How do out-of-school-time programs get from attendance to active engagement? School researchers propose that engagement is composed of three "ABC" components, affect, behavior, and cognition, which can also be applied to out-of-school-time programs.

6

The ABCs of engagement in out-of-school-time programs

W. Todd Bartko

IT IS NOT SURPRISING that research on schooling and children's academic experiences could occupy a large library. All children in the United States are mandated to attend school, and improving teaching and learning are longstanding national priorities. Yet the choices that children, adolescents, and parents make about how youth spend their out-of-school time (OST) are critical for their current and future well-being. It is only recently, however, that researchers have become interested in studying the OST experiences of children and youth. This newly found interest began in the mid-1990s, coinciding with the beginning of direct federal funding of after-school programs.

Research on after-school programs grew rapidly following the Clinton administration's investment in after-school programs, initially conceived as a vehicle for curbing youth crime. It is now well known that the after-school hours from 3:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M. are the peak time for crimes committed by juveniles and for engaging

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT, NO. 105, SPRING 2005

in drug, alcohol, and cigarette use and sexual activities. Not surprisingly, this is the period of the day when many children and teens are on their own due to parents' work demands. Furthermore, the increase in the number of dual-earner families and the welfare-to-work policies that took many single mothers out of the home and placed them back in the workforce created public demand for more adult-supervised activities after school. The Clinton administration, with wide bipartisan support in Congress, expanded the original Jeffords-Gunderson legislation from an initial $25 million in 1994 to $800 million in 1999, marking the most rapid increase in funding for any federal program in history.

As a result of the tremendous commitment by the federal government and the increased demand for services, after-school opportunities expanded rapidly—and perhaps too rapidly. Some of these programs seemed to be built on the notion that "if you build it, they will come."[1] Without sufficient grounding in the developmental needs of children and youth and without adequate outreach to families, attracting and sustaining involvement was problematic. Often youth attended these programs only intermittently, and program staff worked frantically to design activities that captured the interests of their young participants.

In addition, within a few years of the dramatic increase in funding for after-school programs, stipulations for grantees were added that mandated a focus on academic achievement in addition to the recreational, health, and social service activities. Some youth regarded this as an extension of the school day rather than as an opportunity to participate in fun activities after school. As a result, the challenge to encourage and sustain participation over the long term remains.

Not surprisingly, the pace with which programs have evolved has left researchers playing catch-up, not an unfamiliar role. There is mounting evidence, however, that youth participation in structured, skill-based activities is linked to improved academic performance, positive physical and mental health, lower rates of substance abuse, and rewarding social relationships.[2] There is also some indication that experiences in safe, supportive, and growth-enhancing envi-

ronments may be especially important for at-risk youth, particularly those from troubled families.[3] This body of literature, however, is far from complete and suffers from many of the same growing pains confronting OST programs.

Engagement as the missing link

The central question for this chapter and for both research and practice in the OST arena is, "Given the link between participation and healthy outcomes, how do we get from participation to sustained engagement?" In the Weiss, Little, and Bouffard model of participation set out in Chapter One of this issue, sustained engagement in an activity or multiple activities is posited to lead to more positive outcomes than casual or irregular participation. Both research and common sense tell us that youth who are committed to and highly active in an endeavor are more likely to continue in that endeavor, see it as part of their identity, and benefit from successful participation.

Research conducted in this area by my colleagues and me attempts to understand the factors related to engagement in activities using a model of engagement developed to better understand children's school experiences. In this model, we reasoned that the more children feel connected to their schools as institutions of learning, the more likely they will be to do what is expected of them, try hard, and persevere.[4] Our notions of school engagement are drawn from several related literatures, including research on motivation, self-regulated learning, and school climate. These literatures, however, are largely disjointed. One of the goals of our school engagement work was to better integrate previous research into a model that captures the dynamics of children's behaviors, thoughts, and emotions.

Indeed, our work has capitalized on engagement as a multidimensional construct that encompasses each of the three components. This conceptualization of engagement as an interplay of affect, behavior, and cognition can provide a richer characterization of children at school than any of the research on single components.

In reality, the three components are dynamically embedded within a single individual and are not isolated processes.

The ABCs of engagement

Engagement is best represented by three interrelated components: affect, behavior, and cognition—the ABC model. Affective engagement refers to positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, the academic curriculum, or school. It also is defined as having feelings of belonging and of valuing learning and the broader goals of schooling. Behavioral engagement is related to participation; it includes involvement in academic and social activities in the classroom, including conduct, attention, following rules, and effort. Cognitive engagement refers to investment in learning; it includes being thoughtful and willing to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills.

It is helpful to think about the three components of engagement as a triad rather than individually since none occurs in a vacuum. Some of our previous research on school engagement shows that for some students, affect, behavior, and cognition follow the same patterns (for example, all high or all low). For others, the components appear to be unlinked. To take one example, some students reported high cognitive and behavioral engagement but low affective engagement. These students followed the rules and did the work but were not necessarily committed to learning or did not feel a connection to their teachers or classmates. These findings show the importance of looking at the three components simultaneously rather than individually, as is frequently done in educational studies.

In OST settings, similar patterns may be common, with some youth viewing the activities as a way to fill time after school rather than as an important opportunity to learn valued skills. Conversely, program staff will be familiar with the description of young people who attend programs to be with friends and therefore may be highly affectively engaged but are otherwise not highly behaviorally or cognitively motivated.

With regard to OST, the three components of engagement seem equally applicable and perhaps even more so. Many OST programs work to foster a sense of belonging among participating youth, as well as warm and supporting interpersonal relationships among participants and staff. Similarly, participation in OST activities implies behavioral engagement to some extent. However, high behavioral engagement refers not just to participation but to a high degree of effort. Finally, cognitive engagement in activities refers to a willingness on the part of youth to invest time and effort in learning the skills necessary for the activity. Given that OST programs are not constrained by a state-mandated curriculum as are most schools and classrooms, programs can be designed and run in ways that truly capture the interests, talents, and imaginations of young people and in effect elicit engagement.

Early precursors of engagement in OST

As part of our previous work on school engagement, we interviewed a number of young children about their involvement in OST programs. This was a preliminary effort at assessing the fit of the engagement model to this area of research. Within the sample of third and fifth graders from three inner-city areas in the Midwest, we found few students participating in OST programs. The majority of these children spent their after-school hours at home, at a relative's home, or in unsupervised settings in their neighborhoods. Therefore, it was not possible to get a clear picture of what engagement in activities might look like for these young children. Furthermore, because participation was largely infrequent, we were not able to follow children's activity participation over time to better understand the factors related to sustained engagement.

However, for the children who were involved in OST programs, their comments give us an early view of the situational and interpersonal resources that capture their interests, and these are in line with the affective, behavioral, and cognitive components of engagement. For example, the importance of having time to interact with

peers and of participating in project-based learning is evident in this response from a fifth-grade girl:

> I used to [be in an after-school program], but it is over now. It was called the Discovery Program. It was every Saturday in the morning. It was sort of like school, but no one got homework. We learn about things like hurricanes and volcanoes, do projects there, and lots of fun things. It was really nice, the people were nice. You got to meet new people, and you learn new things. They said that maybe I could be like a volunteer [next year] and help the kids.

This is a good example of a positive affective experience through meeting and connecting with new people and intellectual appeal in the curriculum of the program, as well as the future opportunity for leadership. Although this program ended, it is clear that this student would have chosen to continue to participate, given the chance. The importance of leadership for children's involvement is a crucial piece of the engagement process.

The appeal of spending time with peers is also seen in this comment from a ten-year-old boy, who is not drawn by the activities offered in his current after-school program and who would prefer to attend the YWCA: "I'd like to go to the YMCA 'cause a lot of my friends go there, and I'd get to go have fun with all my friends when we're not in school, 'cause we'd have more time to talk."

Engagement in appealing tasks or novel learning environments that differ from typical classroom assignments is another way to sustain interest in a program. One young boy told us about using computers in his after-school program:

> Go on the computer, I like computers a lot. We use them to go on the Internet, find out what there is on the Net. Also I like to explore around, like go on vacation to Europe and the Bahamas and those places. It's kind of cool, 'cause you don't have to explore too much to find out things, and the computer also gives you information about like the Eiffel Tower and also what I like about the computer is that there's nice things to do on it. You could make like a letter and print it out.

Programs aimed at fostering children's existing interests and abilities within an empowering and supportive environment would

clearly be more likely to lead to both cognitive and affective engagement. One young girl described how her interest in performing arts is enhanced in the program she attends:

> I'm in soccer, chess, and Growing Up/Speaking Out for girls. We're having a play. It's a poem class. And you're gonna see me two times solo, 'cause we each get to do our own thing two times, and the rest is like group. And we have this one thing, it's like a bird, we're all like little birds and we fly in and we fly out.

These examples give some indications of how early experiences in programs can sustain or inhibit subsequent participation. In the future, we hope to be able to talk with adolescents who have been active in one or more OST areas or activities to learn how well the engagement model captures their affective, behavioral, and cognitive experiences over time.

What do practitioners need to do to foster engagement?

Getting children and teens from participation to engagement in an activity or program does not simply require more of the same. Rather, program staff need to be attuned to the affective, behavioral, and cognitive demands of the activity within the context of the developmental needs of and resources available to participants. This is no small task, especially for programs with limited financial resources, staffed by individuals without significant background or training in these issues, with little support and involvement from families, and yet high expectations from the community.

What types of contexts may foster engagement? The youth development literature details aspects of contexts that are related to positive development and growth experiences. There is mounting evidence that children's everyday experiences and the contexts in which those experiences occur tell us a great deal about both children's current well-being and future life chances. Children do better across a range of developmental outcomes when their daily settings:

- Are safe and free of dangers
- Have clear and consistent rules that are enforced
- Are warm and supportive with opportunities to connect to others
- Present opportunities for inclusion and belonging
- Have clear social norms concerning behavior
- Are governed by practices that support both autonomy and responsibility
- Provide opportunities to learn valued skills
- Are connected with each other and consistent in the expectations, values, and practices communicated to the child[5]

These aspects of positive developmental contexts apply equally well to in-school and out-of-school settings. For instance, there is broad evidence that warm and supportive yet structured school classrooms with high expectations on the part of teachers are associated with high motivation and academic achievement.[6] It seems logical that out-of-school settings that support and encourage youth while providing challenging and stimulating activities would be most likely to lead to engagement and, subsequently, to positive psychological, social, and academic functioning.

How do we work to create these types of OST contexts and get children and youth involved?

- *Practitioners must get children in the door.* Outreach to youth and their parents is crucial, either directly through telephone calls, home visits, or presentations at schools, or indirectly through word of mouth. The first few visits to a program are critical since youth (like all of us) quickly develop initial impressions of the activity setting and how well it fits their needs and interests, the competence and personal qualities of the staff, and the degree of comfort and familiarity of peers.
- *Safety is a primary concern of many participants and their parents.* This issue was mentioned frequently in our school engagement interviews with children attending urban schools. Many of them were very concerned about safety issues in the neighborhoods around the schools and also talked repeatedly about fighting among

students. They sometimes described it as horseplay that escalated out of control. Safety is clearly one of the core aspects of contexts that foster positive youth development. Yet we often think only of the physical safety of children and much less about the psychological bullying and interpersonal conflicts that can occur in any setting.

• *Engagement in activities and programs is more likely to occur when youth have opportunities for stimulating and challenging experiences.* Although there is some need for down time, particularly in the after-school hours, young people want the time, resources, and instruction to help them improve at skill-based activities ranging from sports to academics to performing arts. This refers mostly to cognitive engagement, learning skills to master a desired task, but the excitement that often accompanies the mastery process also relates to the affective component of engagement.

• *Program leaders must be competent, knowledgeable, and accepting, together with firm behavioral control and high expectations for participants.* Affective engagement, or the feeling of belonging combined with positive views of adults and peers, is a critical component to sustained involvement. Some youth may tolerate activity settings that are not interpersonally comfortable if they perceive a large payoff in terms of skill development, but a warm and supportive atmosphere is certainly desirable for most of us and a necessary condition for some. It is also important to note that optimal environments for children are warm and supportive as well as challenging. Research on school interventions suggests that improving the climate of schools is not itself sufficient to improve learning.[7] Teachers must also have clear expectations for their students regarding classroom behavior, completing homework, working with others, and performing to the best of one's abilities. In short, youth are more likely to be engaged in an activity where they feel comfortable, accepted, and challenged.

• *Programs need to both foster and take advantage of the relationships among participants.* Many youth choose to attend programs because they have a close friend who attends. Yet engagement in a particular activity or project is more likely to result when youth feel as if they are part of a group. This is best illustrated by the fascinating

work by Milbrey McLaughlin who encourages teens to take on leadership roles in OST settings—in effect, to develop their own programs while working together as a team.[8] This work is striking because it reframes the view that many adults have of adolescent peer groups as the root cause of deviant behavior by showing that teens are willing and able to take on the responsibility for structuring their own time in ways that are constructive, rewarding, and beneficial for the community.

Future research

There is a converging body of research on the characteristics of family, school, peer, neighborhood, and other contexts that are likely to promote the healthy development of children and adolescents. Safe, warm, supportive, and challenging environments allow youth to identify and develop their interests and abilities, connect with peers and adults, and avoid unhealthy and dangerous behaviors. These types of environments, while beneficial for all young people, are critically important for children and teens at risk for school failure or problem behavior or for youth from disruptive or neglectful family circumstances. To the extent that both school and out-of-school activity settings can provide these supportive contexts, youth are much more likely to finish school, develop strong relationships with others, and feel good about who they are and their future life chances.

In OST, much research is still needed. For example, we know very little about how much youth need to participate in OST programs to reap the benefits, that is, whether there is a "dose-response" effect. We do not yet have good data on which children and youth benefit the most from participation. Finely grained studies that detail what specific activities are linked to positive outcomes or the dynamics of social relationships that occur within these programs have not yet been done. In short, there is much to be done before we have a clear picture linking participation to healthy development.

We also know very little about how best to balance children's school and activity participation and leisure time. Much of the research on OST has taken a piecemeal approach, examining the links between participation in one or two activity settings and psychosocial functioning. Given the constraints on how youth spend their time, however, it is important to better understand where participation in programs fits into the daily lives of young people. In a previous study, my colleagues and I found several different patterns of time use among a large sample of twelfth graders.[9] Patterns included youth who were highly active in several extracurricular areas, youth who were primarily involved in sports, students who reported being highly involved in school activities, and largely uninvolved youth. These patterns were linked to academic, psychological, and social outcomes in different ways, suggesting that activity participation needs to be examined within the larger view of family, school, and peer contexts. This may be especially true for at-risk youth living in less-than-optimal family situations or children attending poorly performing schools.

There is also little research devoted to factors that help youth to sustain their participation in activity settings. We have presented some very preliminary work based on a model of engagement developed around children's school experiences. Much more research in this area is needed. In particular, we need to know more about the activities themselves that occur at after-school programs; that is, what activities appeal to what children under what circumstances? Which children benefit the most from participation in these programs? How can programs be made more accessible? Most important, we need good longitudinal research on children's sustained participation over time.

This chapter has put forth some ideas about how to foster engagement with attention to the affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of settings. These ideas, drawn from work on educational and workplace settings, seem equally applicable to OST programs. Further data will help to test this hypothesis and narrow the focus on the most critical features of OST programs for both sustaining engagement and nurturing healthy development.

Notes

1. Gordon, C., & Gordon, L. (producers), and Robinson, P. A. (director). (1997). *Field of dreams* [motion picture]. Universal Studios.

2. Eccles, J. S., & Barber, B. (in press). Adolescents' activity involvement: Predictors and longitudinal consequences. *Journal of Adolescent Research*; Larson, R., & Kleiber, D. (1993). Free time activities as factors in adolescent adjustment. In P. Tolan & B. Cohler (Eds.), *Handbook of clinical research and practice with adolescents* (pp. 125–145). New York: Wiley; Mahoney, J. L., & Cairns, R. B. (1997). Do extracurricular activities protect against early school dropout? *Developmental Psychology, 33*, 241–253; Marsh, H. (1992). Extracurricular activities: Beneficial extension of the traditional curriculum or subversion of academic goals? *Journal of Educational Psychology, 84*(4), 553–562; Marsh, H., & Kleitman, S. (2002). Extracurricular school activities: The good, the bad, and the nonlinear. *Harvard Educational Review, 72*(4), 464–511; McNeal, R. (1995). Extracurricular activities and high school dropouts. *Sociology of Education, 68*, 62–81; Youniss, J., Yates, M., & Su, Y. (1997). Social integration: Community service and marijuana use in high school seniors. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 12*, 245–262.

3. Mahoney, J. (2000). School extracurricular activity participation as a moderator in the development of antisocial patterns. *Child Development, 71*, 502–516.

4. Blumenfeld, P., Modell, J., Bartko, T., Secada, W., Fredricks, J., Friedel, J., & Paris, A. (in press). School engagement of inner city students during middle childhood. In C. Cooper, C. Garcia Coll, T. Bartko, C. Chatman, & H. Davis (Eds.), *Developmental pathways through middle childhood: Rethinking contexts and diversity as resources.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

5. Eccles, J. & Gootman, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development.* National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

6. Wentzel, K. (1997). Student motivation in middle school: The role of perceived pedagogical caring. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*, 202–209; Skinner, E., & Belmont, M. J. (1993). Motivation in the classroom: Reciprocal effect of teacher behavior and student engagement across the school year. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 85*, 571–581.

7. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2004). *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

8. McLaughlin, M., Irby, M., & Langman, J. (1994). *Urban sanctuaries: Neighborhood organizations in the lives and futures of inner-city youth.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

9. Bartko, W. T., & Eccles, J. (2003). Adolescent participation in structured and unstructured activities: A person-oriented analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 32*(4), 233–241.

W. TODD BARTKO *was the executive director of the MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on Successful Pathways Through Middle Childhood and is now an independent consultant in Ann Arbor, Michigan.*