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*A Needs Assessment of Butts County after-school Programs and their
Inclusivity*

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the
School of Human Ecology

By

Gracie Thompson

Under the mentorship of *Thomas Sweeney*

After-school programs have proven themselves to be a fantastic way for students to gain extra learning and social skills, while not in the usual school setting. Another benefit is to increase physical activity, to lessen the chance of childhood obesity. In Butts county, more specifically Daughtry Elementary School, there is currently an after-school program, but it does not have much of a structure- recreationally or at all. This poses a hidden problem for the students in the school system who may have no one to motivate them to get active, or no one to make them do any kind of outside socializing. By assessing the current needs of the students at Daughtry Elementary school, recommendations were made to open the possibility of integrating an inclusive, recreationally based after-school program- should they choose to do so. In order to do this, Zoom interviews were conducted to fully understand the student's, teacher's, and parent's needs at the school. The interviews addressed any roadblocks for not already having an inclusive program and the benefits for the students specifically at DES that an inclusive, programmed after-school program would bring. Currently, most after-school programs do not allow students who have special needs or behavior issues to attend. The research conducted here found that the current roadblocks are staffing, funding, and training. By having an after-school program in place, we are adhering to a student's emotional, physical, and behavioral needs.

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Introduction

After-school programs have proven themselves to be an integral part of an elementary student's success. This is an opportunity for them to get more active, to get more homework done, and to socialize. Having the option to go and interact with peers or have extra play time is something that students need on a fundamental level. When the alternative is going home alone or never getting any physical activity, the consequences of not experiencing an after-school program can be detrimental (Kinder, 2019). This project will assess the benefits children and parents could enjoy from an inclusive, structured, well programmed after-school program at Daughtry Elementary School.

The importance of after-school programs is widely recognized in the recreation industry. They offer a vast range of benefits such as increased physical activity, social interaction with peers, and a lower probability of acquiring bad habits from prolonged time spent unsupervised (Beets, 2012). After-school programs also offer academic benefits, such as students being able to have uninterrupted time for homework, and an opportunity to receive extra help from the teachers present. The absence of programs like this can have many negative impacts on students and parents. For students, this means that they may be going home to no parents and have a higher chance of getting into a dangerous situation. For parents, they may either accept the fact that their children are home alone, or they will have to leave their job to pick up their child.

When there is structure present, the kids are able to go to after-school every day looking forward to knowing what they are going to do. They also are able to participate in structured play, which is detrimental to the well-being of children (Maslow, 1943). In

Kinder's 2019 study, it is stated that "the findings also indicate structured PA opportunities allow children to accumulate MVPA (Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity). Through different forms, activities structured or organized to increase PA can assist children with meeting the national PA recommendations, including the ability to maximize the benefits received" (Kinder, 2019) Another important piece of after-school program is their inclusivity. This is regarding students with disabilities. In a lot of after-school programs, students with special needs are not allowed to attend these programs. Right now, only one student with special needs participates in the after-school program at Daughtry Elementary School. However, the benefits that after-school could offer students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are tremendous. Increased social integration is quite possibly the biggest benefit of all. This project will offer a needs assessment for Daughtry Elementary School and suggestions as to how they could begin a more inclusive after-school program.

Literature Review

Because the importance of after-school programs is widely recognized across the field of recreation and education, there is a plethora of research that has already been done to support the argument of benefits from after-school. Through my own personal research, I have found a great deal of academic articles that discuss the benefits of after-school programs. Ranging from physical activity levels in students that participate in after-school (Beets, 2012) to the benefits students with Down Syndrome receive from these programs (Young, 2016), these sources discuss all elements of my personal project

and I believe them to be essential in my research. The biggest facet of my research is the tremendous benefits after-school programs can offer.

Physical Activity as a Benefit

The prior research I have found on the topic of after-school benefits is impressive. I have found the most resources concerning physical activity as a benefit. In M. Beets' article entitled "Physical Activity of children attending after-school programs", he and his co-investigators carried out a very interesting experiment. They gave children pedometers to wear to observe how many steps they acquired while at an after-school program. They set a guideline for 4600 steps per child and found that the students on average only hit 2944 steps. He concluded that an efficient after-school program would need to offer 3.4 hours of physical activity a day to allow the students to hit that goal (Beets, 2012). By using this information, I can conclude that an after-school program is possibly the only time students really get a chance to be physically active. If they can go all day long and not hit at least 3000 steps on average, then they are in desperate need for more opportunities to be active. A good, efficient after-school program can offer that to them. Especially with the rising risk of childhood obesity in America, an outlet for physical exertion is vital to the success of students.

Benefits to At-Risk students

Another major benefit of after-school programs is decreasing alone time at home for students who have working parents or are at-risk. When given the option to either go home to an empty house or socialize with peers, most children will choose the latter. Not only is this a better option socially, but this allows them to stay supervised and decreases

their chances of getting into trouble when alone. Kinder defines at risk characteristics to include “low socioeconomic status, increased sedentary behaviors, low parental involvement, substance abuse, and other environmental contexts” (Kinder, 2019). These are the students who will go home to an empty house, or a house with little to no food available. They may observe things at a young age that many of us may never have to witness. If the only chance they have to feel included, or “normal”, is at after-school, then that is the most important thing that those in the field can offer to them. Even things like snacks- that may seem miniscule to most, make a huge difference in their world.

Socialization as a Benefit

This socialization benefit is also huge for students with special needs. One of the most widely studied theories in the field of recreation is Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow was an American psychologist who created the hierarchy to demonstrate what he believed all humans need to survive. At the bottom of this pyramid is the most basic of things, and as you go up the pyramid, things begin to get more complex- see Figure 1.1 for reference. At the third level, Maslow places socialization and making friends. The recreation industry uses this model to understand the importance of socialization and making connections amongst each othe

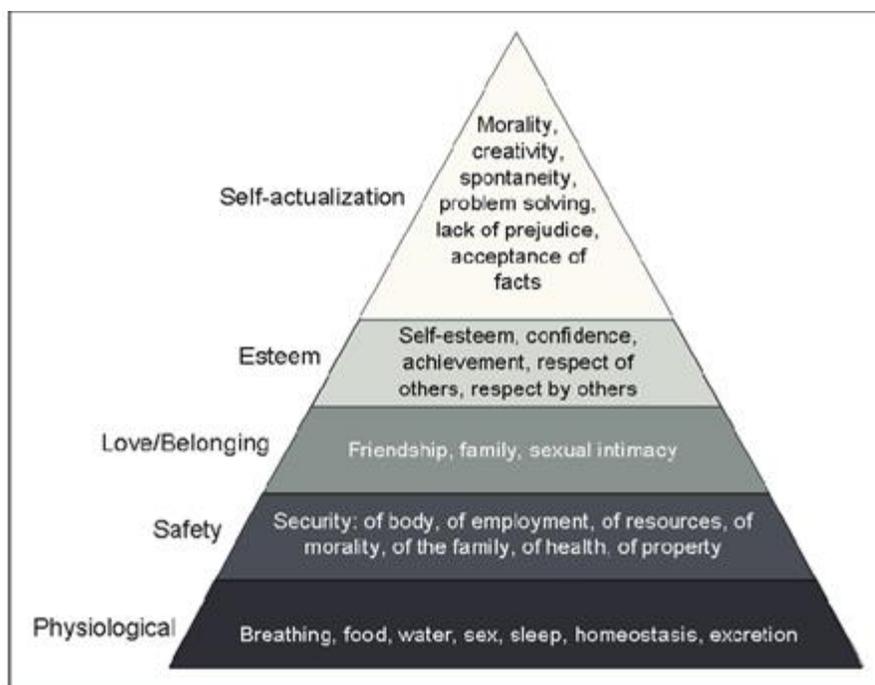


Figure 1.1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. ResearchGate

As previously stated, in a lot of schools where after-school is offered, students with disabilities are not permitted. While in some cases, the reasoning for this is things like transportation issues, there are instances when these children cannot attend because the programs were not designed for them and do not offer the things they need to succeed. In I. Obrusnikova's 2012 article, they concluded that normal school gyms were not made to adapt to the needs of students on the spectrum. Therefore, an adaptive program in physical activity would be necessary for these children to have an opportunity to get an adequate amount of physical activity in their day. How is it fair that these children go without their own play time and outlet for energy?

An Outline of Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities make up a large portion of the student population and make up an even larger percentage of students from low-income households. The mistreatment of these students dates back to the founding of public schools, but inclusion and other justices for them have not been sought out until as recently as the 1970s. According to M. Kosecki, in 1965 there was a statute placed into effect in North Carolina in which parents who demanded that their child, with disabilities, be put into public schools would be presented with a misdemeanor charge (Kosecki, 2017). The *Brown vs Board of Education* Supreme Court case was influential in creating space in public schools for students with disabilities. In 1972, the District of Columbia was sued on the basis of unfair treatment of a student with disabilities in their school. As a result, the courts stated that all students, regardless of levels of ability, were entitled to a fair public-school education and that financial issues were not a fair excuse for their mistreatment and exclusion (Kosecki, 2017). This eventually led to IDEA- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This was monumental in guaranteeing the fair treatment of students with disabilities in a public-school setting, but the inclusion of these students outside of school and in extracurricular settings still needs work. This is especially true for after-school programs. The fact that most of these programs are not designed with special needs students in mind is evidence enough that we have not yet fully included these students in all aspects of a school.

Throughout all the research I have done thus far, I have found that many of my sources have all come to a similar conclusion: after-school programs are an essential piece of a student's educational and social needs. The benefits that they offer to students is so great, that the lack of such a program would mean that for some of those students those needs

would never be met. I have found so far that there is far less research and sources available that focus on after-school programs that integrate students with special needs. Even with the sources that do, I have found that most of them focus on one specific disability (e.g., autism, Down Syndrome) instead of an umbrella. While I believe that my project will answer some very important questions, I also believe that it will raise new questions in the field. What kind of programs could be designed specifically for students with disabilities? How can we design after-school programs to maximize their physical fitness opportunities? How can we recruit staff members to want to work in after-school? What long term effects do after-school programs have on children that follow them into adolescence? Do students with disabilities feel that being integrated with other students is a positive thing?

Overall, the sources I have found have an outstanding amount of information available and relevant to my project. They are rich in data, and the experiments that were carried out in these various projects are exactly the type of thing I need to support my hypotheses and my claims that after-school programs offer great benefits. While some of the articles I have found have differed in their opinions – that after-school programs do not offer enough opportunity for physical fitness- most come to the same conclusion. I think that there is even more research out there to further prove that after-school programs are highly beneficial not just to one type of student, but to all types of students- and that all children deserve the opportunity for physical fitness, social integration, and extended time for academic improvements. I hope that my needs assessment will offer suggestions that will improve the lives of the students at Daughtry Elementary School.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

I conducted a needs assessment; however, I interviewed staff to determine why there is not already a more inclusive, recreationally based after-school program in place and how they thought it would benefit the students. What are the current procedures of the after-school program currently? How inclusive is it? How inclusive is the entire school? What changes could be made to improve the program and increase inclusivity? What are the current challenges to the after-school program? I believed that the biggest reason I would find as to why they do not already have one in place was staff participation. I believed that I would find that there was not a lot of faculty and staff at the school able to stay a little later to supervise an after-school program that is more hands on and involved. However, I also believed that the participants I interviewed would see and understand the benefits one of these programs could be.

Method

Sample and Participant Selection

To begin my recruitment process, I first reached out to the head of Human Resources for Butts County Schools. I was asked to submit a short application for research within the county, and proof of my IRB approval. After I received permission from her, I reached out to the principal of Daughtry Elementary School. I sent him the drafted email that I had ready, asking his permission to work with his staff. Once he gave me permission, I asked for him to send me a list of potential participants and their emails. Once I did that, I began reaching out individually to staff members that were recommended to me. I did this via email as well. Because my project discusses the benefit to any type of student, the staff that I interviewed did not have to be of a certain grade level. With that being said, I

still wanted the participants to either be familiar with the after-school program or the special needs population at Daughtry Elementary School. I ended up interviewing the principal, one special education teacher, a first-grade teacher, a second-grade teacher, and a paraprofessional.

Assessments and Measures

To measure my research and test my hypothesis, I asked a series of interview questions to each participant. Each question had to do with the benefits of after-school programs and why Daughtry Elementary does not have a more in depth after-school program. I also asked them about the level of inclusion in their current program, and I asked them how they thought a more structured, inclusive program could be implemented. These questions also referenced their personal experience with after-school programs, how they think programming after-school will benefit students, and how beneficial they think an inclusive after-school program is. I conducted all of the interviews through private, recorded Zoom calls. Interview questions are located in the appendix. In order to assess all of their answers, I coded them and sought to pull out themes throughout. When I was conducting my research, I was starting to piece together what I thought some potential themes would be between all of the interviews. This made it much easier for me when I was coding, because I already knew what to look for. Once I realized that I had already recognized some common themes, I decided it was best to use deductive coding methods to pull out data that supported the themes I had observed. This was easy to do in terms of my data, because I only did five interviews, so it was easy for me to process through my

data for qualitative purposes. By using computer-aided analysis, I was able to use the transcripts of my interviews to allow NVivo to pull out themes and commonalities in my results. I believe that if I had more data to work through, this method would have been a lot harder because I would not have been able to pull out common themes on my own.

Procedure

Once all of the participants had been contacted and we set up a time for a meeting, I created individual, private Zoom meetings with each of them. I also sent each of them the consent form I had created to ensure that they knew about my research, and that they could opt out at any time. Once our meeting began, I had to verify that they read the consent form I created. Once in the Zoom call, I asked them each interview question I had written, including any follow up questions, if necessary. Everything was recorded and saved onto a password protected hard drive to ensure the privacy of each of my participants. With the finished interviews, I analyzed the data that I had gathered to find any similarities between each interview and to also pull out all of the themes I could find from all of the answers that the participants had given- using the methods stated above.

Results

When gathering my data and conducting my interviews, I was able to pull out some common themes between a few or all of the participants. Further discussion of each theme will make it easier to understand the needs assessment I provide.

Staffing

The first theme that stuck out during my data analysis was the issue of staffing. A lot of the participants stressed that they believed “some” teachers would be willing to participate in a more recreationally structured after-school program. When asked if they believed staff would volunteer more of their time at a more structured after-school program, they were hesitant to say yes.

This is tricky. I think some people would, just to experience it, but I think again that there’s a lot of people who don’t participate in after-school- for the only reason that it’s two and a half hours out of their day that they never really get to see on their check. And I know it goes back to funding, but that’s really the- if we could pay people more to work the after-school program, you would see more people volunteer to do it.
(Interviewee C)

That’s a tough one. I think it really depends on the person and what they have going on in their own family life. Because that’s a- after-school’s a really big commitment and I know, you know, when the teachers are teaching and getting to school at 7:20 to stay until 6 some days that’s a lot, especially for teachers that have young children, or they have families that they need to get to back at home.
(Interviewee D)

It became clear to me that if someone were to try to implement a better after-school program here, it would be a massive task to staff it.

Funding

The next major theme was common in every single interview I conducted. The topic of funding was so popular, that I began to predict with each interview that the participant would talk about it at least once during our discussion. Sure enough, I had a conversation with each one about funding and the lack thereof. As Interviewee C stated in the last section, part of the reason it is hard to find people to staff after-school is because they

never see that go on their paycheck. The issue is that we cannot expect teachers to be paid extra money if the school itself does not even have that money.

I think it boils down to the finances, in reference to being able to pay staff. Our after-school program is very, very reasonable. I think our parents pay \$7 a day for after-school which is very, very reasonable. So due to the funds there are a lot of limitations that we have in reference to staff members that we can bring on.

(Interviewee E)

I began to ponder whether or not the issue of funding was an isolated issue to the after-school program, or across the entirety of the public school system. If the priorities were shifted, what would it take for money to be redirected to further staffing the after-school program? If there was suddenly an unexpected amount of funds that came in, where would it go? The harsh reality is that not many counties would make after-school a top priority and that money would go elsewhere within the school system.

Training

When I was preparing my research and gathering questions, the issue of inclusion was very important to me, but the topic of training never came to mind. I never even considered this as a possible issue. If the staff that are working in after-school do not have the proper legal training to handle highly stressful episodes for these children, how can we expect them to be included in any after-school program?

I think the issue is from a feeling of nervousness almost. As it pertains to children's safety when, you know, running- there's only so much you can do to restrain children or stop them from you know certain situations. Like, if you were trained. So, it requires trained volunteers. And I think that's where a lot of the- and I don't think it's an unwillingness, I think it's more of a hesitant feeling. Am I going to be able to serve these children

appropriately? Am I going to be able to make sure that they stay safe? Am I going to be able to make sure that they are enjoying themselves? Am I trained and well prepared for that?

(Interviewee A)

This was a topic that I was not expecting, but once the participants brought it up, it made sense to me. If the staff are not comfortable in their own abilities to properly serve those children, then how can we expect them to serve those children at all? Why are we not equipping them with what they need to serve those students effectively and efficiently? By not training those staff members, it makes it a very easy excuse to not serve children with disabilities in the after-school program. It is not fair to students who have special needs to have to sit by and not be included in something as simple as after-school. The extra effort to acquire training for the staff of after-school is something that should be used as an opportunity to serve children that the program has almost never served before.

Discussion

My results were found by qualitative methods and interviews. Each participant was asked the same series of questions and their answers were recorded. Each participant was either somewhat directly involved with the after-school program at Daughtry Elementary School or involved with the special needs population there. As I was talking to them, I wanted to find out why they believed there was not already a more structured, recreationally based after-school program in place. I also wanted to know why there was not a more inclusive environment in the after-school program. The question I was most interested in the responses for was “How do you think your school could efficiently integrate an inclusive after-school program?”.

While analyzing my data, I wanted to find themes and commonalities between the answers of the participants. In order to reach data saturation, or where participants began repeating each other, I had to conduct five interviews in total. To my own surprise, most participants said some of the same kinds of things. There were some exceptions, but more often than not, their answers sounded very similar. Even though in some cases, this would not be very helpful to research (having all the same answers can hinder variation) it was actually very validating to my initial hypothesis and my initial predictions. When going through each interview separately, I noticed that the themes of those interviews were all noticeably similar. The themes I was able to pull out of the interviews were as follows: Staffing, funding, lack of participation, training and positive views on after-school programs as a whole. Overwhelming, all of the participants were supportive of after-school programs and voiced the importance of them. This was very reassuring to me, because all of the research I have done showed so many positive benefits to after-school programs socially, physically, and academically.

Needs Assessment

These results were able to show me the things that I believe need to be implemented at Daughtry Elementary School in order for them to implement a more structured, recreational, inclusive after-school program. The first issue was staffing-so in order to encourage more teachers to participate in after-school, the administration could offer various incentives such as Jeans days or rewards for their classrooms. Another way to encourage the staff to participate is to offer a better education on the importance of after-school and how their students would benefit from it. If recruiting staff directly from the school is not proving to be effective, then the school system could potentially create a

partnership with the City Parks and Recreation department to form a type of third-party program. The next issue that needs to be addressed is funding. This issue was one that I had predicted would come up. This is a problem that comes up in almost any aspect of education or recreation, as you need money for everything you do. There are a few ways that I would recommend Daughtry Elementary School uses to increase funding for their after-school program. Not only would it make it a better program, but it would also be a way for the school to offer financial compensation for the staff who volunteer their time. One recommendation that I would make to help them raise money is to do an after-school fundraiser. The children who utilize the after-school program could have a take home fundraiser, and all the benefits could go directly to funding a more structured after-school program. They could also increase the price per day by just \$2. They were very proud of how affordable their program is per day, so going from \$7 to \$9 would not be that dramatic of a jump per child. However, if every child paid the increased amount, it would add up substantially in the long run. The next issue that needed to be addressed was the inclusivity of the program. The teachers kept on mentioning that it was hard to implement an inclusive after-school program when the staff working are not trained on how to handle those students or how to properly restrain them if needed. According to state and national guidelines, in order to physically restrain a child with special needs who is going through a highly emotional or stressful episode, you have to have very specific training. If the school required the staff for after-school to be fully trained to do those types of things, it would make it so much more accessible for those students. They could participate in a program that was designed with them in mind and staffed with them in mind as well.

I believe that a good, structured, recreationally based after-school program would consist of snack time, homework time, and then an extended amount of time outside for play. This could be organized games, or even just free play. I think that an everyday structure and an emphasis on physical activity would benefit these students tremendously.

Limitations and Future Directions

To say that there were some limitations to this project would be an enormous understatement. First and foremost- COVID-19. Because the nature of my project was to be face-to-face, progress was pretty much halted and virtually all of my research had to be readjusted to be virtual. That was very hard, because it was a large task to readjust all of my data in order for me to interview them over Zoom. I was also forced to put a pause on my data collection until at least after September, when the IRB began taking applications again. This pushed my data collection back almost four months from when I had anticipated to do it. Another large issue that I came across was finding a school that was willing to participate in my research. The school that I had wanted to research initially does not currently have an after-school program and I wanted to perform a needs assessment that would help them if they ever chose to implement an after-school program. However, when I reached out to that school, they declined my request to participate in research. I was looking enough to find a school that was willing to participate in my research, but it was still hard to readjust everything I had already done. To say that was a limitation would be an understatement, however I learned how to accommodate for the unknown and how to keep working even when things did not go as planned. I am very grateful that the school that did end up working with me chose to do

so because I feel that the research I did with them was very insightful and that it could potentially help them in the future should they ever choose to implement a more structured after-school program. Another limitation that I experienced was getting responses to my recruitment emails. It was very hard for me to get responses to my email and encourage people to participate. However, once I started getting responses, I got multiple of them. Finally, I was able to get five interviews with five participants. That was very reassuring to me and it validated that people cared about my research and that they wanted to participate.

I think this project has the potential to go in further directions in the future. I think that a lot more research could be done on the issue of children with special needs in after-school and how they are included and how extra training is provided to the staff to ensure that those children can participate. I also think more research could be done on how to build a recreationally based after-school program and the elements of that, and what kind of activities could be planned. I think a big potential area for future research could be how to set aside additional funds for after-school programs in order to improve upon them and make sure that the children at the school are getting the best type of program and experience that they can. Also, I think that going into a deeper investigation as to the issue of funding of public schools would be eye-opening. Even if there was a large amount of money and funds made available to the school system, would they use that money for the after-school program? Or would they use it in other areas that are less directed at students?

Reflective Critique

This project has been one of the biggest learning experiences I have had. Other than the obvious lessons to take away (procrastination, motivation)- I have grown numerous skills when it comes to research and data collection. I have learned how to find sources that support my hypotheses and also that challenge my ideas and don't allow me to take the easy way out. I have learned how to back up what I am saying with actual facts and I am able to discuss the literature I have found in normal conversation. I have learned that procrastination is the worst possible thing you could do- even as I sit here the night before this is due. Most of all though, I have learned that when something goes wrong, there is always a way up from there. This project has thrown so, so many roadblocks in my way and even though every time I have wanted to give up, I remember to keep pushing. I am excited for the results this project will bring.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Have you ever had any experience with an after-school program?
2. What do you think the benefits of an after-school program are?
3. Can you describe the usual itinerary for the after-school program?
4. Why do you think there is not a more hands-on after-school program at Daughtry Elementary School currently?
5. Do you believe that the students here would benefit from a more well-rounded after-school program?
6. How do you think the parents of your students benefit from having the option of an after-school program?
7. Do you believe that the staff here would volunteer their time at a more in-depth recreationally based after-school program?
8. If not, why?
9. Do you believe that the special needs population at Daughtry Elementary School would benefit from an inclusive after-school program?
10. How would you describe the level of inclusiveness at your school?
11. Do you believe that if your school had a more in depth after-school program, the staff would be willing to include students with disabilities?
12. How do you think your school could efficiently integrate an inclusive after-school program?