



Perceptions of Program Quality and Fidelity of an Arts-Based After School Program: A Process Evaluation

Jennifer L. Gay
The University of Texas
Houston Health Science Center

Sara Corwin
University of South Carolina

Participation in after school programs is associated with increases in academic achievement and improved behavior in students at risk. Process evaluation data from participants and key stakeholders was used to gauge implementation, satisfaction, and program attendance of an after school arts program. Lack of scheduling flexibility resulted in low attendance. Students and community partners reported problems with school staff. Students reported being less likely to react negatively to teachers and peers, and liked being in a safe place. Careful selection of staff members who provide autonomy, perceptions of safety, and varied activities may result in increased program attendance and satisfaction.

Participation in after school programs is associated with increases in academic achievement (Scott-Little, Hamann, & Jurs, 2002), attendance (Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, & Gladden, 2007) positive socio-emotional functioning (Scott-Little et al., 2002), and a decrease in negative behavior (Gottfredson, Gerstenblith, Soulé, Womer, & Lu, 2004). Furthermore, these programs allow children to develop friendships and special abilities in areas such as arts and sports (Goerge et al., 2007; Grossman, Walker, & Raley, 2001; Halpern, 1999). Posner and Vandell (1994; 1999) found that children in formal programs were more involved in academic and extracurricular programs, and had parents who participated in more school activities, compared with informal settings, which fostered television watching and hanging out. Researchers have found that after school programs, especially for middle school students, increased student perceptions of safety and

well-being (Grossman et al., 2001; Halpern, 1999; Kane, 2004). After school programs are frequently targeted towards students who are under-performing academically including, but not limited to, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students who are receiving free or reduced-priced lunch, African-American or Hispanic youth, or children who have problem behaviors themselves or have families with problem behaviors (Scott-Little et al., 2002).

Importance of Process Evaluation

Success of after school programs depends largely on participant satisfaction, as that influences future participation and goal attainment. Process evaluation data can be used to identify areas in need of improvement and program elements to retain (McGraw et al., 2000). Interventions with multiple sites can affect implementation, making process evaluation even more valuable (Saunders, Ward, Felton, Dowda, & Pate, 2006). Westmoreland and

Little (2006) suggest that program quality includes opportunities for students to have choice, take on leadership roles, and build relationships of mutual respect between students and staff. Westmoreland and Little (2006) also recommend that staff be trained and evaluated on their positive modeling and relationships with students, not just their ability to supervise and discipline.

Process evaluation provides insight about what types of assessment and intervention methods can and cannot be delivered in specific settings with regard for quality, and differs from formative evaluation where the primary objective is to assess efficacy (Windsor, Clark, Boyd, & Goodman, 2004). In school settings, program process evaluation can include examining student recruitment and retention, student-staff interactions, and student satisfaction (Seppanen et al., 1993). Data can be collected from participants, key stakeholders, as well as program staff to evaluate the intervention implementation (Linnan & Steckler, 2002). This information can be used to determine the quality of the program, completeness, exposure, satisfaction, and contextual influences such as aspects of the environment that may affect program success (Saunders, Evans, & Joshi, 2005). Data may be used either during the program to identify strengths and weaknesses, or after the end of an intervention, to provide better future programming (McGraw et al., 2000). Steckler and Linnan (2002) recommend collecting data from multiple sources to evaluate intervention implementation, program quality, completeness, exposure, satisfaction, and contextual influences (Saunders, Evans, & Joshi, 2005).

The primary purpose of this study was to use process evaluation data to gauge program implementation using participant satisfaction and program attendance data from an after school arts program. More specifically, we had two goals: 1) determine dose delivered and dose received (the number of sessions provided to and received by each group), and 2) explore the quality of the after school program implementation by using student focus groups, community partner interviews, and program fidelity data.

Methods

Description of the Program

The program was designed for students from two urban South Carolina middle schools during the 2005-2006 school year. Poverty levels for the two schools ranged from 87% to 99%, where 91% of students received free or reduced-price lunch. Ninety-nine percent of students at these schools are African-American, and more than half score below basic on state achievement tests (South Carolina Department of Education, 2006). The crime rate in the area is

more than twice the national crime index average. All students in the sixth grade at two urban middle schools were notified of the after school program. Teachers assisted in identifying 35 students from each school to enroll in the program. The program was implemented over two school semesters, at four sites (two each semester).

The program selected a museum of art, a children's museum, a local theatre, and a zoo and botanical garden for the after school program sites. Programs with an arts focus encourage creativity by applying math, science, and writing skills to arts projects, and may also increase student self-esteem and increase parent participation (Scott-Little et al., 2002). Program sites were encouraged to adapt the Visual and Performing Arts Standards (South Carolina Department of Education, 2003) into site activities. Program activities included, but were not limited to, journaling, sculpting, anti-gang violence projects, planting gardens, and poetry. One of the most important aspects of the program was the opportunity to create positive mentoring and role-modeling relationships, which Payne (1996) suggests are the most significant motivators and keys to achievement.

The Process Evaluation

The purpose of the process evaluation was to examine the after school program's level of implementation (i.e., dose-response), student participants' satisfaction with program activities, and staff perceptions of the program.

Development

Members of the evaluation team were contracted external evaluators who observed the implementation of the after school program. This evaluation team, that is trained and experienced in qualitative data methods, conducted interviews and acted as moderators for the focus groups. Informed assent was obtained from students and informed consent from their parents prior to participation. Focus group moderators informed participants that evaluation staff would not share responses with any teachers, and participants could withdraw from the group at any time. All student and community partner sessions were audio-taped. A professional service transcribed all data verbatim and removed any personal and identifying information for confidentiality purposes. The Institutional Review Board approved the materials and procedures prior to data collection.

Evaluation staff developed a 7-item discussion guide for the focus group interviews in order to elicit student responses relating to the following: a) what students liked and disliked, b) what students told others about the program, c) what students heard about other program sites, d) how

students thought they were different because of the program, and e) what students thought an ideal program would include. All students enrolled in the after school program were invited to participate in the focus groups.

A convenience sample of 65 sixth graders (58% female, 100% African-American; ages ranged from 11 to 14 years) participated in focus groups in order to assess the implementation quality and participant satisfaction of the after school arts programs. A total of eight focus group interviews were held, six for the four community partner sites and two for participants who had dropped out during the program.

Staff (n = 6, 66.7% white, 50% female) from each of the four program sites were interviewed in the spring of 2006. The staff was composed of site program coordinators responsible for program delivery at each site. A total of four interviews were held to examine perceptions of program fidelity, implementation, and quality from the community partner perspective. Staff members were asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the after school program, student engagement, effects on students, and barriers and recommendations for the program, following a 9-item interview guide.

Attendance records and program coordinator notes were used to determine dose delivered and dose received. Dose delivered (i.e., the amount of the program provided by community partners) was assessed using start and end times (in minutes) at each site. Dose received (i.e., the amount of time students were engaged in the after school program activities not including transportation) was assessed through the analysis of attendance records and program coordinator notes.

Analyses

The evaluation team, in collaboration with school administrators, established attendance and program time benchmarks a priori. The intervention program goals included having a minimum of 30 students regularly attend each site per semester, having each student attend at least seven sessions per semester, and having community partners deliver 100 minutes of intervention per session. To determine the dose delivered, each site provided detailed information on the activities, start and end time, by date. These records were examined for total numbers of instructional minutes and instructional sessions, as well as how they aligned with the implementation plan. Dose received was determined using attendance data.

Following established guidelines for thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994), two evaluation team members independently read one focus group transcript in order to develop a preliminary codebook

for the focus groups and interviews. Next, the two team members examined each data collection instrument for potential codes and themes unique to the activity and/or respondent. All subsequent codes were added to the master codebook, all documents were then coded and reviewed for accuracy by comparison with original source documents and audiotapes. The verified and corrected documents were imported into QSR NVivo version 2.0 (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty. Ltd., 2002).

Results

Attendance was not reported at the individual student level, but at the aggregated community partner site level. Therefore, some children from the fall semester may have participated in the spring semester as well. Process objectives included having a minimum of 30 students regularly attend each site, each semester, and have each student attend seven sessions per semester. During the fall semester, a total of 68 students participated in the program, whereas only 50 students participated in the spring semester.

The number of sessions provided to participants is defined as the dose delivered. The program scheduled two sessions per week. Seventeen sessions were provided in the fall semester at each of the two sites, while 20 sessions were delivered at each of the two spring sites. The average dose delivered was 101.7 ± 6.1 minutes per day (range of 94-107 minutes per day) of off-site, after school enrichment education. This exceeded the a priori benchmark of 100 minutes set by the evaluation team. Dose received is defined as the participant's interaction with the program (Linnan & Steckler, 2002). The average number of sessions attended by students at the four community sites over both semesters was 7.3 ± 1.6 (range of 10-16 sessions). The number of students who attended each session ranged from 12 to 19 ($M = 15.0 \pm 4.87$). Therefore, students actively participated in 43% of the fall sessions and 36% of the spring sessions. These dose-received numbers are well below the desired 30 students per session. However, students attended 7.3 sessions each semester and were expected to attend seven, achieving the attendance process objective.

Student focus groups. During the student focus groups (n = 8), the moderators asked student participants what they liked and disliked about the activities, scheduling, and program personnel, as well as what they told their parents and friends about the after school program. The four most common themes from the focus groups were: *thinking the programs were fun*, *improving students' grades or behavior*, *scheduling*, and *interacting with the staff*.

Thinking programs were fun. Participants reported telling their family and friends about the

after school program activities and what they thought about the program. Participants from all sites and groups reported telling others that the program was fun, for example, “I hate when I miss a day because I be missing out on fun things.”

Table 1

Questions and Common Responses from Student Focus Groups

Prompt	Student Responses
What did you like or dislike about the program schedule?	<p>“I like the schedule of Monday and Friday.”</p> <p>“I think we should also have on Mondays and Fridays.”</p> <p>“I think we should go Monday through Thursday because on Friday, we have a lot of other things like to do.”</p> <p>“We get home too late.”</p> <p>“I have no time to be with my family.”</p> <p>“On Monday it’s kind of not going to work cause when I go home I be having, I be having homework and stuff and then I be having to wash and stuff.”</p> <p>“I think we should go Monday through Thursday because on Friday, like she [another participant] just said we have a lot of things to do on the weekend and we really want to go.”</p>
Have you seen an improvement in your grades or other ways?	<p>“I get better grades then I used to.”</p> <p>“It helped my grade in drama.”</p> <p>“When I start going to the [program] my grade, my grade, I had a 2.7 now my grade is, now my GPA’s up to a 3.7.”</p> <p>“Mostly everybody that works here has been increasing almost everybody’s brains.”</p> <p>“Telling [my sister] not to bully me anymore”.</p> <p>“So at school you change that too cause you don’t talk back to teachers at school, at school if you don’t talk back to teachers out here [at after school program].”</p>
What do you think of the people who work with the program?	<p>“I like most of the people who work here because they’re nice if you come here every single day then she’s going to give you a [inaudible] treat.”</p> <p>“I disliked some of the people that work here.”</p> <p>“I kind think that they don’t really want to work with us.”</p> <p>“They be yelling at us for no reason.”</p> <p>“When we be trying to have fun [teacher’s name] will try to stop us.”</p>

Students were also asked to describe their ideal program. They responded with activities such as sports, field trips, and parties. Other students also wanted educational games and a place where they

could be safe; for example one student said, “Mine be about no gangs, no violence and if they were to get in trouble one time they would be kicked out of this program.” Table 1 provides selected quotations from the focus group participants.

Scheduling. Focus group participants were asked what they liked and disliked about the after school program. Table 1 provides additional comments from student focus groups. All groups reported liking the activities they were doing. However, there was some disagreement on the days of the week that the program is held, with some students preferring Friday and others not because of family or other program obligations. One of the primary reasons students did not like the after school program was that they arrived home late and had other things to do in the afternoon and evening.

Staff. The most controversy arose when students were asked if they liked the people who worked with the after school programs. Some commented positively, as seen in Table 1, with responses that staff from the sites were “friendly,” “nice,” and “cool.” However, students from two sites reported hostility and disrespect from the school and program site staff. One student responded, “I didn’t like when I was drawing a picture and the teacher messed it up.” Another echoed this sentiment saying, “I don’t like some of them because they try to put stuff on your picture that you don’t even like and they don’t even ask.” Other comments about the staff indicated that there was a lack of respect for the students’ work and this characteristic influenced the students’ perceptions of the entire program.

Improving students’ grades or behavior. Some of the most positive comments about the program were responses to the prompt, “Has the program affected you in any other ways?” One student responded by saying, “I’ve been leading more.” Several students reported not wanting to be “bad” anymore and that they had more respect for the teachers. Additionally, students stated that, “I told [my parents] that it’s helping me in life by helping my behavior at school and at home and in the street too.” Another student responded similarly, “I told my parents it’s helpful and very useful in life and that we will remember this and we will remember this when we’re growing up.” Table 1 provides additional comments.

Low- or non-attendees. Low- or non-attendees also participated in focus groups. Program rosters classified these students as participating as of the enrollment deadline, but they had very low attendance, defined as attending ≤5 sessions during one semester, or dropped out of the program. Students most frequently reported competing activities and conflicts with the Friday meetings that

were scheduled. One student remarked, “I didn’t go on Mondays sometimes because I had tennis practice.” Other reasons cited by participants as being barriers to participation included family responsibilities, such as babysitting for siblings, household chores, and family illness, and disciplinary or academic reasons. As one student reported, “The only time I wouldn’t come is if something come up or if I’m suspended or in detention.” Low- and non-attendees also mentioned programmatic concerns as a barrier.

Community Partner Interviews

The community partner interviews yielded many comments that described *partnering with schools, communication, teamwork, and relationships with students.*

Table 2

Themes and Responses from Community Partner Interviews

Theme	Responses
Partnering with Schools	“I hope it doesn’t end... I’d hate to see a really good thing go away. And I would hate to see the partnership between [the district] and these partners go away...”
Communication	“I felt like I needed a point person that knew everything about the kids in my program. I don’t always feel like I could have gotten the information that I needed. Also, things like calendar dates of schools. There were a lot of times that we didn’t know the kids were coming or didn’t know they had an after school holiday...and so that communication got blurred.”
Teamwork	“I think the parental piece is important and we haven’t really explored that as much as we should have...” “We haven’t done anything other than until now ... we’re inviting parents to the final gala.”
Relationships with Students	“There was a bond between the kids and the instructors even though they only met two days a week and Friday programming was limited... the connection was stronger than I expected.” “We have been able as a staff to sort of develop relationships with them and they have developed relationships with each other where they feel comfortable. And, you know, we can talk to them about music what’s on TV and stuff like that. Sort of puts us on ... our level.”

Partnering with schools. All of the partners agreed that the program itself was a “good thing” and “a good program for inner city children who don’t get to see art and culture.” However, interviewees from each site acknowledged that there were “bumps in the road”. For example, one participant stated that, “It

went fairly well... it has gotten better towards the end of the year. There were a few bumps in the beginning.” Table 2 has additional comments from community partners.

Communication. All sites indicated that communication at the school and district level was inadequate and problematic. One community partner representative summarized the sentiments expressed by all interview participants:

We needed more communication on several levels. From the very beginning we did not know what upper level administration at the school felt about the program or what they thought the students needed. We needed much more regular communication with the school personnel.

The lack of communication among all parties was one of the primary barriers to implementation and program quality. As shown in Table 2, community partner staff cited examples of poor record-keeping, and inconsistencies in information as reasons for not liking the program.

Teamwork. When commenting about teachers or staff, the students were clear to make a distinction between their day school teachers and staff and the community partner “teachers.” Community partners echoed student dissatisfaction with teachers and chaperones from their school who accompanied them offsite. One partner said, “The second semester school staff who chaperoned the students were dedicated and more enthusiastic and supportive than the first semester staff.”

Promotion of teamwork and mutual respect in curricular activities and organizational cultures was key (The After School Corporation (TASC), 2004). In both the student focus groups and the community partner interviews, several participants noted “a real sense of team work” and the cohesion in the groups, especially in preparation for the end-of-the-year projects and presentations. According to one community partner, “The sixth graders really seemed to separate their differences and get the project done. The team work really came together.” This reinforced the students comments that, “They [games] are fun to do in teams.” And “I like that when we had to do the picture making that you had to all work in the group of people like your friends and you got to talk and stuff.”

Another aspect of teamwork is involving parents in after school programs. Several of the community partners noted that their programming efforts did not include as much of a parental component as they could have. Example comments are shown in Table 2. The primary reasons parents were contacted through the after school programs were functional (e.g., early dismissals and inquiries about low attendance) or disciplinary in nature.

Relationships with Students. Every community partner commented on their own personal connection, or “bond,” that they developed with the students over the course of the year. Two of the partners noted that they would be disappointed that this year’s cohort (of 6th graders) would not be back (as 7th graders) next year. Other comments are included in Table 2.

Discussion

Process evaluation was essential to this program because participant satisfaction and implementation strengths and weaknesses were discovered. The students identified a number of activities and aspects that they liked about the program, such as contests, painting, and writing. The success of future programs depends not only on continuing the successful aspects identified by the students as fun and helpful (e.g., behavior, grades, and projects), but also by improving upon the negative characteristics reported by the students.

One recurring theme was the staff. Groups who reported liking the staff seemed to hold more favorable attitudes toward the after school program in general. Unfortunately, a number of students reported staff members who were yelling, angry, and disrespectful. Perceptions of autonomy, safety, and careful selection of high-quality staff members are also themes that have appeared repeatedly in the literature (Grossman et al., 2002; Halpern, 1999; Hollister, 2003; Westmoreland & Little, 2006).

One of the primary aims of this process evaluation was to explore the quality of the after school program implementation utilizing participant satisfaction as an indicator. This information was valuable in an effort to increase participation and retention in the immediate future (Hollister, 2003). Grossman (2002) suggests that flexible programs may be more successful in attracting older children. This was expressed by the students as recruiting and retention for this program was problematic due to the strict attendance policy. The lack of flexibility and competing priorities (babysitting, sports, etc.) resulted in low attendance numbers throughout the year. Students reported preferring a wide variety of programs when asked about an ideal program, but no single activity was reported by all groups. This illustrates that even within one program site a variety of activities may lead to improved retention and satisfaction.

Community partners mentioned a number of issues similar to the student comments, including scheduling. This may have been made worse by the poor communication among community partners, schools, and the school district. Both groups were also dissatisfied with the staff from the schools who accompanied the children off-site. While community partners commented on the students’ lack of

enthusiasm, students felt that there was a lack of respect and trust among all groups. However, there were numerous positive comments about the program that focused on the relationships students built with each other and the community partners. These relationships may have been enhanced with more parental involvement throughout the semester and not just for informational or disciplinary purposes.

Students provided suggestions for improvement that included more choice when selecting activities and program components, activities where they could be physically active, scheduling, and prohibitive attendance policies. Community partners also recommended more small-group interaction, activities that encourage physical activity, and more parental involvement. Given the national trends toward obesity in younger age groups, it was encouraging that both groups wanted more activities involving physical activity. It is important to note that many of the suggestions were in areas where change can occur. Providing community partners with school schedules and information regarding relevant similar activities may improve overall communication. Additionally, schools often have a systematic infrastructure for contacting parents. Therefore, initiating parental involvement may be easier if parent contact was coordinated with schools and the community partners.

There is anecdotal evidence that arts-focused programs are helping students in outcome areas, such as achievement and behavior. Students reported their grades and attendance improved. Perhaps more importantly, they acknowledged being less likely to react negatively towards teachers and friends. Projects focused on teamwork and preventing gang violence seemed to strongly influence the students. Some students felt that the after school program “kept them off the streets” and away from becoming involved in unsafe and risky behaviors. This is encouraging given the impoverished background from which these students come. As reported by other researchers (Grossman et al., 2001; Halpern, 1999; Kane, 2004), after school programs do have the power to influence perceptions of safety, behavior, and achievement, especially in middle school.

These findings are consistent with other after school program evaluations for students at high risk for low achievement. In Seppanen et al. (1993), focus groups of children noted that they would like to have more choice in which activities they participate during after school program. Also, Seppanen et al. (1993) supports the notion that child-staff interactions “sets the tone” (p. 146) by providing positive role models and helping students develop a sense of being in charge of their own environment.

This is a quality some of our sites lacked, as revealed in participant satisfaction.

Scott-Little, Hamann, and Jurs (2002) stated that after school program staff was the second most documented challenge, and several studies mention additional staff training and high staff turnover are related to program quality. While few studies support the link between increased attendance and achievement gains in middle schools (Scott-Little et al., 2002), our evaluation, as well as Reisner, White, Birmingham, and Welsh (2001), found that participants reported social and emotional benefits from participation in after school programs. According to Barker (1997), Hudley (1999), and Huang et al. (2000), students in after school programs demonstrated decreases in aggressive behavior and conflict with peers, in addition to other behavioral improvements.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study are situated in a particular context and generalizations may be limited. The sample was a sample of convenience of students selected by teachers from urban middle schools in South Carolina. While only African-American children were selected to participate, and caution should be used when making inferences about other populations, this sample was similar to others in after school programs based on level of risk associated with low SES, urban or inner-city location, and minority groups. The qualitative methods in this study allowed students and community partners to speak in their own words about their experiences and satisfaction with the program. The collection of data from multiple sources allowed for a more comprehensive picture of program fidelity, implementation, and quality, and validated the statements from both groups.

A comprehensive understanding of the relationship between participant satisfaction and program personnel, as well as the preferences of middle school children for after school programs and reasons for not attending, will provide valuable information for future interventions. As urban, African-American middle school children are increasingly influenced by negative peer behavior (Beal, Ausiello, & Perrin, 2001), it is imperative that future programs provide safe, enriching activities to encourage positive social development and academic achievement. After school programs may be especially important for students who experience bullying or other alienation in home, school, or other environments (Reisner, White, Birmingham, & Welsh, 2001).

Process evaluation can be a valuable component of a formative or impact evaluation as

process elements assess the program quality, fidelity, and feasibility (Linnan & Steckler, 2002). The next steps in process evaluation of after school programs might be to examine a dose-response relationship between academic outcomes and dose-delivered and received. Additional elements of process evaluations, including examination of recruitment procedures, scoring implementation, and assessing the fidelity with which intervention providers deliver a program, may be added to explain whether or not a program is successful. To strengthen future process evaluations, researchers could collect additional data, such as fidelity to an arts-based curriculum, as well as support the training of intervention providers.

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Author Notes

Dr. Jennifer L. Gay
The University of Texas at Houston Health Science Center
School of Public Health, Brownsville Campus
80 Fort Brown, Brownsville, TX 78520
Jennifer.L.Gay@uth.tmc.edu

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