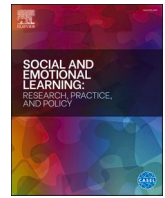


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# Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy

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## Designing for agency and voice: A review of creative and experiential out-of-school programs

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### ABSTRACT

Traditionally, Out-of-School Time (OST) programs sought to provide childminding facilities and supplementary academic support to youth. However, they have evolved to deliver programs that support positive youth development with hands-on inquiry to not only support children and adolescents through key developmental stages but to also navigate socio-political challenges. This scoping review investigates creative and experiential OST programs, their design practices and subsequent outcomes. Results from 40 articles highlight the varied, strengths-based practices which centre around increasing participant involvement in decision-making by emphasising flexibility and choice, while staff work collaboratively alongside them. However, for most, rigorous evaluation was lacking and most studies failed to substantiate their claims of fulfilling the development of voice and agentic identity in youth. Future evaluations must ensure they provide evidence of correlating program design with observed outcomes.

### 1. Introduction

This scoping review explores the design and delivery of Out-of-School Time (OST) programs that aim to foster youth agency and voice. While OST programs initially prioritised providing supplementary academic support to youth, many now support positive youth development with hands-on inquiry outside the parameters of mainstream education settings. These programs not only guide youth through key milestones in their development but are also carefully designed to help navigate socio-political challenges facing their communities. This research focused on exploring programs that were creative and experiential to understand how they supported and enabled youth agency and voice. Despite their immense value, scholarship on the design of OST programs appears to be mostly comprised of varied case studies that present the program's benefits. There is little evidence of critical engagement and systematic evaluation. This scoping review addresses these scholarly limitations. It examines some of the design features – from recruitment, structure, and staffing to community partnerships and cultural competency – that emerged prominently in the literature as important in supporting youth agency, and whether and how the programs were evaluated. In doing so, it explores some of the complex

dynamics that operated between the organisational leadership, facilitators, participants, and communities in the development and delivery of creative and experiential programs that had a meaningful impact on individuals. This article aims to synthesise the scholarship on these OST programs, which is currently widely dispersed among several unrelated journals in the fields of education, youth studies and science. The review also aims to inform systematic evaluation efforts of these OST programs and offer guidance on the design of future creative and experiential OST programs.

Our research project was guided by the principles and strands of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* which offers a sociocultural rather than developmental framework. *Te Whāriki* emphasises the holistic and interconnected worlds of children and youth in their communities through four principles: empowerment/whakamana, holistic development/kotahitanga, family and community/whānau tangata, and relationships/ngā hononga. This framework recognises children and youth as already competent and confident, with the right to engage with their world in their own way and at their own pace. It also provides a strong emphasis on the interconnection between people, places and things (tangata, whenua, and taonga), ensuring the research recognises an ethic of care for and with the more than human, wider

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world (Ministry of Education, 2017). This non-developmental orientation informed our approach to understanding youth engagement across diverse age groups without imposing standardised developmental expectations. This framework guided our search strategy and research questions:

1. What is the scope of the literature on the design of creative and experiential OST programs?
2. What features of OST programs support students' agentic development?
3. How do providers evaluate and reflect on their OST programs?

Our interest in creative and experiential OST programs reflects the body of scholarship that illustrates the significance of creativity in supporting youth agency and voice. We adopt here a definition of creativity as the "interaction of aptitude, process, and environment to produce novel, meaningful, and effective ideas, processes, or products within a specific sociocultural context" (Anderson, 2024, p.2). The theoretical model of Creative Behavior as Agentic Action emphasizes creative behaviour as an intentional action, whereby someone with the "requisite knowledge, skill, and opportunity to act and think creatively" decides to do so (Karwowski et al., 2019, p.402). As others have identified, encouraging youths' creative development as an agentic process can equip them with the resilience, critical thinking, and reflective skills to navigate the fast-changing and sometimes turbulent period of adolescence (Anderson and Mack, 2019; Anderson, 2024).

Experiential learning emphasises the importance of practical, hands-on experiences in learning and development (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning is an integral part of creativity as it allows individuals to actively engage in hands-on experimentation, fostering innovative thinking, problem-solving, and the practical application of creative ideas. Experiential projects that combine the physical with real-world problem-solving have been found to provide enhanced learning retention, immediate feedback, practical skill development, increased engagement and a boost in creativity (Hattie & Yates, 2013). Despite these known benefits, schools' limited resources and an emphasis on standardised tests means educators often struggle to provide creative and experiential learning experiences (Anderson, 2024). Given that OST programs emphasise their flexibility outside of school to provide different learning experiences (Ballard et al., 2023; Carey et al., 2021), we were interested in if and how programs harnessed this flexibility to support agency in youth.

Agentic development refers to the process through which individuals enhance their ability to act autonomously, take initiative, and make decisions that shape their lives, which involves fostering greater self-efficacy and personal agency over time (Bandura, 2006). This concept is rooted in the belief that youth have unique insights and should have opportunities to actively participate in shaping the world around them. Agentic development is integral to the growth and change in youth from adolescence to adulthood. Barton and Tan (2010, p.192) theorise agency "as at once the possibility of imagining and asserting a new self in a figured world at the same time as it is about using one's identity to imagine a new and different world". Subsequently youth are seen as agents of change (Jacobs, 2019; Tokunaga, 2021; Royce, 2009). Voice, often referred to as 'youth' or 'student' voice, is integrally linked with agency and emphasises the importance of empowering youth to develop and share their perspectives and opinions, alongside meaningful participation in leadership, decision-making processes and societal systems that affect their lives (Blakeslee and Walker, 2018). Understanding how agency and voice are fostered and supported in OST programs will help to inform our awareness of informal education experiences on agentic development in youth.

There is a growing body of scoping reviews on OST programs and our research makes a key contribution on the role of creative and experiential programs. These reviews have highlighted the value of these programs in supporting students' emotional, physical, and social

development (Arbour-Nicitopoulos et al., 2018; Brodtkin, 2023; Malorni et al., 2022; Mulvihill et al., 2004). Scholars have also brought attention to the methodological shortcomings in the field, with inconsistent measurements and a lack of evidence to support their reported outcomes. For example, one systematic review and meta-analysis critiqued the inconsistent use of comparison groups and high attrition in the research on the effects of afterschool programs on students' behaviour and school attendance (Kremer et al., 2015). McDaniel and Yarbrough (2016) identified the absence of evidence-based recommendations for developing and improving OST programs as a significant issue in the field. As will be discussed, similar methodological limitations were evident in articles on OST programs that feature in this paper.

OST programs have gained momentum and support for providing development opportunities to youth (Ballard et al., 2023). Scholarship on youth participation in OST programs has primarily focused on the programs' benefits to participants, namely higher levels of civic engagement, agency, identity, empowerment, leadership skills and critical consciousness (Gambone et al., 2006; Shah, 2011). Arts-based programs, in particular, highlight participants' improved creative expression and voice (Gude, 2007). Across the literature, authors emphasised the importance of programmatic conceptualisation and design of OST programs to achieve these outcomes. To date, however, no synthesis of OST research has been conducted that examines how programs can be effectively designed to foster such outcomes. This research seeks to understand how agentic development was considered and designed into creative and experiential OST programs and if the proposed outcomes were appropriately achieved.

## 2. Method

Scoping reviews are exploratory in nature, and simultaneously acknowledge the breadth of information while providing an overview of the field. This review follows Arksey and O'Malley, (2005, p. 22) five stages for a scoping review: (1) identifying the research question; (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) study selection; (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarising and reporting results.

The authors engaged in group brainstorming in parallel with a scan of the literature which revealed several variables and interchangeable terminology associated with OST programs (over 20+). To keep this review manageable, preliminary searches were conducted with these variables. Only variables that retrieved the largest number of results were selected and included in this review (see Table 1: 'Setting' column). The outcomes of interest were based on group agreement of the key factors associated with youth agency and the development of agentic identities, such as voice, identity and empowerment, for children and adolescents (see Table 1: 'Outcome' column). Finally, we were interested in OST programs for school-aged children between 8 and 18 years, which helped define the keywords for the population of interest (see Table 1: 'Population' column).

Phase 1 included an electronic search for peer-reviewed articles, in the English language, from three databases: SCOPUS, Web of Science, and ERIC (via Ovid). This initial search resulted in 4416 articles, of which 2044 remained once duplicates were removed. Four members of

**Table 1**  
Keywords and search combinations.

Setting	Outcome	Population
"out of school"	agency	child*
afterschool	voice	teen*
"informal learning"	empower	adolescen*
"library AND program**"	self-determination	youth
"museum AND learn**"	creativ*	
"outdoor AND learn**"	self-efficacy	
"summer AND (camp OR program*)"	identity	
	activis*	
	"critical consciousness"	

the research team scanned the titles of each article, with each title being scanned by at least two researchers, and excluded the 1501 that did not align with the research questions (Phase 2). Three researchers read the remaining 543 articles' abstracts for their relevance to the project (Phase 3) and the fourth researcher was consulted where consensus resolution for disagreements was necessary. This resulted in a final sample of 176 articles. From these, 176 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility in Phase 4. Articles were excluded if:

- (1) Participants played a passive role in the program (i.e., they are not actively involved in doing/making/creating objects or outputs. For example, if a program simply involved participants receiving information, such as attending a talk or lecture, without being engaged in some sort of making/creating activity during or after then the article was excluded)
- (2) Less than half of the participants were between the ages of 8 and 18 years or group size is one participant
- (3) Programs were school-based (part of the curriculum or a one-off field trip) or occurred during school hours (lunch breaks)
- (4) Programs focused on academic or achievement related outcomes (e.g., numeracy and literacy scores, attendance rates)
- (5) Article is a review or meta-analyses

Forty articles were included in the final review (Table 2). Three researchers manually analysed each article. Details of the design elements of program were evaluated for their participatory and creative and/or experiential processes and their ability to develop participants' agentic identities. Deductive coding was used to identify the key components of program design in OST programs that aimed to develop adolescent agentic identities, including reflections and evaluations to successfully do so. Following this, Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis, was used to generate initial codes, search for themes, create a thematic map, and continue analysis and refinement of the themes to guide the overall narrative of the review.

### 3. Results: program design

OST programs varied from afterschool programs, holiday programs, residential/non-residential summer camps, annual or semester-long programs (8–10 weeks), drop-in or one-off programs, or those that were seemingly continuous. Some programs, such as the *Authoring Action (A2)* program was run in multiple versions – afterschool and summer program (Ballard et al., 2023). Across the studies, participant numbers ranged from 7 to 94. Geographical representation was primarily skewed to programs in the United States (US) ( $n = 35$ ), but a source each from Argentina, Canada, Czech Republic, Japan and Singapore were also included. Most programs included urban youth from minoritised communities, with Black, Latinx and youth of colour, primarily represented in US studies. Characteristics of these studies are provided in Table 2.

#### 3.1. Recruitment

Only a quarter of the studies discussed program recruitment (Pufahl et al., 2021; Royce, 2009; Larson and Hansen, 2005; Marczak et al., 2006; Bertrand et al., 2017; Trott, 2020; Barton and Tan, 2010; Furman et al., 2019; Hathaway & Kuzin, 2007; Dworkin et al., 2003). Advertisements, partnering with local organisations and word-of-mouth were the most common recruitment strategies, while intentional recruitment was crucial for program success. Ultimately, participation was dependent on youth motivation and interest. For example, most participants in the *Generation Y* program initially joined to fulfill their 40-hour school service requirement (Larson and Hansen, 2005). Self-perception also influenced participation as some youth were wary of engaging in programs and activities when they doubted their ability to succeed as this might result in possible peer exclusion (Marczak et al., 2006). Continued

participation was contingent on enjoyment in the program, and for some it was due to having always participated in such activities (Marczak et al., 2006).

Some programs used convenience or purposive recruitment (Bertrand et al., 2017; Trott, 2020) by requesting teachers (Barton and Tan, 2010; Furman et al., 2019) or clinicians (Pufahl et al., 2021) to nominate youth. Acknowledging that participation is sometimes limited due to financial constraints or conflicting schedules and responsibilities, some programs had no fees and provided transport (Furman et al., 2019; Case, 2020), or offered scholarships (Bloom et al., 2019) or financial incentives to maintain participants' engagement and signal that their time was valued (Ballard et al., 2023).

Several providers also prioritised group diversity to expand participants' social networks, foster collaboration and learning (Royce, 2009; Dworkin et al., 2003; Ettekal et al., 2020), and provide them with opportunities to respect diverse peers (Ettekal et al., 2020). Nevertheless, recruitment strategies did not always support this goal. Blevins et al. (2016), for example, acknowledged their first-come, self-selection strategy meant nearly all youth came from affluent neighbourhoods, despite the program being aimed at those from more marginalised communities. For some programs participants with similar backgrounds fostered a safe and supportive environment to explore personal experiences that are potentially difficult or uncomfortable, which further facilitated connection and bonding (Anderson and Mack, 2019; Tokunaga, 2021; Furman et al., 2019). Parents' views on diversity varied, with some favouring same-ethnic peers for cultural development, comfort and a sense of belonging, while others wanted their child to be around "good kids" (Ettekal et al., 2020).

#### 3.2. Program structure and activities

A key theme was pride in shifting power from adults to youth. The *Authoring Action (A2)* program addressed adult-youth dynamics by referring to youth as 'authors' instead of 'participants' to foster a sense of ownership (Ballard et al., 2023), while *GET City* program participants redefined program goals and outcomes (Barton and Tan, 2010). When integrated into the organisational structure, it allows for sharing of power between staff and participants, and the ability of youth to recognise their capacity to influence the program (Brown et al., 2018). This was more feasible in long-term programs with older participants, where adults shifted to more collaborative roles (Cincera et al., 2020; Dunning, 2020). A comparison of more participatory versus adult-led programs showed that overall participants in the latter were no less satisfied (Cincera et al., 2020). In fact, the semi-structured group in a Hip Hop program for mental wellbeing had more positive outcomes than the highly structured and completely unstructured groups (Travis Jr et al., 2022).

A shift in power sometimes felt unfamiliar to participants and staff who were more comfortable with tenets of conventional education environments. Some were uneasy with the shift from didactic learning to ones where students had more control. For example, a participatory ethos threatened the program credibility and caused tensions when emphasising student agency in program activities due to the narrow, assessment-driven boundaries that characterised the Singaporean education system (Anderson and Wales, 2012). Clear expectations can support a transparent and safe environment while providing a roadmap to achieve program goals (Travis et al., 2022; Cincera et al., 2020; Halverson et al., 2015; Dunning, 2020). Sharing the days agenda provides young people with a sense of control (Dunning, 2020), while enabling them to co-design agenda items ensures youth agency and ownership (Larson and Hansen, 2005). However, too much autonomy in choosing topics and activities can make it harder for participants to narrow down on one good idea. A structured program does not imply rigidity, as participants can still be encouraged to share ideas and feedback, for example, by debriefing at the end of the day to utilise participant reflections and feedback for future sessions and iterations of

**Table 2**  
 Characteristics of Included Studies.

Source	Location	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Program type	Length	Group Size	Creative/ Experiential Program Activity	Agentic Development-related outcomes
Anderson and Wales (2012)	Singapore	9–10	Singaporean	Holiday	3 weeks	8	Digital storytelling	
Anderson and Mack (2019)	US	14–17	African American	Afterschool	6 weeks	7	Digital storytelling	Identity development, new skills, increased capacity to become active agents in their own lives
Ballard et al. (2023)	US	13–17	Black/African American	Afterschool & summer	Year-long & 5 weeks	18–25	Creative arts	Developed a voice and felt heard, social capital through networking, increased critical consciousness, personal growth.
Barton and Tan (2010)	US	10–14		Afterschool	Year-long	20	Video Documentaries	Positioned themselves as experts on green energy, desire to address a community issue
Bertrand et al. (2017)	US	10–13	Latinx, Native American, Black, White	Afterschool	1 semester	15	Videos and presentation	Imagined new possibilities, role remediation (from students to experts), critical examination of power relations, advocated on behalf of others
Bevan et al. (2017)	US			Afterschool			Making/Maker space activities	Took intellectual and creative risks, contribution to community
Blevins et al. (2016)	US	9–14	Caucasian, African American, Asian/Pacific, Hispanic, other	Summer	3–5 days	55–94	Blog, videos, spoken word, advocacy campaign	Increased self-efficacy to engage in civic action, knowledge and critical thinking, communication skills
Blevins et al. (2021)	US	9–14	White, African American, Asian/Pacific Hispanic, other	Summer	1 week		Blog and Advocacy Campaign	Shift from students to community stakeholders, sources of knowledge, recognised their responsibility to be actively involved in community
Bloom et al. (2019)	US	8–12		Summer	1 week	45–72	3-D prototyping and modelling	
Brown et al. (2018)	US	5–18	Black/African American, Latinx			20–50	Activism	Developed knowledge of self in relation to community and the world, awareness about an issue, motivated to act
Bruce and Lin (2009)	US	11–13	Mexican American	Afterschool	1 semester	8	Audio-visual podcasts	Meaning-making, voice
Carey et al. (2021)	US	11–19	African American, White, Multi-racial, Native American, Asian/Pacific, Latinx, other	Afterschool		5–8	Activism	Increased awareness of self and their societal position, knowledge and awareness, new transferrable skills.
Case (2020)	US	8–21	Black or African American	Afterschool			Boxing and other recreational activities	
Charmaraman (2013)	US	15–19	Asian American, African American, Latino/Chicano, Native American, Caucasian, Middle Eastern, mixed	Afterschool, weekends	18 months	14	Media production	Ownership of the project, exercised collective voice to promote positive social actions
Cincera et al. (2020)	Czech Republic	8–12	Czech	Residential	3 or 5 days		Various outdoor environmental and nature-based activities	
Collins et al. (2013)	US	12–17	African American, Hispanic	Summer	12 weeks	18–50	Cycling, photography, writing	Increased understanding of local history, geography and their community, new skills, creative self-expression
Dunning (2020)	US	5–18	Latinx, African American, immigrants				Creative arts	Critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, leadership, and creativity
Dworkin et al. (2003)	US	14–18	White, African American, Asian, Biracial			55	Various extracurricular activities	Identity development, emotional self-regulation, confidence to try new things, developed initiatives
Ettekal et al. (2020)	US	11–13	Latinx	Afterschool			Various extracurricular activities	
Eyerman and Hug (2020)	US	11–13		Afterschool	12 weeks		STEM activities	Ownership of their projects
Furman et al. (2019)	Argentina	12–18		Afterschool	10 weeks	5–80	Public speaking, presenting (TED talks)	Overcame the challenge of finding and presenting on a topic, identity development
Golestani (2016)	US	13–18		Afterschool			Activism	Sociopolitical consciousness, advocated for others, created a non-governmental organisation to continue working on the issue

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Source	Location	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Program type	Length	Group Size	Creative/ Experiential Program Activity	Agentic Development-related outcomes
Hallewas (2019)	Canada	11–19		Weekend		23	Theatre	Ownership of the adult-selected topic by finding ways to connect it to their lives, engagement continued beyond the program
Halverson et al. (2015)	US			Afterschool & summer		10–12	Digital media	
Hathaway and Kuzin (2007)	US	6–12		Summer	4 weeks	15	Various recreational activities	Group cohesion
Henderson, et al. (2007)	US			Summer			Various summer camp activities	Increased positive identity, leadership, peer relationships, positive values/decision-making, and spirituality
Jacobs (2019)	US					50	Creative arts - musicals, works of art, videos, dances, etc.	Imagined a positive future, critical thinking, used their voices to address community issues
Keune and Peppler (2019)	US	11–18				66	Making/Maker space activities (e.g., musical instruments)	New technical skills, entrepreneurship (start their own business)
Larson and Hansen (2005)	US	15–19	Hispanic, African American	Summer		20–25	Activism	Strategic thinking (identifying challenges and ways to overcome them), agents of their own development, new skills
Marczak et al. (2006)	US	10–15					Various extracurricular activities	
Martin (2018)	US	13–18		Summer	5–7 weeks	20	Leadership, mentoring and classic summer camp activities	Sense of empowerment, opportunity to use initiative, taking control and leading, identity development, self-worth
Pufahl et al. (2021)	US	13–18		Afterschool	8 weeks	10	Theatre	
Quinn & Nguyen (2017)	US	14–21	Vietnamese	Summer	6 weeks	25	Activism	Spoke on important issues in their communities, critical consciousness
Royce (2009)	US	13–20					Advocacy	Expression without censorship, positively impacted others, expanded social networks
Tayne et al. (2021)	US	14–18	Latinx, Native American, White	Summer	1 week	43	Documentary film production	Identify solutions, sense of hope
Tokunaga (2021)	Japan	13–18	Filipino, Chinese, Nepalese, Indian, Japanese	Part-time high school		5–10	Various recreational activities	Identity development, opportunities for increased social capital through networking
Travis Jr et al. (2022)	US	13–18	Latinx, Black	Summer	5 days	18	Music Production	Increased confidence, strong sense of community, willingness to step outside comfort zone, collaboration, relationship building/building community, decision-making skills
Trott (2020)	US	10–12	White (54 %)	Afterschool	15 weeks	55	Digital photography	Knowledge, strategic thinking, sustained interest and participation outside the program, ability to connect to their lived experiences
Williams and Chawla (2016)	US	15–17		Afterschool & summer			Various outdoor environmental and nature-based activities	Social environmental identity development, change in view of the world, new skills and abilities to practice pro-environment behaviours
Zoch et al. (2021)	US	16–19	African, Asian, Syrian and Latin American	Summer	2 weeks	40	Writing	Negotiate home and new cultural practices, independence in writing, ability to take the initiative

the program (Larson and Hansen, 2005; Pufahl et al., 2021; Bruce and Lin, 2009; Martin, 2018).

Many articles (n = 20) focused on programs that aimed to support youth deemed “at risk” or “disadvantaged” urban youth of colour from low-income communities with limited access to OST opportunities. Importantly, rather than perpetuate stereotypes that exclusively present these youth as needing support and adults’ expertise, several authors emphasised the skills and personal qualities that marginalised youth can contribute to their communities and to society (Ballard et al., 2023; Barton and Tan, 2010). Youth were positioned as powerful agents of change – as co-creators, collaborators or stakeholders (Jacobs, 2019;

Tokunaga, 2021; Royce, 2009), and in possession of assets to be developed instead of problems to be fixed (Ballard et al., 2023; Charamaraman, 2013; Hathaway and Kuzin, 2007). In particular, youth activism programmes, aimed to challenge ‘victim narratives’ young people faced due to their race, age, gender, and other markers by supporting them to understand and actively challenge and dismantle the structural barriers they encounter (Carey et al., 2021; Golestani, 2016; Larson and Hansen, 2005). Programs that do not consider these issues and the communities participants come from may perpetuate inequities, despite aiming to redress these (Royce, 2009; Jacobs, 2019). As such, almost all programs included activities based on participants’ lived experiences and the

opportunity to contribute to their communities.

Program design is therefore dynamic, shaped by participant characteristics and contexts, program leaders' views on participative versus structured approaches, and program duration and goals. Limited time, fixed goals, the language used or highly technical activities may result in increased structure and a 'school feel' (Anderson and Wales, 2012; Halverson et al., 2015; Cincera et al., 2020; Barton and Tan, 2010). For instance, the production of digital art was not only time-intensive but also involved learning highly technical skills thereby warranting a more structured process for their successful completion (Halverson et al., 2015). Hence, flexibility is necessary to reimagine and modify activities to limited time, space and resources while remaining meaningful to participants (Eyerman and Hug, 2020).

Several programs explicitly indicated their intention to operate in direct contrast to what they perceived as students' lack of agency and voice in schools, and instead disrupted power dynamics between adults and participants and fostered collaborative spaces to thrive. For example, *Casita Mira* programs distinguished themselves from schools by replacing "teacher" and "classroom" with "mentor" and "studio" (Dunning, 2020). Enabling youth to negotiate their participation and set behavioural group norms (e.g., via a group contract) increases motivation to engage and adhere to program expectations and guidelines (Jacobs, 2019; Barton and Tan, 2010; Dunning, 2020; Pufahl et al., 2021). Emphasising participant choice based on their interests and needs can make the program more relevant (Eyerman and Hug, 2020). This creates a safer and more authentic space for youth and adults, as a hierarchical school structure does not afford meaningful choices (Jacobs, 2019).

Designing activities with multiple entry points and pathways alleviates barriers of fluctuating attendance and increases participant ability to choose activities based on their interests (Bevan et al., 2017; Hathaway and Kuzin, 2007; Hallewas, 2019). Attendance sometimes fluctuates, due to the voluntary nature of OST programs, competing with other responsibilities (part-time jobs, other activities), youth aging out or a change of circumstances (Hallewas, 2019; Trott, 2020; Hathaway and Kuzin, 2007; Tokunaga, 2021). Programs need to be responsive, for example, by maintaining collaboration online or organising stand-alone sessions for long-term programs that are not highly dependent on the previous sessions' activities/outcomes (Hallewas, 2019). For younger participants, parents actively influence participation (Bloom et al., 2019) which was sometimes affected by financial constraints or conflicting responsibilities (Marczak et al., 2006; Case, 2020). Hathaway and Kuzin (2007) recommend intensive communication, including a contract of commitment by both caregiver and child to maintain attendance. However, others state that a flexible approach avoids burnout and signals that youth are always welcome to return.

Novelty is another important element to hold participant interest and engagement especially in programs that are long term (Eyerman and Hug, 2020). Participant engagement has ebbs and flows, and most will not engage in activities at a similar or consistent rate (Halverson et al., 2015). Process-oriented teaching enables participants to pursue their own interests, at their own pace (Bevan et al., 2017). The use of scaffolding by adults can regulate exposure to challenging materials (Anderson and Mack, 2019; Larson and Hansen, 2005). Additionally, taking into account developmental age during group work and designing of activities is recommended, while gradually building autonomy with age (Dunning, 2020). Carefully selected and open-ended resources stimulate iterative and generative making (Bevan et al., 2017; Keune and Pepler, 2019). A physical environment that stimulates collaboration also encourages students to engage and work with each other, while making materials and projects visible increases curiosity in youth to give it a try (Bevan et al., 2017; Dunning, 2020; Keune and Pepler, 2019).

Over the course of the programs, participants may experience a shift in characteristics, attitudes and behaviours which warrants staff to become highly attuned to the changing nature (e.g., communication practices, norms, decision-making) and power dynamics within the

program. Moreover, sometimes activities may encounter challenges (e.g., participants take more time on an activity or wanting something different/additional) thereby warranting flexibility and adaptation to continue to fit with the programs allotted time and resources (Eyerman and Hug, 2020). The importance of flexibility in fostering youth agency is well recognised. Providers reported that listening to feedback and removing the pressure of assessments facilitate more collaborative relationships between staff and participants (Barton and Tan, 2010). The *iEngage Civic Institutes* program, for example, used digital badges to incentivize and reward positive student behaviours and granted parents access to the badges in the hope that they too would support and encourage their children (Blevins et al., 2016). However, the authors questioned whether such external motivation fuelled by the competitive nature of earning badges countered efforts to intrinsically motivate participants for civic action. Instead, Eyerman and Hug (2020) suggest an end-of-program showcase as a tool to set deadlines and sustain motivation as long-term projects might induce boredom. Almost all studies reviewed involved a showcase/presentation to family, friends and community at the conclusion of the program.

### 3.3. Staffing

The reviewed articles reflected both the importance of appointing appropriate facilitators with the ability to connect with diverse youth, and the lasting positive impact the staff had on the students. Strong facilitation skills and relatability were essential to maintaining positive group dynamics and managing any conflict within participant groups. One program conducted 'ideological interviews' with staff to ensure they were a good fit (Brown et al., 2018) while Jacobs (2019) recommends conflict resolution training to model and facilitate how to resolve issues and maintain a safe program environment. The *Techbridge Girls* program ensured that staff present during sessions had a range of expertise that complemented each other, for example if one staff had expertise in social work then the other had expertise in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (Eyerman and Hug, 2020).

Facilitators' abilities to encourage youth voice and respect participants' choices while guiding and supporting them towards the successful completion of their projects was essential in building trust, fostering youth ownership of projects and establishing connections with adult allies that they can call on for support (Eyerman and Hug, 2020; Anderson and Mack, 2019; Royce, 2009; Dunning, 2020; Larson and Hansen, 2005; Bevan et al., 2017; Charmaraman, 2013; Furman et al., 2019). Such a move from school-based 'teaching at' to 'learning with' models (Dunning, 2020), was aptly called by Halverson and colleagues (2015, p.376) as a "shift from 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side'". Former program participants recalled and admired instructors that made them feel accepted, were respectful and attentive, and entrusted them with responsible tasks (Williams and Chawla, 2016).

The reviewed articles also reflected the need for strong relationships between facilitators and organisational leadership. Those in positions of power have a responsibility to maintain a connection with program staff and participants thereby ensuring that decisions and processes reflect the values and beliefs of all (Brown et al., 2018; Eyerman and Hug, 2020). Additionally, school vision and flexibility in its organisational culture were key in supporting teachers to begin an extracurricular youth activism program (Golestani, 2016). Consistency between adults in the program is also necessary so participants do not receive conflicting information and can be facilitated by ensuring adults have an explicit definition of their roles (Halverson et al., 2015). In this vein, the research suggests facilitators should be granted the flexibility to make responsive pedagogical decisions when tension arises between program outcomes and participant needs.

Several programs invited experts and leaders from the community for one-off sessions or to provide additional skill-based support to activities, thereby contributing to building social capital of participants through networking (Ballard et al., 2023; Bruce and Lin, 2009;

Charmaraman, 2013; Collins et al., 2013; Dunning, 2020; Dworkin et al., 2003). On the other hand, visiting facilitators jumping in and out of programs led to a mismatch between the vision of the adults and youth, especially as they do not possess knowledge of the history, skills and characteristics of the group (Hallewas, 2019). Consistent adult presence is therefore important for building group culture, trust and communication (Ballard et al., 2023). Conversely, fluctuating organisational leadership and high staff turnover resulted in limited recognition and support of some programs (Bevan et al., 2017; Hathaway and Kuzin, 2007).

Some programs successfully employed former participants as staff in later program iterations (Bevan et al., 2017; Halverson et al., 2015; Williams and Chawla, 2016; Keune and Pepler, 2019). Former *In Progress* program participants were trained to become artist-mentors (Halverson et al., 2015). Providing more opportunities for peer-to-peer learning enables youth to drive process and content, and in turn break down traditional power relationships (Halverson et al., 2015; Bevan et al., 2017). Peer instructors have the unique ability to identify problems and solutions by demonstrating the process of learning while making way for a new generation of program leaders. For some participants, same-ethnic leaders served as role models and promoted a sense of belonging by aligning with their identities and making them feel more comfortable (Ettekal et al., 2020; Bertrand et al., 2017).

Few studies mentioned the provision of professional development or training (Blevins et al., 2016; Golestani, 2016; Bevan et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2018; Furman et al., 2019; Jacobs, 2019). Professional development needs to move beyond the implementation of activities to critical discussions about youth marginalisation and youth deficit views in school/society to avoid reproducing the same and ensure more equitable programs (Bevan et al., 2017). In the face of a turbulent socio-political climate, the needs of youth may increase but staff might not be equipped to provide the necessary emotion and social support. For example, The *Theatre Connect* program employed mental health professionals to ensure the safety of LGBTQQ participants as they explored sensitive topics (Pufahl et al., 2021).

### 3.4. Partnerships

The most important partnerships were with caregivers. Caregiver engagement is a critical part of program design as they are gatekeepers for informal learning and development opportunities for young people. Subsequently, the reviewed papers emphasised the value of forming partnerships with participants' families. In reality, only a couple of studies explored caregivers and their children's perspectives to improve family engagement practices. Instead, as Case (2020) recognises, "most of what we currently know about effective family engagement in OST settings is based on data collected from program staff rather than from caregivers" (p. 56). Across the scholarship, almost no research examined adolescent views on how to foster partnership with family members. Consequently, there were few insights into how to effectively involve families in OST programs, making it difficult for program staff to effectively nurture these partnerships.

The benefits of having caregivers actively involved in the delivery of programs are well recognised. When caregivers are involved, they work as volunteers, ambassadors, members of the family support system, and employees (Case, 2020). Being able to witness the positive impact the program has on their children fuels caregiver involvement. When caregivers are actively involved in OST programs, there is better communication with program staff and their children are more likely to participate and continue long-term (Case, 2020). The *Downtown Boxing Gym* made explicit their expectation for caregiver involvement, encouraged open and approachable communication with staff and found multiple avenues through which they could get involved (Case, 2020). Conversely, Collins and colleagues (2013) lament that despite efforts to involve parents (e.g., award party with free dinner), their participation remained low.

Other forms of partnership involve diverse stakeholders such as community centres and other recreation programs, youth development organisations, schools, arts organisations such as museums, universities, and non-government organisations. Sustaining partnership has ongoing benefits such as funding, resources and the continuity of the program. For example, partnering with a local media organisation provided media expertise for the video project while the local high school donated resources in-kind (Charmaraman, 2013). On the other hand, non-governmental organisations partnered with schools to establish social activism clubs and benefitted from increased awareness and support on an important global issue (Golestani, 2016). Bruce and Lin (2009) found that collaborative partnerships enable various stakeholders to offer their unique expertise leading to diverse project dimensions. It led to a supportive network, improved quality of project and learning opportunities for all. Conversely, for Hathaway and Kuzin (2007) the exit of the lead stakeholder in their partnership project with a community organisation resulted in a lack of dialogue and support with the rest of the centre's staff needed for the success of the program. When several stakeholders are involved, it can result in the balancing of goals and priorities of all, which can be challenging (Eyerman and Hug, 2020; Cincera et al., 2020).

Very few studies reflected on the relationship with partners in a program's development and implementation, and even fewer discuss the challenges faced or the failures of the programs (Anderson and Wales, 2012; Cincera et al., 2020; Eyerman and Hug, 2020; Hathaway and Kuzin, 2007). Anderson and Wales (2012) highlighted the difficulties faced in partnering with a community centre in Singapore that offered an ongoing afterschool program. The project was inspired by dissatisfaction with the hegemonic ethos of education in Singapore and intended to provide a language learning space different from the normative school model. The authors report about both the difficulties and failures faced in the partnership because of conflicting opinions about the role of adults and youth, bureaucratic Key Progress Indicators set by the institution partner, as well as ideologies and norms about compliance and obedience.

Partnerships were identified as important to enhance a program, but it can be challenging to get it right – particularly creating the right environment for caregiver engagement and to meet the expectations of a diverse group of people. Tension can emerge and need to be navigated when there are competing goals of external providers.

### 3.5. Cultural competency

Half the studies reviewed focused on specific cultural communities but only a few ( $n = 4$ ) acknowledged culture in programmatic design. Two programs for African Black youth mimicked their organisational structure on the traditional villages in Africa (Brown et al., 2018) while a group of Mexican-American youth utilised the works of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, and Latin American songs and images in their audio-visual podcasts to express cultural pride (Bruce and Lin, 2009). For primarily Latinx and Black youth, a Hip Hop program was a culturally responsive way to promote socioemotional wellbeing (Travis Jr et al., 2022). Immigrant youth in the *One World* program emphasised the need to be surrounded by peers similar to them, thereby resulting in always ensuring that immigrants were the 'majority' despite welcoming native youth (Tokunaga, 2021). This created a space that facilitated conversations in multiple languages, something that participants were unable to do in mainstream education which had a strong preference on assimilation to the Japanese culture. However, program staff struggled to find a balance among diverse cultures as the dominance of certain cultures in the space seemed to alienate others causing withdrawals from the program (Tokunaga, 2021).

Zoch and colleagues (2021) also utilised translanguaging, allowing participants to write in their home language and English in their project to build English writing skills. These ethnically diverse participants found it helpful to have staff that looked like them, and with similar

experiences as them, as it facilitated discussions about using multiple languages in the program alleviating participants' initial feelings of discomfort in using their home language alongside English (Zoch et al., 2021). Conversely, Ettekal and colleagues (2020) found that Latinx youth felt embarrassed that their ethnicity was in focus as it took place in a White-majority setting where they just wanted to fit in. Misalignment between participant and the program intentions and the utilisation of culture caused negative feelings of being stereotyped, misunderstood and sometimes resulted in disengagement (Ettekal et al., 2020). Therefore, designing for agency requires an understanding that the inclusion of culture is determined by program participants rather than by adults.

The scholarship also identified the importance of understanding and responding to the culturally specific priorities of families. Doing so was essential to forming the partnerships that, as previously outlined, providers pursued but often struggled to establish. Ettekal and colleagues (2020) reported that Latinx parents preferred staff that spoke the same language as them to find out more about their children and maintain a connection with the OST provider. Marczak et al. (2006) found that parents perceived structured programs as a tool to keep their children busy under the watchful eyes of responsible adults. Most wanted more specialized activities catering to their children's interest but also realized that this is unrealistic and dependent on what communities can offer.

### 3.6. Evaluation

As one of the aims of this review is to identify rigorous evaluation approaches, it is significant that such an assessment was lacking in much of the literature. Martin (2018) referred to "a discrepancy between intention and implementation" (p. 162) in the literature. When evaluation was evident, the most common methods included interviews, focus groups, observations, and other qualitative methods. Some authors' also used journaling to assess participants' experiences or examined artifacts the youth had created (Halverson et al., 2015; Quinn and Nguyen, 2017; Blevins et al., 2016; Bloom et al., 2019; Charamaman, 2013; Tayne et al., 2021; Williams and Chawla, 2016). A few studies utilised surveys (Trott, 2020; Tayne et al., 2021; Blevins et al., 2021; Ettekal et al., 2020; Marczak et al., 2006; Dunning, 2020; Henderson et al., 2007), primarily as pre- and post-test measures to assess changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. For the most part, however, program evaluation comprised of the authors' first-hand experiences conveyed through anecdotal narratives. Apart from Blevins et al. (2021), studies did not analyse differences based on characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity and age. In this regard, design research, which extends beyond traditional ethnography by not only identifying what is happening, but by evaluating the design and considering the gaps between the programmes goals and outcomes might offer a valuable model (Anderson & Wales, 2012).

Two programs evaluated their effectiveness by shifting away from traditional methods that require significant labour from participants. Specifically, the *Theatre Connect* program assessed its success in increasing LGBTIQ youth wellbeing and social connectedness by measuring whether they met their enrolment targets, maintained participant attendance, secured ongoing funding and sustained a positive reputation in the community (Pufahl et al., 2021). The *Cyclopedia* program similarly included the enrolment of its target population and ongoing financial and verbal support from stakeholders as evaluation indicators (Collins et al., 2013). However, when not supplemented by feedback from youth, such indicators fall short of truly measuring program suitability and resulting outcomes.

Some authors drew on anecdotal participant feedback to indicate the success of their programs. One Grade 10 participant reportedly felt grateful for the afterschool media production program that allowed her to explore her artistic skills in an education system that she felt devalued such activities (Charamaman, 2013). Ballard et al. (2023) reported that participants credited the arts-based program with encouraging them

continue to use their voice and develop social and life skills that shaped the trajectory of their adult lives. They also cited the lasting friendships they formed during the program as a key benefit of participation. Along similar lines, children who participated in a youth development summer camp reported changes in self-esteem, leadership, relational skills, spirituality, and adventure and exploration (Henderson et al., 2007). The authors drew on pre-test, post-camp and 6-month follow-ups with participants and their parents, and noted statistically significant increases in leadership, positive identity, peer relationships, spirituality and positive values/decision making were improved/maintained after six months. It is notable that campers indicated more positive changes than their parents, who already perceived their children to be functioning at high levels across these constructs prior to starting camp (Henderson et al., 2007).

Williams and Chawla (2016) offered one of the few long-term evaluations by speaking with participants five to forty years after completing their environmental education programs. They found that 89 % (n = 18) of interviewees noted that their participation shaped their environmental identity in some way, and of these 60 % reported an influence on their tertiary education choices or careers. In another long-term evaluation, Blevins and colleagues (2021) found that the one-week summer civics program had significant impact on increasing community and political engagement, and political activism independent of sex, race/ethnicity and the number of times participants attended the camp. However, they acknowledged that their results were limited by a non-representative sample of the community in which the camp took place and differences in data collected over several years.

On this note, papers exclusively reported positive program outcomes, with only a minority of articles (Ballard et al., 2023; Larson and Hansen, 2005; Quinn and Nguyen, 2017) acknowledging the oversight. Larson and Hansen (2005) and Bloom and colleagues (2019) recognised that their evaluation lacked the ability to provide hard evidence that the resulting outcomes of the program existed in youth prior to participation. Quinn and Nguyen (2017) stated that they had no way of knowing if the outcomes translated into real life after program completion. One article stated its explicit aim to determine the 'potential social and emotional benefits' of the hip hop program (Travis Jr et al., 2022). Such framing potentially minimizes any opportunity to engage in an informed evaluation of the program.

Apart from well-established, ongoing, year-round programs, the primary outcomes of one-off programs were the completion of a project and the production of a tangible output (e.g., film, song, etc.). Most described participants working through challenges, learning new skills, working with novel tools, meeting deadlines and disseminating to wide audiences. A major issue identified in how findings are reported across the literature is the colloquial and ad-hoc uses of key concepts to describe a variety of outcomes. Several papers did not define concepts such as voice, agency or empowerment, resulting in an inconsistency in the definition and understanding across studies. Additionally, measuring abstract concepts such as empowerment seems to be challenging. One prominent example is the varied use of 'voice' in the scholarship. For most studies, the act of youth presenting their work or producing digital media such as documentary films on issues that were important to them was considered as developing agency and making their voice heard. In most instances, 'voice' is used to refer to communication skills, expressing personal viewpoints, and artistic expression. This practice can lead researchers to take a finding to formulate a conceptually larger claim, becoming a synecdoche.

## 4. Discussion

The scoping review primarily consists of case studies that reflect the design and delivery of individual OST programs, with limited efforts to evaluate these practices and outcomes across studies. This is possibly due to the inconsistencies in definitions of concepts and key terminology, which in turn affects how outcomes are measured and evaluated.

Importantly, there does not exist a dedicated space for such research, as the vast array of journals in which this literature is published is an indication of the expanse and diversity of OST programs. This review is therefore intended to consolidate the literature on the design elements of creative and experiential OST programs, provide a tool of reference for practitioners in this field on programmatic design, and offer insights into the possible outcomes that may result from undertaking these endeavours.

The development and implementation of OST programs and activities are highly dependent on several factors, such as the community in which the program takes place, participant characteristics (e.g., age, gender, knowledge, interest and motivation, skill level) and the goals of the program. While there is no one-size-fits-all framework or approach, some commonalities did emerge. All articles reflected a strengths-based view to program development, that is, with a view that participants already possessed of skills that OST programs could further develop to help youth thrive. In this regard, the authors disturbed stereotypes of youth as mere recipients of adults' expertise and presented participants and other local partners as experts and valuable collaborators.

Although several programs discussed the need for decentralising authority and fostering equitable leadership between staff and youth, there was limited reflection on meaningful and integrated youth participation in this area. Participants were primarily given the autonomy to choose topics of interest or influence activities in some way, but such decisions had to correlate to the overall program goals/vision which was set by adults. Youth were rarely mentioned in the initial conception and design of the programs, thereby limiting their ability to influence the direction and design. While a small selection of articles reported getting feedback from participants, whether this feedback informed the future re-design of the programs was not explicitly apparent.

Recruitment should be a balance between participant interest in the program and ensuring representative participation based on the community within which the program takes place. Apart from mentioning who funded the programs, overall, there was a lack reflection on the process of securing initial or pursuing ongoing financial support for the programs' sustainability. A discussion on the key ingredients for the continuity of programs was lacking. Program staff/facilitator attitudes and interaction styles played a major role in building relationships and participant engagement, especially when aiming to facilitate outcomes such as empowerment and agency. Hence, professional development is essential to support staff in delivering successful programs.

Only a few studies provided some information on program activities by detailing the schedule, format and type of activities carried out (Barton and Tan, 2010; Trott, 2020; Travis Jr et al., 2022). Overall, there was a lack adequate justification for the design choices of the program. Instead, most provided a brief overview of the program and its activities, in addition to a description of the key facilitators and barriers that lead to successful participant engagement and implementation. Creating a connection between the program/activity and participants lived experiences was incredibly important to not only foster motivation and maintain engagement, but also because youth want to actively contribute to their community. Involving community stakeholders (e.g., artists, topic experts) facilitates the expansion of social networks for participants. Working small groups fosters trust, collaboration and social bonds while cohesively moving towards a common goal. Tools such as daily agendas or opening each session with an outline of the sessions' activities is important, especially to improve the comfort of newcomers. Finally, closing the program with a presentation or showcase is not only a form of contribution to the community but also provides a sense of achievement, acknowledging participants' hard work throughout the program.

The lack of thorough evaluation in the scholarship appears to reflect providers' limited resources rather than uncertainty on how to do so, given the repository of manuals and guides for rigorous program evaluation and incorporating the findings into future program activities.

Russell (2018) argues that an increase in public and private funding opportunities for OST programs in the late-1990s and early-2000s saw OST sponsors commission evaluations that aimed to identify the extent to which programs met the needs of the participants, their families, and communities. Such funding requirements, coupled with an increasing public awareness of the potential positive impacts OST programs have on the participants have certainly shaped the field (Harris, 2011; Russell, 2018; Scott-Little, Hamann, & Jurs, 2002). Yet an evaluation of 38 OST programs' data collection and use, acknowledges the process can be burdensome for staff who have limited time and training evaluation methodologies, and participants who already undergo regular testing at schools (Lantos et al., 2024). In addition to modifying the data collection to measure only selected outcomes, they recommend funders provide additional resources to enable program staff or third parties for evaluation (Lantos et al., 2024).

Given our focus on OST programs designed to promote agency and voice, the scholarship presented participants doing so by recognising their power as potential agents of change in their communities. Several programs fostered agency and voice by helping youth research and learn about key social, environmental, and political issues important to them or their communities and society more broadly. Agentic development unfolded as youth envisioned a better future, identified ways to enact change and developed new skills to communicate their ideas and advocate on behalf of themselves and others. For example, Trott (2020) reported that youth in a climate change program developed agency when they felt more informed and confident to identify and take specific actions to reduce their environmental impact. Another afterschool program encouraged students to undertake research and establish themselves as experts on bullying, develop ideas to tackle the issue, and present their findings to school staff and their peers (Bertrand et al., 2017).

Importantly, the scholarship highlighted the importance of youth not only being able to use their voice but to also feel assured that others listened. Some programs created platforms for students to speak with community leaders. The *iEngage* summer institute required students to write letters to local officials and meet with government representatives including a district judge and a city council member (Blevins et al., 2016). As Blevins et al. (2016) noted, students overwhelmingly cited these interactions as their favourite part of the program. At the same time, the ingrained hierarchies that position adults as experts and authority figures made it sometimes confusing for youth when they did not see adults fulfil these roles (Anderson and Wales, 2012). Programs that were designed to foster youth agency could also be undermined by adult "experts parachuting in" and taking over a project (Hallewas, 2019, p.158). For agency to be achieved, youth need to have clear opportunities to express their ideas to engaged audiences that recognise and respect their expertise.

Due to the limited detail about the specific activities within the program undertaken by youth and a lack of theoretical foundations used in the design of said activities, it was hard to link these to subsequent outcomes. Moreover, most studies discussed outcomes witnessed during the implementation of the project as participants engaged in activities or right after its completion, and others were based on the views of program staff. True, sustainable outcome measurement is what happens long-term, which was acknowledged by some studies while also lamenting their inability to facilitate this. A researcher bias was also noticed across a few studies, particularly when authors simultaneously create, run, and study a program, a limitation acknowledged by Blevins et al. (2016, p.374): "we served as both the creators and researchers on *iEngage*". Martin (2018, p.175) explicitly discloses: "It is safe to assume that some degree of researcher bias and reactivity effect were at play throughout data collection and analysis".

Hence, claims about achieving project goals and various outcomes need to be treated with caution. Programs often overstated the impact participation had on youth. An example is when studies describe programs where youth learn about a topic and then indicate that they have

now acquired that skill or disposition. However, there is a significant difference between learning about a topic and putting a competency into practice. Carey et al. (2021, p.951) write that youth “reported gaining social awareness through lessons about [the impacts of] the prison industrial complex”, which leaves the question open to whether a lesson can realistically result in changes in social awareness. We also found equivalences between concepts were casually formulated, such as how trial and error becomes agency in Dworkin et al. (2003, p.24): “agency took the form of deliberate exploration or involved trial and error—teaching oneself from mistakes and evaluation of how things could have gone better”. Programmes also referred to fostering transferable skills into other life domains, but such transferability was left unexamined (Carey et al., 2021). More specific goals and measurable outcomes are needed so that programmes can move beyond giving broad generalisations of their impact.

A lack of critical reflection on program design and outcomes was absent in much of the literature. Notable exceptions included Carey et al. (2021, p.374) who noted that the use of digital badges may have introduced “a competitive mindset” rather than internal motivation. In practice, Blevins et al. (2016) also found that younger children struggled to develop depth in their civics projects, and some staff seemed unprepared to orient students in social justice issues. While many OST programs are privately funded, the programs in this review appear to have been predominantly supported by external grants and government support. This is especially the case for programs that focused on providing equitable opportunities for youth from minoritised or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. When funding is precarious and competitive, it is understandably difficult to have the space and inclination to critically reflect on the programs’ limitations when doing so might expose a program to scrutiny and questions about whether they should continue to receive support. This, of course, raises problems for scholarship. All the articles cited were published in academic peer-reviewed journals, where critical engagement and reflection is instrumental.

#### 4.1. Implications for future practice and research

As indicated, the literature presented OST programs as a reprieve from the pressure schools faced to perform well on standardised tests and other assessment markers (Golestani, 2016; Halverson et al., 2015). Program providers employed innovative and creative strategies to engage participants in meaningful activities about the issues affecting them, their communities and beyond, and drew on youth’s existing knowledge skills to help them to develop agency and voice. In this regard, the findings in this review have several implications for OST programs for those aged eight to eighteen years. The practices outlined can support OST providers in the design of programs, and as fodder for reflection when navigating challenges in their implementation. First, a point of contention is the extent to which youth benefit more from programs that offer well-defined, structured activities (Blevins et al., 2016) or those that offer flexibility and unstructured, open-ended spaces for participants (Marczak et al., 2006). Instead of extremes, OST programs should strive to achieve a balance between both.

Hence, recruitment takes into consideration participant characteristics as this impact’s motivation and engagement, while striving to be equitable and representative of the community in which the program occurs. A second and related recommendation is the type of outcomes produced by programs that align with participant desires and interests compared to programs where youth experience new topics, activities. While the former is likely to increase engagement, the latter exposes youth to learning new skills and having new experiences (Royce, 2009). Thus, there exists a beautiful tension between designing activities that cater to participant interests while taking them on a journey to places unimagined. A third and more conclusive implication for practice is to design programs where youth make new friends and learn to play and work with new peers.

Given the lack of third-party evaluations, we hypothesise that several of these studies are potentially based on reports for funders thereby resulting in articles that only discuss innovative and successful programs. These studies are probably a small subset, within a larger pool of programs that publish by other means or do not do so because of failure. Complementary research on program failures would add vital knowledge to the field. There is also limited literature on indigenous youth and the use of specific cultural frameworks that can help enhance programs, especially when working in countries that have highly diverse populations. Similarly, there was limited discussion on the components that establish strong, ongoing partnerships with parents, stakeholders and communities. As parents are often the gatekeepers to participation, it is important to increase efforts to involve them in OST endeavours. Additionally, the potential to forge strong ties with local organisations and communities increases the opportunity to develop appropriate, meaningful, and sustainable programs.

Finally, there needs to be a consistent evaluation of programs and more longitudinal data utilised when making strong claims about outcomes such as voice and agency. It might be a hard ask to establish consistency in measuring these outcomes because they are abstract concepts that are heavily influenced by the communities, contexts and cultures in which they appear. It might be easier to strive towards consistency in instruments and being more explicit in the definitions of outcome indicators. This might improve the validity and reliability for each program, and the field of OST research.

#### 4.2. Limitations of this review

We acknowledge that this review has some limitations. First, a decision was made to include only the most fruitful search terms, i.e., those that generated the greatest number of results, which might have excluded pertinent literature. OST terms, such as ‘holiday programs’, ‘outdoor education’, etc. were excluded as they did not generate a substantial number of articles, and a preliminary scan showed that most were duplicated in the large volume of articles retrieved from the search terms that this review did use (Table 1). Similarly, the youth development outcomes utilised in the search strategy were based on the most common ones cited in the research and those that were of interest to the research team. However, the aim of this scoping review was a focus on breadth instead of depth, and therefore not to give an exhaustive and detailed account of the field, but rather to begin to synthesise and provide some overview of the design elements and evaluation of OST programs that might be useful to providers when developing and implementing the same. Furthermore, four researchers, all from different disciplines, were involved in scanning and selecting articles. Due to our unique worldviews and own lens applied during this process, some relevant articles might have been unintentionally excluded. While we aimed to research international programs, most articles are based in the US. This is potentially due to a longstanding tradition of extracurricular activities and OST programs in this region and the influence of funders expecting that programs outcomes are published. There are likely to be numerous other programs operating globally, but they do not have the resources or inclination to publish.

## 5. Conclusion

The design of creative and experiential OST programs needs to be adequately justified, explicitly communicated, and rigorously evaluated to ensure that the goals and outcomes these programs claim to foster are successfully achieved. There needs to be more critical reflection on program design and implementation to ensure that participants and their communities are gaining valuable outcomes, especially when publishing in an academic context. Youth agency and voice need not be only an end goal, but an integral part of programmatic implementation, design and expression. Youth are positioned as agents of change, with many programs challenging traditional power dynamics so youth could

be involved earlier in the process as co-creators when designing future programs. Results from programmes were mainly published as stand-alone studies, but this review demonstrates that there is a growing body of research on the role of agency and voice in OST programs.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Ware Cheryl:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Sosa Ricardo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Hunting Amabel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis. **D'Souza Erica:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Gibbons Andrew:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Le De Loic:** Writing – original draft, Investigation.

### Impact statement

Out-of-School Time (OST) programs have transformed from simply providing childcare and academic support to focusing on positive youth development. We reviewed forty articles on creative and experiential OST programs, to understand how program design can contribute to developing agency and voice in adolescents aged eight to eighteen years. We found that strengths-based practices which centre around increasing youth involvement in decision-making by emphasising flexibility and choice, opportunities to contribute to their communities and support adult staff allies were key in developing agentic identities. However, strong evaluation is lacking, thereby leaving most studies unable to substantiate their claims.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The above-mentioned authors have no declarations of interest.

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