

After the Bell Rings: Student Perceptions of Afterschool

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The Question

Research Question:

What makes students attend afterschool for math? More specifically, how can I effectively structure my time with my students in an afterschool program so that they attend and reap the greatest educational benefits?

Rationale and Background:

I teach at East Side Community High School, a small high school on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It serves 500 students in grades 7 – 12. The student body is approximately 60% Latino, 35% African American and 5% Asian, White or Other. Nearly all of East Side students qualify for the federal free lunch program. I currently teach a Math Analysis course to all 55 12th grade students at East Side. According to its mission statement, the school strives to provide, “personal attention, a safe and respectful environment, a strong sense of community, and curricula that is both challenging and engaging.”

True to its mission, East Side is a school with a strong culture of supporting students, both academically through small class sizes and emotionally through a strong advisory program. The result of these twin goals is that teachers develop strong relationships with their students and are committed to their students’ success. To this end, all teachers devote one afternoon each week to work with students after the school day ends at 3:00pm. Teachers are paid to stay afterschool to work with students. There is at least one teacher from each grade available Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 3:00pm – 4:30pm, although most teachers stay until 5:00pm or later.

The idea behind the afterschool program at East Side is to allow time for students to receive extra help from their teachers. Helping students to understand the material presented in class, reviewing material and studying for classroom tests, providing extra time to work on projects, helping students with homework, providing extended time to complete owed work, and holding review sessions for standardized tests are some ways in which teachers utilize that time. In some cases, students are mandated to attend

because they are falling behind academically. The time is usually unstructured and informal and is a further opportunity for teachers to develop strong relationships with their students.

I have noticed in the three years that I have taught at East Side, that attendance for my afterschool sessions is fairly high. I began to wonder who comes to afterschool? Why do they attend? Perhaps more significantly, who does not attend and why not? Finally, I began to wonder whether I was using the time afterschool in a way that most benefited my students. For the students who do attend, what are they getting out of it? What are the implications for my own teaching and for my school in terms of how we structure our afterschool sessions? How can we best help our students?

Review of the Literature:

One of the most widespread problems facing American educators today is the emotional and physical withdrawal of students from school. (Voelkl, 1996)

Many students, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status in urban settings, feel disassociated with their school experiences and have difficulty seeing value in school. Furthermore, significant research exists showing a positive correlation between student engagement in school and academic achievement. (Voelkl, 1996) It seems necessary then to seek out ways in which student identification with their school experience can be enhanced or improved.

Research has looked at the experience of students in structured after-school enrichment programs and the ways in which these students perceive their participation as influencing their engagement in school. Students who are engaged in school exhibit behaviors toward current and future success in the educational setting (Jordan & Nettles, 1999). Examples of such behavior include arriving at class on time with the necessary materials for the specific class and with homework assignments completed.

The positive qualities of school engagement are particularly relevant for low-income, inner-city students who are often defined as “at-risk” for school failure. These students often lack out-of-school structures that contribute to positive student investment behaviors (Posner & Vandell, 1994). After-school programs have recently emerged as a consistent theme in discussions surrounding school reform. School-based afterschool

programs are not uncommon, with 67% of principals offering programs in their buildings as an option for students (Noam, 2004). Policymakers, educators and community leaders have praised the positive effects of after-school programs in recent years, particularly on low-income and at-risk students in urban settings (Halpern, 2000).

Who Benefits?

There is substantial research pointing to the positive effects of afterschool programs, particularly on urban youth. While most of the research has focused on elementary and middle school students, there is evidence of the effectiveness of afterschool programs for high school students as well. Prior to 1994, many of the studies on the beneficial effects of after-school programs focused on suburban or middle-income students (Posner and Vandell, 1994). It is only in recent years that researchers have begun to look at the effects of urban programs on low-income students.

Posner and Vandell (1994) addressed the multiple after-school options for low-income students (structured programs, informal adult care, self-care and maternal care) in an attempt to determine whether the structured, formal afterschool programs had positive social and academic effects for students. While the study showed positive effects in academic achievement, behavior and social adjustment among students in formal afterschool programs, the study was conducted with urban 3rd graders. Students in the elementary school years do not share some of the issues facing teens. Educators in the after-school field struggle with programming for middle and high school students because these populations “think with their feet,” that is to say that they have significantly more freedom as far as their attendance in a program if they are dissatisfied. Only 7% of 12th graders in a national survey replied that they were in schools that offered afterschool extended-day programs. Yet school systems that have evaluated the effect of afterschool programs on student achievement have found positive results in both academic and school engagement areas (Dryfoos, 1999).

So Many Goals, So Little Time

As a result of the standards-based reform movement, there has been a dramatic increase in what is expected of both students and teachers. Furthermore, the local and federal focus on accountability in the form of high stakes testing is in direct contrast to

what we know about the ways in which children learn and make sense of what they learn (Shepard, 2000). Research has shown that children learn and develop at different rates in different subject areas. We know too that students arrive at school with widely varying skill levels. It follows that some students need more time to learn what is being taught (and tested). Other students need opportunities to engage in their learning in more creative, nontraditional ways. According to the Report of the National Education Commission on Time and Learning, Prisoners of Time, schools must be structured around student learning, not around time (Kane, 1994).

Afterschool or More School?

School-based afterschool programs are places educators and policymakers alike have looked to harness time to the advantage of student learning. In light of the high stakes testing associated with No Child Left Behind, there has been a call in recent years to expand the school day in the hopes of increasing student achievement. Yet extending the school day has faced much resistance from both educators and students, especially from high school students who are old enough to make choices about attendance.

Jordan and Nettles (1999) looked at a population from a national longitudinal study of 25,000 high school students to determine the ways in which students use their out-of-school time as it relates to their engagement in school. Recognizing that students spend a good deal more time out of school than they do in school, it is important to determine effective ways in which high school students spend their out-of-school time. Jordan and Nettles determined that those students who are involved in positive, structured activities after-school have a greater investment in school. This ultimately leads to greater educational outcomes (school engagement and academic achievement). This study, while important from a more global perspective, provides little insight into what *types* of after-school activities would be most beneficial.

Similarly to Posner and Vandell (1994), Halpern (2000) used pre-existing data from a large, multi-city study, in conjunction with the existing literature, to determine what qualities of after-school programs provide developmental scaffolding to low-income students. He argues that children need time when “the adult agenda is minimal.” He further recognizes that inner-city middle school students are in a period of intense transition and, should they “slip through the cracks,” may be on a path of detachment

from the school experience. This detachment can worsen at the high school level, creating a high risk for school dropout. After-school programs can provide positive environments for students to develop the necessary resiliency skills to succeed in the school setting. Halpern addresses the issue of content in after-school programs through the notion of quality. He concludes that, irrespective of program structure, after-school programs may be an important developmental intervention for some children.

According to the Forum for Youth Investment (2004), practitioners have struggled with attendance in programs geared toward high-school aged students. High school students have strong opinions about how they spend their time. Afterschool is an afterthought for many teenagers, as competing interests triumph. Teenagers want to receive something for their time – they want to feel valued if they are putting in the time afterschool. They are old enough to comprehend when they are doing something that is self-beneficial and gravitate toward experiences that they feel are worthwhile.

The Harvard Family Research Project (2004) published a brief looking at participation in afterschool programs and found that despite the documented benefits for youth, there appear to be barriers to participation, especially among teenagers. Participation in programs declines as students get older and are free to make their own choices regarding how they spend their time. Student preferences toward “hanging out” and working contribute to their resistance to afterschool as “more school.” Students also often have family responsibilities that prevent them from attending on a regular basis.

According to the Forum for Youth Investment (2003), 60% of U.S. 12th graders are employed for 7 or more hours a week during the school year. Furthermore, 80% of 12th graders have at least 1 school-based extracurricular activity and 67% of high school students are engaged in a community service activity. Teenagers need flexibility in an afterschool program to accommodate these competing interests.

The Study

Data Collection Tools:

Attendance:

I tracked attendance at my weekly afterschool sessions, from September to April. I looked both at individual students’ attendance over the course of the 8 months, and at what percentage of the 12th grade attended afterschool on any given week. I tracked

attendance over the course of 22 afterschool sessions. It is important to note that midway through the school year, East Side instituted a peer-tutoring program in which students were paid to assist teachers afterschool. While my afterschool benefited from two peer tutors, many of the tutors were 12th graders who were then unable to attend afterschool with me as they were employed tutoring elsewhere in the school.

Student Surveys:

I distributed and collected a student survey asking students why they do and do not attend afterschool on a regular basis. Thirty-four students responded to the survey (62% of the grade). I asked students how frequently they used the time afterschool for a variety of different purposes. I also asked students to rank the helpfulness of different activities and structures they encounter in afterschool. Finally, I asked them to reflect on what they found to be most and least beneficial about afterschool. (See Appendix A for survey)

Exit Slips:

I distributed exit slips every few weeks to the students in attendance at afterschool. Students were asked to answer two short questions in writing before they left. They were asked what they had specifically accomplished that day and what else they wanted to tell me about their experience. (See Appendix B for exit slip)

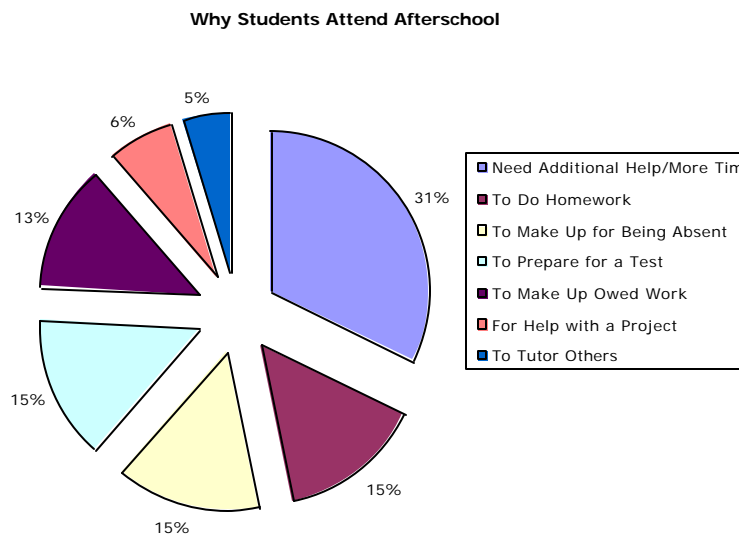
Data:

“When I’m stuck with something and need extra help, I can figure it out if I go to afterschool. I get a better understanding.” – 12th grade student

Despite the fact that on student surveys, the majority of students identified as “rarely” attending afterschool, the average weekly attendance was 11 students until February. In February, a peer tutoring program was instituted school-wide, where selected students were paid to stay afterschool and assist teachers during their afterschool days. After February, average attendance rose to 14 students per week. This amounted to 20 - 25% of the senior class attending on any given week. Attendance data was taken over the course of 22 sessions. There were as few as four students in attendance and as many as 25 students. Out of a senior class of 55 students, 51 students attended at least once (93%), 30 students attended at least 5 times (55%) and 14 students attended at least 10 times (25%).

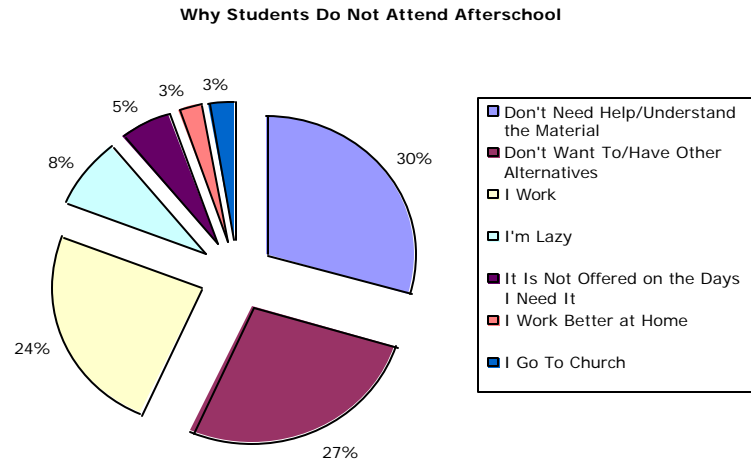
When asked to reflect on why they attended the weekly sessions, students made it clear that they attend afterschool when they need to and if they feel confident they will get something out of being there. This is aligned with the research of the Forum for Youth Investment (2004), which states that in order to commit time to an afterschool activity, older teens want their time to count. Students often mentioned needing additional help or time on a topic, doing homework, making up for being absent and preparing for a test as reasons they attend afterschool. All of these reasons imply some personal benefit to the student. (See Figure 1)

FIGURE 1



While there were a variety of reasons given for why students do not attend afterschool, the commonality was that students do not attend afterschool when it conflicts with something they value more. This finding is aligned with the research in the field. When asked specifically why they do not attend, students consistently brought up other or better uses of their time. In interviews, it was clear that if a student felt they would get something concrete out of staying, they would rearrange their schedules. Otherwise, work, family obligations, friends and other alternatives took precedence. (See Figure 2)

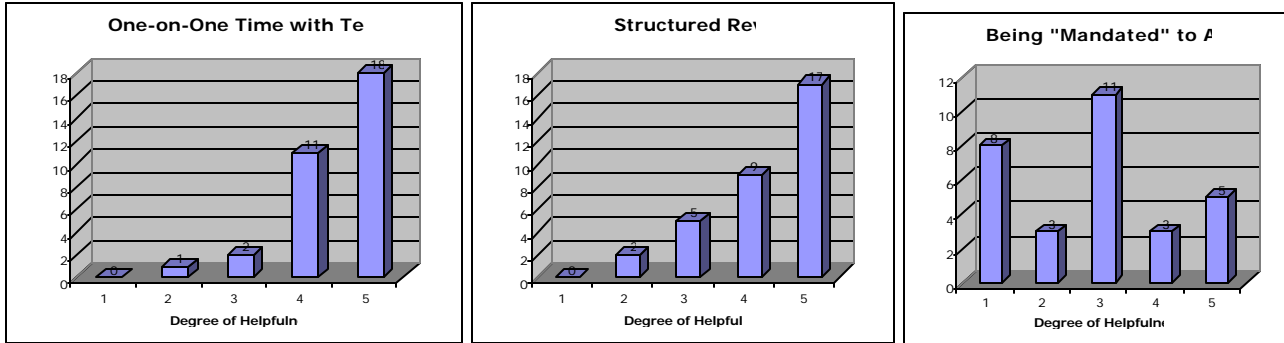
FIGURE 2



Students were asked what activities or structures they found to be beneficial during afterschool by rating different structures they had experienced: one-on-one time with the teacher, working with peers in small groups, listening to music, structured review of a topic, practice sheets on a specific topic, small group working on homework or projects both with and without the teacher, working alone or being mandated to stay afterschool. Students were asked to rate each structure on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most helpful. The students overwhelmingly favored one-on-one time with a teacher and structured review as the activities they found to be most helpful. When asked to rate the degree of helpfulness of certain activities, 79% of respondents described structured review as being incredibly helpful. Conversely, students found working in groups with friends and listening to music to be somewhat to very unhelpful.

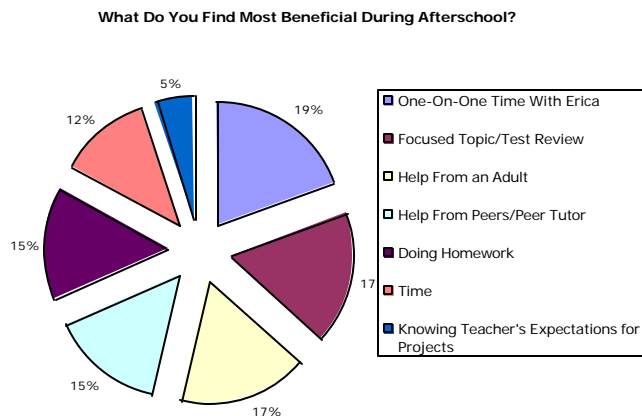
After each quarterly progress report, struggling students are mandated to attend afterschool. This tends to create a conflict between teachers and students, often because students do not understand why they have been mandated. When asked what students found helpful about afterschool, only 27% of students found being mandated to be helpful. In conferences, most students expressed resentment and frustration over being mandated to attend. (See Figure 3)

FIGURE 3



Students were asked in an open response format to reflect on what they found most beneficial to their learning. Students responded that the opportunity to go in depth into topics with a teacher or tutor is highly beneficial. While they listed multiple aspects of afterschool that they found to be beneficial, 41% of students discussed receiving personal attention and/or assistance from a teacher as the *most* beneficial. Interestingly, 15% percent of students mentioned that working with a peer tutor or peer was highly beneficial. Many students commented on the benefits of test review sessions, practice sheets and structured work on a specific topic as being beneficial to their learning. (See Figure 4)

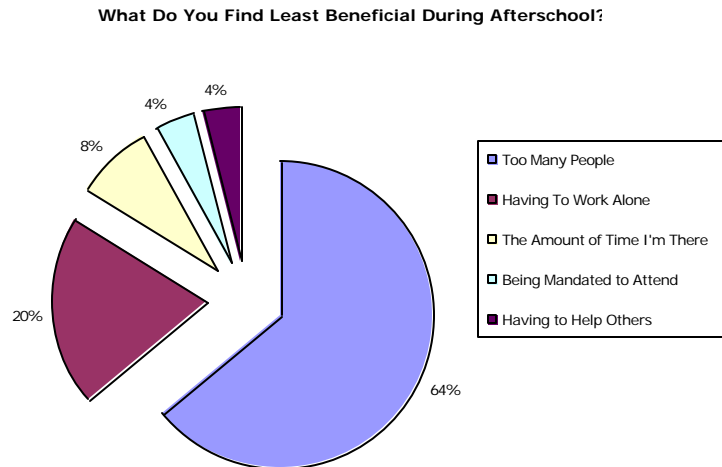
FIGURE 4



From a programmatic standpoint, high attendance is the mark of a successful day in the afterschool program. However, some of the most frustrated responses from students in their exit slips came on days when there were 20 or more students in attendance. Students remarked that they simply could not receive the help they needed. One student wrote, “Get more teachers because you are only one person!” When asked

what they found least beneficial about afterschool, 64% of respondents talked about there being too many students in the room. One student wrote, “I think that sometimes when there is a lot of people, it distracts me.” Many students replied that they were distracted easily when the class was crowded and were frustrated that they could not get enough of the teacher’s attention. (See Figure 5)

FIGURE 5



Analysis:

My data suggests that older teenagers do attend afterschool, especially if they feel their time is valued and they can see a direct benefit from having attended. In order for students to perceive afterschool as having value, they need to feel that the program is aligned with their needs and wants. We as educators need not necessarily focus on “mandating” students to attend, but instead shift the focus onto structuring the program *so that* students will attend. In this regard, the data suggests that a flexible program with a small setting, some degree of structure and where students can get individual attention wherever possible, is a school-based afterschool model that would appeal to older students.

The afterschool program at East Side has a necessary focus on attendance numbers from a programmatic standpoint, as the funding for the program is tied to student attendance. However, from a learning standpoint, students repeatedly voiced their frustration when there were “too many” students in attendance. An afternoon that the school and program administrators viewed as “successful,” one where 21 students

attended afterschool, the students viewed as incredibly frustrating. Conversely, should the afternoon that only 4 students attended be seen as “wasteful” because all 4 struggling students received targeted, one-on-one help? In their exit slips for that day, the students were positive about their experiences. Funding surpasses learning as the driving force of the program. Teachers and administrators are forced to “justify” their programs by keeping numbers high. Yet the fact that students need extra help and support is a given. Different students will need assistance on different weeks, in varying ways and for different amounts of time. Programs must be given the flexibility to meet the needs of the students.

The positive response from students around receiving one-on-one attention from either me or the peer-tutors led me to be more conscious of the structure of my afterschool sessions. One-on-one time gives students the opportunity to address their own personal confusions directly with the teacher. When students received individual support toward understanding of the material, they were better able to complete homework and other assignments individually. I began to speak with individual students during the school day, setting up “appointments” to review specific topics or assignments with them afterschool. Students generally kept these appointments and appreciated the attention. The more that students had the opportunity to interact in a one-on-one or small group setting, the more beneficial they perceived their experience.

There is a danger though that afterschool begins to be perceived as “more school,” as students work further on material they saw earlier in the school day. Yet my students rated explicit activities such as practice sheets and structured time such as test review sessions highly. Students who simply wanted time to work still attended and worked individually, but my focus was on a specific topic. Students knew this in advance so they knew what to expect if they chose to attend. One-on-one and small group attention, as well as individual practice opportunities, was provided around the topic. Students appreciated the structure and valued the fact that it was provided in a flexible environment.

The peer-tutoring structure that was put in place mid-year worked to improve my students’ experiences afterschool. There were more people in the room to whom the students felt that they could turn for help, allowing students to feel satisfied that they “got what they came for.” The peer-tutoring component was a valuable addition to the already

in-place afterschool program at East Side, as it was able to enhance the students' experiences and balance out the increased attendance.

The main catalyst for change in the afterschool program in my classroom was listening to the students' voices and perceptions of what was working and what was not. My students were forthcoming about their opinions and responded positively as I was able to "tweak" the structure of my afterschool program to meet their needs. A number of students benefited academically from attending afterschool, as was evidenced not only by rising test scores, but also in their understanding of the material.

Implications:

An academic afterschool program can be successful for older teens if we listen to what they are asking for and capitalize on their interest in "getting something" for their time. This has interesting implications at the classroom and school level, but also at a policy level. If afterschool will continue to be seen as a potential remedy for the difficulties faced in urban education, policymakers need to be thoughtful in the both the design and funding of these programs. The implications of these conclusions at the classroom level are:

1. Structure afterschool sessions in such a way that students can revisit or build on what they have learned in class.
2. Provide the *option* of structured review or practice of skills learned in class, such as periodic test review sessions or unit review sessions.
3. Afterschool should not be more school. Structure does not need to replace the informal nature of working with students.
4. Create an incentive to attend. Food, extra credit and opportunities for revision of assignments are all examples of motivators for older students. Students will feel they are being "compensated" for their time.
5. Provide the opportunity for stronger students to serve as peer tutors to struggling students in a supervised manner.

In order for an afterschool program to be successful on the classroom level, it must be supported by school administrators. The administration must:

1. Provide compensation for teachers to stay afterschool and work with students.

2. Encourage the creation of a school-wide, multi-age peer-tutoring program.
Compensate peer tutors for their time.
3. Provide experienced tutors to assist classroom teachers with afterschool help.
Programs such as America Reads and America Counts are excellent sources of tutors, as are partnerships with local colleges, universities and schools of education.
4. Create incentives for students to attend, thereby creating a positive culture around afterschool.

Lastly, policy makers must realize that while afterschool has huge potential educational benefits for students, it is not the single “silver bullet” solution to the problems facing public education. There has been increased funding for afterschool in recent years, but this funding is too often tied to attendance figures. For students to reap the greatest educational benefits, policy makers must:

1. Shift the measure of success of a program away from attendance numbers and on to individual gains. Measure the quality of service instead of the quantity served.
2. Provide support around school-based afterschool programs.
3. Support research into effective models of school-based afterschool programs for high-school aged students.

Older teenagers want to be successful academically. If they perceive a school-based afterschool program as a means to that success, they will attend. But their voices must also be heard and honored. They know what they need and what structures will provide them with the tools necessary for success. Students will reap educational benefits from afterschool programs when they attend and receive the individual attention they deserve to master the material and further their understanding.

APPENDIX A

Math Afterschool Survey

Please take a minute to fill out this survey. I am doing a research project on afterschool at East Side and am interested in your opinions. Thanks!! -Erica

Please circle the answer that fits you best

1. I attend afterschool for math: Always Sometimes Rarely Never

2. When I attend math afterschool, I work on:

Homework	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Exhibitions	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
A concept I don't understand	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Test review sessions	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Revising quizzes or HW	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Other	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never

Please explain what you mean by "other" below:

3. I find myself attending after-school for math *more* *less* *about the same* than I do for other subjects. (Please circle one.)

4. The reason I attend math after-school is:

5. If I don't attend after-school for math, it is because:

6. There are many things going on in the after-school program. Please rate each the following on a scale of 1 – 5, where 1 is the least helpful and 5 is the most helpful:

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
Not helpful			Incredibly helpful	

- _____ One-on-one time with Erica
- _____ Working with peers in small groups
- _____ Listening to music
- _____ Structured review of a specific topic (with Erica teaching – like a test review)
- _____ Practice sheets on a specific topic
- _____ A small group working on the same homework together
- _____ Working in a small group with Erica or a student teacher on an exhibition
- _____ Working by myself on homework or other work
- _____ Being "mandated" to stay by Erica or by my advisor
- _____ Other (be specific what you mean by other in the space below)

-
7. What do you find most beneficial to your learning when you come to after-school?
8. What do you find to be least beneficial to your learning when you come to after-school?
9. What could I do to make after-school more interesting and productive for you?

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