How can programs address the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity in the United States? Program leaders need to consider how to adapt their program to make it culturally relevant to the youth and families they serve.

7

Cultural competence in afterschool programs

Sandra D. Simpkins, Nathaniel R. Riggs

THE PROPORTION OF racially and ethnically diverse youth attending public schools has increased steadily over the past few decades. By 2030, it is estimated that children in the United States will be 31 percent Hispanic, 13 percent Black, and 9 percent Asian.[1] Not only are children in the United States diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, 23 percent of families in the United States include at least one parent who was born outside of the United States.[2] This growth in diversity, however, is not uniform. Certain regions in the United States have experienced unprecedented growth, such as the 154 percent increase of the Hispanic population in Tennessee and South Carolina.[3] These population shifts as well as open enrollment in schools mean that schools and afterschool programs (ASPs) may experience significant changes in the population they serve.[4]

Recent decades have also witnessed increased attention placed on ASPs as a social context for promoting the academic and social–emotional development of all young people, but which often receive prioritized fiscal support for serving low-income and diverse youth.[5] As such, ASPs are increasingly asked to respond to various

culturally and linguistically diverse youth, which can be challenging for providers who do not share the same background.[6] Even if staff and youth share a similar background, differences in cultural orientation, values, practices, and lived experiences can still remain. Being able to communicate and connect with a variety of youth may also help promote the participation of typically underserved youth, such as Latinos.[7]

We posit that bridging potential differences between ASP staff and youth is vital to an ASP's success. According to self-determination theory, children and adolescents join certain ASPs and not others, in part, because they feel like they belong at the program.[8] Youth who do not feel connected to the leader and peer co-participants are unlikely to enroll in the first place or are likely to drop out.[9] Not only does a sense of belonging promote participation, scholars also assert that a program will have larger impacts on youth who feel like they belong.[10] We believe that cultural competence in ASPs may help promote connections and belonging among diverse populations by bridging potential ethnic and cultural differences between individuals.

What is cultural competence?

Cultural competence has emerged as a theoretical framework for better understanding and addressing the role of cross-cultural relations in the adaptation of social, health, and educational services to better meet individuals' needs.[11] A culturally competent organization is one that is knowledgeable, welcoming, respectful, and able to effectively communicate and interact with culturally diverse individuals. Cultural competence is based on the premise that culturally conflicting beliefs, values, preferences, and behaviors affect interactions among individuals (for example, clinician–patient and educator–student), as well as interactions between individuals and larger systems (for example, healthcare system and educational system) in ways that contribute to observed cross-cultural health and achievement disparities.[12] Cultural competence among providers

is hypothesized to decrease these disparities in part by diminishing conflicts and promoting a more individualzed, culturally tailored approach to health and education.

Culturally competent systems address culture at three levels: organizational, structural, and professional.[13] Among the organizational factors considered to be culturally competent are recruitment initiatives across institutional levels that value diversity, such as hiring diverse personnel and requiring professional development on culturally competent "best practices."[14] Common structural factors include issues related to the design and function of the system including reducing language barriers between teachers and students and culturally diverse curricula.[15] Finally, professional staff characteristics commonly cited as culturally competent include staff knowledge and awareness of cultural differences, positive attitudes toward those of diverse cultures, and effective interpersonal communication skills.[16]

The importance of cultural competence in ASPs has been recognized for some time.[17] Woodland, in discussing cultural relevance and young Black males, while acknowledging the generalizability of his ideas to other ethnic backgrounds and genders, reasoned that universal or "one size fits all" ASPs may not be as effective for culturally diverse youth because they do not address their cultural and communicative needs.[18] Nevertheless, research and theory on cultural competence in the afterschool context lags far behind other fields. ASPs that include culturally specific content have shown benefits for culturally diverse Latino and African-American youth.[19] However, no clear framework has been proposed which could lead to testable hypotheses used to investigate which aspects of a culturally competent ASP might impact youth development.

Designing culturally competent afterschool programs

Although far from agreed upon, attempts to develop models of cultural competence in the fields of medicine and education can serve as initial roadmaps for developing frameworks for culturally

competent ASPs. As a first attempt to develop a model of cultural competence in ASPs, we reviewed indicators of cultural competence included in empirical research on this topic as well as the accreditation criteria or material for several large organizations that serve youth, including the Council on Accreditation, The National Association for the Education of Young People, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters.[20] We retained indicators that encompass the three levels of cultural competence and align with dimensions of high-quality ASPs, including opportunities to belong, positive social norms, supportive relationships, psychological safety, and the integration of family, school, and community.[21]

The list of 14 indicators presented in Table 7.1 provides direction on how culture might matter. This list is not an exhaustive or definitive set of criteria for ASP cultural competence. Rather, the list includes an illustrative set of some of the core indicators that, according to theories on program quality and empirical research, should further strengthen programs. Our goal in developing this illustrative list is that it will provide food for thought for ASPs as well as be a starting point for future refinement and precision.

Indicators in Table 7.1 start with the organizational level. Indicators at this level are aimed at promoting diversity and alignment between the ASP and the people they serve. Although many of the organizational factors are not directly experienced by youth, they trickle down to shape culturally competent structural and professional levels of ASPs. One organization-level factor is the inclusion of a culturally competent board that aligns programmatic and staff decisions, such as staff hiring and training, to the cultural needs of youth in ASPs. For example, Big Brothers/Big Sisters has recently created boards to help create culturally responsive mentoring, hiring, and training to serve Latino and Native American youth.[22] The anticipated result will be enhanced mentoring of culturally diverse youth and the staff can also serve as positive "role models."[23]

Structural factors include the nuts and bolts of a program, such as programmatic communication, the physical environment, content, and opportunities. Although many programs already integrate

Table 7.1. Indicators of cultural competence

Organizational factors
- Have an advisory board that includes members reflecting local diversity to design the ASP and staff training[a]
- Hire and retain staff reflecting local diversity[b]
- Hire staff with specialized college-level course work and/or professional development preparing them to work with diverse youth and families[c]
- Have initial and ongoing staff training on diversity of families in the local area[d]

Structural factors
- All communication is available in the languages and communication styles (e-mail, eye contact) youth and families prefer[e]
- Opportunities are available for youth irrespective of background[f]
- Physical environment is welcoming and accessible to all youth and families[g]
- To the extent possible, content is responsive to and/or actively promotes youths' and families' values and practices related to diversity, such as teaching songs from several cultures in music[h]
- Have a written policy and procedures on how the ASP is welcoming to all youth and families[i]

Afterschool staff professional factors
Staff should…
- Have knowledge about the youth and families in the area[j]
- Have positive attitudes about all youth and families[k]
- Have skills to counter potential biases and discrimination or practices that are degrading to particular groups[l]
- Engage in culturally sensitive interactions with youth and families[m]
- Be sensitive to families' values and work with families to bridge any differences or conflicts with families[n]

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[a]Big Brothers/Big Sisters. (n.d.).
[b]Diversi & Mecham. (2005); Wu & Van Egeren. (2010); National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Big Brothers/Big Sisters. (n.d.); Simpkins et al. (2013); Riggs & Medina. (2005).
[c]National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Council on Accreditation. (n.d.).
[d]Diversi & Mecham. (2005); Wu & Van Egeren. (2010); National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Council on Accreditation. (n.d.).
[e]Wu & Van Egeren. (2010); National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Council on Accreditation. (n.d.); Simpkins et al. (2013); Simpkins et al. (2011).
[f]National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Council on Accreditation. (n.d.); Simpkins et al. (2013).
[g]National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Council on Accreditation. (n.d.); Simpkins et al. (2013).
[h]Wu & Van Egeren. (2010). National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Woodland. (2008); Riggs et al. (2010); Council on Accreditation. (n.d.); Simpkins et al. (2013).
[i]National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August).
[j]National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Council on Accreditation. (n.d.); Simpkins et al. (2013); Simpkins et al. (2011).
[k]Diversi & Mecham. (2005).
[l]National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Council on Accreditation. (n.d.); Simpkins et al. (2013).
[m]Diversi & Mecham. (2005); National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Council on Accreditation. (n.d.); Simpkins et al. (2013).
[n]Diversi & Mecham. (2005); National Association for the Education of Young People. (2012, August); Council on Accreditation. (n.d.); Simpkins et al. (2013).

diversity in some of these structural factors, such as having program materials in multiple languages, cultural differences also include more subtle aspects. Modes of communication, such as flyers and e-mail, may be commonplace and effective for mainstream American families, but other forms of communication may be necessary to reach diverse groups. ASPs should ensure that their program is available and welcoming for all youth. Many of the commonly cited barriers of participation fall within structural factors.[24] Addressing these barriers is vital, but high-quality programs need to consider how to integrate diversity at the professional level.

ASP staff impact a number of factors related to youth development including sense of belonging and motivation to participate in ASPs. We believe that culturally competent ASP staff can better foster development in culturally diverse youth by applying interpersonal skills that reflect accurate knowledge and positive attitudes toward diverse cultures. Staff should also prevent any negative or discriminatory practices and interactions at both the staff–youth and youth–youth levels. Some Mexican-origin youth in our study have noted discriminatory interactions at both levels, but more often among peers. For example, one seventh grade boy said that although his leader was nice, "I got like racist jokes cracked about me [by peers]. I'm just like whatever."[25] Expanding staff's cultural knowledge, attitudes, and interpersonal skills through formal and informal training can help support positive cross-cultural beliefs and interactions.[26]

Tailoring cultural competence to meet local needs

It should be noted that cultural competence is not just about hiring bilingual staff or staff that match youth in terms of ethnicity. Those strategies are beneficial, but cultural competence is more complex. Cultural differences between youth and staff can emerge from divergent cultural practices, such as if the typical display of affection varies by cultures.[27] Bilingual staff may assist in communicating these cultural differences. However, true cultural competence

requires an acute understanding and positive sentiment toward a particular group's practices, values, and lifestyles.

Additionally, individuals within any single ethnic group can be quite diverse. For example, Latinos are the largest ethnic-minority group within the United States (17 percent of the total population; 51.9 million people), of which two-thirds are of Mexican descent.[28] Although people of Mexican descent share the same ethnicity and cultural heritage, Mexican-origin families in the United States are diverse in terms of their experience with ASPs, immigration (64 percent are US citizens), family income, and orientation toward mainstream American and Mexican cultural practices and values.[29] This diversity within ethnic groups and even within a particular neighborhood adds an additional layer of complexity. Although it can pose a challenge for staff, we believe that this initial investment is worthwhile. Unless staff understand the individuals they serve, they run the risk of designing a program that may not be meaningful to youth. For example, we have found that Mexican-origin seventh grade youths' preferences and experiences varied by context. In a largely White, middle-class school, some of the youth did not emphasize their heritage or as one mother explained "they don't wanna be Mexican. They are embarrassed of their culture."[30] Several families in this area also dealt with feelings of inferiority; as one mother explained, "I don't think we're middle class, we're low. Overall we live in this area, that supposedly is a higher [income] area and I think that many times [our kids] feel intimidated, like a little bit less."[31] These poignant examples illustrate the concerns of Mexican-origin youth in this particular school, which did not always apply to Mexican-origin youth in more ethnically concentrated schools in our study. In order to effectively address the developmental needs of these youth and design relevant programs, staff need to get to know the lives of youth in their specific community.

Although ASPs largely focus on youth participants, they also serve youths' families. Parents and youth can have variant language skills and cultural orientations. Among immigrant families, youth family members typically have stronger English language

skills and are more oriented to mainstream American cultural practices and values than adult family members.[32] Bilingual and/or bicultural staff may be better equipped to meet the potentially divergent needs of youth and parents. For example, a Mexican-origin boy noted that although he spoke English well, it helped to have a leader who spoke Spanish helped because "my dad doesn't understand English that much."[33] ASP staff must be familiar with the diversity across and within the families in their area in order to be most effective.[34] As such, ASPs may consider hiring practices that reflect parent and youth needs.

Final thoughts moving forward

Families in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse at unprecedented rates. Programs will need to consider how to bridge cultural and ethnic divides to ensure their sustainability and success. Our goal is not to dramatically redesign all programs to focus on teaching about culture or diversity. The landscape of ASPs is vast and includes programs with a variety of goals and content. In fact, the main focus of most programs is something other than teaching about culture or diversity; it is to teach a specific skill, like sports or music. We are not suggesting changing those goals. Rather, we would urge staff to consider the subtle ways culture matters for their program in order to strengthen their program in what they currently aim to achieve.

We believe that several strategies can be useful in designing culturally competent programs. One major step is developing staff knowledge, awareness, and appreciation of the diversity in the surrounding community. Program leaders should talk to the youth and families they serve, including those who do not attend, about their lives and what they want in an ASP. Because many programs primarily serve youth, integrating youth voice into the program content and policies will be particularly important.

To design and implement high-quality culturally competent programs, the burden cannot be placed solely on programs, many

of which are already stretched too thin. Financial and professional resources will need to be invested in this effort. It is important for youth development and program success that these efforts are carefully thought out and staff are well supported. Large statewide and national organizations might need to lead the charge in developing professional opportunities and materials for their local chapters. To be most effective, professional opportunities should include initial and ongoing staff training on cultural competence for their local community. Smaller, single-site programs may be able to capitalize on conversations with community partners or other professional trainings, such as for teachers at the local school. Developing these connections with other community-based organizations can deepen staff's knowledge of families in their area and might be helpful in hiring staff from the local community. Where there have been calls for regular school-day teacher training programs to prepare teachers to work effectively with culturally diverse students, fewer calls have been made for ASPs and staff to be trained in cultural competence.[35] It is time to bring cultural competence to the forefront in program design and the training of afterschool staff.

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Commentary

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AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS (ASPs) have the potential to make a transformative difference in the lives of the young people who participate. With an ever-growing literature regarding the role of ASPs in promoting positive youth development, it is clear that these programs must continue to be responsive to the increasingly diverse population of young people they serve.[1] A program's ability to address issues of cultural diversity is critical to fostering a young person's positive development. Moreover, an ASP's success is often dependent upon its ability to support the development of positive relationships between adults and young people. These positive relationships encourage young people to stay meaningfully engaged in the ASP thereby maximizing benefits for youth from ongoing participation. In addition, a young person's ability to form important relationships with staff and other young people may be deeply influenced by the ASP's ability to be closely attuned to the unique cultural needs of a particular young person or group of young people. Neglecting the cultural implications (for example, family expectations, family communication, and community values) of relationship building can lead the young person and his/her family to disengage from the program. Simpkins and Riggs (this volume) clearly identified that cultural competence is both relevant and essential to the success of ASPs and their ability to promote the positive development of young people.

Given the crucial role culture plays in all aspects of ASP program design and implementation, programs must first understand and then apply the awareness of cultural diversity to their work. This includes implementing specific program strategies focused on promoting family involvement with respect to the cultural values of the youth active in the day-to-day program. Organizations must

ensure that their policies and procedures reflect a focus on cultural competency, including hiring individuals who reflect the cultural values of the community. Recruiting, training, monitoring, and retaining these individuals will be essential to ensuring the success of the ASPs and ensuring the positive development of the young people who participate. Ongoing vigilance to ensure cultural competence is necessary for high-quality programming where young people can thrive.[2]

As an organization, the ASP can do much to influence the program through program goals, training, and expected outcomes. However, it is the staff who work with the young people each day who will need to be the eyes and ears for the program to ensure program success. Cultural competence requires staff to listen carefully to the young people in the program, to understand the world in which these young people live, and then respond accordingly. It is only then and then alone when young people feel heard and respected—that they develop a sense of belonging and this sense of belonging that leads to opportunities for positive development. It is this unique opportunity to hear and meet the cultural needs of young people in an ASP setting that is unlike any other context. It is this intentional focus on cultural competence within an ASP that allows the young people who participate the opportunity to gain the greatest benefit from participation in the program.

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