
Editor-in-Chief's Notes

The Significance of Enrollment, Attendance, and Engagement

ONE OF THE GREATEST challenges in youth programming is that hopes and expectations are typically not aligned with facts and reality. We want young people to join out-of-school-time activities to decrease their social isolation and risky behavior and to increase their passion in learning and school achievement. But youth often do not want to come daily or even regularly, and thus it becomes impossible to have sufficient “dosage” to accomplish these ambitious effects. Even if youth love the program sufficiently and make a strong commitment, it is not clear that the high expectation placed on programs can be met. Consider how many hours youth spend in schools, yet the results are so often mixed. A prerequisite to reaching any goal a program aspires to is that young people, especially those at an age where they can decide for themselves how to spend time after school, will attend.

Moreover, the fact that young people can choose to join or to stay home forces youth workers to deal with their consumers the way schools never have to. It leads to a view of young people as partners in the educational process, providing choices that build on their talents. We can study the process of learning and engagement far better under conditions of choice than in situations of mandatory presence, as in schools, where most of the learning research takes place. When and why do young people show up at programs, and when do they stay away? It is very important for our field to shed light on this “showing-up phenomenon.” It is the foundation

for any outcome and an indicator (though not a proof) that something is happening.

I wanted this often-overlooked area of program development and evidence-based youth work to be addressed in *New Directions in Youth Development*. For that reason, I solicited an issue from Stanford University researchers Ben Kirshner, Jennifer O'Donoghue, and Milbrey McLaughlin on the topic of youth participation (issue 96). It was primarily focused on activities and programs that empower adolescents to participate and engage. I was lucky to have a great team of colleagues at Harvard to whom I could turn to address research and practice on participation in a new way. Heather Weiss, Priscilla Little, and Suzanne Bouffard were interested in focusing on this topic based on their research on enrollment, attendance, and engagement in out-of-school time. It makes a great deal of sense to focus on these three elements that organize the everyday language of programs: How do programs get youth to show up? What can they do to retain participants and join in regularly? And once they are there, how can they ensure they will be engaged by participating in meaningful activities?

Although it is important from a research point of view to separate the constructs into independent variables, they are not separate at all. If activities and relationships are meaningful, youth tend to come and become attached to programs and people. If youth can get engaged with friends, they want to attend. And conversely, it is impossible for them to be engaged if they do not attend with some regularity. Despite this interconnection, it is essential to study what the connections really are, how strong they are, what young people define as engaging, and what level of regularity different subgroups strive for. The issue editors have assembled an excellent group of researchers to make productive contributions to the interplay of these elements and have extended the question to include information about gender, culture, and race. We still know far too little about the significant issues that face every program that works with youth.

What is important to recognize when dealing with the questions posed in this issue is that after-school youth settings are different

from most other social institutions, like the schools, family, or peer group. I have introduced the concept of intermediary space in previous issues of this journal to depict the nature of this particular social space: it belongs to no one, it needs to be managed collaboratively, and it is based more on participatory planning and service delivery than on bureaucratically handed-down directives. That might change over time, as one or another force might gain some hegemony. But funding patterns and coordination needs make it more likely that different players with different constituencies and goals will jointly shape the field of time after school.

The field has moved into prominence by at least three movements that have begun to move closer: prevention, youth development, and school reform. Each of these is making a special contribution to the intermediary space of good after-school programming. I believe that understanding how to engage youth so they come to programs regularly is tied to how to achieve the goals of these three movements. For example, prevention and public safety advocates want young people to attend regularly to protect youth and to protect society. Programs that cannot retain youngsters are deemed as not performing their duty. Those interested in school reform want students to be in programs regularly to gain additional time on task through homework and an academic focus. However, they tend to weigh the regularity in after-school programs against the need of students to be active in the school when school is out: around sports activities, theater productions, and clubs. Youth development staff tend to have yet another set of priorities. Although they want young people to come to their programs regularly, they typically believe that programming has to be based on what youth want and that this ability to choose also has to include the choice of joining. Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCA, for example, have been careful not to force young people to come against their will or for amounts of time where they have to choose to be “in or out.” Thus, the expectations for attendance and engagement are quite different. It also makes for problems when these movements collaborate to create policies, expectations, and practices for this intermediary space yet are not truly aligned. As

always, it is the youth who will point out these contradictions or act on them in their choices. This *New Directions* issue takes us to the next step in this important exploration and discussion and will not be the last one dedicated to this topic.

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