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Expanded learning: A thought piece about terminology, typology, and transformation

Gil G. Noam, Ed.D., Dr. Habil and Bailey B. Triggs, M.S.

Abstract: What is it about afterschool that gives it so much potential to powerfully influence educational best practices around the world? This paper will explore what truly defines “afterschool” beyond the time- and location-based pedagogy of the term and will make the case for the use of “expanded learning” or “expanded opportunities” as the terms that most clearly describe this critical time of youth learning and development. This paper will explore the cultural and bureaucratic differences countries have that influence how young people spend their time and what those differences say about a country’s views on child development and its aspirations for its youth. Beyond an exploration of cultural differences, this paper will also discuss the trends that are influencing our international efforts to shift the view of expanded learning programs beyond a safe place to keep children occupied while their parents work, toward a fundamental space for child development and educational innovation.

Keywords: Expanded learning, afterschool, youth development, social-emotional skills

An international need for afterschool programs

There is a universal increase in demand for safe, supportive, educational experiences for youth outside formal education. Changes in the global workforce, growing gaps in financial inequality, and concerns about financial stability in old age have led more people into the workforce than ever before. For example, the rate of women’s participation in the labor force in East Asia has steadily risen since the 1980s (Kim, 2017), with Japan seeing a sharp rise in dual income households and a labor force that increased by 3 million people since 2012 (Miura & Higashi, 2017). The rise in dual income households with parents who work full time led to a rise in children who require additional supervision and enrichment while their parents are at work. Countries in Scandinavia, acknowledging the shift toward dual income households that began in the 1970s, have developed a dual-earner career model to facilitate participation in the labor force by both men and women with children (Ferrarini & Duvander, 2010; Rostgaard, 2014). Additionally, there are growing concerns in many societies about the income and cultural capital gap among their population and the need for added support and opportunities for those who are left behind. There is also the recognition

that schools alone cannot fulfill all the essential learning needs of children and youth, and that other socializing spaces have to be strengthened at a time when religion and busy home lives and the reduced influence of the extended family are all taking a toll on moral, ethical, and whole child development.

Research has found that programs which run outside of traditional educational settings¹ have the potential to provide more than a safe place for children to be while their parents are at work. There is a growing body of evidence to support the idea that these programs can foster youth development, including positive feelings and self-esteem, attitudes, and social behaviors (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). This type of program plays an important role in youth development and impacts can extend to improvements in school performance (Lauer et al., 2006). For example, a meta-analysis of afterschool programs² in the United States showed that participants in programs that addressed personal and social skills demonstrated significant increases in their self-perceptions and bonding to school, positive social behaviors, school grades and levels of academic achievement, and a significant reduction in problem behaviors (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). This is not a surprising finding, due to the relationship-centric nature of many afterschool programs where adults mentor youth on a range of topics from study tips to social-emotional coping skills in the face of adversity.

Another strength of afterschool is its ability to foster strong peer relationships by focusing many of its projects around teamwork and collaboration. These programs are often offered to youth from a variety of age groups, which allows students at different stages of development to benefit by learning from each other. Finally, afterschool programs' flexible structure allows youth to choose the topics they want to pursue based on their interests, share their opinions, and influence the direction of their learning experiences. Because these programs allow for so much innovation, they can drive education opportunities forward and serve as pilot sites for advancements that can then be brought into the classroom. With so much potential for powerfully influencing educational best practices, it is important to better understand the diverse approaches taken across the world regarding how these programs are designed to meet the needs of the youth they serve, and to identify the commonalities that unite these programs and can drive innovation and improvement for all.

International approaches to expanded learning: A typology

Despite a common need for enriching experiences for youth outside the classroom, there are broader cultural influences that inform how different countries approach this afterschool time. Our research has found three different types of afterschool programs: (1) academic cram schools; (2) free play; and (3) a hybrid approach that focuses on both academic and exploration-based, social-emotional opportunities. These three different approaches are influenced by cultural values and market demand, as determined by the priorities and expect-

1 For the purposes of this paper, traditional educational settings are defined as classroom-based instruction provided by trained teachers.

2 For the purposes of this introduction, we will refer to these programs as "afterschool" due to the term's popularity in the United States.

tations of parents, and are often supported through government policy (Ferrarini & Duvander, 2010; Yano Research Institute, 2017). In this next section, we will briefly explore all three approaches and how they can inform and enrich our understanding of after-school.

Academic cramming

“Cram schools,”³ popular in countries across Asia like Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, are programs that focus primarily on academic achievement as a way to extend and reinforce the learning happening during the school day. There are several cultural factors that explain why a rigorous academic approach to extended learning is highly valued and socially important to these societies. Many of the countries that support cram schools have similar social factors that help make this approach so popular, including small nuclear families where more financial resources can be spent on a child, parents with busy work schedules who are looking for structured activities for their children outside of school time, a school culture that focuses on examinations as proof of student learning, and a society-wide importance placed on math and English education (Kwok, 2004). Research has found that students who attend these “cram” afterschool programs define learning as “memorizing and internalizing school knowledge,” and that they reported that they were mainly motivated by external rewards like high test scores (Harnisch, 1994; Maksić & Iwasaki, 2009; Tsai & Kuo, 2008). Two cultural beliefs helped popularize the cramming approach to afterschool education: 1) Students’ success on test results leads to upward social mobility, and 2) Discipline and dedication are two of the greatest personal values, as influenced by Confucian traditions (Bray, 1999; Kwok, 2004).

Free play

On the other side of the spectrum are programs in countries like Finland and Sweden where afterschool is seen as a protected space that emulates features of home and the natural peer world of children (Kane, 2015; Ljusberg, 2017). In these programs, children are often able to direct their own leisure time activities with supervising adults present (Haglund, 2015). This approach is taken as not just fun for the sake of fun, but because play-based learning is seen as an important way to build important life skills beyond academic achievement (Kane, 2015; Klerfelt & Haglund, 2014).

The hybrid approach

In the United States, afterschool programs often employ a hybrid approach with the goal of creating a safe place for kids in a world that is perceived to be—and in some contexts is—objectively dangerous and requiring adult supervision. These programs have an added focus on strengthening academic support through activities such as homework and tutoring. Additionally, there is a focus on enrichment in areas such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) activities that are not tied to school, and can also include play, sports, and the arts. As more mothers joined the workforce during the 1960s and ‘70s and relied on

3 Known as *juku* in Japan, *buxiban* in Taiwan, and *hagwon* in Korea.

child care options outside the home, the tension between supporting academics and providing a protected care and play space was experienced in youth-serving organizations such as the Y (formerly, YMCA) and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA). In the 1980s, the focus shifted to child protection and violence and crime prevention. During this period, afterschool was seen as a safe space protecting children from risks, violence, gangs, and drugs (Modglin et al., 1995). In the middle to late 1990s, afterschool programs were increasingly seen as a way to address educational inequities and academic contributions across race, ethnicity, and social-economic status by increasing funding to better reach and serve minority populations in the community (Noam, 2002).

In the last decade, educators in the United States have been challenged with the question of how to create intentional learning environments that go beyond extra time for homework or play. This is an important issue because almost a quarter of families in the United States currently have one or more children enrolled in an afterschool program (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Most recently, the focus has shifted toward academic accountability. The limited funding for afterschool programs in the United States allows government and private funders to exert pressure on programs, many times by requiring that afterschool programs collect and report on quantitative data as evidence of program improvement. While these new expectations can be challenging for programs without an established data collection system, they also provide an opportunity for afterschool programs to demonstrate their impact on students over time. Data can be used both to build a case for additional funding and to support a more personalized approach to learning that can drive student satisfaction and learning outcomes.

To understand the variety of approaches to afterschool programs across cultures, we are overstating the point to accentuate the differences. Many afterschool programs in countries that focus primarily on testable academic achievement also have other, more leisure-based activities. For example, education reform in Hong Kong over the past two decades has led to a whole-child approach that provides youth in afterschool programs with more experiential learning opportunities (Sivan & Siu, 2017). Similarly, Japanese researchers looked closely at afterschool programs designed to support social-emotional development and found that these programs contributed to students' empathy and educational interest and ambition (Kanefuji, 2015). The more play and peer-centric Scandinavian approaches to leisure centers, as they're often called, can also include homework time. But as ideal types they are very different in philosophy, priority, and desired outcome and reflect each society's priorities and education system. Despite so much globalization and internationalization of academic measurement through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) system, the ideals of and goals for child and youth development and education differ immensely across continents, regions and countries.

Underlying transformations in education that will increase the importance of expanded learning

Despite these three differing approaches to afterschool, there are several trends that are influencing a universal movement toward a more expanded view of this important time outside the classroom. These trends include a movement toward personalized learning with a deeper emphasis on student engagement, choice, and purpose; the growing understanding that social-emotional skills are crucial to future youth success, particularly within the workforce; and an increased reliance on data as a driver for educational decision-making.

Advancements in technology and theories about relationships have increased personalized learning opportunities for youth, have become popular in school settings, and have the potential to extend beyond the confines of the bounded school day (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Pane, Steiner, Baird, & Hamilton, 2015). These shifts have created fast advances in the design and deployment of afterschool programs that push against the traditional ways in which schools are organized. School as an institution has a long history and traditions are hard to change; however, this information revolution is challenging everything else in society and will not stop in front of the schoolhouse.

Another aspect of an increased momentum toward new contents and contexts of learning are the new needs of employers. What do today's students need to succeed in the workforce? In the United States, college was believed to be the final step to prepare youth to enter the workforce; however, there is a rising charge that today's college students lack resiliency, and higher education responded by creating educational environments free from challenge. This rhetorical backlash of our culture's advances in understanding the importance of student mental health focuses more on critiquing a generation of students, than understanding how we as educators can work together to increase the skills that will lead to long-term student success.

The message from research is clear: to perform well in school and life, students need more than just academic skills—they need ways to enhance social and emotional capital (Knowles-Cutler & Lewis, 2016). Call them what you will—resilience, emotional intelligence, non-cognitive abilities—these so-called “soft skills” coupled with core competencies in reading, writing, math and science together define success for our students. And while there is a great deal of buzz around social-emotional skills, there is also a great deal of confusion surrounding them (Noam & Triggs, 2018). It is critical that as educators, we narrow down this long list of skills so that we can get down to a workable number around which we can develop an agenda, train teachers and afterschool providers, and engage parents and students.

A further element of change in many countries is precise uses of data to drive decision-making. In education, this data-orientation has been elevated through the participation of many countries in the PISA rankings. This competition has led countries like Korea, Japan, and Singapore to put an intense focus on academics, with practices that include longer school days, memorization, outside tutoring for exams, and the cramming programs that define a large portion of their extended learning offerings. On the other hand, Finland continues to score top marks in academics, scoring 5th in the most recently released 2015 PISA rankings for Science, Reading, and Math, while taking a more play-centered approach to its

extended learning opportunities. This approach to student academic skills has made education ministries and school administrators across the world data-oriented. PISA has expanded its focus to begin to include 21st-century skills, and many educators are interested to learn what other elements one can measure that correspond with a wider view on after-school programs, such as critical thinking, perseverance, student engagement, empathy and more. Developing strategies of data use that are non-punitive and include elements of expanded opportunities (even measuring them) and learning are becoming an important international perspective.

These trends are cutting edge for everyone in the business of raising children: from education systems, schools, afterschool settings, to the teachers, youth workers, parents, and most importantly, the students themselves. The demands on children have changed and the world they inherit requires different, expanded learning skills. Countries that are fixated on test scores—as most are—will soon be left behind as critical thinking, complex problem-solving, non-hierarchical teamwork and creativity help drive computer and robot-assisted economies. Facts and knowledge still matter, but with the advent of most information being readily available on our phones and other devices, rote learning and fact-based memorization will soon be a thing of the past. The faster societies change their teaching and learning approach both in schools and out, the better they will prepare their students, societies, and their citizens for the fundamental changes that are upon us. Given these underlying changes toward a similar updated of education systems, it is important to tie the innovations of afterschool to these transformations taking place. For this purpose, it is worth reflecting in what is “in a word.”

An exploration of terminology

Most terminology covering the afterschool space worldwide is focused on time and space. What is clear is that big educational transformations across the world are tied to philosophy, technology, and data. Given these shifting priorities and influences, it is important to find a term that describes not only a new time and space where these programs can take place, but also acknowledges the modern needs of families and the global workforce. This term should highlight the *opportunities* children need, not just the outcomes we want to see from these programs. It should describe how we support not only student achievement, but a true equity of opportunity for youth, particularly those whose families do not have the funds for private tutoring or expensive sports or travel camps outside of school time. These terms must share an expanded vision of what this education is for and what opportunities are truly available to youth.

Educators have struggled over the past few decades to find an encompassing term to describe and define programs that provide care, learning, and development opportunities for children and youth outside of the classroom. There are many names for this “extra” time and space, and the names a society chooses reveal a great deal on the values and expectations they place on these type of programs. In East Asian cultures that favor “cram schools,” the names chosen for this program focus on the school connection, as well as highlighting the additional expense of these private, for-profit enterprises. For example, in

Japan these programs are known as *juku* (cram school), *buxiban* in Taiwan (tuition class), and *hagwon* in Korea (for-profit private institute). In Scandinavia, the terms for these programs emphasize leisure, freedom, and a home-like environment that belies the cultures approach to this time outside the classroom. For example, in Norway there are *Skolefritidsordning* or *SFO*, which translates to “school free time/leisure scheme.” In Denmark and Sweden, they also have youth clubs called *Fritidshjem* and *Fritidshem* respectively that both translate to “leisure centers,” or literally, “free time home.” In Finland there are *Asukaspuistot* (resident parks), which are open playgrounds for school children to play in the morning and afternoon. Staff work with the children to participate in activities outdoors or indoors. In Germany and Switzerland, the popular terminology is “full-time, or all-day school” (*Ganztagsschule*). In the United States, one of the most common terms to describe this organizational time and setting is *after-school*. The problem with this term is that it is linguistically limiting the definition of these programs by time (“after”) and place (“school”). This is important because a limited definition can lead to a limited vision that prevents important innovation. Many of the popular terms (e.g., *after-school* and *out-of-school time*) define themselves in relation to school, while implying this time is not school. The term *after-school*, although popular in the United States, adds the additional limitations of excluding programs that meet before school, during the summer, or during other school breaks. *Out-of-school time* also holds popularity in the United States for this reason, but still centers around the concept of the program being held “outside” of school (at least it can be misinterpreted as such), when often these programs are held within school building as a way to share limited educational resources.

Because of these limitations, new terms have emerged to address this evolution of non-school programs, including *extended* and *expanded learning*. These terms sidestep the location-based limitations of *after-school* and *out-of-school time* and introduce the word “learning” or “education” as the unifying concept, rather than schooling. *Expanded learning* is the broadest term of the two, because “extend” implies prolonging the existing, in-school learning opportunities, whereas “expand” implies a more flexible, broad approach that pushes the boundaries of these programs both in time and opportunities. But the difference is not great, and it is possible to use them almost interchangeably.

No term will ever satisfy everyone, but in our experience, youth development leaders and staff are no less committed to an expansive view of their work, no matter what we decide to call it. But naming is important, and the field would benefit by coming together and embracing the term *expanded learning*. This term approximates what this multi-national movement is beginning to embrace, i.e., that the innovation and the societal need is not only about extending time but also supporting a whole child in purposeful, playful, contextual, and deep exploration and learning. But we are far from a consensus both intra- and internationally, and we have to build out the term *expanded learning* or *expanded education* to not alienate communities and countries and to embrace ideas and ideals that are child-centered and holistic.

To achieve this balance, we define *expanded learning* or *expanded education* as an experience that provides opportunities for children and youth to increase their motivation, passion, and engagement in understanding the world. These programs should help youth gain added skills or deepen the ones they learn at school, at home, and in their peer group.

If these programs were designed to only repeat and reinforce school learning, we would call them *extended schooling*, not expanded learning. *Expanded learning/education*, as we define it, takes place in settings that involve adults who can serve as facilitators, tutors, and mentors and can be run in schools, in community centers, or in sports clubs, arts organizations, businesses, and in nature.

Conclusion

The expanded education space is an ideal innovation for new ideas that, once established, will provide the inspiration schools need to harness the power of this recent wave of technology-based reform. When looking to the future, we must acknowledge that the opportunities available to today's youth are shifting more toward STEM, particularly in the workforce. As advances in technology automate our workflows, more and more jobs will be available for youth who develop complex problem-solving skills necessary for success in STEM fields. At the same time, the workplace of the future will become less hierarchical and less centered on individual accomplishments. Internationally, this will play out in a variety of ways, because the cultures of different countries play a big role. It is clear that people will have to innovate in groups and have a more scientific approach to cope with disappointments and failures. The sooner we can help kids embrace those ideas, the better. Expanded learning is more than capable of meeting our societal needs, often more than today's schools. Now that we have a clear sense of the trends influencing education, the field can support common measurement and best practices as we learn from the wide diversity of experience across the globe. We must fight for innovation and a more child-centered educational practice in all spheres of a child's life, which makes education both extended and expanded. Just as our ideas of education are expanding, so are the opportunities for learning and the environments where these programs take place. As programs around the world incorporate the concepts and practices of expanded learning, young people will be more prepared for the new world than ever before.

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