Social and Emotional Learning in Afterschool Settings

Equity Evaluations, Recommendations, and Critiques

**Veronica Benavides, Shakirra Meghjee, Tasha Johnson,
Aasha Joshi, Christine Ortiz, and Victor Rivera**

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has proven to be an effective conduit to improved attendance scores, grades, and graduation rates; to adaptive behaviors and gainful employment in adulthood; and to a wide variety of other measurable factors spanning the spectrum of human adaptiveness and wellness (Aspen Institute, 2018).

Although SEL has been integrated into many school-based programs to support student success, afterschool or out-of-school time (OST) programs are uniquely suited to SEL development. OST programs provide the opportunity for niche, interest-based projects that are emotionally engaging for youth; they also foster close adult relationships and opportunities for youth agency and leadership, among many other features (Olson, 2018).

SEL can have an incredibly powerful impact on equity efforts. It can enhance academic, emotional, social, and career wellness—areas of youth and human development that are all directly and severely affected by inequity. That said, the application of SEL to OST is rife with equity issues and concerns. These considerations are critically important in light of the reality of systemic oppression—the context in which everything "social" exists. One cannot consider the

VERONICA BENAVIDES, EdLD, is the founder of Benavides Consulting.

SHAKIRRA MEGHJEE is director of growth at Equity Meets Design.

TASHA JOHNSON, PhD, is senior director of the Character Development Learning Institute at YMCA of the USA.

AASHA JOSHI, PhD, is director of research, analytics, and insights at YMCA of the USA.

CHRISTINE ORTIZ, EdLD, is the founder of Equity Meets Design.

VICTOR RIVERA is manager of strategic priorities at YMCA of the USA.

whole child or support their SEL and development without first understanding the historical context that shaped their experience and the systemic sociopolitical and circumstantial forces at play in their life.

Our exploration of the intersections of SEL and equity in afterschool environments results from a partnership between the YMCA and Equity Meets Design, an organization dedicated to delivering equitable OST programs to youth and communities. The first step in exploring models and promising practices for equity was a comprehensive research synthesis. This article presents key findings and recommendations from our research into existing scholarship and best practices. First, we outline the rationale, research questions, and methodology. Then we present our findings on major themes in the literature. Next, an equity "deep dive" explores the intersections of SEL and equity in OST settings. We conclude with recommendations to the field.

Rationale

Communities and neighborhoods across the United States are changing rapidly in many ways. Newcomers are settling in communities of all sizes and demographics. Individuals of different abilities, faiths, gender identities, and sexual orientations are making their voices heard in larger numbers than ever. Meanwhile, around the world, technology is shrinking distances among people, places, and organizations; no event is isolated. What happens halfway around the world affects everyone. The YMCA has positioned itself to drive and support these changes, domestically and internationally.

Evolving communities represent new opportunities for the YMCA, a global organization that promotes social responsibility, youth development, and healthy living across diverse communities. YMCA staff understand that, when they respond effectively to changing community needs, they are positioned to ensure access, engagement, and inclusion for all to address pressing issues. Intentional engagement and outreach strategies allow the YMCA to reach diverse, isolated, and underserved populations. These strategies build bridges to serve the needs of all populations in new and better ways. Being inclusive elevates the "Y experience" for everyone who walks through the doors. In this way, the YMCA advances its cause to build, rebuild, and strengthen community.

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As the YMCA works to build inclusive OST settings for youth, it has intentionally focused on equity. In partnership with Equity Meets Design, an organization dedicated to redesigning inequity and racism in the U.S., the YMCA explored the conditions and resources needed to advance equity for youth through OST programming.

Research Questions

Research shows that SEL programming in OST settings leads to improved outcomes for youth across a variety of measures (Durlak & Weissberg, 2013). A comprehensive meta-analysis of afterschool programs found that OST program participants demonstrated increases in academic performance, positive feelings and self-perceptions, and bonding to school (Durlak et al., 2010).

In an effort to design inclusive OST settings, YMCA leaders sought to understand ways to ensure equity in experiences and outcomes for youth. This research synthesis examines the intersections of SEL and equity in OST settings. The following research questions guided the design and implementation of the literature review:
- What do effective SEL practices, policies, and principles look like in OST settings?
- What do equitable practices, policies, and principles look like in OST settings?

In answering these research questions, we found few resources on the intersection of SEL and equity. The following research question emerged from our discovery of this gap in the literature:
- In what ways do SEL and equity practices, policies, and principles intersect in OST settings?

We explore this final research question in the equity deep dive section of this article.

Methods

To answer the research questions, we explored existing scholarship at the intersection of SEL, afterschool programming, and equity. We grounded our review in Equity Meets Design's conceptual framework for equitable and anti-racist design, shown in Figure 1.

We followed the scoping review method (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) for our analysis of the literature. We searched for terms related to SEL, OST, inclusion, and equity. The literature we reviewed included

Figure 1. EquityXdesign Framework
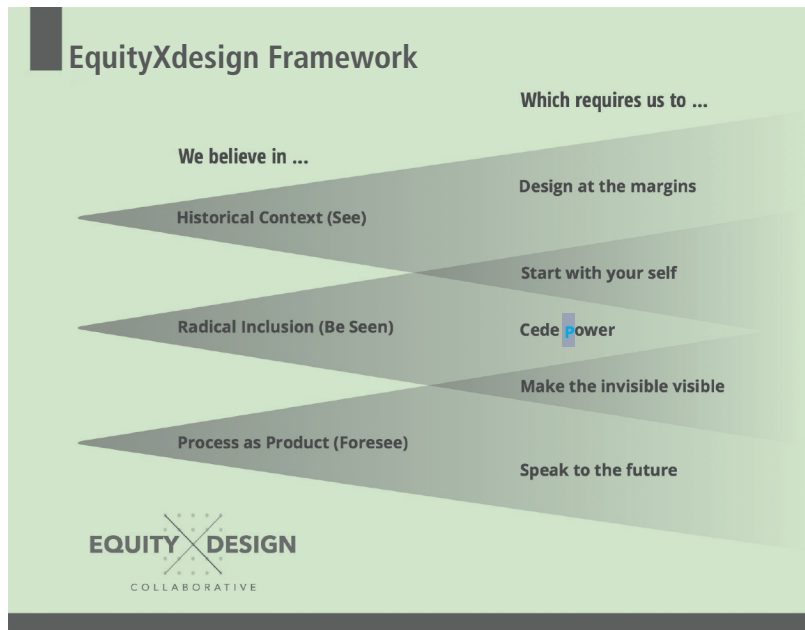
Source: EquityXdesign, 2016. Reprinted with permission.

peer-reviewed articles as well as policy, research, and evaluation reports published by practitioners.

Findings: Three Themes

The review of literature elevated three interconnected themes regarding effective and equitable SEL practices, policies, and principles in OST settings. Figure 2 illustrates these three components.

Customization and Specificity

Effectively applying SEL in afterschool environments requires consideration of the unique characteristics and implications of OST. Jones and colleagues (2017)

Figure 2. Advancing Equity in OST Through Social and Emotional Learning

state that OST practitioners must have a working understanding of different approaches to SEL, gain clarity about exactly how they are supporting SEL skills, and be intentional about collaborating with school partners. When OST programs are deliberate about how they address and support SEL, outcomes improve, and there is more alignment among SEL efforts and expectations across settings. Furthermore, components of SEL programs should be compatible with the organization's mission and pedagogical approach and with the needs of the specific population being served (Jones et al., 2017). Because OST settings have smaller blocks of time to work with than schools do, OST SEL programs should be engaging and should match the purpose and character of the organization in order to have the greatest impact on participants in the time available (Gullotta, 2015).

Similarly, programs must balance being adaptable and being consistent; they must offer enough variability in program content to continuously engage youth, while still being consistent enough to be manageable and sustainable (Gullotta, 2015). Devaney (2015) adds that, for SEL to have an impact, program quality must be high and young participants must engage for at least 30 to 40 days per year. Equity rightsizing necessitates that participants influence program changes. They must have authentic youth development experiences that are facilitated by people who represent their cultural and contextual backgrounds and are skilled in equity pedagogy.

Standardization and Measurement

Lack of standardization, measurement, and quality control in OST settings adversely impacts the effectiveness of SEL interventions. Although the effects of OST programming on school achievement and on SEL outcomes are well documented (Olson, 2018), SEL OST programs, by and large, lack benchmarks and metrics, making it difficult to focus content and measure effectiveness. Several scholars suggest that effective and reliable measurement is necessary to enable OST organizations to customize programming, engage in continuous improvement, and evaluate program impact (Naftzger & Terry, 2018; Noam et al., 2018).

Despite the clear benefits of SEL in OST settings, the outcomes and impact are difficult to measure (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Researchers struggle to isolate program effects due to factors like sporadic participant attendance and differences in implementation among sites. Therefore, Hurd and Deutsch (2017) recommend expanding measurement criteria; they also warn against the high-stakes testing culture that shapes many school settings. Equity pedagogues have long advocated against broad targets for mastery and excellence levied against groups that have historically been marginalized and oppressed. The OST field, and the YMCA specifically as a legacy organization, has an opportunity to slant the trajectory toward justice by embracing inclusive, human-centered, and equitable assessment and evaluation methods that will inform high-quality youth development for all.

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Effective OST program evaluation relies on youth satisfaction surveys, strong quality assessment and improvement practices, and decisions to measure only a few variables at once (Devaney, 2015). Although there are rigorously validated tools to measure SEL outcomes (Wilson-Ahlstrom et al., 2014), only a handful have been tested in afterschool settings and are free for use. In light of these limitations, Devaney (2015) argues for SEL measurement tools that are explicitly designed for afterschool settings.

A 2003 report on afterschool equity, access, and diversity trends in California (Scharf, 2003) found that data collection and analysis efforts generally did not focus on equity issues. Less than 30 percent of 273 surveyed programs collected the kind of data needed to assess how well different types of youth were being served. An even smaller subgroup, only 11 percent, did any analysis of differences among groups (Scharf, 2003). When OST programs are encouraged and guided to analyze participant data by subgroups, they often find significant differences. More recent studies have found that, despite advancements in data collection, many OST programs struggle to measure social and emotional competencies and equity indicators (Spielberger et al., 2016; Noam et al., 2018). Youth development program influencers and decision-makers need equity-focused data to define targeted interventions, redirect resources to youth in greatest need, and recalibrate strategic goals to support underserved and underrepresented groups.

Devaney (2015) defines multiple frameworks for approaching SEL and encourages OST SEL programs to carefully choose one framework based on their goals and on the needs of their students. Programs should clearly define a minimum number of benchmarks on which to base their measurement of the framework's efficacy. These frameworks could include noncognitive skills, 21st century skills, and character development (Devaney, 2015).

Equity and Trauma-Informed Practice

SEL supporters advocate personalized learning and whole-child development. However, without sufficient equity consciousness and training for staff and teachers, SEL interventions run the risk of manifesting biases and perpetuating problematic perspectives and dynamics. According to the Aspen Institute (2018), an equity-focused and emotionally intelligent approach to SEL includes:

- Improving learning environments, reducing bias, and building asset-based mindsets in students and staff
- Improving culture and climate, which are critical for SEL
- Directly addressing stereotype threats and implicit bias
- Supporting staff in dealing with social and emotional assets and needs and with secondary trauma and stress
- Using resources for enrichment rather than for remedial academic instruction

Stafford-Brizard (2018) states that adults can play a significant role in modulating the behavior of students if they are aware of possible triggers so they can design routines and structures accordingly. In a similar vein, Reeve (2004) discusses the profound benefit to students when teachers support student autonomy. Such support is relatively uncommon, especially in education environments with significant equity challenges, but it fosters creativity, imagination, and curiosity, in addition to competence and self-

authorship (Reeve, 2004). Additionally, researchers and practitioners emphasize the importance of taking a trauma-informed approach and of empowering participants and staff to support one another to succeed (Afterschool Alliance, 2018).

Furthermore, OST programs can't foster SEL in communities where they don't exist. Communities of color, specifically black and brown communities, have proportionally fewer OST programs than white communities (Pittman et al., 2003). The OST programs that do exist tend to be underfunded and to lack richness, depth, and diversity of activities; most are in dire need of more training and resources (Jones et al., 2017). In California in 2003, the number of OST programs serving predominantly African-American youth was proportionally lower than for other youth populations, and the OST programs that were available had lower budgets and fewer enrichment components (Scharf, 2003).

Research on the equity and access of OST programming in the U.S. reveals that low-income and rural communities are often underserved, immigrant youth are often underrepresented, awareness and inclusion of LGBTQ+ youth populations is often lacking, training on how to serve children with physical disabilities is almost nonexistent, and interesting programs for older youth are rare (Olson, 2018; Pittman et al., 2003; Scharf, 2003). These programmatic barriers are compounded by societal barriers such as lack of access to reliable transportation.

Equity Deep Dive

This deep dive examines the intersections of equity and SEL practices, policies, and principles in OST settings.

> It is well known that many students face adversity outside of school—in housing and food insecurity, inadequate access to health care, and disproportionate punishment by the criminal justice system, for example—which impedes their ability to learn in school. Too often, however, students of color also face adversity inside of school, including lower expectations, harsh disciplinary approaches, negative school environments, and racial microaggressions that disconnect rather than connect them to school. (Aspen Institute, 2018, p. 2)

The Aspen Institute's statement about schools can also be OST settings, where children can face the same challenges. It illustrates the unfortunate paradox of applying SEL to marginalized student populations without taking a socially and emotionally conscientious approach to understanding and honoring the systemic impacts of inequity in young people's in-school and OST experiences. A truly effective and holistic SEL approach requires rigorous examination of all forces of inequity, both exterior and interior, in order to neutralize the impact of those forces.

Some SEL advocates champion greater reporting, administrative coordination, and shared interfaces between OST environments and schools (Olson, 2018). Such efforts are certainly important for SEL OST standardization and quality control. Clear goals and metrics that align with a shared vision allow continuous reflection and improvement and enable identification of existing or emerging inequities. Additionally, programs that define success targets for participants from marginalized groups need increased access to quality improvement tools and resources to support practitioners' professional development (Pittman et al., 2003).

Although tracking and reporting can be linked to improved outcomes for children, programs and stakeholders must critically evaluate the purpose and impact of success targets and measurement practices to see if they truly serve the needs of marginalized student populations. Pittman et al. (2003) state:

> There is enormous pressure to find ways to maintain or increase the numbers served and to link outcomes to academic performance and, for middle and high school youth, risk reduction. These pressures make it all the more important that access and equity questions be asked and answered. Without a clear focus on who is being reached and how they are being supported, the answer to the "which third?" question [that is, which young people will benefit] is likely to become "the third that is easiest to reach and easiest to teach." (p. 5)

This statement illustrates the ongoing nature of equity issues surrounding SEL and OST environments. For example, OST programs committed to the development of the whole child often emphasize physical health and safety (Stafford-Brizard, 2018), as these are prerequisites for learning and thriving. For many black and brown children, these foundational factors are not a given (Aspen Institute, 2018). Because properly resourced and effectively practiced SEL programs have enormous potential to ameliorate the effects of systemic oppression on youth of color,

compounding and cyclical differences in access to high-quality SEL OST programming become even more critical.

In general, the efficacy of SEL OST interventions is mediated by the quality of the program and the level of youth participation and engagement (Devaney, 2015). The SAFE framework—sequenced, active, focused, and explicit SEL activities—gives OST programs evidence-based practices to help them better manage the quality of their SEL initiatives (CASEL, 2020). SAFE focuses on progressive skill development, with an emphasis on SEL skills, and on active student engagement in learning these skills (Durlak et al., 2010). For youth who face opportunity gaps, such a logical, sequential, and predictable model of engagement, interaction, and instruction presents a platform in which teachers and learners can customize learning, explore development in authentic settings, and model and explicate what excellence looks and sounds like.

The issue of equity for OST programs is nuanced and multifaceted. Pittman et al. (2003) outline the stances common to programs that attend to equity issues: "cultural embeddedness, support for identity development, cross-cultural and anti-bias learning, strong youth leadership, and staffing practices designed to directly respond to diversity and equity" (p. 4). These program characteristics are less concrete, more complex, and more expensive than more tangible elements such as safety and recreation (Pittman et al., 2003).

Despite these challenges, some SEL OST programs represent equity in both their internal operations and their external words and deeds. For example, the McKinley Afterschool Program of the Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Center in New York challenges students to work on activities that address local community issues (Afterschool Alliance, 2018). One team of students chose to educate their community about gun violence. Their initiatives included community performances, a documentary against gun violence, and a virtual town hall (Afterschool Alliance, 2018). This type of programming provides a space for strong youth leadership and a platform for positive identity development.

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In another example outlined by the Afterschool Alliance (2018), the Boys & Girls Club of Souhegan in Milford, New Hampshire, began a youth empowerment service team through which middle schoolers committed themselves to the cause of reducing opioid overdoses. The team designed an action plan focused on prevention and mental health and hosted a youth summit for local schools and community organizations (Afterschool Alliance, 2018).

The YMCA has similar examples. Some local affiliates offer camps targeted to youth of color, youth with exceptionalities, or LGBTQ+ youth. Where local affiliates identify these programs as priorities, the YMCA national office provides evidence-based support and curates critical insights. The national organization also has a "grow your own" pipeline leadership fellowship and strategic staffing practices designed to support diversity, equity, and inclusion.

These and similar equity-informed, socially just, and culturally and contextually relevant operations are potential arenas in which marginalized youth and adult practitioners can transform life outcomes for the next generation of leaders and learners. Without an equity focus, the phrase "social and emotional learning" can be an empty promise at best; at worst, it contributes to disparate access. Considering systemic oppression and the development of the whole child together can enable OST programs to integrate SEL and equity. When they fully serve children at the margins, they can also better serve the youth population at large.

Recommendations

This literature synthesis reveals that the priorities of SEL and equity initiatives in OST are complementary. Research shows that the integration of SEL and equity is essential to establishing inclusive and just OST experiences for youth. However, a disconnect persists between SEL programming and the practical application of principles of inclusion and equity. Building on our research, we suggest four considerations for OST programs as they design SEL programming.

Align program implementation and organizational strategy with the mission and character of the organization. Programs must deeply examine,

adjust, and align program components like mission, population served, stakeholder needs and strengths, pedagogical approach, and staffing decisions to ensure that participants experience impactful SEL OST programming. Many OST programs are grounded in equitable missions and visions. However, program implementation can stray from the mission due to funding and other factors. Therefore, practitioners must maintain a laser focus on stakeholder needs, characteristics, and desires and must act in alignment with their mission and purpose.

Choose appropriate SEL frameworks and specific metrics based on participant needs and program goals. Measurements of the effectiveness of SEL programming should reveal to what degree and how well different types of participants are served so that programs can engage in continuous improvement driven by data. An equity perspective on measurement includes asking participants what they think by, for example, fielding youth satisfaction surveys. Quality assessment and continuous improvement practices must examine the impact of SEL program practices on specific subgroups of participants. An equity perspective therefore includes pushing for more accurate measures of the effectiveness of SEL interventions among subgroups. All of these aspects of an inclusive perspective on measurement are critical to equitable implementation of SEL both in individual OST programs and at scale in the practice community at large. More intentional benchmarks and measurement practices can help to unlock the potential and potency of SEL.

Apply an equity lens to all proposed SEL interventions. Equity-focused OST programming supports positive identity development, cultural responsiveness, and student-led learning. To ensure that SEL activities help children at the margins, OST programs must provide equity training for staff and volunteers. Personal reflections on positional privilege and power are a vital part of such training. Program leaders must invest in improving the climate and culture of SEL programming through transparent conversations about the intersections of SEL and equity. To support the social and emotional development of the whole child, program staff must understand the historical context of children's lives and the systemic forces that affect them. Furthermore, program leaders should adopt intentional staffing practices to support equity, which includes hiring former program participants and other members of the immediate community.

Address systemic oppression explicitly. Tradi-tional OST programming can solidify the status quo of systemic oppression. From barriers related to fees, transportation, and lack of community partners to the absence of awareness of inclusion, difference, and ex-ceptionalities, traditional OST practices must change in a fundamental way. In addition to examining and addressing systemic inequities embodied in policies and practices, programs and OST networks must work intentionally to transform adult skills, attitudes, and behaviors. Individuals contribute to the larger system. Therefore, changes on an individual level—for exam-ple, in the form of heightened awareness of microag-gressions or knowledge of strategies for culturally re-sponsive programming—will undoubtedly contribute to transformative system-level change.

Giving Voice to the Voiceless Changemakers

We conducted a comprehensive literature review as part of the YMCA's organizational and community commitment to continuous improvement, diversity and inclusion, and high-quality youth development. This synthesis reveals the complexity of the charge to youth development leaders to positively influence the lives of 21st century learners.

Collaboration is a key ingredient in bringing an equity lens to bear on SEL programming. For example, the YMCA's partnership with Equity Meets Design gives voice to voiceless changemakers in the struggle for social justice and equality while invoking the spirit of culture and community. The example of our two organizations, one legacy and the other entrepreneurial, may inspire other OST organizations and networks to embrace the many intersections of SEL and equity as they maintain their relentless focus on meaningful youth development.

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