

A young girl with pink and yellow unicorn face paint is looking at a smartphone. The background is a colorful, abstract pattern of green, blue, and yellow.

The Magic of Afterschool

Raising the Next Generation of Resilient Unicorns

Katie Svaicer

As I was observing an afterschool program, I was struck with the ease of which a group of elementary-age children transitioned from one plan to another because of a last-minute room change. I myself had just experienced frustration with the same change merely because it meant I had to move my belongings to another space.

In contrast, these children moved quickly, with no apparent signs of frustration, anger, or anxiety, from their usual classroom to another room. They were unfazed, even without their supplies or familiar setup, without assigned seats, and with their regular schedule already interrupted. Then I watched their instructor walk in, relaxed and unflustered. She was

clearly ready to amend her plan, though she didn't have her supplies in this room. The children were smiling and laughing; they had adapted and were eager to continue their photography class. They were as ready and excited to learn as their instructor was to teach.

That moment was an example of resilience, one of the key attributes of afterschool programs, educators, and participants. The instructor smoothly embraced the last-minute change, calmly modified her plans, and didn't let the change impede her ability to teach a great lesson. She modeled resilience for program participants in a real-life situation that was happening to them as well. Then those participants also practiced

KATIE SVAICER is program manager of tuition-based afterschool and engagement at Youth Guidance in Chicago, where she has worked for 16 years in many levels of direct service and leadership. She has also contracted with various arts organizations throughout Chicago. She developed this essay as part of her participation in NIOST's Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship.

resilience as they adapted without aggravation or hesitation. They didn't let the sudden change interrupt their learning, their enthusiasm for photography, or their plans for the rest of the afternoon. This last-minute setback became a learning opportunity. None of it was planned or rehearsed. And yet the schedule change became an opportunity to learn how to move on, keep one's composure, and maintain positivity—in a word, a lesson in resilience. It was pure afterschool magic!

Resilience as a Key Social and Emotional Competency

As we nurture a new generation of youth into the leaders of the future, we are learning more and more about the importance of social and emotional competence. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a hot topic in teaching philosophy—the latest “it girl” of education. In today's world, every person must be able to work with and live among all different kinds of people from all walks of life. Social and emotional competence is what enables individuals to function and thrive among people different from themselves. It gives them resilience to overcome obstacles, no matter how large or small, to reach their highest potential.

Children learn critical SEL skills through their experiences. A child who skins their knee while learning to ride their bike gets back on to try again, even though the fall was painful and scary. Another child realizes, perhaps for the first time, that not everyone will like them and that some people may not be their friend. With help, they can learn that, as long as people can be respectful to each other, not being friends is OK.

As society comes to understand the importance of SEL, schools and afterschool programs are working to incorporate deliberate activities to help students sharpen social and emotional competencies, including resilience. Sometimes it seems like we're trying, for external reasons, to check specific boxes on our list of popular and necessary skills we need to teach. For schoolteachers, those boxes may include how they are evaluated, how the school or district looks at such issues as suspensions and expulsions, and what their administrator or community expects of them. For afterschool professionals, the boxes that

need to be checked may be tied to securing grant money, showing school principals the legitimacy of our work, or accumulating favorable data to present to funders. We sometimes spend so much energy proving ourselves through the deliberate practices we incorporate to achieve SEL outcomes that we forget the skills we demonstrate and promote in our work every day.

The beauty and nuance of our work lies in the inherent qualities that make afterschool magic. Afterschool is where everything comes together, like the last piece of a giant, complicated, politically charged, under-resourced, underestimated, barely funded puzzle. This is where the big picture is finally visible: a landscape where young people learn through new experiences that are unlike what they get during the school day, thanks to flexible programs that allow them to explore subjects that interest them and that don't have the underlying pressure of performance or grades attached. The afterschool program schedule values peer interactions and classroom comradery as well as youth-led decision making. The environment is ever-changing because it adapts to the needs and wants of each group of young people. The adult leaders, who aren't necessarily traditional teachers, aim to build relationships with participants and support them in their needs.

We sometimes spend so much energy proving ourselves through the deliberate practices we incorporate to achieve SEL outcomes that we forget the skills we demonstrate and promote in our work every day.

In this magical environment, which is designed to enable participants to strive at their own levels, opportunities for social and emotional growth abound. Even in programs that focus on academic support, the pressures of school-day tests, expectations, and performance are removed. Afterschool has the freedom and flexibility to offer a wide, diverse range of programming in innovative and nontraditional ways that are rich with opportunities

for participants to sharpen their SEL skills through practice. For example, programming is often planned and led by participating youth. Young people in different age groups have the unique opportunity to learn and play together, and participants may have the option to focus on their hobbies and passions. In their everyday afterschool interactions, participants may be observing and absorbing more real-life SEL skills than they do in deliberately planned SEL activities.

One SEL skill that afterschool programming is particularly good at nurturing is resilience. Research has shown that young people often learn resilience through informal relationships with community members. As Bonnie Benard (2004) said, “One of the major findings from resilience research is the power of informal mentors—neighbors, friends, parents, teachers, or anyone who takes the time to care.” For children in afterschool programming, some of those relationships are with their afterschool mentors and instructors. Because these relationships are based in programming that focuses on enrichment, encourages interaction, and is often driven by youth voice, the opportunity to model resilience is intrinsically embedded in the core of afterschool programming.

Why Afterschool Is So Good at Resilience

Afterschool gives adults frequent opportunities to model adaptability and resilience, simply because the afterschool environment is constantly changing. Think about the general structure of many afterschool programs: Space is often limited and may be assigned by an outside entity; supplies are often donated; programming is often inspired by youth and planned and led by vendors or staff; participants may come and go at different times every day; staff retention may be difficult; and funding can come and go in yearly, monthly, or even weekly cycles. Successful professionals in the field of afterschool programming must be flexible and able to multitask, solve problems creatively, and carry on with the mission under adverse conditions. In other words, we must be resilient.

I love to refer to afterschool professionals as *unicorns*. I was introduced to this comparison in a training years ago conducted by Leslie Beller, founder and CEO of MHA Labs in Chicago. She uses the word *unicorns* for afterschool professionals because we are workhorses who perform magic daily. No matter how busy and demanding this job can be, we find ways every day to make it work for participants. If that isn't resilience, I don't know what is!

To be successful in this field, we must be able to change spaces at the last minute to accommodate

schedule conflicts. We must be able to facilitate projects with the supplies we have rather than the supplies we want or even need. We must be able to create programming that meets the unique needs of a specific community, school, grade, or class—or sometimes even an individual child. We must create an environment that is not disrupted when participants leave early; projects must be flexible enough to accommodate fluctuating attendance. When staff members are absent or quit unexpectedly, program managers must be able to move staff around, and frontline staff may need to work with different groups. Program leaders must be able to run programming with less funding than they expected. All these tasks require resilience.

Not everyone can handle the rapid changes and split-second decision making with the resilience this work requires. Those people never quite earn their unicorn horns, so to speak. They tend not to last in this field.

Modeling Resilience for Program Participants

The afterschool professionals who earn their horns, the ones who can adapt to our field's ever-changing circumstances, are the ones who model for program participants what it means to be resilient. As with any significant adult in their lives, children observe and absorb the ways their afterschool facilitators deal with adverse situations. Seeing how adults display resilience when facing difficult situations shows participants how to deal with the hardships they inevitably will face.

Young people often have unique relationships with adults in their afterschool programs. Those adults occupy a sweet spot: They are authority figures, but they can support each child's individual needs and wants. Because they can customize what happens in their classrooms, they can connect with participants on a personal level. They often serve as role models and confidants.

This trusting relationship is what enables afterschool facilitators to model resilience (and other SEL skills) simply by doing what they do every day in their ever-changing context. Often they are demonstrating resilience without either themselves or the young people being aware of it.

The afterschool professionals who earn their horns, the ones who can adapt to our field's ever-changing circumstances, are the ones who model for program participants what it means to be resilient.

Perhaps we can take the time to become even more aware of the example we are setting as afterschool leaders and facilitators in order to make our modeling even more effective in helping participants learn resilience. If we point out to participants the resilience they exhibit daily in response to changes in their afterschool program, they can develop a self-awareness that gives them confidence to access a tool they now know they possess. Knowing that they know how to carry on with photography class after a last-minute location change can help them face larger adversities. Having demonstrated resilience, they now know that they are capable of resilience. We can help participants grow and give them confidence by showing them that they already use resilience and other SEL skills.

In the uncertainty of the world in which our young people are growing up—the world they will eventually lead—resilience is more important than ever. Well-rounded and successful human beings need the ability to work with people in all their differences; they need to be able to change plans, respond on the fly, and solve problems creatively. One of the ways we can support program participants to achieve success in school and in life is to do our daily unicorn magic. When we are told *no*, when circumstances change, when resources are taken away, we work harder than ever to continue to serve program participants. Simply by overcoming these obstacles, we model resilience. We move forward creatively, bravely, and strongly, showing our young people how to tap into the magic by becoming resilient unicorns themselves.

Reference

Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. WestEd.