Evaluation of the Impact of the Dougherty Arts Center's Creativity Club on Children At-Risk

David Scott
Peter A. Witt
Michelle Garteiser Foss

Abstract: This study, which is based on an evaluation of an arts-based, after-school program that included a number of at-risk children, examined the outcomes parents sought for their children, the benefits children received from program participation, and elements that precipitated positive outcomes. Data were collected using participant observation and in-depth interviewing. Results of the study indicated that parents enrolled their children for distinct reasons and felt that their children accrued many benefits as a result of participating in the program. Salient program elements that appear to have contributed to positive outcomes included nurturing and caring leaders, multiple leaders, specialized disciplinary functions, structured and challenging activities, choice of activities, and an emphasis on kindness and cooperation.

Keywords: Program evaluation, at-risk children, art programs

Authors: David Scott is an assistant professor, and Peter Witt is the Department Head for the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at A&M University, Texas. Michelle Garteiser Foss is a graduate assistant in that department.

The last decade has witnessed increased concern among park and recreation professionals for the plight of children and youth who are considered at-risk. Communities across North America have responded to the needs of these individuals by initiating recreation programs during after-school hours. The goals of these programs are to prevent children from getting into trouble, and to provide enriching activities that contribute to youth development. While the number of recreation programs targeted for at-risk youth appears to be growing, there have been only a few studies (e.g., Baker & Witt, 1996) designed specifically to evaluate program effectiveness. To facilitate service delivery and ensure future funding for programs targeted to the needs of children and youth at-risk, additional program evaluation research is necessary. The goal of this study was to examine the kinds of benefits that at-risk and other children seek and receive from participating in such programs, and determine the salient program elements that appear to contribute to positive outcomes.
Organized public and private recreation in the United States and other countries has its origins amidst the deplorable living and social conditions of late 19th century urban areas and the corresponding absence of "safe havens" for children and youth to play. Early advocates and organizers of play and recreation believed that without supervised play and recreation, children ran the risk of using their free time in unhealthy and unsavory ways. This point of view was made explicit by George Butler (1940): "Children will play without guidance. The impulse to play is too strong. . . . But if the environment frustrates its free expression, play activities are just as likely to be destructive as they are constructive" (p. 80). Play leaders also felt that supervised play imbued children with life-learning skills and desirable character traits. Some leaders felt that a healthy play environment was necessary to ensure a healthy society. Jane Addams (1907), for example, stated, "Play in youth is the guarantee of adult culture. It is the most valuable instrument the race possesses to keep life from being mechanical" (p. 169).

Sessoms (1993) has recently written that "many of the problems which brought parks and recreation to [sic] being at the beginning of the century have once again surfaced" (p. 8). Indeed, the 1980s and early 1990s have witnessed a growing concern for inner-city children confronted by poverty, community violence and family distress (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Dryfoos, 1990; Garbarino, Dubron, Kosteln, & Pardo, 1992; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Schultz, Crompton, & Witt, 1995). Although all children in society are now thought to be at-risk to some degree, children in the above circumstances are thought to be particularly at-risk with regard to successfully completing school; avoiding problems associated with use of drugs and/or alcohol; becoming sexually active at an early age and possibly being infected with a sexually transmitted disease or becoming a teenage parent; and becoming a member of a gang with resultant involvement in delinquent activity (National Commission on Children, 1991).

Today, the problems confronting children and youth are often framed in terms of misused free-time. In language reminiscent of ideologues during the reform park era of the early 1990s (Cranz, 1982), some current writers feel that many latchkey and unattended children are incapable of supervising themselves (Williams & Howard, 1993). The "perils" of free-time are underscored in a recent report by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1992):

Each day America's 20 million young adolescents decide how they will spend at least five (40 percent) of their waking hours when not in school. For many, these hours harbor both risk and opportunity. For some, particularly those supervised by adults, the out-of-school hours offer opportunities to be with friends, play sports, pursue
interests, and engage in challenging activities. But for many home alone, the out-of-school hours present serious risks for substance abuse, crime, violence, and sexual activity leading to unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS. (p. 1)

The report goes on to say that it is how youth spend their free time that determines whether they are at-risk: “Time spent alone is not the crucial contributor to high risk. Rather it is what young people do during that time, where they do it, and with whom that leads to positive or negative consequences” (p. 1).

In response to the above problems, many communities throughout the United States are currently developing and implementing a variety of subsidized education and/or recreation oriented after-school programs for elementary, middle-school and even high school-age children and youth (Witt & Crompton, 1996). Many of these programs are being developed by public park and recreation departments either alone or in conjunction with school districts, and voluntary agencies. One goal of these programs is to prevent children from getting into trouble during after-school hours. Another goal is to increase the time youth devote to academic and other enrichment activities by extending formal structured activities to include the time between when school ends and when parents can pick children up after work (Peterson & Magrab, 1989; Schultz, Crompton, & Witt, 1995; Witt & Crompton, 1996). As noted by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1994), youth programs have the capability of inculcating important life skills: “Through community-based youth programs, adolescents learn to set and achieve goals, compete fairly, cope with victory and defeat, and resolve disputes peaceably” (p. 11).

Underlying these goals are developmental issues related to resilience and protection. Resilience has been defined as a pattern of successful adaptation following exposure to biological and psychosocial risk factors and/or stressful life events (Public/Private Ventures, 1994). Children who display resilience have learned to be productive, learned how to make connections, and learned socially accepted rules and procedures of daily life. Protective factors are those facets within the individual’s life space that moderate and/or mitigate the impact of risk on subsequent behavior and development (Jessor, 1992). According to Jessor, protective factors include such things as high intelligence, quality schools, neighborhood resources, interested adults, models for conventional behavior, value on achievement and health, and church attendance and involvement in schools and voluntary clubs. Protective factors and resilience help at-risk children and youth to avoid behaviors that compromise health and normal growth, and help them achieve economic self-sufficiency, positive and responsible family and social relationships, and good citizenship (Jessor, 1992; Masten & Garmezy, 1985).

The rush to develop after-school programs designed to meet the goal of increasing productive use of free time, with the presumed effect of
protecting the child and increasing his or her ability to navigate a successful pathway through childhood and adolescence, has not been accompanied by processes to evaluate the impact of these programs. Two recent studies indicate that after-school programs do result in positive outcomes among youth who are at-risk (Baker & Witt, 1996; Posner & Vandell, 1994). While after-school programs are currently receiving considerable attention, with declining budgets there is no guarantee that they will continue to be supported in the future unless studies that document their impact are undertaken.

Besides documenting the positive outcomes and benefits of such programs, studies are needed that identify key or salient program features that seemingly contribute to these outcomes. As recreation professionals know too well, some programs are better than others. Unfortunately, little research has been undertaken to discern what elements within a program contributes to its success (or failure). According to Rossman (1995), all recreation programs include six elements: interacting people, a physical setting, objects, rules, relationships, and animation. Animation is particularly relevant here since it pertains to how a program is set into motion and how the action is sustained throughout" (p. 48). By focusing on animation, our goal is to observe what programmers do to facilitate positive experiences. Providing leadership is one way in which programs are animated. Strong and competent leadership has always been at the core of recreation programming, a point emphatically made over a half century ago by Margaret Mulac (1941):

No matter how well a program is planned, its ultimate value to the community is limited to the abilities of the leaders who execute that program. The good program may become an inferior one in the hands of the poorly-trained, lazy or indifferent leader. (p. 9).

Thus, the goal of future research should be to determine those salient elements (e.g., role of leadership) of recreation programs that contribute to positive outcomes and benefits among children and youth who are considered at-risk.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study presents an evaluation of an after-school program, the Creativity Club (CC), offered by the Austin Parks and Recreation Department (APARD) at the Dougherty Arts Center (DAC). Efforts were made to discern the short-term benefits that children derived through participation in the program. In addition, because little has been written in the literature about programmatic elements that have the potential to produce positive benefits, efforts were also made to identify program elements presumed to be responsible for achieving positive outcomes.
The Dougherty Arts Center and the Creativity Club

The Setting
The DAC facility consists of an art gallery, an auditorium-theater, specialized studio lab spaces, and administrative office space for city-related art activities. The facility is an older building that, according to participants and the authors' observations, looks and feels like an art center. The DAC provides a variety of multi-disciplinary classes including: painting and drawing, photography, silkscreening, sculpture, pottery, metals, acting, dance, and art appreciation. Programs are offered for children, adolescents, and adults.

Stated Goals of the Creativity Club
One of the DAC programs is the CC. According to the program organizers, the CC is an after-school program for those who want more than day-care. It is intended that children will grow in creativity and confidence through daily visual and performing arts classes. Children are taught skills in the visual and performing arts and are helped to develop awareness of the creative process and self-expression. The program strives to challenge children, thereby developing their problem-solving skills, building their self-confidence, and, ultimately, creating a positive self-image. According to the Arts School Manager, the program is designed to foster initiative and encourage children to continue participation in the visual and performing arts as teens and adults. Directors of the program point out to visitors it is not a typical parks and recreation arts and crafts program.

Program Schedule
The CC program originated as a summer fine arts camp for children. Due to its overwhelming popularity, the CC concept was used in the planning of an after-school program beginning in 1990. Currently the CC after-school program is offered from September until May for children 6 to 10 years old. The CC program meets five days per week, Monday through Friday. Children can receive transportation from one of several elementary schools to the program site. Children arrive at the Center between 3:00 and 3:45 p.m. and parents pick up the children beginning at 5:00 p.m. with the last child usually picked up by 5:30 p.m. Formal classes are held from 3:45 to 5:00 p.m. Classes are taught in three separate classrooms: one each for the visual arts, creative dramatics, and creative movement. The DAC auditorium is also available for use by the creative dramatics and creative movement classes.

Program Structure
During the period when participants are arriving at the center, the children congregate either in an outdoor play area or in a lounge (depending on weather conditions) for autonomous play activities and socialization. During the formal class period, one group meets with the visual arts teacher for the entire hour and fifteen minute period, while the other two
groups split their time between dramatics and the movement classes. Over the course of the program, children spend an equal amount of time in the three class settings. Several times per week all of the children participate in an outdoor play segment such as "Capture the Flag." Near the end of the school year, considerable time is devoted to developing a play that encompasses many of the art, dance, and drama skills that the children have learned during the program.

Program Leadership

The Center attempts to hire instructors who are practicing artists and who also possess teaching experience. The instructors design and implement their own curriculum, which gives them greater freedom to modify activities to fulfill the needs and personalities of particular children in each class.

Efforts to Include At-Risk Children in the Program

From September 1994 to February 1995, the CC enrollment was 19 children (6 males, 13 females; mean age = 7.6), drawn mainly from three schools from which transportation was available after school. Several of these children were from single-parent families with modest incomes, yet all were willing to and capable of paying the program's $95 monthly. However, the DAC staff were concerned that due to the monthly cost, a number of children who could benefit from the program were not able to attend. They were also concerned that only one girl from the elementary school closest to the center (six blocks) was attending the CC. However, given the economic profile of the local community (over 70% of the children at the local school were on the federal free lunch program), the monthly fee was a prohibitive factor for most of these children and other means of funding had to be found if attendance of children from the local neighborhood was to be promoted. It was the feeling of the program organizers that the CC program might play a risk prevention and protective role in the lives of all of the participants and especially those in this latter group. Compared to the rest of the city, children from this school were in greater danger of eventually dropping out of school, using drugs, joining a gang, or becoming involved in delinquent behavior.

In early 1995, plans were finalized to include eight additional children from the local elementary school (LES) in the CC (all boys, mean age = 8.4; seven of the children were on the free-lunch program; four were from single-parent families). Funding to support the inclusion of these children in the program was made available from the budget of LES's after-school program, which in turn had obtained its funding from the Austin City Council as part of a special project to create after-school programs at 20 low-income elementary school sites. Children from LES were nominated by the LES art teacher because they had demonstrated some artistic ability and interest, and were seen as possibly benefiting from the CC program. With the inclusion of these additional children, the study group totalled 27 children, nine of whom were considered to be the at-risk subgroup (eight
boys added to the program from the LES and one girl already in the program from the LES).

**Methodology**

Data collection methods for this study fall within the rubric of naturalistic inquiry. Two primary methods of data collection were used: participant observation and in-depth interviewing. A mixed form of data collection yielded different views or slices of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Different methods, thus, produced additional and complementary data, and guarded against biases that may have emerged using a single method.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation was undertaken primarily by two trained research assistants beginning when the children from the LES joined the program through the end of the program in May, a period of approximately 14 weeks. Observations were done on 14 separate occasions. One research assistant was a university employee and an outsider to the CC program. The other was a part-time leader of the CC; on days when not leading she was employed to take field notes. Note taking for any given day lasted from the time the children arrived until the time they left. Field notes included the observers’ impressions of what was happening, who was involved, what was said, and so on (Spradley, 1980). Notes were taken on the spot and written up more fully later. In addition, two of the other leaders agreed to keep a journal of their CC experiences. The observers and the leaders were asked to pay particular attention to benefits children achieved through program participation and possible programmatic elements that helped to facilitate these outcomes. While it was impossible for observers to provide detailed observations and descriptions of all children and all activities on a given day, observations were made over time and thus provided a multitude of “snap shots” of children’s experiences and CC activities.

**In-depth Interviewing**

Near the end of the study period, twenty in-depth interviews were conducted by the part-time leader with at least one of the parents of the children. Of the 20 parents interviewed, this represented 14 of the original 18 non-LES children who had been in the program since the beginning and six boys’ parents out of the eight boys and one girl who were the identified at-risk children from the LES. Given that the interviews were conducted in people’s homes, there were cases in which the child was present for part of the interview and was included in the discussion. For the other seven children, four of their parents declined to be interviewed and interviews with the other parents could not be arranged at a mutually convenient time. The children for whom interview information was available were typical of the children in the program. No differences in age, gender or free lunch program status were observed.
Procedures used for interviewing followed the suggestions of Spradley (1979) and Burgess (1984). The interviews were guided by an interview agenda related to the purposes of the study. Questions were purposely open-ended, allowing parents to talk about their child's involvement in the program using their own terms. Interviews generally lasted between one and three hours, with most around one and a half hours. Specific questions were asked to help acquire information about why parents enrolled their children in the CC and what benefits they felt their children acquired from participation. In addition, parents were asked about program elements that might have led to the identified outcomes. An in-depth group interview was also conducted at the end of the program with all the program leaders and most of the Arts Program staff to determine their opinions about the success of the program in meeting the needs of the children. All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Analysis of Data

Data analysis was performed via a dual process of subjective interpretation and visual inspection of field notes and transcribed interviews. This method, which is akin to the constant comparison method (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), involved reading through all the data and identifying topics or categories. Descriptors or labels were then created for the identified categories, after which categories were grouped together (e.g., benefits sought or benefits received). Data were then reread within categories and subcategories were created as appropriate. Finally all the data were reread in order to create new categories, adjust the grouping of categories, or develop new subcategories (Burgess, 1984). The above process was initially undertaken by one of the three study authors. A second author also went through all of the available data and helped refine, amplify and add to categories and subcategories. Finally, the third author reviewed the categories and subcategories as developed by the first two authors and then independently read the available data and further refined the developed categories and subcategories.

Quality of Data

Observations that were seen or heard often were judged to be reliable (Becker, 1958). Reliability was also enhanced by discussing findings with DAC staff and program leaders. Internal validity was established via longevity in the field and by interviewing a variety of informants (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). A mixed form of data collection, or data triangulation, also contributed to both the reliability and validity of the study by providing different kinds of data on the same phenomena (Denzin, 1989).

Results

Three primary categories for the data analysis corresponded to the primary research questions: (a) reasons parents enrolled their children in the CC after-school programs, i.e., benefits sought, (b) benefits obtained from participating in the CC after-school program, and (c) characteristics of the CC program that helped to facilitate outcomes.
Benefits Sought Through Enrollment in the Program

Parents who were interviewed were all highly enthusiastic about the program. Indeed, the CC was regarded by parents as a far superior program to other after-school programs. The parents of the non-LES children had sought out and personally enrolled their children in the CC because it met many of the characteristics they were seeking in an after-school program. As it turned out, parents of the children from the LES wanted to have their children in a program like the CC but had not been able to enroll their children due to the monthly cost. Thus, they were “thrilled” and “honored” that their children had been chosen to participate in program. In general, all of the parents (LES and non-LES) expressed similar reasons for wanting their children in the CC, with four seeming central.

Structured, Goal-Oriented Program. First, parents liked the idea of a structured, goal-oriented after-school program for their children. Almost all parents felt that their children were not being challenged by after-school programs in which they were previously involved. These programs had mainly been extended care opportunities located at the same school their children attended or an off-campus after-school day care program run by a proprietary agency. For example, the parent of one of the non-LES children noted a prior negative experience in an extended care program and the perceived advantages of the CC program:

He started out in extended care after school, and extended care was great for a lot of things, but one of the things I like for my child is structure, and I didn’t like it when he was just out playing all the time. And I guess that’s what attracted me to Dougherty, because they had an art program where the kids were going to learn art and theater, and I really thought it would be good for him, and that’s why I brought him here. He needed the structure to help overcome his hyperactive tendencies.

The possibility of having one's child involved in a structured and challenging program was echoed by one of the LES parents:

The structure [of the CC] has been beneficial because there is the potential for some challenge there. Most after-school programs are a little bit cattle-pennish by necessity. You run around outside for a while, play games inside, occasional little field trips to a pool or something. I mean they are constrained by number of kids (4 to 60 ratio and kids from K to 5th grade), budget, facilities. There's not much they can do aside from just keep a watchful eye over the kids until the parents come pick them up. He was getting very bored and starting to get into a lot of trouble.

A Quality Alternative to Being Home Alone. Several parents had been leaving their children on their own or compared the advantages of enrollment in a CC-type program to the child being in self-care after school. For example, a LES parent stated, “I thought what a great opportunity for
the kids to do this as opposed to being at someone’s house where the sitter is watching soap operas and kids are running the street doing whatever. I hate that idea especially.” This point of view was also voiced by another LES parent:

I really feel very fortunate because I know that he’s very gifted and everything and I know that he isn’t getting enough from us, and I was afraid that one day he’s just freak out and just start going off and doing things that bored kids do, which is happening all the time.

Seeking to Channel Child’s Artistic Interests. A third major reason parents enrolled their children was that they regarded their children as both artistic and creative, and the CC was felt to be an after-school program that would channel these interests. A number of the LES and non-LES children already drew, painted, danced, sang, or played a musical instrument prior to coming to the CC program. The program was seen as a way of enabling the children to pursue their interests and expand their abilities.

Parents Felt Art Was Important. Finally, parents themselves were either involved in the arts or strongly supportive of the arts, and they felt strongly that their children would benefit by being involved in an arts program. One of the fathers of a LES child expressed his feelings as follows: “Art is important, very important. I think it gives them self-esteem and it opens up their mind to the opportunity, to the beautiful things.”

Benefits Achieved

What were the benefits that parents and program leaders identified as accruing to the children who participated in the program? In other words, how successful was the program in meeting some of the goals and aspirations of both the program organizers and the parents? While parents and leaders felt that the children enrolled at the CC benefitted from the program in various and multiple ways, it is important to note that positive outcomes were often described in terms of children’s special needs or developmental stage. For example, some parents felt very strongly that their children needed to learn to get along with other children. Others wanted their children to learn how to express themselves more freely, while others wanted their children to be exposed to the arts. However, taking the group as a whole, the major benefits identified by parents and leaders included (a) creativity, (b) self-confidence, (c) enjoyment, (d) knowledge and appreciation of art, (e) a place to shine, (f) learning to get along, and (g) development of friendships.

Creativity. Parents felt that a major benefit that their children experienced from the CC was the development and channeling of creativity. Parents usually defined creativity in terms of increased inventiveness. Thus, one mother described her 7-year old stepdaughter in the following terms: “She likes to collect anything, rocks, leaves, scraps. I can’t even throw away cartons and cereal boxes anymore, because she just wants to create things from it. Part of that is from the CC.”
Self-Confidence. Many parents felt that their children had more self-confidence, more self-esteem, and exhibited a greater willingness to freely express themselves as a result of the CC. One mother of a non-LES child commented about her 7-year old daughter: “There are lots of challenges for her. There was a lot of confidence building that needed to happen. There was a lot of reluctance to participate, and we’ve made a lot of progress with that.”

Leaders also felt that children developed confidence over time. Two children from the LES are particularly noteworthy in this regard. The first was an 8-year-old girl described by all the leaders as being very shy when she first started coming to the CC. By the end of the year, she was observed enthusiastically participating in all activities and was regarded by one leader as having an outstanding grasp of abstract art. The second was a ten-year old boy who was initially very reluctant to participate in dance and drama because he felt participation in these activities was not masculine. Over time, he was also observed participating in these activities. As one leader stated, “He realized that you can be on stage in makeup and still be cool. You can dance and be cool.” After reading the initial study report, a teacher at the LES added these comments about this particular child:

After his enrollment in the CC, he began to get in trouble at school. This was “good” trouble. I know that when my reserved LEP (Language Education Program) students start to get in trouble for talking and acting out, this is a good thing. It is an indication to me that their confidence level is increasing and they’re taking those risks that before were too scary to attempt. All this mischief for Antonio [all names used are pseudonyms] I know was a direct connection to the exposure and drawing out of language at the DAC. I asked his parents if they had noticed a difference in behavior and they assured me he had become more active and more talkative.

Another 8-year-old had been enrolled in the program by her mother because she wanted her daughter to have, the opportunity to expand her interests beyond involvement in triathlon. During one of the exit interviews, the daughter reported that the program had done more than just add to her abilities: “[The program] makes me feel more good about myself. I used to think, well all I can do is swim, bike, and run. Now I can swim, bike, run and do acting. And sing.”

Enjoyment. Many parents also felt that the enjoyment their children received from participating in the CC was a major benefit. A number of parents described the excitement that their children displayed as a result of their participation. The following statement made by a mother about her daughter is typical: “She comes home and really goes into detail about what happened. Whereas before when I picked her up she would get in the car and say, ‘Oh good, let’s go home.’”
A father of a LES child describes his son's enjoyment this way: "Even over Easter Holiday, he asked if he could go to the program even though it was a holiday. I know if a kid wants to go someplace even though it's a holiday, it must be something he really likes."

Both parents and leaders felt that the enjoyment children experienced was related to the challenge of structured activities. Parents, in particular, contrasted the enjoyment their children received from the CC with the boredom they experienced at extended care programs.

*Appreciation/Knowledge of Art.* Almost all parents wanted their children exposed to the arts and felt that their children had acquired artistic skills, and appreciation and knowledge of the arts. One mother of a non-LES child stated that her 7-year-old daughter had developed artistic perception as a result of attending the CC:

> I was surprised when we went to the Museum of Modern Art in Houston and we were hearing comments from Sally about the structure of the painting, and what this represented, and shades and sorts of stuff that I think she learned here. I don't think she learned that at extended care!

In some cases, parents said that their children had developed a desire to sample other art forms. One 10-year-old, for example, has since enrolled in a clay class at the DAC.

*A Place to Shine.* Parents and leaders felt that the CC provided children with a place to feel good about their skills. In the language of one leader, "the CC was a place for children to shine." In this regard, the CC provided children a vehicle for demonstrating their artistic skills, displaying leadership, and engaging in activities that were valued by both parents and leaders. One of the leaders described these benefits in terms of an 8-year-old boy from the LES: "I don't know how much Richard grew as much as Richard had a chance to shine, you know? Yeah, to be recognized for the ability he had. He was great in drama, and he was wonderful in the play."

*Learning to Get Along.* Some parents felt that the CC had resulted in their children learning to get along better with others. Parents noted that their children were showing greater self-control, autonomy, and less aggressiveness. The following comment made by the father of a 10-year-old boy from the LES is revealing:

> For the first month, Jose used to be the leader type. You know, "You are going to do it my way and that's it!" But now, he's like, "Who cares who is the leader? We'll all just have fun!"

For a boy who was an accomplished piano player and undertook a lot of activities on his own, the CC experience provided valuable opportunities to learn to interact with others:

> He doesn't need more confidence. I think just interacting with kids, saying his bit then stepping back and having other kids, you
know, the whole interaction thing, giving and taking, I think that’s real neat. He’s a real loner it seems like, but we like the idea of him getting in with a group and performing a play all together. I’m real excited about that.

**Development of Friendships.** A number of friendships were developed among the children enrolled in the CC. While many friendships found limited expression outside the CC, a few spilled over to outside contexts with children being invited to other’s homes. A few parents regarded these friendships as benefits for their children. This was particularly true among parents who felt that their children were having a hard time getting along with other children.

Several of the children were the only child in their family. Their parents talked about them being more comfortable dealing with adults and the amount of time the child spent around adults. For these children, the CC provided an opportunity to learn to interact with other children and build new friendships.

**Characteristics of Creativity Club**

A final area of interest for this study was in the characteristics of the CC program that were particularly advantageous in bringing about some of the benefits that children seemed to gain from participation in the program. The main characteristics identified were (a) nurturing and caring leaders, (b) multiple leaders, (c) specialized disciplinary function, (d) structured and challenging activities, (e) choice of activities, and (f) a focus on kindness and cooperation.

**Nurturing and Caring Leaders.** CC leaders’ interactions with children were nurturing and warm. Leaders were routinely observed providing individual attention to children. This attention went beyond simply providing instruction and leading activities. Leaders played and joked with children. They also interpreted rules, provided encouragement and praise in appropriate ways, and provided discipline as necessary. Leaders also spent a great deal of time talking with and getting to know the children. In one case, three of the four leaders attended a weekend music performance in which one of the LES children was performing. Leaders were also aware of plays in which several other CC participants had been involved. They also showed an interest in the success of the children, as reflected in the following comment by a leader about one of the children: “She is very talented and when she starts to get a lot of self-confidence she’s going to shine.”

Over the course of the program, leaders also developed an understanding of the group dynamics among the children. They used this information when forming groups—antagonistic children were kept apart as much as possible, while children who had developed friendships were kept together as a way of fostering these relationships. Leaders also helped children develop coping strategies as a means of dealing with some of their interpersonal problems.
Children came to learn that the CC leaders cared about them. During the interviews, parents also made a number of comments about the positive influence that leaders had on their children. A favorable rapport allowed many children to take the leaders into their confidence regarding personal problems. An incident involving a 7-year-old girl whose family was homeless, is revealing. She rarely came to the CC with food while most of the other children did. She became very upset when she observed other children throwing away food and not sharing it with her. She was able to talk at length with one of the leaders about the incident. That talk, according to the leader, seemed to help the girl get over her anger and become involved in that day’s activities.

Parents also talked about the leaders being role models for their children. This was especially true for a number of the boys who were in single-parent families with female heads of households. These mothers particularly liked the idea of their being a positive male role model for their children.

Some parents recognized that increased self-confidence came from a feeling of acceptance fostered by the CC leaders. The mother of an 8-year-old child from the LES made the following insight during an interview with one of the leaders:

[My son] really enjoys you, Bill [the male leader], and the other people at the CC; I think most of the kids feel the same way, too. They have an adult who’s treating them not as a programmable entity, but as a viable human being with whom to interact and who is also respected.

**Multiple Leaders.** Exposing the children to several different leaders had a positive impact on the children. Leaders stated that they felt that there were children they had reached and other children they had not. However, as one leader pointed out, all of the children had been touched, in one way or another, by at least one leader.

**Specialized Disciplinary Function.** The presence of full-time staff members, in addition to the program leaders, provided an important disciplinary function. Sometimes children were “sent to the office” for extreme misbehavior (e.g., hitting another child or building up too many warnings or time outs). Besides eliminating distractions from ongoing activity, these visits served as reminders to the children that their participation in the CC was a privilege that could be revoked.

The visits also provided children an opportunity to talk with other concerned adults. Sometimes these adults were able to relate to the children in ways in which the leaders could not. One example of this is illuminating. Two ten-year-old Hispanic boys from the LES were sent to the office for misbehaving during dance and drama class, and talked with the Arts School Manager who himself was Hispanic. Upon finding out from the boys that they felt that dance and drama were not masculine, the
program leader helped them understand the positive aspects of these activities. Leaders noted a significant improvement in both the overall behavior of the boys and in their willingness to participate in dance and drama. Leaders and staff at the DAC agreed that a common heritage shared by the children and the Arts School Manager was an important factor in the improved behavior of the boys.

Structured and Challenging Activities. DAC staff and program leaders of the CC regarded the after-school program as a vehicle for teaching fine arts. Leaders were not simply involving children in craft activities or "fun and games." Rather, activities had a definite structure, as manifested by the presence of daily lesson plans and goals, learning objectives, and the coordination of individual activities. Art projects, for example, generally involved a series of steps that required several periods or days to complete. Moreover, an end-of-the-year play, which took several months to plan, involved the integration of drama, dance, and art activities.

The structured nature of the CC program made activities challenging. Art projects and dance rehearsals, for example, required time and effort to complete. While the leaders did not expect professional results from the children, they did provide children constructive feedback as a means of improving their skills. An emphasis on skill development provided a mechanism whereby children had to focus their attention and immerse themselves in the activity if they were to succeed.

Choice of Activities. The CC provided children a wide degree of autonomy in terms of activities and projects in which they could invest their energies. This was reflected, first, in the fact that the CC offered simultaneous instruction in art, drama, and dance. While children were encouraged to participate in all types of activities, many voiced a strong preference for one or two types. The children were sometimes excused from participating in one activity so that they could participate in a preferred one. Second, instructors encouraged children to use their imaginations and create art projects, dance steps, and theatrical acts that were interesting to them. During art class, for example, children were observed creating papier maché sculptures that they designed themselves. Also, the end of the year play included skits, dances, costumes, and scenery that were designed by the children.

A Focus on Kindness and Cooperation. Kindness and cooperation were integral components of CC activities. Children were given recognition points for various acts of kindness (e.g., sharing food; helping other children; unexpectedly performing tasks such as cleaning out the game closet) and these were posted in a hallway for all to see. An emphasis on kindness was reinforced by guest speakers from philanthropic organizations (e.g., Meals on Wheels, Salvation Army, Ronald McDonald House). Many CC activities had children playing and working together in order to achieve a set of common goals. For the end of the year play, for example, children worked together to create steps for a dance number. A LES parent made the following comparison between the CC and other programs that have
a greater emphasis on competition: “The sort of group activity that you do here is not the way a lot of classes are set up, where there’s a lot of emphasis on competitiveness as opposed to group cooperation.” In sum, an emphasis on kindness and cooperative activities gave the children an opportunity to reflect on others’ needs and not just their own.

**Conclusions and Implications**

**Conclusions**

This study of an arts-based, after-school program that included a number of at-risk youngsters focused on the outcomes parents sought for their children, the benefits children received from program participation, and those program elements that appeared to affect positive outcomes. Using data collected through observation and in-depth interviewing, we found that parents enrolled their children for distinct reasons and that children accrued many benefits as a result of participation. Salient program elements that seemingly contributed to positive outcomes included nurturing and caring leaders, multiple leaders, specialized disciplinary functions, structured and challenging activities, choice of activities, and emphasis on kindness and cooperation.

**Implications for Practitioners**

In the short term, at the very least, the CC appeared to be achieving some of the benefits identified by Jessor (1992) and others as critical to helping youth achieve protection against some of the risk circumstances in their communities and homes. These buffers include positive role models, helping children achieve a sense of acceptance, belonging and competence, controls against deviant behavior, and increasing children’s ability to work with others and resolve conflicts. What is interesting is that protection, in the eyes of parents and CC staff, went beyond simply keeping kids occupied and, by implication, out of trouble. Virtually all of the parents interviewed wanted their children to be meaningfully involved in a program like the CC with its potential to provide children with important developmental benefits.

These results have obvious implications for the design and implementation of at-risk youth programs in general. Results from this study indicate that parents desired and children benefitted from a structured, goal-oriented program. Most parents felt that extended care or traditional after-school programs did not provide their children with enough challenges. These parents valued the CC because it fostered learning and personal goals. The advantages cited by parents of having their children attend the structured CC program support findings reported by Posner and Vandell (1994). In that study, children involved in formal programs spent more time in academic and developmentally enriching activities and less time watching TV than children involved in other forms of after-school arrangements.
Parks and recreation departments need to do a better job of identifying the benefits that children and youth at-risk accrue through program participation and create positive means for helping them achieve those benefits. Findings from this study indicate that the means by which park and recreation agencies provide protection for children and youth at-risk are within their control. Thus, as noted by Rossman (1995), recreation programmers must look more carefully at how they animate their programs. It is not enough to simply provide “fun and games.” As noted, positive benefits and outcomes appear to stem from goal-oriented and challenging recreation programs and activities. Also important are nurturing and caring leaders. The value of strong face-to-face leadership in at-risk youth programs cannot be understated. Early advocates and organizers of play and recreation regarded face-to-face leadership as central to the success of recreation programs. Jay B. Nash (1927) described leadership as the “keynote to any program of education” (p. 318). George Butler (1940) made a similar point: “Under the guidance of a capable leader the child has the opportunity on the playground to develop desirable character traits, individual as well as social” (p. 1940). As a number of modern writers have noted (Kraus, 1985; Russell, 1986), the concept of leadership in the field of park and recreation has changed over time to one that embodies management and coordination. As we seek to create enriching programs for children and youth at-risk, it is wise for us to look to our past and make sure that we reestablish strong leadership as a “keynote” in these programs.

To date, there have been too few attempts to document the impact of park and recreation programs targeted to the needs of children and youth at-risk. Practitioners will have to be more systematic about documenting positive outcomes in order to garner tax dollar support for their programs or provide the information necessary to convince corporations, foundations, or other private sources of financial support to provide or continue assistance. The cooperative effort involved in undertaking the current study should also be of interest to practitioners. A lot of interaction occurred between members of the university research team and CC staff and administrators. While the process of collecting data was initially a bit threatening due to a perception that leadership abilities and programmatic intent were being evaluated, the CC staff quickly realized the value of participating in an evaluation process designed by an outside group. A cooperative, interactive process quickly developed. Staff members indicated that as a result of interactions with the research team, there was increased focus during program planning meetings on outcomes and means to achieve these outcomes. It is also important to note that when the results of the study were made available to the DAC staff and the after-school program leaders at the LES, efforts began to insure the involvement of children from the LES in future sessions of the CC.
Future Research

Given that this evaluation study was limited to a single program over a 14-week period, the extent to which our findings can be generalized to other programs is tenuous. Nevertheless, findings here, and various observations during the program by the authors, provide direction for additional research that can help determine the characteristics of successful recreation programs targeted to the needs of children and youth at-risk. Questions need to be pursued relating to both outcome and process. With regard to outcome, efforts must continue to identify the kinds of benefits sought by youth, their parents and program leaders and determine whether these benefits are being achieved. With regard to process, interest should be focused on the characteristics of programs that help participants achieve benefits. Some of the research questions that might be pursued are as follows: To what extent are the program elements identified here applicable in other settings? [For example, the CC program was also offered at two other sites. Would the same results be observed in different settings, with a different set of leaders, and a different mix of children?] How important is prior interest in an activity to program success? To what extent do cooperative versus competitive goal structures differentiate successful from unsuccessful programs? What role does turnover in leadership play in program success? Are some activities (e.g., sports versus art) superior at facilitating benefits? Finally, what effect does parental support have on success of programs?

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References


