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Access and Equity in Out-of-School Learning

Moving beyond the study of learning as a strictly school-based phenomenon, recent decades have seen a significant rise in research on learning in everyday and out-of-school settings often referred to as out-of-school time (OST). Within this field, there is a growing focus on access and equity. Research animated by an access framework often considers what it takes to make socially and academically supportive OST learning opportunities available for all students, particularly those historically marginalized or inadequately served by schools. This frame emphasizes the ways in which OST settings provide access to distinct forms of academic and professional practice, identity and community development, and connections with mentors and peers.

For equity-oriented researchers, this "access" frame is a necessary but insufficient approach to studying and working to transform educational inequities. Research animated by an equity framework treats all learning as a cultural and sociopolitical process and foregrounds questions of epistemology, power, and justice, such as "Access to what?" "For whom?" "Based on whose values?" "And toward what ends?" These questions build on a history of scholarship that utilizes careful studies of everyday activity to problematize narrow, ethnocentric measures of learning and argue for ecologically valid approaches to research. Equity-oriented research on OST environments therefore seeks to substantively widen our definitions of where and how learning takes place, challenge deficit ideologies, and reimagine education more broadly. This entry further examines the specific issues, current research, and policy questions involving the access and equity frameworks as they are applied to OST. It also discusses the implications of research findings on access and equity for the OST field.

Conceptualizing Access and Equity: Key Issues

OST settings include both educational programs (extracurricular activities, after-school programs, museums) and everyday settings (the home, peer groups, community settings). Research that centers issues of access within OST learning tends to highlight the differential opportunities available for young people to engage in extracurricular and OST programs across socioeconomic groups and geographic regions. This research addresses the following basic questions: Are high-quality OST programs available in the school or the community? What are the explicit or implicit costs of participation? How do programs recruit participants? What forms of transportation are or are not available to young people? What burdens does participation place on families? While OST programs are seen as a key site for positive youth development and academic support, the elimination of budgets for youth programs and the rise of "pay to play" policies have led many to highlight the growing gap in access to OST opportunities.

The quality of OST programs is also shaped by a number of internal factors: the facilities available for programming; staff ratios, makeup, and turnover; access to resources for various activities and field trips; connections with parents and families; and the availability of meaningful professional development for program staff. Training in asset-based approaches to working with emergent bilingual students, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) youth, and students with different abilities, for example, is essential to developing inclusive and respectful environments that serve all students.

In addition to these economic and structural dimensions, the increasing policy focus on narrow academic outcomes has reconfigured the relationships between OST and school-based learning, with particular implications for working-class youth and youth of color. Historically, many after-school programs were built on the twin goals of youth development

and academic support. Other OST spaces are organized around interest-driven activities such as music, arts, media, sports, and recreational activities—emphasizing the development of young people's confidence, collaboration, and agency and exposing youth to new interests and possible future paths. However, due to the requirements associated with public and private funding, OST programs are increasingly tasked with demonstrating effectiveness by evidencing impact on academic outcomes (often narrowly defined as raising test scores). In particular, those settings committed to providing free or low-cost programming are more likely to rely on sources of funding that require narrow forms of evaluation, exacerbating existing inequities within the OST landscape. While some argue that this shift is intended to leverage the role of OST programs to support young people's academic growth, it also significantly constrains the space available for robust intellectual and social activities that may or may not directly translate into increasing test scores. This shift disproportionately affects students who are already experiencing the narrowing of school curriculum under federal policies that have emphasized the use of test results for school accountability and teacher evaluation.

Researchers and practitioners are therefore concerned that the standardizing, sorting, and tracking practices that characterize many (though not all) schools will encroach on OST learning environments to the detriment of more inclusive and dynamic practices. In some cases, this encroachment is a direct result of new assessment requirements; in others, it is a local derivative of parents' desires for OST staff to offer additional homework support, particularly with the increasing demands of the Common Core curriculum adopted by most states. In these cases, OST staff may find themselves negotiating between providing expanded homework support at the request of families, teachers, or administrators and providing the kinds of enrichment activities they might otherwise implement.

These enrichment activities may be organized around peer collaboration, play, and the arts, as well as robust forms of disciplinary practice such as hands-on science or creative writing. For example, children engaging in literacy practices within after-school programs may be more likely to have the flexibility to focus on the process rather than the immediate product, to take their time with reading and writing, to engage with texts and linguistic genres that are personally and culturally relevant, and to engage in multiple forms of making meaning. Thus, the kinds of enrichment activities that can take place in OST programs are not counter to academic development. On the contrary, they can serve as an example of what deep and socially meaningful academic engagement might look like, particularly for students who may feel disconnected from disciplinary practices in school. Such approaches can also position youth as competent thinkers and learners within disciplinary domains, a substantive experience of intellectual dignity that is particularly important for students who may be labeled as failing in school. Indeed, some studies have found that (a) the less school-like nature of OST programs is key to their ability to recruit and retain participants and (b) some programs not explicitly focused on academic outcomes produced gains in academic achievement, school engagement, and graduation rates. While these findings contradict the assumption that OST programs need to become more school-like in order to support academic outcomes, there is also a need to expand how "outcomes" are defined to reflect the full range of academic and social practices supported by OST settings.

This last point touches on a key argument highlighted by equity frameworks: The need to study and assert the value of OST settings on their own terms. There are multiple layers to this issue. First, there is a need to widen our view of OST learning to include the range of cultural and historical repertoires of practice young people develop across settings. This includes the forms of apprenticeship and learning that emerge both within OST educational programs *and* in the context of family, peer groups, hobbies, and other everyday activities.

This view is essential to challenging reductive conceptions of culture and traditional forms of research and assessment that portray the practices of young people—particularly working-class youth and youth of color—as deviating from dominant cultural norms. Equity-oriented researchers therefore seek to illuminate the dynamic histories of practice, ways of knowing, forms of joint activity, and value systems present in various cultural contexts as a foundation for studying locally defined learning processes and outcomes. This is particularly pressing for youth whose out-of-school lives are treated as obstacles to be overcome rather than resources to draw on or whose interest-driven practices and forms of expertise are devalued in school. Such research can also help challenge the assumption that school-like learning necessarily involves greater cognitive demands than learning within everyday settings.

Second, this lens is essential for approaching the pedagogical design of OST settings in ways that do not implicitly reproduce assimilationist ideologies (those that take dominant linguistic, cultural, and intellectual practices for granted as the ideal end points of development). This is a key distinction between the "access" and "equity" frames: To what extent do OST learning opportunities account for the histories of practice young people are involved in? Do they value and build on multiple ways of knowing, and if so, how? What kinds of mentorship and tools are available to help youth navigate everyday encounters with racialization and other forms of marginalization? Research that stops at providing equal access risks overlooking the need for explicit attention to issues of culture, race, and power, including the forms of exclusion that can emerge in settings designed based on the cultural norms and experiences of dominant populations. This "sameness as fairness" model has been shown to be an inadequate approach to bringing about substantive forms of equity.

Third, from a disciplinary perspective, attending to issues of epistemology and power is not only useful for broadening participation in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) but can also assert the space to take critical views of the disciplines themselves, and to support young people in simultaneously participating in and expanding what counts as science or literacy. Indeed, OST settings may be especially rich contexts for the generative expansion of disciplinary boundaries. In an after-school tinkering program designed and studied by Meg Escudé and Shirin Vossoughi, educators routinely introduced new scientific and artistic activities by inviting elementary-age children to draw connections to their everyday experiences. These connections were not only treated as bridges to science, as defined from a dominant perspective (science is culture and value free, takes place in the lab, utilizes the scientific method). Rather, they were treated as legitimate forms of scientific practice that reflect a range of values and epistemologies. This approach draws on foundational research by Douglas Medin and Megan Bang on the cultural dimensions of science, the centering of indigenous epistemologies in science education, and the pedagogical roles this approach can open up for parents and other community members. Thus, attending to issues of epistemology and power is necessary to understanding how, specifically, young people are positioned and supported in OST spaces, the moment-to-moment opportunities for learning available therein, and the deeper values and purposes of educational activity.

Current Research and Policy Considerations

While the preceding sections outline both the areas of overlap and debates among researchers studying access and equity in OST learning, there is some consensus within the field that high-quality OST programs are intentional learning environments. Intentional learning environments are as follows:

- Youth centered, taking an assets-based approach and prioritizing both adult mentorship and youth leadership
- Knowledge centered, developing clear learning foci and high-quality instruction, and designing for fluid movement between expert and novice roles such that young people's intellectual resources and forms of expertise are taken seriously, and teachers also recognize themselves as learners
- Assessment centered, with assessment defined as formative feedback and opportunities for authentic performance and recognition; this approach to assessment parallels the historical role after-school staff have played in supporting students with academic struggles without defining them by those struggles

The Fifth Dimension program provides one example of this approach. The Fifth Dimension is a network of university–community partnerships that bring together undergraduate students and elementary-age children to engage in joint activity around play, literacy, and technology in after-school settings. In contrast to adult-centered models, the Fifth Dimension's focus on shared activity and bidirectional learning reorganizes interactions such that academic struggles are remediated through social supports and authentic activities. The program is inspired by the sociocultural approach of Lev Vygotsky, in which all participants learn through collaborative engagement with robust tools, ideas, and social relations. Fifth Dimension and similar programs also intentionally support undergraduate students and preservice teachers to reflect on their assumptions about children and learning, grapple with what sociocultural theories mean in practice, and expand their views of students' potential and capabilities.

Researchers also define high-quality OST programs as providing an inclusive social network and structure, challenging learning experiences and opportunities to form strong social bonds with peers and adults. These qualities are reflected in the aspects of OST programs that youth themselves identify as the most valuable: supportive relationships with adults and peers, safety, and opportunities to learn. Young people also report being most affected by the experience of leadership, opportunities to make a difference in their community, and the sense that they matter within the setting or community. In this vein, programs such as Oakland's Youth Radio and Chicago's YOUmedia provide opportunities for youth to engage in creative media production and journalism grounded in their lived experiences and perspectives. Youth Radio has developed a pedagogy of collegiality whereby young people and adults draw on one another's skills and perspectives to create original, multitextual, and professional quality work for outside audiences. These settings support the argument that designing intellectually rich and equitable OST programs must include identity and affect as core elements of learning.

Implications

These findings on access and equity have three main implications for OST. First, there is a need for a much greater investment in OST programs, particularly in communities where there is a high need for such programming. Many researchers and advocates agree that this investment ought to prioritize greater support for the staff who do the everyday work of developing and running youth programs in the form of appropriate compensation, professional development, and the recruitment and retention of educators with diverse cultural backgrounds and forms of expertise. Currently, OST staff play multiple roles as teachers, tutors, counselors, mentors, and advocates. Investment in professional development should include both ongoing training and appropriate time for preparing activities and reflecting on implementation. Time to debrief and reflect is crucial for staff to collectively identify and address the inequities that can reemerge in moment-to-moment decisions and interactions

with young people. Overall, there is consensus in the field that the long-term social bonds identified in the literature as fundamental to positive youth development deserve to be safeguarded and sustained through greater support for OST educators.

Second, there is a need to move away from narrow, test-based forms of evaluation. In their place, researchers have called for more dynamic and formative models of assessment that account for the local values and approaches to learning within OST settings. Though positive youth development and academic growth are not at odds, there is a stated need for more expansive measures and ways of assessing a range of approaches to disciplinary learning. At the same time, children and youth need spaces to play and to connect with one another and with positive mentors who are not limited to the academic outcomes of school. Significant learning outcomes within informal environments are diverse and often unanticipated prior to the learner's participation in the activity. Thus, Jay Lemke and others argue that robust assessment must attend to cognitive, socioemotional, and identity-based outcomes at the level of the individual, the group, and the larger project or community. For equity-oriented researchers, a widened view of learning outcomes is also essential to challenging deficit orientations and recognizing the range of cultural practices and forms of ingenuity young people enact in their everyday lives.

More broadly, researchers have called for reimagining the gap between school-based and OST learning by creating meaningful pathways for youth to move between informal or interest-driven practices and academic and professional domains. Thus, OST settings can not only play a crucial role in the social and academic development of youth, but they can also stand as examples of what is possible when learning is conceptualized not only as a cognitive process but also as a social, emotional, cultural, and historical activity grounded in community-based values and visions for the future.

See alsoPolicies Supporting Out-of-School Learning; Race and Ethnicity in Out-of-School Learning; Social Class and Socioeconomic Status

Further Readings

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