A bridging typology captures a range of ways that after-school programs connect children’s diverse worlds and support project-based learning.

8

Learning with excitement: Bridging school and after-school worlds and project-based learning

Gil G. Noam

In New York City on a cool and sunny spring day in 2001, I visited an after-school program housed in an elementary school not far from the Museum of Natural History. The museum administers the after-school program, which is funded by The After-School Corporation (TASC).

The purpose of my visit was to witness the work our collaborative team (the Program in Afterschool Education and Research and Project Zero at Harvard University) had done to create project-based learning strategies in after-school programs. What I experienced there was quite remarkable. I saw a group of third and fourth graders as they were selling their cookies and crafts. They were excited that I was not as interested in their baked goods as I was in the colorful mosaics they had created on top of cigar boxes. The sale of each box provided them with $2.80. Who knows how they had arrived at that market value, but I did not care; they were so irresistibly enthusiastic that I immediately reached into my wallet.

In her excitement, the youngest of the three girls making the sale incorrectly subtracted from the three dollar bills I had given them
and was giving me back one of my three bills as well as twenty cents. But the older, more business-savvy, and maybe also more math-literate one quickly took back the change and correctly gave me two dimes. As I watched them in their shy yet amazingly successful experimentation with the entrepreneurial world (they had already moved on to the next customers), I decided to recreate with our team the steps they had gone through to reach their success.

These students had decided over many weeks of deliberation with two program staff members what their project would be. Together, the members of the group settled on a money-making venture because they were very troubled by the high incidence of cancer in their extended families. Almost all of them had lost a relative. They wanted to do something about this frightening illness and were going to donate their proceeds to the American Cancer Society. In order to make money, they were encouraged by the staff to work on a written business plan and a timeline. After some refinement of the plan by the group, the children began their six-week creation of arts and crafts. What was compelling was not only their excitement and determination, but also the ways they critiqued and supported one another. The students also trained to add and subtract and, in general, to get their sales force ready for the week when they began selling to parents, other students, teachers, and administrators.

This young group of after-school students made more than three hundred dollars, and at a very touching occasion, the children handed an oversized check to an official of the American Cancer Society.

This is project-based learning at its best. Here, a group of after-school students democratically conceptualizes goals, learns how to write and revise a plan, works together to make creative products, and studies skills that enable them to perform the various tasks. Math is not just math anymore, but a way to get ready to sell. They worked through some of their sadness over losing loved ones by collectively doing something about it, thereby making the passively endured into an active pursuit. And these children reaped the benefits of reaching their goals, experiencing support from staff, teachers, and parents as they learned about generosity and organized giving.
Few would argue that this is impressive teaching and learning that fosters engagement, commitment, and community and skill building. This is also the type of learning that is going on in many after-school programs throughout the country. But it also a very time-consuming and difficult form of teaching, as we have learned in our work in New York City. This work requires a great deal of staff training and support and is the kind of teaching many school teachers shy away from because of the organizational complexities and coordination skills required. Ironically, some of the best pedagogy in after-school settings, typically accomplished with insufficiently trained staff, occurs far too rarely in schools with a trained workforce. And here lies an essential dilemma: although the informality of after-school settings lends itself to projects, community exploration, service-learning, and other participatory approaches to exploration and discovery and is fun, feels to children different from school, and allows them to develop their own voice, our research has shown us that after-school programs often lack the capacity to embark on this complex pedagogy.

Many after-school directors, youth workers, and policymakers worry about too much connection or integration with schools because they view schools as powerful institutions, even bureaucracies, that could easily overpower the structure and content of after-school time. Thus, a potential ally in learning, a reservoir of resources and know-how, often remains untapped. Projects such as the Cancer Society effort could become a bridge between the school day and the after-school program, even linked to curricular goals such as math, reading, and writing, and enriched through field trips, student decision making, and the integration of academic and nonacademic learning goals.

There is among many after-school leaders the hidden, and sometimes not-so-hidden, hope that innovative after-school pedagogy will eventually penetrate the schools. These leaders have as their goal not only to fill the out-of-school time productively, but to make the entire educational experience of children before, during, and after school better. Most after-school educators believe that after-school programs should feel, look, and be different from the
school day but also that these programs should actively engage with schools and school personnel. Is there a way, many leaders ask, to connect the informality and small-group orientation of after-school programs with the more structured goals of the school day? How would one use, for example, projects across the school day and the after-school time? Could homework become more meaningful by integrating it into the projects initiated in the after-school hours?

The editors of this issue contribute greatly to this discussion through their spatial conceptualization of the different spheres of learning. They assembled chapters that show to what degree we need to stretch our notions of academic skills and success. These chapters showcase innovations from around the country that occur when schools and out-of-school programs are invigorated by community service, family involvement, and service-learning.

To make such ambitious goals a reality for many students everywhere, there has to be a productive organizational connection between schools and after-school programs, one that involves families and communities. Furthermore, there should be respectful interpersonal connections between teachers and after-school staff. And finally, there must be some knowledge of each group’s educational goals. Is this one more educational utopia? Until recently yes, but there are now many experiments and models that can help shape the field of creative after-school education.

Bridging school and after-school does not mean that all programs must become school based or that they should become school-like. What is important is that programs aim to create some across-learning opportunities, achieve integration of some learning goals, and deepen children’s exploration and skill acquisition, all the while respecting the existence of many types of learning that should be protected across a diversity of educational environments. Increasingly, after-school programs divide the time into nonacademic activities, such as sports and crafts, and academic activities, such as structured curricula or enrichment in language arts, science and math, and homework support.

In order to explore what some of the issues are that support bridging between schools and after-school settings, I conducted a research project together with Gina Biancarosa and Nadine
Dechaussay, two staff members of the Program in Afterschool Education and Research at Harvard University. We recognized, along with many others working in the field of after-school education, that without empirical evidence in the form of quantitative analyses, qualitative investigations, or even compendia of best practices, this emerging field of after-school education will make only marginal progress. We interviewed leaders in the field, visited many programs, and reviewed the existing literature to create a typology of learning and bridging. The model and findings are described in a recently released book, *Afterschool Education: Approaches to an Emerging Field*, as well as a forthcoming report of the Boston After-School for All Partnership.\(^1\) What follows is a synopsis of our typology and implications for creative learning. I also explore the implications for project-based learning for each bridging type. Any project approach can exist within any type, but the nature of the mission, the academic and nonacademic goals, and the ideology around youth participation all combine to create different forms of projects.

---

**Bridging**

Connecting children’s diverse worlds in order to support learning, after-school programs act as “intermediary spaces.”\(^2\) Typically, these programs are produced by vibrant collaborations between different institutions and forces such as schools, families, community-based organizations and cultural institutions and university programs. Because after-school programs usually do not belong to any one constituency, they serve as a natural intermediary for children. After-school connects to academic work, but without serving as a school, and takes on aspects of family life (such as comfort, security, and recreation), but without becoming a family. To support children’s learning requires more than a simple introduction of school goals and methods into the after-school context. What is needed is a concerted effort to connect children’s divergent worlds so that their learning becomes more meaningful and relevant to their life experience.
In our own research and intervention studies, we have used the term *bridging adolescent worlds* to express the attempt to foster a sense of continuity for youth as they traverse their cultural contexts. After-school programs, because of their informality, allow for in-depth and flexible adult-child relationships, can invite families and community to participate in programming, and have the ability to connect with schools. Thus, they have the potential to function as an essential environment, connecting the multiple worlds of children.

---

**Bridging domains and types**

In our initial efforts to understand bridging between schools and after-school programs, we were struck by the lack of theoretical conceptualization on the topic. For that reason, we began by simultaneously collecting data and developing a productive typology of bridging using Max Weber’s approach to ideal typing. Our typology describes the intensity of bridging in programs and remains neutral to the question of what type of intensity is best. This is because the appropriate type of bridging depends on the mission and goals of each program.

Programs typically bridge within three domains: interpersonal, curricular, and systemic. These domains are not mutually exclusive but often co-occurring (see Figure 8.1). The most common domain
we found was interpersonal bridging, which ranges from serendipitous meetings between school and after-school staff to regular contact between school and after-school staff by telephone, e-mail, and other means. How productive the impact is also depends on whether the flow of information is reciprocal or one-way. In many of our interviews, after-school staff complained about the difficulty of establishing contact with busy school personnel.

Curricular bridging consists of attempted alignment between school and after-school curricula. Compared to interpersonal bridging, the positive impact of curricular bridging depends less on reciprocity and more on clear articulation of goals and consistent development of curricula that engage and challenge children.

Systemic bridging entails the sharing of governance, funding, transportation, and systems. For example, decision-making teams in both institutions might incorporate members from both institutions, ensuring a certain level of collaboration. The meetings of such teams could range in their sphere of influence from the needs of individual children to future directions for the school and program.

Considering both the domains and dimensions of bridging makes it possible to categorize programs according to the intensity of their relationships with schools. The following typology provides a scale of intensity from Self-Contained (programs and schools that do not interact interpersonally or organizationally) to Unified (programs and schools that have been brought together such that there is no distinction between the two institutions). Between these poles we distinguished three other types—Associated, Coordinated, and Integrated—with each representing a gradual increase in bridging intensity from one pole to the other (see Figure 8.2). We draw our examples of these types from research in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and across the country. We have chosen to profile these programs because they were particularly suited to distinctions we wished to elaborate.5

Self-Contained programs

Programs that make little or no attempt to collaborate with schools we describe as Self-Contained. These programs usually have such a clearly defined mission that they perceive a stronger connection
to schools to be potentially threatening, overwhelming, or simply unnecessary. As a result, the youth participants effectively constitute the only connection between school and after-school. While some Self-Contained programs set aside a block of time for homework that students are responsible for using productively, such work is not regarded as the true purpose of the program. The lack of bridging in these programs seems mainly the result of program philosophy rather than location or organizational capacity.

Self-Contained programs tend to fall into two categories: those with strong, self-designed academic curricula and those with a predominating arts, sports, or expeditionary learning focus. Interestingly, we found several programs that aim to promote academic learning despite their lack of connection with the school. These programs view themselves as “second schools”—intensive academic programs of study, delivered in the after-school hours to compensate for the school’s failure to reach certain students. These programs generally view the school as dysfunctional or children as requiring more than the school curriculum offers, so they design their methods to counter those of the schools.

One such “second school” program we included in our research. Despite the location of the program in a public school, it is its philosophy to keep bridging to a minimum. Its operating premise is
that its “focused, demanding, result-oriented” environment and curriculum propels children to achieve in a way that the standard school curriculum does not. Its focus is for its “scholars” to apply to, be accepted into, and succeed at public exam schools and private schools. The fact that such schools demand more than simply meeting state standards means that the Steppingstone curriculum must go beyond the traditional school curriculum. The program is a rigorous one that requires a fourteen-month commitment from children, and its results are impressive even beyond a selection bias (for example, academic motivation and parental support), with 87 percent of the 2001 scholars getting into exam schools and 90 percent of the 1995 scholars entering college in 2001.

Some Self-Contained programs can compromise their own effectiveness if they become so alienated from the school that they cannot exchange information with teachers and guidance counselors about the overall well-being of children they jointly serve. Even so, it is clear that a great deal of high-quality learning can take place in such programs if the program has well-articulated goals, a curriculum or projects designed to meet those goals, and a staff capable of that kind of learning. Many Self-Contained programs are not project based at all, with a “school outside the school” approach that focuses primarily on skill training. Strong community-based programs often use a project-based approach, but the project reflects the priorities of the programs: productive in relationship to the community but not in terms of academics.

**Associated programs**

Programs that reserve a role for school engagement in their program mission but do not have a strong connection to schools we describe as Associated. We found that a major reason for the lack of connection was that schools or after-school programs have not been responsive to each other’s attempts at outreach. Program philosophy and organizational capacity were also influential. The majority of programs we observed or interviewed fell into this category. Community-based programs, in particular, often are found here because of the added challenge that their locations present to bridging efforts.
The specific technique used to make contact with schools differed greatly from program to program but tended to focus on interpersonal bridging. One popular method of outreach was sending surveys or forms to children’s teachers that asked for information about academic strengths and weaknesses. Jenny Atkinson, senior director of education and arts for the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, described a form that she used as a staff person at a club. It read: “This child has tutoring once per week. What areas should we focus on to make this time most effective?”

Associated programs vary in the persistence with which they try to communicate with school personnel, according to the program’s organizational capacity and philosophy. Programs that were more effective in this category achieved increased response rates by combining bridging methods. For example, a program staff person might follow up on written contact with informal contact in the form of the after-school director’s introducing herself to the school principal or engaging in some sort of outreach to teachers as well.

Our interviews with programs revealed that Associated programs were limited in the intensity of bridging because the onus tended to fall entirely on the after-school staff. Many schools do not have dedicated teachers of administrators to serve as liaisons with after-school programs. Therefore, the responsibility to bridge falls on programs and on their staff’s convincing principals and teachers of the merit of collaborating with them. In many of the community-based YMCA programs, for example, program directors are responsible for bridging, and that responsibility competes with a multitude of other, and usually more pressing, responsibilities that directly and immediately the children. In sum, although there was a basic familiarity between Associated programs and schools, this did not necessarily translate into regular or deep sharing of information or connecting learning in any way other than homework clubs.

In Associated programs, there is some recognition of the academic experiences of children in schools but insufficient knowledge of school content to link after-school programs to academic pursuits. These programs tend to be more focused on tutoring and
homework and less on deepening what is being learned during the school day.

**Coordinated programs**

Programs that maintain consistent communication and joint learning goals with schools we describe as Coordinated. The difference between a Coordinated and an Associated program is primarily in organizational capacity. Both types share a program philosophy that considers engagement with schools to be an important factor in achieving learning goals. However, Coordinated programs go a step further by dedicating significant staff time—50 percent or more, often at the director level—to create the school connection. These staff efforts allow for more elaborated bridging strategies to be employed, generally including interpersonal and curricular links.

We found that there is no consensus yet on the title and training of the person who performs these duties. In a recent report, we have recommended the creating the role of education coordinator in after-school settings.

One highly regarded Boston after-school program can serve as an example of successful interpersonal and curricular bridging realized by an education coordinator. The education coordinator of the school-based program is a presence in the school. With the approval of the principal, she is able to greet teachers informally as she walks through the halls or picks up children at the end of the day. She distributes a brief survey to teachers at the beginning of the year requesting information about the strengths and challenges of children in her program, and she then follows up with teachers in person to discuss specific children. Due to her relationship with teachers, the return rate of the forms is as high as 90 percent. She uses this information on individual children to guide the work of college volunteer tutors whom she supervises and to inform her decisions when purchasing games and educational supplements for the program. She also has access to the children’s grades used for an informational and evaluative tool.

Another significant provider of middle school after-school programming in Boston has two curricular approaches to bridging. One is the program’s innovative apprenticeship model that brings
together disadvantaged adolescents and local professionals to complete a project. Past apprenticeships have ranged from performing a mock trial at a city courthouse facilitated by lawyers and a judge to creating a cookbook with a chef. Academic competencies are taught as they relate to completing the project. In addition, the organization implements a literacy curriculum at all of its sites that is aligned with the standards of the school system.

A common challenge that Coordinated programs face is that although there exists a fairly intense desire to support the school curriculum, the two institutions of after-school and school remain separate. They have an interface through the designated liaison or a part of the after-school curriculum that is aligned with state standards. Nonetheless, the majority of the staff members at the program are uninvolved directly with bridging efforts. This is not necessarily a disadvantage because it does free most staff from the considerable effort required to work with schools. At the same time, the lack of involvement affects the degree to which staff members can fully reinforce or complement school day learning.

Coordinated programs often have a mission that makes projects with a strong skill orientation and even academic content desirable. There is a recognition of children’s learning during the school day and beyond. Apprenticeship programs with volunteer experts are a good example. Projects are professionalized, and leadership is usually handed over to nonteachers, but they have a strong educational focus. They are not as oriented toward youth participation as projects often are in free-standing and associated programs. Instead, they tend to be focused on expert knowledge. This approach helps address one hurdle of after-school education: that many staff are overwhelmed by the complexity of project-based learning.

*Integrated programs*

Programs that engage in a systemic or institutional relationship with schools we describe as Integrated. At this intensity of bridging, both the program and the school have identified the other as an important partner in achieving their learning and developmental goals. In addition, the after-school program develops an organizational structure that will allow it to devote staff time and
resources to interpersonal, curricular, and systemic bridging, and these are reciprocal investments on the part of the school. Here, the after-school program and school share space, staff, and procedures. Clear curricular continuities exist. An after-school director may obtain a grant for equipment, such as computers, that directly benefits the day program, or the two institutions may apply for grants collaboratively. Administrative structures support shared goal setting and the easy flow of information back and forth. Two important indicators that a program is Integrated are that the after-school director is part of the school leadership team and that school personnel are on the program’s advisory board.

An in-school/after-school academic and mental health intervention at a number of middle schools in Boston, Cleveland, and San Francisco, developed by faculty at Harvard University, exemplifies the integrated bridging type. The program has developed a new professional role called prevention practitioners: youth development specialists who bring together knowledge of education, community development, and mental health practices. Practitioners work in classrooms two days per week while they are in session, providing academic and behavioral support to the whole class and extra services to children identified as particularly at risk. Practitioners also staff their own after-school programs for students they work with during the day, which reinforces the program’s focus on academic and mental health resiliency, through different methods. Teachers also participate in the after-school program. The classroom and after-school programs require close collaboration between teachers and practitioners. The program is part of the school support and leadership teams. This integrated approach provides continuities for the “whole” child as well on other children in the classroom and yields many benefits for learning.

In Integrated programs, projects can become very school focused. Because youth workers or extended-day teachers also work in classrooms, classroom activities can be meaningfully connected to after-school learning. This can lead to projects that enrich school-day learning without becoming school. The link can be not only through curricula but also through people who are familiar with the school’s learning goals. This can lead to projects that
enrich school-day learning through exploration and hands-on activities and even the development of joint projects between schools and after-school programs.

**Unified programs**

Unified programs are almost indistinguishable from school because they are on-site and are part of a truly extended school day. The extended day in this intensity of bridging does not mean that school has wholly infiltrated the after-school program. Instead, the day incorporates the best of both worlds and weaves them together seamlessly. There are very few programs that truly fit this description. However, there are some private schools that aspire to this goal. The full-service school models introduced in other chapters of this volume can also fall into this category.

The vision for the potential of such programs is strong. De Kanter, Huff, and Chung contend that a model we call Unified would enable schools to address subjects that have been increasingly viewed as supplemental or peripheral to schools’ academic goals. At the Unified level, there are no projects that happen solely during the school day or the after-school program. Projects tend to permeate the entire educational experience of the child. It remains to be seen whether this vision can be realized in public schools, whether it will be successful in cross-pollinating the purposes and methods of school and after-school, and what practices in particular are most effective.

**Summary of bridging typology**

The typology we have provided describes the great diversity in means and ends of bridging between after-school programs and schools. This discussion is important for schools, funders, and parents, but we see a particular relevance for after-school providers who can use the typology to identify themselves within the spectrum and determine whether they are bridging in a way that is consonant with their own program goals. Each type has slightly different characteristics, such as the difference in organizational capacity between Coordinated and Associated programs or the
increased institutional bridging among Integrated and Unified programs. Program directors who want to effect change should use these salient features as cues when thinking about how to move from one category to another.\textsuperscript{9}

\section*{Conclusion}

We found that some essential bridging is already occurring in most programs, homework clubs, and homework help. We call this type of learning “extended” because it is entirely dominated by the school, usually involuntary, because teachers demand it of children, and parents want it done before they return home. Homework is a form of learning that usually provides little room for program staff or youth to act independently and creatively. Few people argue with this form of bridging, but we need to expand our notions of bridging considerably. After-school time should not be just more school; it should provide children and youth with a different space and experience.

It is not the location of a program that will define or predetermine bridging efforts. Some programs that are located in school remain very hostile or indifferent to the school day, while other programs that are free-standing are engaged with the content of school learning and view their mission as supporting children’s academic success. Many productive and creative forms of bridging are springing up all over the country. Some of the best ones are embracing some of the curricular goals of the school day, including science, language, and social studies, and building community-focused and enriching projects that invite youth participation. The Museum of Natural History example provides an excellent model. It also demonstrates the potential usefulness of bridging. The children chose a topic that connected them to their families, a collective working out of illness and loss, that had strong parental support. The effort also required school resources, a school audience to raise the money, and a staff that was knowledgeable about the writing, conceptual, and math abilities the children brought to their task.
Many programs proudly proclaim that they are achieving academic success in their projects. But analysis of the academic component shows that it is very marginal. A cooking class should not be viewed primarily as a math class. Although measurement is involved, academic learning does take some level of explicit skill training. It is perfectly fine for children to cook and enjoy the success of learning these skills. Programs should not count only if they are tied to academic outcomes. Indeed, translating and evaluating every activity in terms of academic outcomes is a sign of too much bridging, a form of giving in to principles that take away from the identity and goals of after-school programs. But if certain tasks, like subtracting and adding, are connected to the curriculum of the school day, as they were in the Cancer Society project, and the skills are honed and practiced, significant gains result. What is more, these outcomes will be enhanced by the children’s motivation to learn them in order to perform the exciting project tasks.

Because after-school projects are labor intensive, expensive, and time-consuming, making connections to the learning of the school day and being able to access resources of the school day can be very productive. What we have to avoid is having the children and staff experience the projects just as more school instead of as a creative extension of learning that is more hands on, more participatory, and more community focused. And even these kinds of learning activities and projects should not take up the entire after-school time; there should be time for play, recreation, and the arts. Furthermore, extended and enriched learning can be considered an alternative to homework help because it serves, among other things, as a creative form of deepening of classroom learning. And finally, such an endeavor has the potential to produce a two-way bridge, running from the after school to the school as well.

Linking different learning approaches to secure success for children can lead to join professional training, joint planning, and even integrated administration of certain programs. Certainly, there are dangers, especially if this effort becomes a pretext on the part of
schools and school districts to control the budgets of after-school programs. But a vision of increased bridging implies connecting different identities between schools, families, and after-schools. It should make us committed to develop strategies that benefit all organizations involved, most importantly the children and families served. How else would we get the children of the American Cancer Society project to learn academic content, produce art, and learn how to buy and sell and budget, and all while generously donating money on behalf of themselves and their families to a major organization fighting illness? Is that not what learning is ultimately about for all parties involved? Certainly it is if our goal is to produce environments where we combine learning with responsibility and excitement.

Notes


5. It is important to note that some of the profiled programs—including the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, B.E.L.L. Foundation, and Citizen Schools—are one of multiple sites. In these cases, we can speak with authority only about the site where we interviewed.


7. Although one of Boston Excels’ primary objectives is to ensure “that all school partnerships contribute to school goals,” thereby potentially promoting high alignment between school and after school, this alignment does not
reach the unified level of intensity because this level is characterized by an extended school day for all students and by school and after school essentially being indistinguishable from one another.


**Gil G. Noam is a clinical and developmental psychologist at Harvard University and McLean Hospital and with his team creates learning communities and prevention programs in school and after-school settings.**