Roles, Goals, Stressors and Supports for the Urban Afterschool Education Workforce: Qualitative Findings from an Experimental Trial

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Background / Context:
Community-based education programs have garnered great interest over the past two decades as tools to improve student outcomes and reduce existing achievement gaps. Experimental studies of such programs suggest they enhance students’ academic competence, psychological wellbeing, and social skills (Vandell et al., 2005). Recently, New York City (NYC) dedicated significant resources to community-based education to achieve those goals. This increase in attention offers a unique opportunity to study and support the educational workforce of community-based organizations (CBOs). Staffing these “non-traditional” education programs demands deeper study of their educational workforce tasked with implementing curricula and promoting youths’ academic and social-emotional development (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Lyon et al., 2011).

Extant literature indicates that after-school instructors (ASIs) contribute to the quality and sustainability of the afterschool environment (Vandell, 2005; Lyon et al., 2011). However, beyond ASIs’ background characteristics, we know little about ASIs as professionals. Given demographic and educational differences (e.g., ASIs are younger than teachers and less likely to have a college degree), and differences in afterschool versus day school positions (e.g., part-versus full-time, different levels of stability and pay), it is likely that ASIs have distinct professional trajectories, goals, and needs from day school teachers. Yet, these professionals are tasked with implementing the social and academic interventions and increasing student outcomes. It is critical to understand the professional goals, needs, and strengths of these central implementers of community-based social and academic interventions to inform workforce development, implementation science, and outcomes for youth.

Purpose / Research Question:
In low-income, high-needs, urban afterschool settings, it is important to determine the type and amount of professional support to improve ASIs’ ability to effectively implement evidence-based programming and impact youth development. Through qualitative investigation embedded within a longitudinal experimental trial, three questions are addressed:

1. What are the characteristics of the low-income, urban after-school education workforce (e.g., background, experience, skills)?
2. What are ASIs’ personal and professional goals for themselves and their students?
3. Which types of professional support (coaching, mentoring, or other assistance) are salient and valued for positive ASI experiences and practices?

Setting / Population / Participants:
Data come from a broader randomized control trial examining the effectiveness of an afterschool workforce development model – coaching in cooperative learning – implemented by a large CBO in one urban low-income area. Cooperative learning refers to teaching strategies that encourage productive and positive interactions among students with heterogeneous skills in order to create a positive learning environment and promote academic and social development (Slavin, 1990). For the broader trial, nineteen ASIs serving 3rd to 8th grade youth in five after-school programs were randomized into treatment (enhanced coaching) and comparison (coaching as
Analyses focused on whether assignment to treatment and/or implementation of cooperative learning improved the afterschool setting quality and youth academic and social outcomes.

The current study involves qualitative interviews and focus groups conducted with 17 ASIs from the larger trial. Participants come from all five sites. Approximately equal numbers of males ($n = 8$) and females ($n = 9$) participated; all ASIs identified as African-American ($n = 7$) or Latino ($n = 10$).

**Research Design:**
The current study involves single time point of qualitative data collection after the completion of the broader trial to: (a) deepen and explain quantitative findings (mixed method implementation aim) and (b) generate hypotheses for future research on the afterschool workforce and professional development models (hypothesis generation aim).

**Data Collection / Analysis:**
At the conclusion of the larger study, eight semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with afterschool program staff. Questions focused on professional and personal goals, stress and support, professional development, and cooperative learning. Each interview/group lasted 30 to 60 minutes and was audiotaped and transcribed.

Responses were content analyzed using a directed approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to ascertain professional goals and experiences, and identify multilevel barriers to and facilitators of cooperative learning implementation (see Fig. 1). To maintain rigorous standards and internal validity, we used the consensual qualitative research (CQR) approach proposed and updated by Hill et al (2005). Specifically, three researchers independently reviewed transcripts, categorized emergent themes, and co-created a preliminary coding manual. Then, each researcher independently identified discrete units of text that corresponded to categories within each theme. When coding discrepancies were identified, researchers worked together to resolve them; this led to coding manual revisions. The two researchers then recoded all text to identify the prevalence of each theme/category and normative examples. An external auditor familiar with the project was trained and independently coded a portion of the text using the revised manual (e.g., Hill et al., 2005). Coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved after reaching consensus among the research team.

**Findings / Results:** The findings are summarized by major themes aligned with existing implementation science models (Damschroder et al., 2009). We identified the following themes:

(a) **self-identified roles and goals of ASIs:** Most ASIs perceived their role to be more like mentors than like teachers. ASI goals for students primarily fell into the categories of academic learning / engagement, social-emotional learning, and personal development. For themselves, the ASIs reported career goals ranging from higher education to program director at their current workplace.

(b) **organizational stressors and supports:** ASIs reported that the relationship between day school teachers and their program, administrative support, and collaboration with other group leaders had the greatest influence on their performance.
(c) **classroom proximal processes:** ASIs reported that the classroom micro-context was influenced by class size, student personality types, and activity type.

(d) **Coaching characteristics and relationships:** ASIs suggested that the relationship with and characteristics of the educational coach were crucial to perceived coaching effectiveness.

Based on these findings, we propose a nested model to capture the ASI experience embedded in the multiple afterschool structural and relational contexts (see Figure 2) and a workforce development model (see Figure 1). This presentation will highlight the emergent themes and related subcategories from our directed content analysis and the developmental model.

**Conclusions:**
The resulting findings are expected to improve workforce development and further implementation science by identifying the experience and needs of after-school instructors in low-income, urban settings.
References


Figure 1. Dynamic and developmental model capturing the After-School Instructor’s (ASI) perspective
Figure 2. Organizational and relational structure of the educational after-school program from an ASI perspective.