The Impact of After-School Programs

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Public Administration in Public Sector Management and Leadership

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Abstract

Analysis of the Impact of After-School Programs

By

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Master of Public Administration in Public Sector Management and Leadership

After-school programs have provided families and children with a safe place for supervision, recreational sports, and enrichment opportunities. Due to increased funding and demand for evidence of effectiveness, after-school programs in the United States have been under pressure to demonstrate their impact on student outcomes. This project proposal will examine the literature on after-school programs and issues surrounding staff turnover. The literature identifies staff turnover as a significant factor in program quality. Specifically, the literature review exposes a gap in the perspectives and needs of after-school program staff. Also, there is a lack of strategies designed to reduce staff turnover. This project proposal aims to explore key contributing factors of turnover amongst after-school staff, with the intent to provide program directors and policymakers with a deeper understanding of staff needs and current experiences. The information gathered from this project proposal can improve program implementation, resulting in higher student outcomes. A qualitative research design, using multiple in-depth interviews with after-school program staff, will be conducted. This research aims to explore themes relating to staff needs and identify concepts that contribute to high turnover.
Introduction

The necessity for after-school programs (ASP) began over a hundred years ago, as child advocates noticed worrying trends with unsupervised children on the streets during after-school hours (Vandell & Shumow, 1999). With an increasing number of women entering the workforce, the need for childcare continues. The COVID – 19 Pandemic has intensified the demand for ASPs because parents are struggling with virtual learning and need the support of a structured program. For millions of parents, COVID -19 has changed how their children attend school and have created childcare obstacles. The abrupt closure of schools, daycares, and after-school programs left many parents without options and scrambling to find adequate programs. The significant role schools and ASPs play in millions of families' daily lives has never before been felt so strongly as during the COVID-19 Pandemic. An estimated 24 million workers in the United States who have children under the age of 14 will face the harsh reality of not having an at-home childcare option for the 2020 – 2021 school year (Afterschool Alliance, 2020).

Childcare concerns have brought the need for ASPs to the forefront. After-school programs operate by delivering structured adult supervision for students in K-12 grades at the end of each school day. After-school programs offer an array of structured learning opportunities. They offer sports, academic enrichment clubs, homework support, arts and crafts, community service opportunities, and dance activities (Kremer et al., 2014). In addition to enrichment classes, students receive a daily snack or supper. The intended goals for most ASPs are to deliver quality supervision, reduce the academic achievement gap, decrease crime committed by youth during the hours of 2 to 6 pm, provide students with safe opportunities for socialization and expand learning opportunities for low-income or at-risk students (Kremer et al., 2014).
Policy initiatives such as No Child Left Behind, Every Student Succeeds Act, and the COVID-19 CARES Act have allocated funding explicitly for use by after-school programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). In California, there are approximately 1.7 million K-12 grade students enrolled in an ASP. Therefore, it is crucial to take a closer look at the implementation of ASPs and their effectiveness in meeting student achievement goals (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). The literature explains that implementation, defining the fundamental role of ASPs, and high staff turnover are significant obstacles that impact the quality and effectiveness of ASPs on student outcomes.

It is essential to learn as much as possible about the experiences of staff working in an ASP to make informed decisions, improve program implementation, increase student outcomes, and minimize staff turnover. However, researchers have not conducted an in-depth analysis of the current staff’s perspectives, experiences, and needs while working in an after-school setting. This project proposal will examine how after-school program (ASP) employees experience their work environment and will identify central themes relating to staff turnover. The information gathered in this research is aimed to provide policymakers with information that enables them to improve programs by focusing on retaining quality staff, which can positively increase student outcomes.
Review of the Literature

This literature review will provide an overview of after-school programs in the United States. It will discuss the need for after-school programs and the impact after-school programs have on student development. Additionally, this literature review will examine program implementation, shifting program priorities, program outcomes, and staff's crucial role. Furthermore, this literature review also suggests using the Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit (SAFE) framework to improve staff training and program implementation. The literature describes two distinct viewpoints on what the role of after-school programs should be; they are referred to as coalitions. The first coalition focuses on academics. The second coalition focuses on a holistic approach that emphasizes social-emotional learning opportunities for students. Finally, the literature aims to identify trends, contradictions, and identify research gaps, as it relates to ASPs.

Defining After-School Programs

After-school programs (ASP) are defined as safe havens where children can play, engage in various hands-on activities, receive academic support, participate in recreational sports, and are provided with opportunities to build competencies (Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente, 2010; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). In an ASP, students are supervised by adult staff. A regular day in an ASP includes structured play, physical fitness and wellness, assistance with homework, an art/craft activity, free snacks, and an occasional field trip. Generally, ASPs operate Monday through Friday. ASPs begin when the school bell dismisses at 3 pm, and they serve students between the ages of 5 and 18 (Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente, 2010). Also, ASPs offer children opportunities to learn leadership skills while safely socializing with peers in a
supervised setting (Mahoney et al., 2005). As the field of after school has expanded, ASPs have introduced new clubs to their programs.

In recent years, ASPs have included Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) curriculum, nutritional programs, drug prevention courses, visual and performing art classes in their offerings (Hirsch, 2011). There are three main types of ASPs currently offered. They include school-based programs, community-based organizations (CBOs), and community-school partnerships (Dryfoos, 1999; Lewis, 2000). The first type, a school-based program, is administered by local school districts. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which is the second-largest school district in the U.S, operates Beyond the Bell Branch; and manages school-based programs such as the Youth Development Program (YDP) and Youth Services Plus (YS Plus) (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). The second type of ASP is CBOs; these programs are community-based after-school programs that utilize school facilities or public parks to operate their programs. LA’s BEST, Afterschool All-Stars, Woodcraft Rangers, and LA Conservation Corps are the largest CBO’s in Los Angeles (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Lastly, community-school partnerships are programs that attempt to integrate schools and the community to enhance youth development both inside and outside the classroom (Dryfoos, 1999). Organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA of America, Children's Aid Society, Department of Parks and Recreation, and university-assisted school programs are examples of community-school partnerships (Hirsch, 2011). The common goal of ASPs is to provide youth with a safe environment and exceptional program offerings to enrich their learning experiences through public funding.
The Need for After-School Programs

Millions of families across the United States depend on ASPs to provide supervision for their children while they are at work. For most parents' a common worry is finding quality, safe, and dependable childcare throughout their child(ren) K-12 education. As the cost of living continues to rise in the United States, the need for a dual-income household, increases families' pressure to find quality daycare options for their children (Aizer, 2004). Many families must continue coordinating after-school childcare for their child(ren) because work schedules often last beyond school hours (Vandell & Shumow, 1999). The Afterschool Alliance reported that 10.2 million children participate in ASPs across the United States (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Additionally, Mahoney et al. (2005) state that low-income, at-risk, and English learners benefit from participating in ASPs. As a result, ASPs have been tasked with implementing quality programs that produce specific student outcomes (Cross et al., 2010).

Program Implementation

Regardless of how well an ASP is designed, its implementation is essential to achieving desired student outcomes. Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, and Parente (2010) explain that “implementation refers to how well an intended program is put into practice” (p. 289). Quality program implementation requires time and consistency. Implementation of program strategies across ASPs is often inconsistent and may account for the lack of desirable student outcomes. ASPs across California and the United States vary significantly in program implementation (Sheldon et al., 2010). Evaluating an ASPs implementation strategy is critical in the program evaluation process (Cross et al., 2010). ASPs that focus on quality implementation tend to reflect positive impacts (Cross et al., 2010; Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente, 2010; Sheldon et al., 2010). Sheldon et al. (2010) used data from a multi-site ASP evaluation in California to explain
that using a continuous program quality improvement plan can significantly improve training and implementation strategies.

Cross et al. (2010) stated that positive program experiences were found in varying degrees of implementation across five different programs. Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente (2010) highlights the importance of considering the multi-dimensional aspects of program implementation in future research. Cornelli and Richards (2010) suggest that ASPs consider the needs of students, parents, and the community on program design and implementation (2010). They also indicate that considering these stakeholders can produce the most significant positive impact (2010). Unfortunately, stakeholders have yet to agree on what ASPs should prioritize.

Due to the development of differing opinions on what ASPs should prioritize, Brecher et al. (2010) coined two coalitions in the ASP arena. The first is the academic coalition, which believes that ASPs should promote academic skills with low student to staff ratios. The academic coalition favors ASPs utilizing professional staff to instruct students after school and make attendance mandatory (Brecher et al., 2010). The academic coalition includes public-school leaders, teacher unions, and state and federal agencies (Brecher et al., 2010; Kremer et al., 2014).

The second coalition is identified as a developmental coalition. The developmental coalition’s “core belief is providing opportunities for holistic youth development, leading them to support programs that: reach all or most youth regardless of academic performance” (Brecher et al., 2010). Further, this coalition believes that ASPs should hire dedicated individuals with a wide range of skills, talents, and interests and should not exclude nonprofessionals (Park et al., 2020). Another core belief of the developmental coalition is that ASPs should be structured to best support the youth and their family’s needs while also incorporating social-emotional developmental skills throughout various enrichment activities (Brecher et al., 2010; Durlak,
Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Traditional after-school providers, child welfare agencies, religious organizations, and parks and recreation departments all support the developmental coalition.

**Prioritizing Academic Learning**

As ASPs continue to grow and develop their offerings to children, the demand for academic support from various stakeholders increases. More specifically, ASPs have felt the pressure to demonstrate and measure participants’ academic achievements due to funding resources' stipulations (Cosden et al., 2004; Sheldon et al., 2010). It is now common for many ASPs to include project-based learning activities in their programs, which align with educational standards (Hirsch, 2011). Additionally, ASPs in California are beginning to use structured lesson plans, integrating the California Common Core subject standards such as English, math, listening, and speaking into their curriculums (Sheldon et al., 2010).

**Prioritizing Social-Emotional Learning**

In recent years, educators and researchers have been paying closer attention to social-emotional development in children. Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) describe that:

“Social and emotional learning involves the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (p. 10).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) embraces the concepts that help children develop supportive relationships, encourage meaningful and engaging activities while making learning fun and challenging (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). Another benefit to utilizing the SEL developmental model is that children are better prepared for higher education, competitive and meaningful careers, and can become constructive members of society (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017; Weissberg &
Cascarino, 2013). Finally, ASPs can help low-income children “feel valued, included, and recognized” who would otherwise feel alienated (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017, p.97). Hirsch (2011) explains that many ASPs focus on SEL skills because they believe that helping students develop positive attitudes and emotional intelligence will improve the skills needed to grow positively into adulthood and better manage stressors. These outcomes are less achievable if organizations face high turnover rates due to the ambiguity of staff roles and program vision.

**Exploring Program Outcomes**

**Academic Performance Outcomes**

Cosden et al. (2004), Mahoney et al. (2005), and Posner and Vandell (1994) make strong positive correlations between ASPs and improvements in academic scores for students who participate consistently. These three studies demonstrate a positive relationship between the time spent in ASPs and reading scores for children. Cosden et al. (2004) point out that students who spent more time in unstructured activities exhibited a greater risk of adverse educational outcomes than their peers who participated in structured ASPs. Authors also highlight that the academic support that many ASPs provide is most impactful for low-income, at-risk, and English learners (Cosden et al., 2004; Mahoney et al., 2005).

**Social-Emotional Learning Outcomes**

Strong support for social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are found in both meta-analyses conducted by Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) and Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, and Schellinger (2011), which focused on enhancing student SEL, found significant positive results. Durlak, Weissburg, and Pachan (2010) found that students who participated in an ASP showed statistically positive and significant increases in social behaviors, self-perception, feelings of bonding to school, and academic achievement. Likewise, Durlak,
Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, and Schellinger (2011) explored SEL programming's efficacy on student outcomes. They focused on the effects of “social and emotional skills, attitudes towards self and others, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance” (p. 407).

Recent SEL findings have demonstrated multiple positive outcomes in both short and long-term student goals. Mahoney, Durlak, and Weissberg (2018) stated that many school districts in the United States have incorporated SEL programs in their curriculum. SEL programs have been well received by parents, students, and educators to the extent that the U.S Department of Education is in the process of issuing standards for SEL skill development for K-12th grade (Mahoney et al., 2018). These findings suggest that a well-implemented SEL program can also strengthen student academic achievements. For these standards to be achieved, staff turnover needs to be addressed as it is a significant obstacle in achieving SEL goals.

In summary, authors Hurd and Deutsch (2017) and Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) noted that schools across the United States need to find a healthy balance between academics and social-emotional learning to provide students with optimal learning experiences. Furthermore, in-depth scrutiny of the role of ASP staff is required to achieve these goals. Turnover has been identified as a concern for many ASPs; it will prove beneficial to provide staff with job clarity to resolve the rift between the two program priorities.

The Rift in Program Priorities

Historically, ASPs were created as safe havens where children could participate in recreational activities while their parents were at work (Vandell & Shumow, 1999). This value of ASPs was confirmed in 2001 when the Afterschool Alliance found that 94% of voters indicated that supervision for students between 3 pm and 6 pm was a top priority (Feinstein, 2003). More
recently, concerns over adolescent development, sexual maturation, and juvenile crime intensified the need for adult supervision by ASPs. Increased funding and academic pressure by the No Child Left Behind Act began a rift in program priorities for many ASPs because funding from this Act requires improved educational outcomes (Roth et al., 2010). At the same time, many practitioners and authors believe that an ASP should remain true to its original goal of keeping students safe while encouraging social-emotional learning in an after-school environment (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Feinstein, 2003).

To summarize, both coalitions highlight important goals for student achievement and development. However, the rift over core values relating to the primary purpose of ASPs has created ambiguity in the role of ASP staff and after-school programming. Park et al. (2020) posit that ASPs who combine academic support with SEL skills have shown significantly higher educational outcomes. The rift in priorities has created many debates among policymakers, ASP practitioners, researchers, and school administrators. Since policymakers require funding to demonstrate positive academic impact, will this focus on academic impact take away from other engaging and equally meaningful activities, such as SELs, thus fundamentally changing the core of ASPs?

The Role of Staff

Mentoring

Early research, such as Vandell and Shumow (1999) and Rodes and DuBois (2008), discuss the critical role staff play in ASPs and how their contributions impact student outcomes. Staff who work in ASPs play a vital role in the overall success of the program. Staff is integral in creating mentoring relationships with students and are responsible for program implementation, which may prove challenging. A significant factor that plays into the dynamics between program
staff and students is group ratios. The student to staff ratios varies significantly across ASPs. It has been reported that student to staff ratios can range from 4:1 to 25:1 and can even be as high as 30:1 (Vandell & Shumow, 1999). Large student groups make it difficult to supervise, implement strategies, and develop meaningful mentoring relationships. Mentoring in ASPs is very important because research has identified that mentors can significantly impact students' self-esteem, sense of belonging and help them make better life decisions; this is especially critical for low-income students (Feinstein, 2003). Rodes and DuBois (2008) found “significant associations between youth involvement in mentoring relationships and positive developmental outcomes” (p. 254). Cultivating a supportive and mentoring relationship between ASP staff and students is essential and can increase positive student outcomes. Strong organizational commitment from staff is required to promote meaningful mentoring relationships.

*Staff’s Organizational Commitment in After-School Programs*

A critical factor in the quality of program implementation is the organizational commitment of staff in ASPs (Vandell & Shumow, 1999: Rodes & DuBois, 2008). It is common practice for ASPs to hire recently graduated high school students. Younger staff typically apply for positions in ASPs because it is part-time work, providing applicants with a flexible schedule to attend college. For many individuals, ASPs are simply a stepping-stone to another job (Sheldon et al., 2010). It is essential for ASPs to fully understand how their organizational culture and job characteristics impact their organizational commitment (OC). Understanding OC is a complex topic; many factors and employee attributes must be considered. Camilleri and Heijden (2007) explain that organizational commitment “is considered to be a bond of the individual to the working organization,” it is seen as a psychological contract (p. 243). The literature suggests that an employee’s perception of how well the organization is managed is
likely to result in greater OC, potentially leading to higher motivation and performance (Camilleri & Van Der Heijden, 2007). Suppose there is a high level of OC. In such a case, committed employees are less likely to be absent, are more invested in the organization, and feel a sense of obligation to remain part of the organization (Allen et al., 2010).

Job satisfaction and OC are the two most important reasons for turnover (Allen et al., 2010). By understanding the OC concept, managers and directors can reduce avoidable turnover and improve employee retention strategies. Further, a lack of OC has severe implications for organizations because instability leads to higher cost (Camilleri & Van Der Heijden, 2007). Also, low OC causes negative consequences for employees, such as bad work attitudes, a decline in job performance, and less team morale (Camilleri & Van Der Heijden, 2007). Therefore, understanding an employee’s OC in an ASP setting is beneficial and may prove vital towards improving student outcomes and reducing staff turnover.

Staff Turnover

Research by Granger (2008), Rodes and DuBois (2008), and Cross et al. (2010) identify high turnover in ASPs as a significant problem that affects program implementation and creates obstacles in accomplishing the desired student outcomes. Developing a shared understanding of what causes high turnover and how staff fluctuation affects ASPs is crucial. Allen et al. (2010) explain two types of turnover; involuntary turnover is initiated by the organization, while the employee requests voluntary turnover. Involuntary turnover is generally perceived as being in the organization's best interest because it is generally a result of poor job performance, restructuring, or downsizing (Allen et al., 2010). In contrast, Levy et al. (2012) state that high rates of voluntary turnover can cause undesired outcomes for the organization such as a decrease in employee morale, teamwork disruptions, loss of workforce diversity, and can potentially cause
a reduction in the quality of work until the job is fulfilled. Moreover, it costs the organization time and money to replace staff when they leave. The loss of time and money associated with recruitment, selection, orientation, and training of new employees can be better spent by investing in current staff’s professional development (Levy et al., 2012).

School administrators, program directors, and policymakers pressure ASPs and staff to establish procedures that will improve student outcomes (Sheldon et al., 2010). However, high staff turnover can make it challenging for ASPs to consistently and accurately demonstrate their effectiveness and implement program strategies (Granger, 2008; Cross et al., 2010; Sheldon et al., 2010). Furthermore, “constant turnover becomes problematic when the wrong people are leaving, or when the turnover rate becomes high enough that the cost and instability outweigh the benefits” (Allen et al., 2010, p.59). Cross et al. (2010) highlight that staff quality might be the most critical feature of an ASP because they directly affect implementation. Highly skilled staff were observed to be better at providing a positive social climate, engaging activities for students, and demonstrating strong classroom management (Sheldon et al., 2010). If the end goal of ASPs is positive student impact, acquiring and retaining skilled staff will require ASPs to conduct a turnover analysis to determine which staff are leaving, turnover rates, turnover cost, and the extent to which turnover is a problem. This data can help ASPs improve skill-building activities and develop retention strategies.

Staff Retention

Despite extensive research on employee turnover, there is a lack of resources that effectively discuss employee retention in the arena of ASPs; it remains a critical issue for many ASPs in the United States (Cross et al., 2010). Understanding the main contributors that affect turnover will enable managers to successfully develop appropriate retention strategies to target
the variables that contribute to turnover among specific employees (Levy et al., 2012). Allen et al. (2010) state that the strongest turnover predictor is related to employees' withdrawal process who are searching for other job opportunities. Employee surveys can be utilized to combat the withdrawal process. Surveys can be used as a retention strategy by assessing the levels of OC and satisfaction from employees (Allen et al., 2010). Also, the relationship employees have with their managers play an essential role in turnover decisions (Levy et al., 2012). Therefore, training managers can improve retention rates to build and develop supportive and positive relationships with their staff (Levy et al., 2012).

Furthermore, Camilleri et al. (2007) suggest that job clarity and reducing work ambiguity are important factors that can improve retention. This means that work environments and job design matter. Regarding ASP’s front-line staff, their role must be clearly defined, work expectations should be communicated, and managers need to consistently provide appropriate support. ASPs that cultivate a cohesive and supportive work environment have a significantly higher potential of improving retention among their staff (Allen et al., 2010). Therefore, cultivating a cohesive and supportive work environment, allows for students to develop and foster meaningful relationships with staff (Cross et al., 2010). Currently, there is a gap in the evidence-based framework as to how these relationships should be formed.

**SAFE Framework**

Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit (SAFE) is an evidence-based framework that starts with a sequenced set of activities to achieve goals, uses active learning techniques to help students acquire skills, focuses on personal or social development, and uses explicit objectives for personal and social skills (Granger et al., 2007). SAFE is a mutually beneficial framework for improving student outcomes and effective skill training of staff in ASPs (Durlak, Weissberg, &
Research on ASPs has identified a significant trend shared by many quality ASPs. Analysis by Granger et al. (2007), Granger (2008), and Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) have all discussed the benefits of utilizing a SAFE framework in their studies. The SAFE framework was developed out of recommendations made by researchers who conducted extensive research on personal and social skill development in clinical and school settings (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010).

SAFE highlights that students learn best when they are taught in a logical progression. ASPs need to engage students as research has demonstrated that students' learning experience is enhanced when they can try new things and receive consistent feedback on their performance (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Active engagement is especially crucial in ASPs as students are coming to the program after attending a full day of regular school. ASPs must be focused on addressing specific growth areas for students. Lastly, ASPs need to communicate learning objectives explicitly. Otherwise, students may become confused about the end goal and may lose interest in the activities that support mastery. Programs that followed the recommended SAFE framework demonstrated improvements in essential skills, attitudes, social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). ASPs that used the SAFE framework exhibited positive effects for 70% of the outcomes except school attendance (Granger et al., 2007; Granger, 2008).

Adding to the previous research, Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) and Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, and Schellingger (2011) agree that the SAFE framework improves student outcomes by providing structure and guidance to the staff. Sheldon et al. (2010) explain that a “traditional one-time professional development training session at the beginning of the year rarely makes lasting impacts on staff members’ skill development or program quality”
Hurd and Deutsch (2017) agree that ASPs should provide continuous training sessions throughout the year to ensure that all staff members receive equivalent resources and training. Moreover, the literature shows that utilizing and implementing the SAFE framework in ASPs is a useful tool for training ASP staff and reducing turnover.

**Limitations**

Researchers have generally focused on formal ASPs and have chosen to examine their efficacy on students' social-emotional behaviors, academic results, and physical outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2005; Sheldon et al., 2010). The first limitation that the literature review exposes is that the effects of ASPs remain equivocal. Secondly, there are validity concerns with the methodology used in some studies. Lastly, there is a lack of research focusing on the experiences of ASPs staff regarding turnover.

The literature review identified how ASPs support students and their development. Researchers agree that ASPs provide students with a safe place to spend their time after school; however, the effectiveness of ASPs on student outcomes is ambiguous. For example, a meta-analysis by Kremer et al. (2014) states that in general, prior studies on the effects of ASPs reported results that varied, and the findings were inconclusive. On the other hand, Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) noted statistically significant and overall positive findings across all the student outcomes. Similar results are reported by Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, and Schellinger (2011), which stated that SEL programs notably improve students’ attitudes, behaviors, and skills. Other studies have synthesized the effects of ASPs and demonstrated that some programs have positive academic outcomes (Granger, 2008).

On the contrary, Roth et al. (2010) and O'Hare et al. (2015) provide negative findings. Roth et al. (2010) examined how the amount of participation in ASPs impacts outcomes. Their
research found little support that increased attendance in ASPs resulted in improved behavior or academic outcomes. An evaluation of an after-school's prosocial behavior program by O’Hare et al. (2015) found adverse effects on the group of students who participated in the ASP compared to the control group. A study conducted by Park et al. (2020) reported partial support for positive interactions between students and staff in a structured after-school setting helped reduce behavioral problems. It is important to note that conflicting results in findings may result from the researchers examining various outcomes. Also, the studies that represent conflicting results in the efficacy of ASPs may result from methodological weaknesses.

Secondly, there exist validity concerns in the methodology used in the research on the effectiveness of ASPs on student outcomes. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Kremer et al. (2014), which included 24 studies, found "serious methodological flaws, such as inappropriate comparison groups, sporadic participation attendance, and high attrition" (p.619). Both Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) and O'Hare et al. (2015) point out that missing data such as pre or post-data raises internal validity concerns and may reduce the power of the studies. The sample size in studies conducted by Cross et al. (2010), Weaver et al. (2016), and O’Hare et al. (2015) was relatively small; the number of programs observed was between 2 to 6, which limits the generalizability of the findings presented. Another limitation of the research on ASPs is the "selection effect," the unmeasured characteristics of the students selected to participate in the studies could potentially affect the findings (Mahoney et al., 2005; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Additionally, it is unclear whether participation in ASPs caused the different outcomes or if the program attracted students who were already doing better than their peers.

Lastly, the literature states that staff turnover is a consistent challenge, and it creates significant obstacles in program implementation and retention of staff (Hurd & Deutsch; 2017).
However, there is a lack of data providing practitioners with specific reasons for a lower organizational commitment from staff in an after-school setting to address turnover. Furthermore, the literature offers few evidence-based practices for minimizing staff turnover and improving retention strategies for front-line staff working in ASPs. Reducing staff turnover can create a more consistent environment for both staff and students, enhancing program outcomes.

**Research Gap**

The literature explains that implementation, defining the fundamental role of ASPs, and high staff turnover are significant obstacles that impact the quality and effectiveness of ASPs on student outcomes. Staff turnover is a consistent challenge for many ASPs (Cross et al., 2010; Sheldon et al., 2010). However, studies have not analyzed the perspectives, experiences, and needs of staff working in an after-school setting. Future research should thoroughly explore the key factors that lead to turnover in ASPs to attract new staff, retain well-trained staff, and develop strategies to reduce staff turnover.

**Literature Review Summary**

After-school programs (ASPs) are defined as safe havens where children can play, explore enrichment activities, receive academic support, participate in recreational sports, and build competencies (Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente, 2010; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). As the cost of living grows, the number of working mothers also increases, and quality childcare becomes necessary. ASPs provide working families with a safe place to leave their children while they work. Millions of families across the United States utilize the resources ASPs offer, including supervision, materials for hands-on projects, field trips, nutritional education, snacks, and mentoring relationships with program staff (Aizer, 2004). Currently, ASPs have been under increased pressure from school districts and policymakers to demonstrate the academic impact
that programs have on students, which led to a split in coalitions. The first coalition is an academic coalition based on The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This coalition heightened the pressure on schools to improve standardized test scores. This resulted in school districts recommending that ASPs take on an active role in bridging the academic gap by focusing on activities that strengthen educational outcomes. The second coalition consists of other supporters of ASPs who believe the real focus should be on a holistic approach towards developing students' social-emotional competencies. Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) propose a third coalition that notes schools across the United States need to find a healthy balance between academics and social-emotional learning to provide students with optimal learning experiences. The information gathered from the literature review supports the concept that the most significant improvement in student outcomes are achieved when ASPs focus on social-emotional learning strategies. As a result of this focus, academics are also improved because students feel a stronger sense of belonging; they are excited to attend school, complete homework more frequently, and manage their feelings more effectively (Mahoney et al., 2018).

Program implementation, staff retention, and identifying the vision and focus of ASPs continue to be challenging. Limitations in research results vary due to program dosage and the selection of participants. Many researchers identified staff turnover as a significant factor affecting program quality (Cross et al., 2010; Granger, 2008; Sheldon et al., 2010). However, few studies have explored strategies to reduce turnover and have not analyzed the experiences of staff working in an ASP.
Research Question and Aim

What are the key contributing factors of turnover among employees in the Leading Educational Achievement Revitalizing Neighborhoods (LEARN’s) after-school program at the Pasadena Unified School District?

This project proposal aims to explore how current after-school program (ASP) employees experience their work environment and determine central themes relating to staff turnover and staff needs. This study will identify shared attitudes towards Pasadena LEARNs ASP. This study can provide program directors and policymakers with information regarding current and past employees’ perspectives and needs. The information gathered in this study can also help stakeholders develop strategies to increase staff retention and ultimately improve program quality.
Research Design

Approach

This project proposal intends to explore the experiences of front-line staff in an after-school program (ASP) and gain a deeper understanding of their current work environment. This research aims to explore themes relating to staff needs and identify patterns that contribute to high turnover. With more insight and knowledge regarding everyday work experiences, the researcher intends to explore the staff’s current perspectives and if implementing a Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit (SAFE) framework will enhance their organizational commitment. Furthermore, this project proposal's information will help program directors and policymakers improve ASPs by reducing staff turnover.

The researcher will gather information from staff utilizing a qualitative approach. Blair (2016) explains that qualitative research involves a smaller group of participants, and the researcher generally takes a holistic approach to inquiry. Qualitative research is a nonnumerical understanding of the world; it is useful for understanding perspectives, context, and phenomena (Johnson, 2014). This qualitative research will help us understand the views of staff through verbal statements. Comprehensive, in-depth interviews will be the method tool used to collect information from front-line staff. This research method will use a cross-sectional and inductive analysis approach to review the data collected. The unit of analysis will be individuals who work in an ASP. The proposed study will code reoccurring themes from the responses provided during interviews. The qualitative research will provide the researcher with a perspective on training needs, challenges staff face with program implementation, and main factors contributing to staff turnover.
Sample Design

Participation in the research project will be voluntary. Front-line staff from the LEARNs After-School Program in Pasadena, California, will be the focus of this study. This will be a purposive sample because the LEARNs program is a formal school-based ASP, which provides both academic support and SEL learning opportunities. LEARNs consists of approximately 180 staff members that meet the criteria desired for participation in this study. Additionally, the LEARNs staff is composed of diverse front-line staff that would allow for the generalizability of the research findings. LEARNs is currently experiencing high rates of staff turnover among these staff. Also, LEARNs would possibly benefit from a turnover analysis to address the issue of staff turnover.

All of the LEARNs staff will have an equal opportunity to be a part of the study. The study's recruitment will entail sending an invitation in two forms, email and physical letter mailed to the employee’s home, to ensure that all current employees have an equal opportunity to participate in the study. LEARNs front-line staff will receive a hard copy invitation and an electronic invitation through their work district emails to participate in an in-depth interview study. The interested participants will have two weeks to return their invitation /interest cards to the research team to be considered in the study. Participants will be selected randomly from a list of respondents who will ultimately participate in the interviews.

The researcher will utilize a stratified random sampling design in this study. Johnson (2014) explains that in a stratified sample, “the researcher will separate the population into strata based on some meaningful characteristic to answer their research question” (p.151). The selection of participants will be two staff members who currently work at an elementary program; two staff from a middle school program; and two staff members who have recently
resigned. The participants will be placed into two strata groups, elementary and middle school groups. The researcher will then draw 2 participants from each strata group for a total of 6 participants.

The researcher will ask the Human Resources Department for a list of LEARNs staff who have recently resigned from their position within the last three months. The researcher will group the list of names into the two strata groups, as described earlier. The research team will, once again, randomly select one potential participant from the two categories. Potential participants will be reached by phone and asked if they would be interested in participating in an interview about their experience working for an ASP. Once two participants, one from each strata, have agreed to participate, this will complete the recruitment of participants for a total of six voluntary participants. Next, the researchers will begin scheduling interview appointments.

**Data Collection Tools**

A semi-structured method will be employed in this research. The type of tool used to gather primary data for this qualitative research study will be in an interview form. A total of six participants will be interviewed individually. The first four participants will be current staff. These four participants will receive one set of interview questions with 35 questions (Appendix A). The interview questions will mainly consist of open-ended questions regarding demographics, work experiences, strengths, needs, and challenges relating to their experience working in an ASP. The interview questions' core concepts are inspired by research conducted by Camilleri and Van Der Heijden (2007). Their analysis identified that job and personnel characteristics impact organizational commitment and, ultimately, turnover (2007). They indicate that an employee’s perception of how well the organization is managed will most likely improve their organizational commitment. The questions included in the interview are loosely based on
these concepts to gauge the employee’s current perception of the LEARNs program. The concepts used in the interview include demographics, job attributes, employee-leader relations, employee perceptions of the organization, and the current needs of the employee. The interview duration is expected to last between 60 to 90 minutes, or as needed. The researcher will inform the interviewee that the interview will take place outside of their regular work hours. Researchers will ask for consent to audio record the interview session after explaining that no identifying information will be gathered and attached to the recordings. Participants will be asked follow-up questions to have them elaborate on their responses. The second set of interview questions will be administered to the employees who recently resigned. The last two individuals will be interviewed using a second set of questions, made up of 29 questions (Appendix B). The second set of interview questions will focus on demographics, job attributes, employee-leader relations, employee perceptions of the organization, and reasons for leaving.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher will use a systematic and organized approach to analyze the data. Phase one of the qualitative data analysis will consist of transcribing the audio recordings of the six interviews. Phase two of the data analysis will require the confirmation of the transcriptions' accuracy from a second researcher. Phase three, will involve using a low-tech process for identifying issues, patterns, and themes by reviewing the interviewer’s notes. Data will be analyzed using the affinity diagram process; this process is an idea-generating tool that enables “the research team to identify the common ideas or themes” (Johnson, 2014, p.164). A framework of common words and themes will be developed, and their frequency will be noted. The fourth phase will require a spreadsheet to record the themes identified and their specific
location in the transcripts. Lastly, the researcher will explore connections about the data and will explain the findings.

**Projected Results**

This research aims to understand further the experiences and situations that lead to turnover. The researcher hopes to compare and contrast the experiences of staff working in an ASP setting. The researcher expects to gather many hours of interview recordings and to have ample written information to develop patterns and themes. The goal is to identify common challenges staff encounter in their day-to-day work to improve in those specific areas. Additionally, the researcher intends to discover if current and past staff's work perspectives are positive or negative and what key contributors should be considered.

**Validity**

Johnson (2014) states that internal validity considers whether other factors may influence the research results (p.76). The bias concern will be addressed by having two researchers analyze the same data set; they will then compare the results to ensure no distortion (Johnson, 2014). To avoid internal validity threats regarding selection, the researcher will use a random selection process for selecting the ASP sites. The ASP under review implements the same program model at all of their elementary and middle school programs. Internal validity concerns with conducting this research will depend on the truthful responses from the staff. It is not uncommon for staff to fear retribution by their employer. The researcher will attempt to mitigate the current staff’s fear of retaliation by assigning a number to the participants instead of using their full names.

This research is considered externally valid because of its replicability. School-based ASPs are very similar across school districts because their funding comes from the same state and federal sources. The majority of school-based ASPs have similar program structures,
requirements, and hire similar staff (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). The likelihood that the findings of this study will hold to other ASPs is strong. The information learned from this research can be transferred and applied to other ASPs.

Summary

Blair (2016) recommends that utilizing a qualitative research design using smaller groups can generate meaningful data. The researcher will use a qualitative method using a small group of staff members to understand their perspectives and current work environments. The unit of analysis will be individuals who have experience working in an ASP. The researcher will recruit participants by using two forms of communication, email, and a physical letter. A stratified random sampling design will be utilized to select the schools and staff members participating in this research. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. The researcher will gather primary data from six participants by conducting in-depth interviews. The data collected in the interviews will be transcribed and coded by reoccurring themes. Validity concerns will be addressed by having multiple researchers review and analyze the common trends and findings before presenting the final results. The researcher hopes to discover key contributors that lead to staff burnout and eventually turnover. The research design can be easily replicated, and the information from this study can be transferred and applied to other ASPs.
Discussion

Expected Contributions

This study aims to explore the experiences of current and past staff members who work in an ASP. Most importantly, the researcher expects to present the most important patterns and themes that can provide a deeper understanding of critical contributors that lead to high turnover in an after-school setting. This study will provide stakeholders with valuable insight from the point of view of front-line staff. The goal is to apply the findings in this study to understand staff’s everyday needs, improve current training to best support staff’s professional development, and, most notably, reduce staff turnover. Improving an ASP’s effectiveness presents many challenges. Granger (2008) and Cross et al. (2010) recognize that most front-line staff work part-time, are paid low to modest hourly rates, and seldomly qualify for fringe benefits. This project's literature review identified that front-line staff who work in an ASP are predominately untrained, young, and prone to frequent turnover. As explained by Cross et al. (2010), "qualitative data suggest that staff quality might be the single most important characteristic to program success" (p. 378). It is challenging to develop a quality program if the staff is always quitting or believe that their organization is not addressing their needs. Suppose the ultimate goal is to improve the quality and impact of ASPs on student outcomes. In that case, a deeper understanding of staff’s needs, and perspectives will be a valuable tool of information for program improvement strategies.

Methodological Limitations

The researcher will utilize a qualitative methodology approach for this study. The sample size of the six interviewees is relatively small. Working with qualitative data may present challenges in making meaning of the data (Johnson, 2014). Keeping the information organized
may become difficult. The interview process and verbatim transcript of interview recordings may generate an overwhelming number of written documents for the researcher. Other issues/topics may emerge from the interviews that are not specific to the researchers’ interview questions or the study's aim. The time required to gather the data from open-ended questions, record common themes, and analyze the findings will take a substantial amount of time.

Although the qualitative approach used in this study can present its challenges, it also provides precious data. The literature reviewed in this project highlights staff turnover as a significant problem in ASPs; however, they do not include the perspectives and needs of front-line staff working in an after-school setting. By applying a qualitative approach, participants are more likely to provide robust and comprehensive responses (Johnson, 2014). Additionally, the researcher in this study will gain a deeper understanding of current trends that make it difficult for ASP staff to commit to working long term. Most importantly, the qualitative data analysis will tell a descriptive and detailed narrative of the current staff’s experiences and needs. This research study will contribute to the research on ASPs by reporting on the most recent findings from staff and organizational climate. Transferability is strong, and program directors can use the information gathered from this study to improve staff development strategies, improve implementation procedures, and possibly develop a continuous quality improvement plan that focuses on the needs and retention strategies of front-line staff.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations will be maintained throughout the research study. Participants' well-being will be of utmost priority; this research study does not intend to harm participants in any way. All participants will be given informed consent forms before the start of the interview. No identifying data will be collected nor attached to any document revealing participant identity.
Once the participants' selection is complete, the researcher will explain how the participants were selected and the study's primary purpose. The rights of participants to end their involvement in this study will be respected immediately. The researcher's contact information will be provided to all participants if they should choose to inquire about the research study's legitimacy. The researcher also agrees to explain the interview process's duration and disclose any possible harm from retelling any negative or traumatic work experience. Mental health resources will be provided to participants should they require professional counseling due to their participation in the study. The risk of bias is addressed by having multiple researchers analyzing the findings and comparing notes. The final results will be recorded after all researchers have reached a consensus. Once the study is completed, participants will have the opportunity to contact the primary researcher and inquire about the results.

Summary

This project proposal's expected contributions are to report on the most current findings on staff working experiences and perspectives working in an ASP environment. As mentioned by Cross et al. (2010), quality staff might be the most critical aspect in achieving a quality ASP and eventually resulting in positive student achievements. The methodological limitations of the proposed research design are that it may become difficult to keep the qualitative data organized, and making meaning of the data can prove challenging. The ethical considerations in this project proposal have been addressed appropriately. Participants will be given informed consent forms before starting the interview process, and an individual's confidentiality will be respected. Participants will have the opportunity to request information regarding the project's final results if they would like. Lastly, in qualitative data analysis, the risk of bias in data interpretation is a limitation (Johnson, 2014). To reduce said risk, the researcher will have multiple researchers...
review and compare the findings, and only after a consensus has been reached will the results be formalized.
Conclusion

After-school programs (ASPs) provide essential resources for families, students, and the community. ASPs are places where parents can drop off their children and know that adults will safely supervise them. Students can engage in many recreational activities such as dance, music, performing arts, and sports. ASPs provide students with enrichment activities that expand horizons (Kremer et al., 2014). Also, ASPs help reduce juvenile crime from 3 pm to 6 pm (Vandell & Shumow, 1999). The literature review supports the notion that ASPs positively impact student outcomes related to social-emotional learnings and academic improvements (Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan, 2010; Grander, 2008; Mahoney et al., 2005). An important finding in the literature was that program implementation and staff retention often affected the effectiveness of ASPs. When ASPs are continually dealing with staff retention challenges, there is less focus on strategies that help staff with program implementation. Program implementation directly affects the quality of the ASP, which translates to poor student outcomes.

This project proposal aims to provide a deeper understanding of the main factors that lead to turnover. The proposed research design will explore the experiences and needs of ASP staff. A benefit to this project proposal is a deeper understanding of the challenges and strengths that staff experience will be explored. The in-depth interviews used in the research design will provide stakeholders with a list of common themes and patterns on ASP staff’s perspectives. The results of this study can spawn new research on evidence-based best practices for ASPs. ASP practitioners and other policymakers can use the information gathered from the project to change policies and improve program strategies to best support staff and ultimately improve the program's overall impact on student outcomes. This project proposal will present a unique perspective from both current and past staff working in an ASP. Participants' interviews will
provide rich and meaningful information about the work environment of part-time staff. The information obtained from this project proposal can be applied to reduce staff turnover and improve retention strategies and, ultimately, student outcomes.
References


Camilleri, E., & Van Der Heijden, B. (2007). Organizational Commitment, Public Service Motivation, and Performance within the Public Sector. Public Performance &


Appendix A

Part I - Current Employee Demographics

1. What is your age?
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What is your level of education?
4. What is your marital status?
5. What is your current employment status?
6. Are you currently attending school?
   a. If so, what is your field of interest/study?
   b. If not, do you plan on pursuing higher education?

Part II - Work Experiences

7. How long have you worked for Pasadena LEARNs?
8. What do you enjoy most about your job?
9. What do you least enjoy about your job?
10. Describe how you feel about coming to work every day?
11. How would you describe your relationship with your superiors?
12. Do you have any examples where you felt supported by your managers?
13. Can you share your opinions with your employer? Why or why not?
14. Do you think your superiors hear your opinion? Why or why not?
15. Do you feel that your beliefs and values are aligned with the organization? Why or why not?
16. Is your work valued by your employer, why?
17. Does management communicate clearly and often with their employees? Can you provide an example?

18. Do you think that the work you do matches your pay?

19. How do you feel about your workload? Is it too much, too little, just enough?

20. In your current position, do you believe there is a clear path to a promotion?

21. Are your job duties clearly defined?

**Part III - Strengths**

22. What would you say is your biggest strength?

23. Describe a time when you used your most significant strength at work?

24. Are there any examples you can share with me about how your employer recognizes your strengths?

25. What can your employer do to help increase that strength?

26. Do you feel you have space to grow professionally at your employment?

**Part IV - Needs**

27. Is there anything you would like to see improved in your job?

28. Do you believe you are receiving enough training and support at your job? Why or why not?

   a. What resources would you like to receive to feel supported?

29. Is there a specific type of training you would like to receive?

30. Is there a particular skill you would like to develop?

31. Do you believe you have all of the physical materials needed to do your job effectively?

32. Is your position what you expected it to be?
Part V - Challenges

33. Please discuss an incident where you felt challenged professionally?

34. What skills did you rely on to overcome that challenge?

35. Name a time you felt stressed and overwhelmed at work?

   a. What did you do to address these feelings?
Appendix B

Part I - Ex-Employee Demographics

1. What is your age?
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What is your level of education?
4. What is your marital status?
5. What is your current employment status?
6. Are you currently attending school?
   b. If so, what is your field of interest/study?
   c. If not, do you plan on pursuing higher education?

Part II - Work Experiences

7. How long did you work for Pasadena LEARNs?
8. What did you enjoy most about your job?
9. What did you enjoy least about your job?
10. How long ago did you decide to resign from your current position?
11. What were some of the main factors that led to your decision to leave?
12. Did you get along with your co-workers? Why or why not?
13. Did you get along with your superiors?
14. Were you supported by your managers; can you provide an example?
15. Could you share your opinions with your employers? Please explain?
16. Did you feel your managers heard your opinion?
17. Did you think that your opinion was acted upon by your superiors?
Part III – Ex-Employee Strengths

18. What would you say was your biggest strength?
19. Describe a time when you used your most significant strength at work?
20. Did your employer recognize your strengths? Please explain?
21. Did you feel you had the space to grow professionally at this employment? Why or why not?

Part IV – Ex-Employee Needs

22. In your opinion, were you provided with the necessary tools to do your job well?
23. Is there anything you would like to see changed that would have made you reconsider leaving your position?
24. Was the job what you expected it to be?
25. Do you believe you were trained well enough to do your job?
26. What resources would you have liked to have received?

Part V – Ex-Employee Challenges

27. Please discuss an incident where you felt challenged professionally?
28. What skills did you rely on to overcome that challenge?
29. Name a time you felt stressed and overwhelmed at work?

   a. What did you do to address these feelings?