience/time working at a location

These factors are similar to the number one factor Jordan (2014) found in their study, “encourag[ing] positive relationships between students and staff” (p.2). However, the other factors found through this study do not align with the factors that Jordan (2014) found. It is also important to note that I did not explicitly ask about the specific key factors found in Jordan’s (2014) study. More research is needed to see if there is a correlation between the important factors for relationship building found in my study and those found in Jordan’s (2014) study.

Additionally, the LA’s BEST study (Huang et al. 2007) found that staff-student relationships were crucial to student engagement, which is an important factor to program success. The study found that two of the most important aspects to these relationships were students’ perceptions that staff cared about them and staff perceptions that they were able to make a difference in students’ lives (Huang et al. 2007).

In my study, one of the most important factors towards staff citing that they had a strong connection with those around them was that they *believed* that relationship was important. For example, if staff cited having a strong relationship with a student, they were also more likely to



cite that they believed that relationship was important. Additionally, the reverse relationship was also found to be significant: if staff believed that a relationship was important, they were also more likely to cite having a strong relationship. Therefore, staff perceptions regarding relationships influenced the strength of that relationship, which is a similar finding to the LA's BEST study that found that staff perceptions that they could influence their students' positively influenced the strength of their relationships with those students (Huang et al. 2007).

My hypothesis for this research question was that a climate where bonding is encouraged between not only students and staff, but between the staff, the staff and administrators, and the staff and parents is the most influential structural component of afterschool programs for relationship building. My hypothesis was supported by this research, as staff connection with the people around them correlated very highly to staff believing that relationships with the people around them are important, and staff believing that relationships with the people around them are important also correlated very highly with staff connections with the people around them.

*Research Question 3: Is relationship building in afterschool programs important to their success, measured by staff engagement and enjoyment of working at the program?*

When looking at engagement factors that promoted relationship building success in afterschool programs across the country, a study conducted with Boys and Girls Clubs (Rhodes 2004) found that Club staff members offered support to students by mentoring students about skills and life lessons ranging from academics to sports to conflict resolution skills. This suggests that staff assisting students with problems that don't relate to academics help them form relationships with students and in turn help the program to be more successful. Most staff in my study reported that on average they "encourage students to work hard", "make students feel important", and "tell students they can accomplish anything", and they do so more often than

they “help with in or out of school problems” and “discuss the value of education”. This suggests that staff are engaging with students on topics that involve helping students to learn new skills and learn life lessons, but the fact that less staff on a daily basis “help with in or out of school problems” and “discuss the value of education” suggests that teaching these lessons to students may not be seen as the main focus of staff’s jobs at the afterschool program.

Additionally, as shown through the results of the ANOVA, staff discussing the importance of education with students and staff saying things to make students feel important led to staff citing a greater enjoyment of working at the program ( $p < 0.01$  level), and staff encouraging students to work hard also led to staff citing a greater enjoyment of working at the program ( $p < 0.05$  level). Another factor that was shown to be influential was that staff who cited that they enjoy working at the program also cited a greater connection with students ( $p < 0.001$  level). Since enjoyment can impact the connections staff members have, and staff discussing the importance of education, staff saying things to make students feel important, and staff encouraging students to work hard can influence the amount of enjoyment staff have, likely staff working with students on life skills can have some impact on connections with students. However, no engagement variables such as “helping students with in or out of school problems” led to a greater connection with students. This suggests that while indirectly, these variables may influence staff connections with students, there are likely greater factors at play, such as many of the factors discussed in research questions 1 or 2.

To fully answer this question though, we need to look at other ways that staff engaged with students that weren’t just measured on quantitative Likert scales. Looking at qualitative question 3, which asks about how staff support students in their learning, most staff responded in a way that suggested they value having a relationship with students, such as by working to

support students in their learning by helping them with homework or by providing students additional learning opportunities. By being able to develop relationships with students, staff were better able to help students academically both by providing help on their school work and by providing additional learning opportunities, such as by showing students drawing techniques after they expressed an interest in drawing.

My hypothesis for this research question was that relationship building is crucial to the success of afterschool programs. My hypothesis was supported by this study because, especially shown through qualitative measures, staff valued having a relationship with students and cited ways in which they felt connected with students.

#### *Limitations*

There were several limitations to this study. To start, the study cannot be used as a representative sample of YMCA afterschool programs in the United States, as participants did not come from all 50 states. For example, most respondents came from states either on the West or East Coast, there were few responses from Midwest states and no responses from Alaska and Hawaii. Furthermore, many of the responses likely came from the same few programs, so the data is skewed towards experiences at specific YMCA afterschool locations and is not necessarily representative of the average experience of the average employee. There is also potential bias through self-selection since employees that already feel a stronger sense of connection with those at their site were likely more inclined to fill out a survey asking about relationship building experiences.

Another major limitation is that many of the responses were from supervisors of YMCA afterschool programs and not the staff themselves, despite the fact that there were many

responses from YMCA staff who were not supervisors as well. It is unclear the exact number of responses that were from supervisors as opposed to staff, as I did not explicitly ask for this information, although there were some participants who self-reported it. Many responses being from supervisors is due to the fact that the only contact information I was able to find and receive was for supervisors, and while supervisors were asked to pass the survey along to their employees, many supervisors also saw themselves as afterschool employees and filled out the survey as well. Supervisors likely have a different experience surrounding relationship building due to the unique position. Also, many responses were very favorable towards relationship building with supervisors, which could in part be due to many supervisors filling out the survey and citing that many of their staff have positive relationships with them because that's how they feel, which may or may not be representative of how staff themselves feel. To get a more accurate sense of how YMCA staff feel towards relationship building, it would be helpful to conduct this same study but only with YMCA staff who are not supervisors.

#### *Future Research*

Prior research has found that staff connections with students, and staff believing in the importance of those relationships, positively influences student outcomes at afterschool programs (Huang et al. 2007; Jordan 2014). My research did confirm that connection is a crucial part of afterschool program structure. However, what remains underexplored is why connection has so much more of an influence on afterschool program structure than other measures such as trust and staff helping students with problems unrelated to school. Because of this, some suggestions for future research are as follows.

First, it would be interesting to do the study with a representative sample of YMCAs from all fifty U.S. states, as this was not a representative sample. Having a representative sample

would help these results be generalizable to the United States as a whole, as these results are not generalizable currently since I did not have a representative sample. Another direction for future research would be to explore why there was such a strong relationship between having a strong connection with people and believing in the importance of relationship building, and vice versa. It would also be interesting to explore why this relation was so much more potent than variable relations regarding other relationship building techniques such as trust and reliability. More information is therefore needed on how beliefs about the importance of relationship building and connections with those in afterschool programs could be used to strengthen afterschool programs, which could be another direction for future research.

## CONCLUSION

This study has resulted in three main takeaways. The first takeaway is that at YMCA afterschool programs, staff tend to experience trust and communication with the others at the program. Trust is important because staff having a high level of trust with students was statistically correlated with staff believing that relationships with their students are important. Communication is important because staff communicating with their coworkers led them to have a greater enjoyment of working, and staff communicating with students' families led to a higher connection with students. This all suggests that the structure of afterschool programs promotes the development of relationships both between students and staff and between staff with each other and staff with students' families, which is in alignment with prior work on this topic (Sinclair, Christensen, Lehr, and Andersen 2003:5; Burns 2000).

The next important finding is identification of the factors most influential for relationship building in afterschool programs. The following factors were found to be the most important: 1. Staff were able to feel a connection with those around them at the afterschool program; 2. Staff believed that the relationships with those around them are important; 3. Staff were able to build relationships with people using techniques other than verbal communication (such as listening to the stories of others); Staff were able to have informal conversations both with students and other staff members; Staff had a common goal; and 6. Staff felt that they had had a large amount of experience/time working at that location before the study.

The last important finding revolves around staff engagement and enjoyment at afterschool programs. Most staff in my study reported that on average they “encourage students to work hard”, “make students feel important”, and “tell students they can accomplish anything”, and they do so more often than they “help with in or out of school problems” and “discuss the

value of education”. The amount of enjoyment staff have while working can also influence the connection that staff have with students. However, staff “helping with in or out of school problems” and “discussing the value of education with students” did not impact relationships that staff had with students when measured through an ANOVA. As seen through qualitative measures, most staff did, however, report that they value having a relationship with students and value supporting them in their learning.

In all, this study sheds important light on the implications of structure and connection in afterschool programs. Given that roughly 10.2 million children participate in such programs annually (Youth.Gov n.d.), insight into the factors attributing to the program success is essential for the well-being of children across the US.

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## APPENDIX A

## Survey Questions:

1. “How comfortable do you feel communicating with other site staff at your site?”
2. “How comfortable do you feel communicating with day school staff?”
3. “How much do you think students trust you?”
4. “How much do you think that the students respect you?”
5. “How reliable are the students?”
6. “How much do you trust the students?”
7. “How much do you respect the students?”
8. “How often do you help students with problems they may be having in school?”
9. “How often do you help students with problems they may be having outside of school?”
10. “How often do you discuss the importance of education with students?”
11. “How often do you encourage students to try hard in school?”
12. “Site staff say things that make students feel important”
13. “Site staff tell students they can accomplish anything if they work hard towards it”

Table 1 Corresponding to Questions 1-2

| <b>Response</b> | <b>Corresponding Numerical Value</b> |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
| Not at all      | 1                                    |
|                 | 2                                    |
| Somewhat        | 3                                    |

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
|                  | 4 |
| Very comfortable | 5 |

Table 2 Corresponding to Questions 3-7

| <b>Response</b> | <b>Corresponding Numerical Value</b> |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
| Not at all      | 1                                    |
|                 | 2                                    |
| Somewhat        | 3                                    |
|                 | 4                                    |
| A lot           | 5                                    |

Table 3 Corresponding to Questions 8-13

| <b>Response</b>      | <b>Corresponding Numerical Value</b> |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Never                | 1                                    |
|                      | 2                                    |
| Several times a week | 3                                    |
|                      | 4                                    |

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| Daily | 5 |
|-------|---|

## APPENDIX B

1. How comfortable do you feel communicating with your students' families or guardians?
2. I enjoy working at this afterschool location
3. I feel connected with the students who I work with
4. I feel connected with my coworkers
5. I feel connected with school day staff (i.e. teachers that my students have at school)
6. I feel connected with my supervisor at this afterschool location
7. I feel connected with students' families/guardians
8. Building relationships with the students around me is important
9. Building relationships with my coworkers is important
10. Building relationships with school day staff (i.e teachers that my students have at school) is important
11. Building relationships with my supervisor at this afterschool location is important
12. Building relationships with students' families/guardians is important

Table 4 Corresponding to Question 1

| <b>Response</b>  | <b>Corresponding Numerical Value</b> |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Not at all       | 1                                    |
|                  | 2                                    |
| Somewhat         | 3                                    |
|                  | 4                                    |
| Very comfortable | 5                                    |

Table 5 Corresponding to Questions 2-12

| <b>Response</b>     | <b>Corresponding Numerical Value</b> |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Never               | 1                                    |
| Sometimes           | 2                                    |
| About half the time | 3                                    |
| Most of the time    | 4                                    |
| Always              | 5                                    |



## APPENDIX C

1. If you feel comfortable communicating with other staff in your afterschool program, what is something that allows you to feel comfortable doing this? If not, why not?
2. If you feel you and the students you work with have a high level of trust, what is something that your afterschool program does well to help you develop that trust? If not, why not?
3. What is something that you like to do in your afterschool program to support students in their learning (if anything)?

## APPENDIX D

1. Do you work with YMCA afterschool programs? Answer choices were “yes” and “no”.
2. Which state? Answers were provided as open responses.
3. How long have you been working in your current afterschool program? Answers were provided as open responses.
4. What is your gender identity? Answer choices were “male”, “female”, “non-binary/third gender”, and “prefer not to say”.
5. What is your race/ethnicity? Answer choices were “White”, “Black or African American”, “American Indian or Alaska Native”, “Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander”, and “Other”.
6. What is your age? Answer choices were “under 20”, “20-25”, “26-30”, “31-35”, “36-40”, and “over 40”.

## APPENDIX E

Table 6 With Variable Code Names

| Question   | Variable Name              |
|--|----------------------------|
| How comfortable do you feel communicating with other afterschool staff at your site? | communication_coworkers    |
| How comfortable do you feel communicating with day school staff?                     | communication_school_staff |
| How comfortable do you feel communicating with your students' families or guardians? | communication_families     |
| How much do you think the students trust you?  | trust_students             |
| How much do you think that the students respect you?                                 | respect_students           |
| How reliable are the students?   | reliable_students          |
| How much do you trust the students?  | trust_staff                |
| How much do you respect the students?  | respect_staff              |
| How often do you help students with problems they may be having in school?           | in_school_problems         |
| How often do you help students with problems they may be having outside of school?   | out_school_problems        |

|  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| How often do you discuss the importance of education with students?                    | education_importance              |
| How often do you encourage students to try hard in school?                             | students_work_hard                |
| Site staff say things that make students feel important                                | staff_important                   |
| Site staff tell students they can accomplish anything if they work hard towards it     | staff_accomplish                  |
| I enjoy working at this afterschool location   | enjoyment                         |
| I feel connected with the students who I work with                                     | connection_students               |
| I feel connected with my coworkers   | connection_coworkers              |
| I feel connected with school day staff (i.e. teachers that my students have at school) | connection_school_staff           |
| I feel connected with my supervisor at this afterschool location                       | connection_supervisor             |
| I feel connected with students' families/guardians                                     | connection_families               |
| Building relationships with the students around me is important                        | relationships_students_important  |
| Building relationships with my coworkers is important                                  | relationships_coworkers_important |

|  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Building relationships with school day staff (i.e teachers that my students have at school) is important | relationships_school_staff_important |
| Building relationships with my supervisor at this afterschool location is important                      | relationships_supervisor_important   |
| Building relationships with students' families/guardians is important                                    | relationships_families_important     |
| Do you work with YMCA afterschool programs?  | YMCA_program                         |
| Which state?   | State                                |
| How long have you been working in your current afterschool program?                                      | Length_in_program                    |
| What is your gender identity?  | Gender                               |
| What is your race/ethnicity?   | Race                                 |
| What is your age?  | Age                                  |