Closing the Achievement Gap: Assessing Best Practices in Rhode Island After-School Programs

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Joseph Korzeb

Dr. Dean Libutti, Honors Project Advisor

HPR 401 & 402: Honors Project
Introduction

Elementary through secondary education in the United States witnesses a persistent, statistically significant gap in academic achievement between students in need and students of privilege. In recent decades there has been an increased effort to recognize and understand the dynamics of this achievement gap. “Achievement gaps occur when one group of students (such as, students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The national debate surrounding the severity of this issue has nearly concluded, as the achievement gap is widely accepted as an issue that must be addressed. In fact, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), last conducted in 2011, found an educational achievement gap between white and black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). This study found that white students in grades 4-8 performed better than black students on math and reading assessments in a statistically significant manner (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Now, the debate is just beginning regarding the implementation of effective intervention strategies to close the achievement gap. This study will focus on investigating the impact of after-school programs as an intervention strategy. There is noteworthy evidence supporting the success of after-school programs in closing the achievement gap. One example of this notion being supported by literature is the fact that after-school programs witness a higher rate of participation by communities of color than white communities (measured by race density) and demonstrate influence in closing the achievement gap (Hynes and Sanders, 2011). More narrowly, this study will seek to answer the question: Do select after-school programs in Rhode Island provide sufficient best practice components in their after-school programs for students in
need? In examining this question, Rhode Island is chosen as a local case study in hopes of identifying commonalities among the program make-up of various after-school programs. The hope is that these findings will provide context for existing literature that derives necessary best practices for after-school programs. It is important to note that this study recognizes “students in need” as students who identify with one or more of the following groups: students who are racial minorities, students who grow up in a family of low socio-economic status, and students who suffer from mental health or developmental challenges. This study will rely on existing literature to determine the threshold by which one is identified within any of the aforementioned groups and recognizes that students may belong to multiple groups.

**Literature Review**

An examination of existing literature studying after-school programs further supports the initial speculation that after-school programs enhance student academic achievement. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that after-school programs do indeed help to close the gap in academic achievement between racial minorities and white students (Hynes and Sanders, 2011). This evidence is only one assertion to begin the inquiry into the benefits of after-school programs for in-need populations.

Research shows that when after-school programs help to remedy socio-economic challenges, student achievement and general well-being are both elevated (Howes, Olenick & Der-Kiureghian, 1987). In fact, there is an emotional benefit for students participating in after-school programs with peers that is more prominent for low income students than it is for middle income students (Marshall, Coll, Marx, McCartney, Keefe & Ruh, 1997). In regards to developmental and mental health challenges, research of after-school programs to address these
needs is saturated in studies of middle school students. This is due to the unique developmental and identity challenges that are faced by this age group and student population. It was found that when dedicating after-school programs and resources to “foster intrinsic motivation, healthy identity, positive self-esteem, adaptive peer relationships, and positive conflict resolution, these skills and qualities reduce the likelihood of future high risk behaviors” (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). As a result, with high risk behavior being reduced, student achievement in the classroom is then enhanced (Kruczek, Alexander & Harris, 2005). Although this evidence demonstrates that after-school programs do indeed help to increase student achievement for students in need, it is important to summarize specific components of after-school programs that are universally important to closing the achievement gap. A study of after-school programs in Boston, Chicago and Seattle which target low-income students emphasizes that “important structural features [of an after-school program] include an adequate number of staff to assure individualized attention to children; an adequate level of staff literacy to help children with learning support needs; adequate facilities and equipment, and nutritious snacks for children” (Halpern, 1999). A study of nine after-school programs by Mahoney, Parente, and Lord (2007) affirms that student engagement and adequately trained staff are vital for the success of students participating in after-school programs. In reference to the importance of social development, O’Hare, Biggart, Kerr, and Connolly (2011) found in a mixed-method study that the coaching of students by an adult mentor helped to increase “prosocial behavior” and was partially responsible for student outcomes.

There are patterns of repeated, beneficial components of after-school programs and highlighted emphasis of particular components that are impactful. These observations have helped to extrapolate a synthesized list of best practices recommended for after-school programs.
In summary, those best practices are structure (defined as having a specific mission for the program), nutrition, peer to peer contact, physical exercise, trained and qualified staff, adequate staffing, a feeling of engagement by students, developmental and mental health counseling, the availability of physical space, and adequate funding for the program. These factors were repeated to be beneficial throughout the literature and were gathered from both comprehensive and isolated studies.

After gathering this information, it must be determined if there is an answer to the research question: Do select after-school programs in Rhode Island provide sufficient best practice components in their after-school programs for students in need? This study attempts to contribute to the field of educational research by synthesizing all of the components of an after-school program that are identified as beneficial and then testing to see if in practice, these components exist within after-school programs in Rhode Island.

**Research Design and Methodology**

To design the research, first, the literature review is used to determine the most prominent components required to run an after-school program dedicated to serving students in need. These components are defined as “best practices.” After determining the best practices, it was decided to administer a qualitative interview to five different after-school program coordinators to determine which best practices existed in these programs. A qualitative survey was chosen to allow for flexibility in the responses given by the respondents. This flexibility will benefit the study by allowing the program coordinators to exercise their expertise of their respective programs and dialogically deliver that content, rather than being constrained to finite choices. Both an after-school program content expert and an expert in research methodology were
consulted to determine the wording of 13 questions that would be asked in the qualitative survey. These questions include both open-ended and close-ended prompts. The open-ended questions are asked to allow the coordinators of each program to self-assess the extent by which the program fulfills the best practice. Therefore, each of the nine, open-ended questions contain one best practice component. The question wording is of each question is intentionally chosen to illicit an answer in response to the level of fulfillment of the best practice. The four, close-ended questions are asked to provide objective and demographic results of each program which are meant to yield results concomitant to the open-ended responses. The answers to both the open-ended and close-ended questions are necessary to examine the entire make-up of each program.

Due to time constraints and the fact that the researcher is an undergraduate student, a sample of convenience was used to determine the five programs that would be investigated as part of this study. Two different content experts at University of Rhode Island recommended the five programs in accordance with the research question that is asked. The programs all serve in-need student populations and are all located in Rhode Island. The programs are diverse in geography, mission, and the age of the students they serve. One program serves high school students, two programs serve elementary school students, and two programs serve middle school students. The respective programs take place within one or many of the following cites: Providence, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, Cranston, North Kingstown, Central Falls, and East Providence.

After determining questions that would be asked and the programs that would be examined, a pilot interview was conducted with a professional in higher education whom had participated in an after-school program as a high school student. This pilot interview allowed for the reworking of the questions, and wording, in order to illicit more focused responses from the
interviewees. In addition, the researcher was able to determine the approximate amount of time each interview would last. The pilot interview also provides for a check in validity and reliability for the questions being asked. After the pilot interview was conducted, it was determined that question 3 must be added which asks “What are the outcomes or expectations you hope your students to achieve by the end of the program?” It was determined that this question demonstrates the guidelines the programs self-impose which will help the researcher to witness the data from responses of this question in relationship to the best practices within each program. The pilot study determined that this question was a necessary addition to the survey for the purpose of providing sufficient data to answer the research question. After the pilot study, the other questions were all determined to be valid and contributory in yielding data that could be used to answer the research question.

The researcher recorded each interview to ensure an accurate collection of data when conducting the actual interviews with the coordinators of the programs. Permission was explicitly asked for and granted by each program coordinator. This methodology allowed the interviewer to be engaged with the respondents, ask follow-up questions for clarification, and be receptive of the answers given. After conducting every interview, each of the recordings was listened to question by question and the answers from the respondents were transcribed in preparation for data analysis. Transcribing the responses question by question allows for an unbiased and accurate collection of data.

Results

The answers given to each qualitative interview yield both objective and coded results regarding the demographics and best practices of each program. The program key explains the
location of the respective programs and the grade levels of the students enrolled in the program. Appendix 1 helps to organize information regarding the mission of each program, the age range of the student participating in it, the outcomes and expectations each program has for its students, and the funding source(s) for each program.

Program one is unique in regards to location. This program exists in five different urban cities throughout Rhode Island and emphasizes the importance of having its students establish a common program identity that is embraced by students across all locations. This identity is encouraged to develop a support system among peers that transcends students’ city of origin. In addition to building this identity, program one’s mission is to “reduce high school dropout rates and increase educational and career success for low-income urban youth” (thecollegecrusade.org). This program serves students ranging from elementary school to high school, but this study only surveyed the director of programs offered to middle school students, ages 12-14. It is a privately run, nonprofit program that works directly in public schools. The main outcome the program hopes its students achieve by the end of the program are an increase in academic achievement, which they measure quantitatively, but do not make publicly available. The main sources of funding for program one are a 7 year Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant, state funding, and private funding from individuals and businesses. The GEAR UP grant is dedicated specifically to middle and high schools in areas with high poverty rates and “is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education” (US Department of Education, 2015).

Program two is the only program surveyed that is located in a suburban location. It is a publicly run program that has the mission “to help ensure that children come to school ready to
learn, that families have the tools and support necessary to raise happy, healthy children, and that the community is invested in sustaining strong families through education and involvement” (nksd.net). The program serves elementary students, 5-11 years old, and is located across the street from the public school it serves. As a Title I school, this program hopes to achieve the outcomes associated with the language of this funding grant. It also seeks to increase the attendance rate at school and to help serve the respective social and academic needs of each individual student. Title I funding aims to “provide financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards” (US Department of Education, 2015). In addition to Title I funding, program two also receives funding from the 21st Century Learning Grant. This grant is designed for high poverty, low income schools and “helps students meet state and local student standards in core academic subjects, such as reading and math; offers students a broad array of enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic programs; and offers literacy and other educational services to the families of participating children” (US Department of Education, 2015).

Program three is located in an urban setting and is publicly run directly by the public school. The mission of the program is to have “students spend time after school beginning their homework, followed by their selected activity, and then all programs culminate their evening with a community dinner.” “We hope our students achieve social and academic growth” (calcutt.cfschools.net). This program serves middle school students, ages 10-14 years old. Program three has the expectation that there will be a growth in literacy and math from the beginning of the year until the end of the year which they measure quantitatively, but do not make public. They also have the expectation that students will grow socially and emotionally
which they measure through a self-evaluation administered to students. The program director states that internal evidence supports that students are achieving both of these outcomes. The program is funded by the 21st Century Learning Grant.

Program four is located in an urban location and is privately run. The program works in both private spaces and in the public schools existing in the city. The mission of the program is “to inspire, enable, educate, and reach out to all young people in East Providence, especially those who need us the most, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible, and caring citizens” (epbcg.org). The program serves elementary school students, ages 5-11. Outcomes that the program hopes for its students to achieve by the end of the program include an increase in test scores and general, personal development. The program is funded by the 21st Century Learning Grant.

Program five is located in an urban setting and is privately run while working directly in public schools. The mission of this program is to “empower the students to create their own projects with a focus on scientific programming. We also hope that our alumni return to their community” (Program 5 coordinator, Roberto Gonzalez). The program works with students ages 10-23, but primarily focuses on working with high school students, ages 14-18. The expectations the program hopes its students will achieve are 1) To provide access and incentivize attendance, rather than demanding it and 2) To introduce skills and have students master the concepts. Both of these expectations are measured qualitatively and the program director cites that there are many individual anecdotes to support the success of these students in achieving the outcomes established. This program is entirely funded by individual contracts with schools and businesses, community partnerships, and some small grants.
Program Key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program 1</th>
<th>A privately-run program working with middle school students in five different urban locations. The program emphasizes homework help and increasing math and reading achievement.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program 2</td>
<td>A publicly-run program working with elementary school students in a suburban location. The school is a Title I school, meaning that there is a high percentage of low-income students who qualify for free or reduced lunch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program 3</td>
<td>A program run directly by the school district working with middle school students in an urban location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program 4</td>
<td>A privately-run program working with elementary school students in an urban location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program 5</td>
<td>A privately-run program working with high school students in an urban location. The program emphasizes science, technology, engineering, art, and math education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographic/Objective Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program 1</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. What is the mission of your after-school program?</td>
<td>“Reduce high school dropout rates and increase educational and career success for low-income urban youth” (thecollegecrusade.org)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. What is the age range of the students participating in your program?</td>
<td>12-14 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. What are the outcomes or expectations you hope your students to achieve by the end of the program?</td>
<td>Ensure that academic achievement increases from the time of arrival until the time of departure (measured qualitatively)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. What is/are your funding source/sources?</td>
<td>Federal GERAP grant (7 years), state funding, private funding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program 2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. What is the mission of your after-school program?</td>
<td>“To help ensure that children come to school ready to learn, that families have the tools and support necessary to raise happy, healthy children, and that the community is invested in sustaining strong families through education and involvement” (nksd.net)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. What is the age range of the students participating in your program?</td>
<td>5-11 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. What are the outcomes or expectation you hope your students to achieve by the end of the program?</td>
<td>This is dependent on students’ respective needs, but includes social and academic enhancement and the district goal of increasing school attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q1. What is the mission of your after-school program?</td>
<td>“Students spend time after school beginning their homework, followed by their selected activity, and then all programs culminate their evening with a community dinner. We hope our students achieve social and academic growth” (calcutt.cfschools.net)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. What is the age range of the students participating in your program?</td>
<td>10-14 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. What are the outcomes or expectations you hope your students to achieve by the end of the program?</td>
<td>1. Growth in literacy and math from the beginning of the year until the end of the year (measured quantitatively) 2. Social and emotional growth (measured by a self-evaluation administered to students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. What is/are your funding source/sources?</td>
<td>21st Century Learning Grant and Title I funding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program 4</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. What is the mission of your after-school program?</td>
<td>“To inspire, enable, educate, and reach out to all young people in East Providence, especially those who need us the most, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible, and caring citizens” (epbcg.org)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. What is the age range of the students participating in your program?</td>
<td>5-11 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. What are the outcomes or expectations you hope your students to achieve by the end of the program?</td>
<td>1. Increase in test scores (measured quantitatively) 2. Personal development (measured qualitatively)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. What is/are your funding source/sources?</td>
<td>21st Century Learning Grant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program 5</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. What is the mission of your after-school program?</td>
<td>“To empower the students to create their own projects with a focus on scientific programming. We also hope that our alumni return to their community” (STEAM Box coordinator, Roberto Gonzalez)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. What is the age range of the students participating in your program?</td>
<td>10-23 years old, but primarily high school students (14-18 years old)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. What are the outcomes or expectations you hope your students to achieve by the end of the program?</td>
<td>1. To provide access and incentivize attendance, rather than demand it (measured quantitatively) 2. To introduce skills and have our students master the concepts (measured qualitatively)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. What is/are your funding source/sources?</td>
<td>Individual contracts with schools and businesses, community partnerships, and some small grants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coded Results

The coded results shown in Table 2 demonstrate the answers given to 9 questions that are asked to determine the best practices provided by each after-school program surveyed. Therefore, each response gives insight into the extent by which each best practice is fulfilled by each of the five programs. The coded results show evidence as to which best practices demonstrate a greater level of fulfillment by select after-school programs in Rhode Island and which show a lower level of fulfillment. The coded results are organized by best practice fulfillment of all the programs, whereas, the demographic and objective results are organized by the design information for each individual program.

The first question asked (question 5 of the survey) is: Do you feel that there is adequate staffing to carry out the mission of your program? This question is asked to determine if programs sufficiently provide the identified best practice of adequate staffing. Programs 1, 4, and 5 give answers indicating a moderate/partial fulfillment of this best practice and programs 2 and 3 indicate a low level of fulfillment. Each program self-evaluated the amount of staff working for their respective programs and then responded if the staffing level was adequate in carrying out the mission of the program. Programs 1, 4, and 5 all mention that their staff can perform all tasks required of them, but more staff would help with tutoring (mentioned only by program 1) and the ability to dedicate more time to each individual student. Program 2 mentioned that there is a high turnover of staff which leaves them consistently understaffed and program 4 stated that their student to staff ratio is 13:1 and an ideal ration would be about 5:1. These responses determined that programs 2 and 3 would be coded in the low fulfillment category.
Question 6 asks: What are the credentials you require for your professional staff whom work with students? This question is asked to determine the extent by which each program fulfills the best practice of trained and qualified staff. Existing literature mentions various criterion that dictate qualified staff, and these responses are coded by the self-evaluation of the program coordinators in collaboration with the fulfillment of the criteria outlined by the literature. Programs 1 and 3 are coded as having highly qualified staff, program 5 is coded as having moderately qualified staff and programs 2 and 4 are coded as having low qualified staff. Program 1 states that all of its staff have bachelor’s degrees, work fulltime specifically as a program advisor for the program, and many of the advisors are former participants of the program themselves. Program 3 responded that all employees working with students go through a federal background check and have both professional experience and education related to the particular activity that employee is facilitating. Program 5 is coded as moderate because according to the program coordinator, the staff it has working with students “ranges from experts in the field to a volunteer who is available to help out, to the students facilitating activities themselves.” Programs 2 and 4 both mention that the level of professional experience varies among employees, but most employees are fairly inexperienced in the field of education. Program 2 runs its program with mostly volunteers and does not require any specific level of educational attainment for the volunteers. Program 4 has about 1-3 highly trained teachers and the rest of the staff are volunteers. Among all staff, program 4 cites that there is a high turnover rate which creates an overall lack of experience, therefore, lowly qualified staff.

Question 7 asks: Do you feel that your program is adequately funded? Programs 1 and 4 both responded simply with an affirmative yes, coding them in that category. Program 3 is coded as a moderate yes because the coordinator mentions being very fortunate with the funding the
program has, but stated that more funding could improve the quality of staff and the content of their programming. Programs 3 and 5 are coded as not fulfilling this best practice because both programs responded firmly that the funding they receive does not allow them to achieve the mission of their respective after-school programs.

Question 8 asks: Is there significant peer to peer contact within your program? Programs 1, 3, 4, and 5 all indicate a high level of peer to peer contact. Program 1 discusses that its students develop a “program identity” where students identify with and interact with students from students within their immediate program, in addition to students participating in programs throughout the state of Rhode Island. Programs 3 and 4 responded that students are engaged from with other students from the time they arrive until the time they leave on a daily basis. Program 5 states that students not only engage with students during activities, but also peer educate each other and facilitate extracurricular activities themselves. Program 2 is coded as moderately fulfilling the best practice because the program coordinator responded that sometimes the students work in groups and teams, but most of the time the students interact directly with professional staff.

Question 9 asks: Is there a sufficient availability of physical space for your program’s needs? Programs 1, 2, and 5 are all coded as achieving a high level of fulfillment of the best practice of sufficient physical space. These programs all cite having the support and coordination of public schools whom they work with to assure that there is space for every activity they run. Programs 3 and 4 are coded as having a low fulfillment of this best practice. Both program coordinators state that they only have one gymnasium to work in. Program 3 says that the availability of only one gymnasium does not afford enough space to run simultaneous programs.
This lack of space takes away from extracurricular benefits for students. Program 4 says that the struggle for physical space is a consistent challenge and the one gymnasium is not sufficient.

Question 10 asks: Is there a component of nutrition to your program, either educational or the providing of food? Programs 1 and 5 are coded as not fulfilling this best practice with program 1 responding that a grant existed in the past for nutritional snacks, but does not anymore and program 5 stating that food is sometimes used as an incentive for students’ participation, but the food offered is not healthy. Programs 2, 3, and 4 are all coded as achieving a high level of achievement because they all provide a healthy snack and nutritional education for their students. Program 2 also incorporates gardening education and invites representatives from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to work directly with students.

Question 11 asks: Is there a component of physical exercise to your program? Programs 3 and 4 are both coded as achieving high fulfillment of this best practice because both coordinators responded that students participate in different physical activities, multiple times per week. Program 2 is coded as partially fulfilling the best practice. The coordinator states that physical exercise is emphasized more with younger students and that there are some choices for physical activity depending on the given day. Programs 1 and 5 both simply responded that a component of physical exercise does not fit into their respective program goals. For that reason, those programs are coded as not fulfilling the best practice.

Question 12 asks: Do you feel that students are engaged during your program? Programs 1, 3, and 5 are all coded as achieving a high level of fulfillment. Program 1 states that students always expect to actively participate and advisors know and address the individual needs of the students. Program 3 responded that students do not want to leave the program and are engaged with both the staff and other students. Program 5 mentions that all students are highly engaged
with each other through peer-teaching workshops and finds that students enjoy being part of the program. Programs 2 and 4 are coded as moderately fulfilling the engagement best practice because both programs responded that engagement in the program typically depends on the individual student. Some students demonstrate high levels of engagement and other students display a disinterest in the program.

Question 13 asks: Is there a component of mental health or developmental counseling in your program? Both mental health and developmental counseling are included in the question wording because existing literature identifies that personal, nonacademic development is a best practice in delivering a successful after-school program for students in need. Program 3 is coded as highly achieving this best practice as it cites that personal development is an immediate area of emphasis in addition to academic development. The program encourages students to join groups and clubs, connects students to the girl scouts and boy scouts, conducts workshops on decision-making and has professional counseling staff available for students. Programs 4 and 5 are coded as moderately fulfilling this best practice because they both state that there are components of developmental counseling but those components are secondary to the academic goals of the program. Programs 1 and 2 are coded as not fulfilling the best practice. Both programs simply answered that there was no component of mental health or developmental counseling as part of their respective programs.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>High/Affirmative Yes</th>
<th>Moderate/Partial Yes</th>
<th>Low/No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Do you feel that there is adequate staffing to carry out the mission of your program?</td>
<td></td>
<td>1, 4, 5</td>
<td>2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What are the credentials you require for your professional staff whom work directly with students?</td>
<td>1, 3</td>
<td>4, 5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Do you feel that your program is adequately funded?</td>
<td>1, 4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Is there significant peer to peer contact within your program?</td>
<td>1, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Is there sufficient availability of physical space for your program’s needs?</td>
<td>1, 2, 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>3, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Is there a component of nutrition to your program?</td>
<td>2, 3, 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Is there a component of physical exercise in your program?</td>
<td>4, 5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Do you feel that students are engaged during your program?</td>
<td>1, 3, 5</td>
<td>2, 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13. Is there a component of mental health or developmental counseling in your program?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>4, 5</th>
<th>1, 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Table 2

**Analysis**

In organizing the data that is explicitly related to determining the best practices provided in each program, “categorizing analysis” is implemented as the data collection technique. Categorizing analysis is defined as “reading the data and developing your coding categories, based on what data (including the participants’ terms and categories) seem most important” (Maxwell 2013). The results yielded by each program survey are coded question by question to demonstrate the threshold of fulfillment achieved by each program for each best practice. These results show themes regarding the level that each program reaches in fulfilling the best practice. These themes created coding categories to assess that level of achievement. The coding categories are “high/affirmative yes,” “moderate/partial yes” and “low/no.” Each category is assigned to the answer given to 9 of the 13 questions (4 questions were demographic and objective). The three different codes organize the data to provide for differentiated analysis of each program independently in addition to a comprehensive “snapshot” of best practices provided in select, Rhode Island after-school programs.

The results show that the programs studied do not contain every best practice component that is defined by existing literature as beneficial to students in need. However, because this is a qualitative study, there is evidence to implicate explanations for the unfulfilled best practices.
The survey responses also show that certain unfulfilled best practices can have an effect on the ability to implement other best practices.

First, there is the issue of funding. Three of the five programs answered that they were not adequately funded. Adequate funding is identified as a necessary component to run an impactful after-school program, but it is also a component that affects every other aspect of each respective program. For example, when answering the question about the level of staffing (another necessary component), the coordinator of program 3 cited a lack of funding as the reason for its student to faculty ratio being 13:1 when she would like it to be 13:2. Program 1, which answered that it is adequately funded, mentioned it no longer offered a component of nutrition for its program due to the expiration of a previous grant. Therefore, a program which self-identifies as an “adequately funded program” highlights that as funding sources change, the priority of a program changes with it. In addition, program 5 mentioned that the program has turned down funding and avoids applying for certain grants if the requirements for the funding are restricting or attempt to dictate the program goals.

Another factor to consider when analyzing these results is the content focus of the after-school programs. Program 2 and program 5 have a narrow content focus whereas programs 1, 3, and 4 aim to deliver more comprehensive content. The focus on specific content with programs 2 and 5 creates a void in the ability to achieve particular best practices. For example, program 5 focuses specifically on science, technology, engineering, art, and math content. The specificity of this content was cited by program 5 for the reason that there is not a high level of physical exercise or a component of nutrition to its program (both are best practice components). In reference to program 2, a focus on increasing academic achievement is equal to the program’s focus on alleviating poverty and helping to build a strong community. As a result, the staff who
work with students are not required to have a professional background in education nor a college
degree which can hinder the ability of the program to engage students and coach them personally
(both of which are identified as best practices).

Analysis of the data demonstrates the complication in understanding the cause and effect
relationship between fulfilled best practices and best practices that are partially fulfilled or
unfulfilled. The data demonstrates that funding, content, and program mission all significantly
impact the prospect of fulfilling other best practices.

Conclusions

The results of this study do not provide a definitive answer to the research question: Do
select after-school programs in Rhode Island provide sufficient best practice components in their
after-school programs for students in need? A general conclusion that is inferred from the data is
that each after-school program is uniquely influenced in its mission and designed to carry out
that mission. Some missions defined in the results, intentionally and unintentionally ignore
certain best practices that are defined in this study. Although it is evident that there are complex
reasons for unfulfilled best practices existing in Rhode Island after-school programs, it must be
noted that these deficiencies demonstrate a need for improving the development and execution of
after-school programs.

The data demonstrates that overwhelmingly, there are deficiencies in staffing levels (zero
programs responded that they are adequately funded) and the availability of mental health and
developmental counseling for students (only one program responded as prioritizing this aspect of
their program). Many programs cited a lack of funding as the reason for low staffing levels. In
regards to mental health and developmental counseling, program 2 responded that the component
“is not a fit for this program,” program 4 responded that it is “secondary to the academic goals of
the program” and program 5 mentioned that it was not an explicit focus of the program but “intertwined with everything we do.” These responses demonstrate that low staffing levels are the result of the external pressure of funding whereas the lack of mental health and developmental counseling is the result of a more conscious choice to prioritize other aspects of the program.

Best practices that are sufficiently fulfilled across programs in Rhode Island are peer to peer contact (all programs responded as having high or moderate levels) and student engagement (all programs responded as having high or moderate levels). Program 1 cited that they attempt to develop a “crusade identity” among their students that allows the students to build a community across cities in Rhode Island where the after-school program exists. Programs 3, 4, and 5 all discussed that their programming is intentionally designed to foster peer to peer contact. The most common theme as to the reason for a high level of student engagement was “understanding the wants and needs of individual students” which was cited by programs 1, 3, and 5. Program 5 went further to say that students will also facilitate programs for their peers which allows them to engage in teaching content in addition to learning it.

After-school programs in Rhode Island demonstrate that they provide many resources to serve students in need and help to close the achievement gap. While the programs do provide many best practices identified as necessary by this study, it cannot be stated with certainty that after-school programs in Rhode Island provide sufficient best practice components for students in need.

**Recommendations**

Analysis of the data demonstrates that more research must be done to study the make-up of after-school programs in Rhode Island and throughout the United States. Shortcomings of this
study include a lack of breadth in the number of programs interviewed, a lack of geographic diversity in the location of the programs, and an insufficient amount of attention given to the difference in program needs depending on the age of the students. This study identifies recommendations to impact future research focused on the make-up of after-school programs, best practices required for successful after-school programs, and funding that influences after-school programs.

Future studies would benefit from interviewing more than five program coordinators. The increase in the quantity of programs studied will allow for more statistically significant data. It is also recommended that there is increase in the diversity of program locations. Containing this study to only programs in Rhode Island limits the intellectual diversity of the program staff, and students, with many of the program coordinators having similar origins, education, and professional experience. Many of the students will have similar childhood upbringings and experiences as one another due to proximity constraints. Future studies should examine programs from many states in an effort to diversify the types of students and staff who are participating in the program. Lastly, this study failed to treat the varying differences that exist in the bio-psychosocial development of students ranging from elementary school to high school. It is recommended that future studies isolate the different ages of student participants and categorize each age group as a separate case study. By isolating the different age groups, programs can be assessed and categorized more narrowly which will increase the accuracy of the results and make for more compelling conclusions regarding those results.

The best practices defined by this study must be refined, studied more, and supported with a greater breadth of literature in order to defend their designation as a best practice. A specific recommendation for testing the fulfillment of best practices is for researchers to visit
each program interviewed in addition to conducting a survey of the program coordinators. This study did not conduct a site visit for each program. By doing so, there would be more accuracy in the coded results. The researcher would have both observations and survey responses at her/his disposal which would help to determine the coding category associated with each best practice for each program. However, based on the results of this study, a policy recommendation is to have after-school programs conduct a best practice review in order to assess the design of their program. The review will allow programs to determine if they are implementing best practices.

In conducting this review, it is recommended that program providers increase the intentionality of each program by examining the holistic needs of the students. Many of the programs surveyed discussed a trial and error approach to determine how to best suit the needs of their students. It is recommended that each program to conduct an intake of their student population’s psychosocial and academic needs and then design their program in a way that helps to fulfill demands that are determined as necessary by the students. Carrying out this approach of intentionality will most likely require additional staffing, more highly trained staff, and a decrease in the amount of time spent on current activities in order to increase the amount of time spent on activities necessary to fulfill students’ needs. The holistic review of each program’s intentional goals will offer the opportunity to compare these intentional goals to the execution of the program and the best practices needed to execute the program effectively.

The last recommendation, which affects the review of the programs and the review of best practices, is to further examine the funding of after-school programs. This field of study would benefit from more research on the effect that the language of grants has on the design of programs. This research would also provide implications for the effect that funding has on best practices in after-school programs. This study implies that currently, the source of after-school
program funding dictates the content of the program (4 out of 5 of the programs in this study use this model). This model prevents flexibility in programing and prohibits program experts from tailoring the program content to the needs of their students. It appears that changing this model for acquiring funds will allow for more program autonomy and student autonomy over their own outcomes. Therefore, more research must be done on the scope of funding sources for after-school programs (3 of the 5 programs in this study received funding from the same grant), the effect that grant language has on program design and execution, and the effect that underfunding has on the ability to fulfill best practices. Studying the scope of funding sources will allow researchers to understand the institutions/individuals that influence after-school program funding. This study witnessed funding sources originating primarily from the federal government, but more programs must be studied to determine other sources of funding and to infer conclusions as to the origin of program funding. Studying the effect of grant language on program design and execution will allow researchers to better understand the origin of control over the content of after-school programs. This inquiry will also give insight into the influence that grants have on the ability of programs to carry out best practices. Lastly, studying the effect that underfunding has on after-school programs will allow researchers to gain understanding of the power that adequate funding has on the ability of after-school programs to fulfill all other best practices.

Implementing all of the aforementioned recommendations will enhance future studies of after-school programs and further contribute to this field of study. In addition, it can be assumed that a future study utilizing these recommendations would indicate a clearer answer to the research question proposed. A clearer answer to the research question will also provide greater
inferences as to the role that *successful* after-school programs play in closing the academic achievement gap.
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