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Experience Sampling Provides a Window into After-School Program

Experiences

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BACKGROUND

The last decade has seen an increase in the number of after-school programs for middle school youth, with as many as 6 million students participating in these programs in 1999 (Safe and Smart, 2000). After-school programs currently available to youth vary in scope and purpose, although they tend to have similar daily schedules, including time for games, physical activities, and homework (Halpern, 2000). Programs may be designed to provide a safe environment for youth, to provide academic enrichment or to reinforce basic academic skills.

While research studying the effects of after-school programs on youth is limited, findings suggest that program participants have better school attendance, increased achievement test scores, and lower drop-out rates (Fashola, 1998). A limitation of these evaluations is that they largely examine program effects as a whole, rather than identify specific aspects of the program that contribute to its effectiveness. This may be due to difficulty in measuring the processes by which program attendance might influence student outcomes.

Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, and colleagues (1983, 1987, 1991) have been instrumental in the development of a methodology, Experience Sampling, which allows researchers to collect systematic data about what a person does, thinks, and feels during daily life. This record of daily experiences is not usually captured by other data collection methods, and reduces the error found

in instruments that rely on the reconstruction of experiences after the fact (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983). Experience Sampling has been used with 5th to 12th graders to measure a variety of constructs including affective states, family relationships and life situations (Larson, et al., 1996).

Assessing the after-school activities of middle school students is challenging. Program observations provide data on observed activities, interactions, and program climate, but do not offer insights into students' feelings and experiences within the after-school environment. Many middle school students spend their after-school hours in unobservable environments, such as home alone or hanging out with peers. Questionnaire and survey data are retrospective, asking respondents to recall past experiences and feelings regarding their after-school activities. Experience Sampling opens a window into students' experiences by providing researchers with data regarding activities and feelings at the moment the experience occurs.

METHOD

The current study employed Experience Sampling to examine students' experiences during after-school hours, and compare their experiences in after-school programs to those in other environments.

- The sample included 25 7th and 8th graders who attended an after-school program at least 3 days per week.
- Each student wore a watch for 7 days, which randomly signaled the student 5 times per day from 3:00 to 8:30 p.m. on weekdays and from 10:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. on weekends.
- When signaled, students completed a logbook (Figure 1), listing their location and main activity, and rated their activities and feelings on a 4-point scale along several dimensions: choice, importance, and enjoyment of activity; level of

concentration; and satisfaction with activity. They also rated 11 affective states. Finally, students listed who was doing the activity with them and who else was around.

INSERT FIGURE 1

RESULTS

Where are students during the after-school hours?

In this study, we were primarily interested in the after-school hours as an important context for middle school students' development.

- The largest percentage of beeps, recorded during the time between when school ends and 5:30 p.m., occurred while students were at school (38.7%; Figure 2). In this sample, students were participating in some kind of adult-sponsored activity or program while at school during the after-school hours.
- Students also reported being home during the after-school hours (32.9%), in transit (9.5%), and at someone else's home (4.5%).

INSERT FIGURE 2

Who are students with during the after-school hours?

- Students most often do activities with two or more friends during the after-school hours (39%).
- If students are not engaged with friends, they are more likely to be alone than with parents or siblings.

INSERT FIGURE 3

What are students doing during the after-school hours?

- Students were more likely to report being involved in academic activities while at an after-school program in comparison to elsewhere (19% vs.7%; Figure 4).

- Students also were more likely to be engaged in sports, physical activities, hobbies or interest activities while attending an after-school program versus when they were somewhere else.
- Passive activities, which included watching TV or watching others do something, were reported more frequently when students were not attending an after-school program.

INSERT FIGURE 4

How do students feel about their activities during the after-school hours?

Differences between mean ratings on choice, importance, enjoyment, concentration, satisfaction, loneliness, happiness and boredom for program versus non-program time during the after-school hours were estimated using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. Nonparametric methods are more appropriate when differences between means are not expected to be normally distributed (Marascuilo & Serlin, 1988). Alternative parametric models yielded similar results. Significant differences were found (Table 1).

- These results suggest that while at after-school programs, students are happier, and enjoy their activities more than when they are not attending programs.
- While at after-school programs, students are less bored and less likely to wish they were doing something different.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Experience Sampling provides a rich source of data through which we can better understand student experiences in after-school programs. The students in the current study were likely to be participating in an adult-sponsored activity or program during the after-school hours. They were often engaged with friends doing homework or sports. They report feeling happy and enjoying their activities while at the after-school program. Experience Sampling allows researchers to examine associations between activities, feelings about activities, and context.

These data give researchers an insight into what particular activities students engage in while attending after-school programs and how they feel while engaged in these activities.

While the current study did not collect outcome data, these results further suggest that Experience Sampling may be useful in identifying which aspects of after-school programs are influencing academic outcomes and to pinpoint the processes that mediate the effects of after-school programs on youth development.

Table 1. Mean Comparisons for Program and Non-Program Time

	Afternoon at the Program	Afternoon NOT at the Program	Wilcoxon Z
	Mean (Sd)	Mean (Sd)	
How much choice did you have about this activity?	3.24 (.82)	2.92 (.87)	-1.009
How important was this activity to you?	2.79 (.74)	2.59 (.81)	-.850
Did you enjoy what you were doing?	3.19 (.70)	2.63 (.78)	-2.073*
How hard were you concentrating?	2.72 (1.10)	2.28 (.76)	-1.200
Did you wish you were doing something else?	1.57 (.72)	2.08 (.81)	-1.982*
Lonely	1.21 (.43)	1.35 (.49)	-1.779+
Bored	1.57 (.75)	1.99 (.91)	-1.960*
Happy	3.03 (.75)	2.61 (.92)	-2.277*
N	20	19	

+p< .07 *p<.05

Figure 1. Experience Sampling Logbook

Time Signaled: _____

Time filled out: _____

1. **Where** were you?

2. **What** was the **main** thing you were doing?

3. **What** else were you doing?

.....
4. **Circle** your answer for **each** question.

	Not at All	Some what	Pretty much	Very much
a. How much choice did you have about this activity?	1	2	3	4
b. How important was this activity to you?	1	2	3	4
c. Did you enjoy what you were doing?	1	2	3	4
d. How hard were you concentrating?	1	2	3	4
e. Did you wish you were doing something else?	1	2	3	4

5. How were you feeling?

Circle your answer for each feeling.

	Not at All	A Little	Some What	Very Much
Lonely	1	2	3	4
Happy	1	2	3	4
Angry	1	2	3	4
Stressed	1	2	3	4
Excited	1	2	3	4
Bored	1	2	3	4
Scared	1	2	3	4
Sad	1	2	3	4
Relaxed	1	2	3	4
Proud	1	2	3	4
Worried	1	2	3	4



6. Who was doing this activity with you?

7. If you were with kids, were they your friends?

Circle all that apply.

Yes No

8. Were they:

Boys Girls

9. Were they:

Older Younger About Your Age

10. Who else was around?



Figure 2.

Reported Locations During the After-School Hours

End of School until 5:30 pm

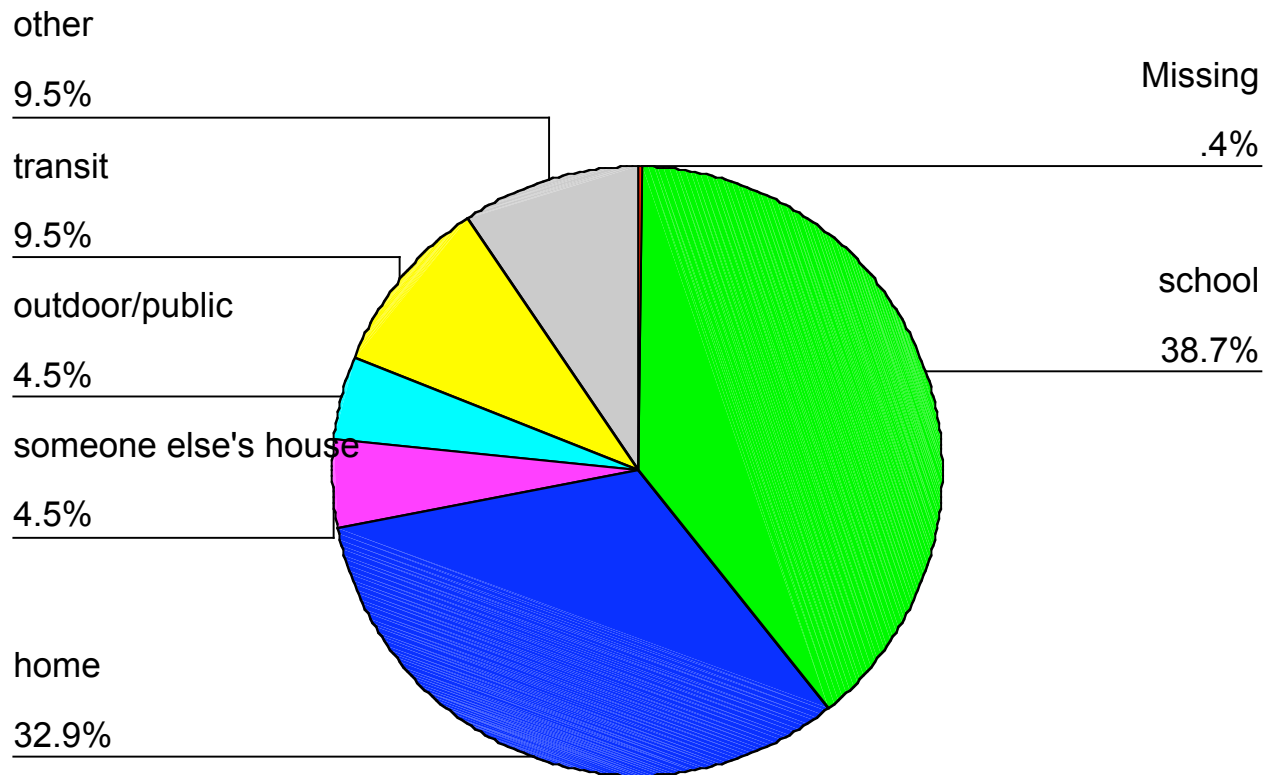


Figure 3.

Activity Partners During the After-School Hours

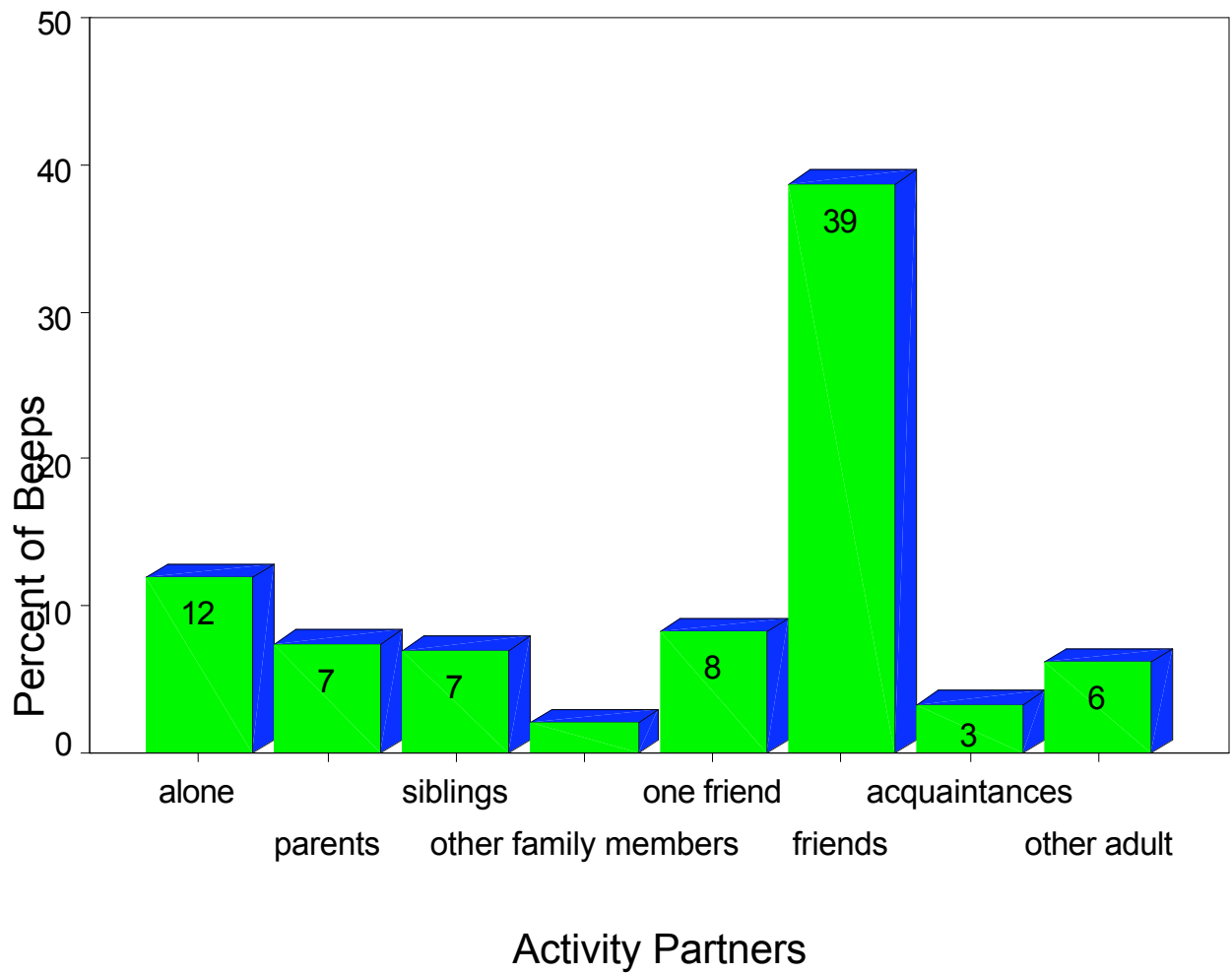


Figure 4.

Reported Activities While at a Program and Not at a Program

