Youth Perspectives on Staff Turnover in Afterschool Programs

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Relationships with staff are crucial to participants' growth in youth development programs. These programs help young people develop social and emotional competencies including relationship building, defined as "the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017). In my work in afterschool programs, I experience firsthand how lasting relationships between staff and the youth and families they serve are central to the work. Staff become a touchpoint and a steady presence: connecting youth to opportunities, listening to them, and supporting them simply by being there.

However, staff are not always there. Rates of staff turnover in youth-serving organizations are extremely high—as high as 40 percent per year, according to the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition (2010).

This level of turnover leads to challenges not only for the employers, but also for participating youth. Efforts have been made to address the root problem by finding ways to retain staff. The nonprofit sector has discussed, among other strategies, offering higher pay, incentives, professional development, upward mobility, and other benefits that would encourage staff to stay (Parker, 2018). In the meantime, however, we have not spent much time finding out how young people feel about staff transitions or thinking about ways to support them when staff leave their program.

To help fill this need, I conducted research in the program in which I was working during my participation in the National Afterschool Matters Fellowship, asking youth and staff about participants' perspectives on staff transitions and on what they need

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to make transitions easier. My findings suggest ways programs can support youth through staff transitions to bolster their ability both to persist in the program and to build relationships with new staff.

Research on Relationships and Staff Turnover

Many positive outcomes for youth are attributable to relationships with caring adults. According to Murphey, Bandy, Schmitz, and Moore (2013), the benefits of positive relationships with caring adults include lower rates of bullying and of mental health issues, greater likelihood of engagement in school and afterschool opportunities, and improved persistence. Young people who have a relationship with at least one adult outside their family learn to overcome adversity, show a desire to learn new things, and have strong communication skills (Murphey et al., 2013). The study did not look at the longevity of adult–youth relationships or whether the consistency of the relationship affects outcomes; still, the findings support the focus youth programs put on building positive youth–staff relationships.

Grossman and Rhodes (2002) focused on how the duration of relationships with nonfamily adults affects positive youth outcomes. In a study of urban youth participants in Big Brothers Big Sisters programs, the authors found that youth–adult relationships lasting for 12 or more months elicited more social and emotional improvement than did shorter relationships. Young people who had shorter-term relationships of less than six months with their adult volunteers showed negative effects on well-being, including increased alcohol abuse. The researchers call for further examination of young people's feelings of rejection when mentors move on (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

Understanding the benefits of youth–adult relationships, youth development workers invest a lot of energy in building relationships that young people find trustworthy, supportive, and consistent. We also encourage program participants to invest in relationships with staff. What happens when those relationships come to an end because staff members leave their jobs?

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Laroche and Klein (2008) suggest that staff turnover affects participants by damaging their ability to build trust with adults. Borden, Schlomer, and Bracamonte Wiggs (2011) agree that regular staff turnover forces young people to try over and over again to create relationships with new staff. This negative experience affects new staff members as they come up against the challenge of trying to build relationships with youth who have developed a sense of mistrust. Sustained employment, these researchers suggest, could lead to stronger relationships between participants and staff (Borden et al., 2011).

A study by America's Promise Alliance (Center for Promise, 2015) explored the impact of adult–youth relationships on school persistence. Unlike the studies cited above, this one also explored young people's perspectives on their relationships with adults. The study suggests that youth who experience inconsistent and unstable relationships avoid seeking out relationships with adults, as they do not trust that the adults will be there in a supportive way over time (Center for Promise, 2015).

Context

To add to the field's understanding of the effects of staff turnover, and specifically of young people's own experience of staff turnover, I conducted research at my own program, a sports-based youth development program operating five sites in the Boston Public Schools. This program offered academic, athletic, and social and emotional development programming, as well as family engagement, for about 250 participants, ages 11 to 14, per year. It also worked with students from sixth grade all the way through their post-secondary pursuits.

One part of my job as family engagement coordinator was to help participants deal with staff turnover. My participation in the National Afterschool Matters Fellowship sponsored by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time gave me the opportunity to conduct research in my program on how youth experienced staff turnover.

My program was not unusual in experiencing significant staff turnover every year. Like many

programs, it relied on volunteers and service positions. Of 40 staff members, only 40 percent were full-time permanent employees. The other 60 percent were AmeriCorps volunteers, who typically stayed with the program for just a year. Turnover thus was built into the program structure. Full-time staff, meanwhile, faced long hours, demanding work, and other factors that led to burnout—which in turn led 10 percent or more of staff to leave every year.

Methods

Realizing that program leaders were expecting participants to accept staff changes without asking how they experienced those changes, I held three focus groups with eighth-grade students in the afterschool program. All 13 focus group participants were Boston Public Schools students who had participated in the afterschool program for two or three years during middle school and had expressed to me their willingness to discuss their program experiences. Parents also gave permission. These students hailed from the two program sites that had the highest rate of staff and AmeriCorps turnover between 2016 and 2018. I developed a focus group protocol that asked participants to reflect on their experiences when staff members left, to share their opinions, and to recommend ways the program could make staff transitions easier. I recorded the focus group discussions and then transcribed them. I then reviewed the transcriptions to identify common themes in the data, followed by another review to code the responses manually.

To get another perspective, I developed an online survey for program staff to ask about their experiences with students who were processing staff transitions. I recruited current and former staff by sharing the online survey with 48 staff and AmeriCorps volunteers who had been with the program between 2016 and 2018. In all, 23 current and former staff and AmeriCorps volunteers completed the survey, which was hosted on SurveyMonkey. About one-third of staff respondents worked at one of the two sites from which I recruited student focus group participants. Almost half (48 percent) said on the survey that they had been with the organization for more than one year and 43 percent that they had been with the organization for

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six months to one year. Nine percent were no longer with the organization. I supplemented SurveyMonkey's automatic tally of results with manual coding of responses to open-ended questions and with analysis of responses. The results illuminated participants' feelings about staff turnover and staff members' experience of how these feelings manifested in behavior. The responses also generated suggestions of ways to support students as they experience staff transitions.

Youth Perspectives

In the focus groups, I asked program participants about their feelings when staff left their site or the organization, how they responded to the loss, and what would have been helpful for them.

Participants reported on the range of emotions they felt when staff left. Young people in all three focus groups (nine of the 13 respondents) reported having negative feelings, including devastation, sadness, anger, frustration, loss, and lack of trust. One participant said, "I felt like I was losing a family member. It's hard to see them leave and see someone else come in and try to fill their space." Even though they experienced negative feelings, a few students also reported that they had at least some positive feelings about the transitions: They were happy for the staff member for moving on to something else or looking forward to the opportunity to meet new people. These findings indicate that at least some participants had mixed emotions about staff turnover.

When asked about the challenges they faced after staff turnover, the students in all three groups named changes in relationships or lack of connections with new staff. Some students expressed the opinion that the program felt different in some way after the departure of staff members.

In response to questions about what would make transitions easier, respondents agreed that they needed advance warning so they could prepare for changes, though they did not agree on how much time they would need. About a third of focus group participants said that they had considered quitting the program when staff members left. All focus group respondents were current program participants, so obviously they had remained in the program. All reported that they were happy with their decision. When asked to elaborate on factors that

influenced their decision to stay in the program, students cited the importance of facing challenges in life, sticking to the commitment they had made to the program, and giving new staff a chance.

Staff Perspectives on Youths' Experience

The challenges identified by the 23 staff who completed the complementary survey about youth responses to staff turnover were consistent with the challenges the students identified. The most common student behaviors or feelings staff selected from a list of possibilities were resistance to building relationships,

Figure 1. Staff observations of participant reactions to staff turnover

missing former staff, and trouble adjusting to program changes, as shown in Figure 1. More than half of the staff surveyed said that at least some students had quit the program after staff changes.

Asked about their own challenges in dealing with students after staff transitions, more than half of the staff respondents cited difficulties in building relationships with students. Other challenges included managing student behavior and maintaining student buy-in with the program, each of which was cited by more than one-third of staff respondents.

Strategies to Help Youth Deal with Staff Turnover

The youth focus group questions and staff survey both asked about strategies to help program participants handle staff turnover. The suggested strategies, shown in Table 1, focused on program consistency, communication, and relationship building.

Both students and staff agreed that giving young people a role in selecting new staff would make staff transitions a little easier on students. Students suggested practices that would allow them to get a sense of the candidates' personalities and how they interact with young people, such as being a part of interviews or mock program sessions with candidates. To these high-stakes strategies, focus group respondents added low-stakes ways they could be involved in finding candidates with whom they could feel comfortable, such as outlining the staff qualities that are important to them.

Similarly, staff expressed interest in including participants without making them part of final decisions—for example, by having them participate in interviews and practice program sessions or by having them meet candidates in advance. These suggestions could be considered high stakes, as participants could be disappointed if they build connections with candidates who do not actually get the 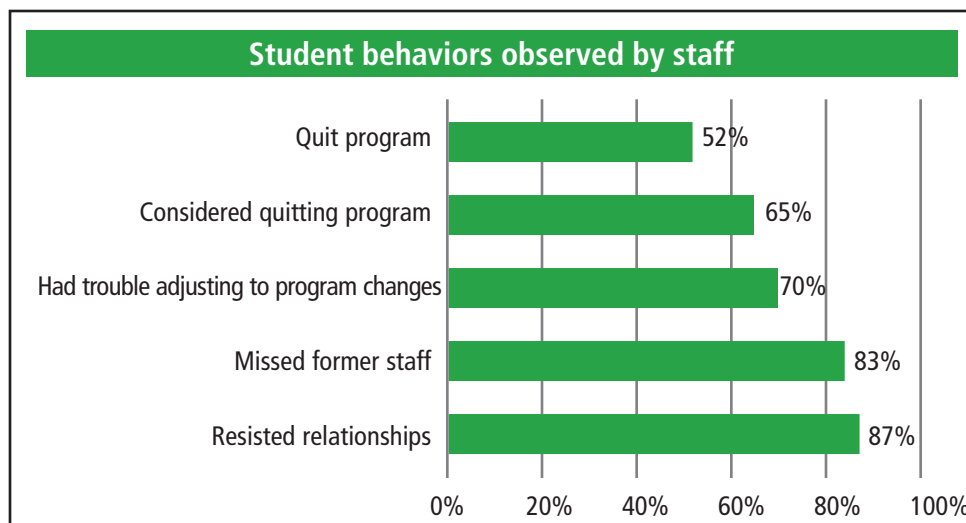job. Staff also suggested some lower-stakes ways to involve students in the hiring process, such as helping to create job descriptions and interview questions.

Limitations and Next Steps

The most important limitation of this study is that it focuses on one program and taps only a small number of respondents. In addition, comparison of data on staff turnover and youth attendance would more fully illuminate the connections focus group and survey participants made between staff turnover and youth dropout.

Larger and more rigorous studies on the effects of staff turnover on youth would be of enormous benefit to the field. Another area for further research is exploration of youth involvement in hiring practices and the results of that involvement. The specifics of involvement could include, for example, how many and which young people are included in hiring practices,

Topic Area	Strategy	Suggested by
Program consistency	Maintain program elements that students identify as important	Students and staff
	Seek student input on program changes	Students
Communication	Make sure outgoing and new staff share information with each other	Students and staff
	Provide as much notice as possible about staff transitions	Students and staff
	Communicate clearly and honestly with students	Staff
Relationship building	Provide opportunities for students to meet new staff along with staff they already know	Students and staff
	Offer intentional time for students and staff to get to know each other	Students and staff
	Establish celebrations or rituals to say goodbye	Staff
	Create and maintain strong relationships among remaining staff and students	Staff

Table 1. Strategies for supporting program participants through staff transitions

the extent of their involvement, how much influence have on final decisions, and many other questions.

The youth development field needs to work on the root causes of high staff turnover, such as low pay and staff burnout. In the meantime, we should also take measures to support young people during staff transitions rather than assuming they will easily adjust. The practices outlined in this article may help participants cope when they lose staff who are important to them. Particularly as we value afterschool programs as places where young people can build strong connections that will help them thrive, we must not take lightly the effect of the loss of relationships that matter to program participants.

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