

# Views of an After School Recreation Center: Findings from Two Years of Participant Observation

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## Abstract

After-school centers provide academic support to children and youth, offer a place to engage in extracurricular activities or can simply provide a place to go after the school day is done. Research on after school programs reveals that the most effective programs are the ones that are relevant to the population which they serve and see the attendees as valuable participants who are assets to the program. This poster focuses on a drop-in after-school recreation center (The Center) located within a public housing community (Green Hills) in the greater Los Angeles area. The housing community has over 1500 residents, 850 of which are under eighteen. Despite this large population of youth and children, The Center has only about thirty children a day walk through its doors. Information about The Center was collected using anthropological methods including participant observation and in-depth interviews with children, parents, staff and administration. The data collected reveals the contrasting views of The Center, its structure and its programs. By working with the community, a report was prepared for the administration and staff in order to facilitate a more shared vision of The Center and contribute to the creation of a neighborhood-specific program that sees the people that it serves as value contributors to The Center and its programs.



**"What I like about Mike is he's calm and he's friendly... but [when I] come over here... Mike's like going crazy because he don't have nobody to help him.**  
- Jewel, 16 years old

## Recommendations

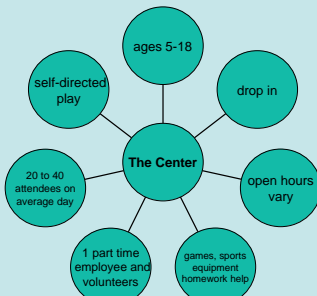
### Staffing and Programs

Utilize high school students and university students, who are required to do volunteer hours, to support the single staff member at The Center. Even short-term volunteers can provide activities desired by parents and children (sports, arts and crafts, homework support). They can also provide administrative support to the staff member by supervising children and helping to maintain The Center on a day-to-day basis. Activities and tasks such as these can be easily transitioned as volunteers change over time.

### Sustaining The Center Over Time

The administration of Green Hills need to embrace the idea that The Center is valued by families and need to make a commitment to the sustainability of the programs that it offers, the hours that it is open and the rules and expectations that it has for its attendees. As The Center builds its structure and becomes a consistent presence in Green Hills, more children and youth will attend and create an inclusive place for children of the neighborhood to engage in new experiences and healthy activities.

## Description of The Center



## Research Questions

- How and why do families in Green Hills currently utilize The Center?
- What are attendee's responses to The Center's current structure, activities and staff?
- How can The Center better serve families in the future? Are changes in structure, programs or staff desired?

## Research Methods

- Participant observation at The Center from June 2006 through June 2008
- Interviews with 15 children/youth, 7 staff/volunteers and 5 parents/guardians
- Review of program documents including attendance records, training resources and planning materials

## Theoretical Framework

- After school programs can provide educational and social benefits to children<sup>1</sup>.
- The most desirable and effective after school programs are the programs that are relevant to the population that they serve and value the children who participate in their programs<sup>2</sup>.
- In this program assessment, as in anthropology, children are viewed as part of a larger community which they cannot control, yet are also active agents who effect and contribute to the people and places around them<sup>3</sup>.

1. Bridgall and Gordon 2002, Costen et al. 2004, Heath and McLaughlin 1993, Mercier et al. 2000, Posner and Vandell 1999, Roffman 2001 and Sprouse 1999  
2. Edwards 2007, Heath 1996, Heath and McLaughlin 1993, Lerner 1995, Lerner et al. 2002, Roffman 2001, and Swadner and Lubeck 1995  
3. Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007, Ginwright and Cammarota 2002, Jenkins 1998, Orr 2002, Schaper-Hughes 1998, Stephens 1995.

## Findings

### Staff and administration have no concrete plan for The Center and run it in a constant state of transition.

A staff member, Mike, commented on how The Center is run by saying "to... agree on exactly what The Center should be doing ... is a very fine line that's becoming erased and rewritten, erased and rewritten I think on a monthly or even daily basis."

Beky, a volunteer reflected on what she had seen during her time at The Center, "[i]f they should implement maybe more rules or programs and keep them going instead of it being like a short term thing and trying it out and it not working so they give up..."

### Parents and children that currently utilize The Center value its presence in Green Hills. Attendees have positive things to say about The Center, especially the staff and volunteers, but also express ambivalent feelings about The Center due to its inconsistent hours and unchanging activities.

James, age 7, who attends The Center almost every day explains why he likes the staff at The Center: "[i]f I ask them... to play...[i]f I don't have nobody to play with they...just like put everything down and start playing with you."

William, a long time attendee of The Center explained his experiences by saying, "we get all motivated to start a new program] and then it don't happen...just don't make no promises if they say they'll...take us somewhere we'll be like are we really gonna go this time or it still don't happen..."



## Analysis

My research has shown that The Center is an important part of Green Hills and is the only drop-in, after school center available in the neighborhood. During my time at The Center the programming was either inconsistent or non-existent, which contributed to the lack of regular attendance on the part of the attendees. The Center needs to be recreated utilizing input from children and parents so that its programs can be a shared vision between the administration and the people it serves. Utilizing the ideas and knowledge of the families in Green Hills will create an after-school program that will be both supportive and supported by children, youth and parents.



Diane who attends The Center nearly everyday says, "the Center is fun and... it has a lot of things to do and... [the staff member] Mike is nice... and it's fun cause you can do homework and you can play a lot of games ...and we're always gonna have fun at The Center."

-Diane 6 years old



Comments or questions  
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