Literature Review on the topic of Professional Development in Out of School Time and Youth Work

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There is widespread interest in the fields of out-of-school-time (OST, or afterschool (AS)) and youth development in learning about, offering and studying the effects of professional development (PD) on staff, program quality and youth participants. However, there are also myriad challenges to offering PD such as staff buy-in or commitment (especially because of high turnover in the field), significant variability in programs (structure, content, population served, purpose and location), lack of clear definitions of youth work and the qualifications of a youth worker, lack of agreement on the best format for PD, and possibly most importantly, a lack of funding to provide this PD.

The need for Professional Development

There is virtually unanimous agreement about the need for PD in the OST/youth work field. For example, in one study, Johnson (2019) argued that a lack of high-quality PD hinders programs' abilities to provide quality experiences for children and youth. PD is especially needed for front-line staff to succeed at their jobs and it helps with retention. Increased program quality helps with staff and participant retention as well as participant outcomes. In another study, (Robertson, 2020) respondents unanimously agreed that training is necessary for afterschool workers to provide high quality programming. The authors recommend creating training programs to develop more qualified staff although they do not specify the format or content. In research conducted on programs specific to military families (Silliman, Edwards, & Johnson, 2020), researchers' "findings point to the value of intensive and extended training focused on experiential learning, critical reflection, and mentoring…"

Walker, 2021 argued the following:

> "Findings included participants' need for professional development to deal with children with special needs, including virtual trainings, conferences workshops, webinars and archived modules, and ongoing team meetings. Without adequate support, they relied on their parenting experiences or the lessons they learned from their parents. Recommendations include the creation of professional development that incorporates workers' prior experiences and skills, draws on those strengths, and further develops them. Understanding workers' professional development needs could bring about positive social change by directing and informing administrators increased and targeted support of these paraprofessional workers, resulting in a possible increase in students' positive developmental outcomes."

A whole host of researchers and practitioners have argued repeatedly that PD is an essential component of improving program quality and retaining staff. The next sections present research and other explorations that demonstrate the myriad positive effects of PD for both staff and program quality.

Benefits of Professional Development for Staff

Research and reporting on PD efforts in the OST/youth development field indicate a variety of benefits for staff resulting from myriad approaches to PD. When it comes to pursuit of degrees or higher education, there are many positive outcomes. At the same time, there are some challenges in terms of access and return on investment. For example, Tallon, Hay and Smith (2022) report the following in response to obtaining a degree:

> The participants reported a shift in their self-perception as uneducated and unskilled employees, to competent learners and highly skilled workers. Obtaining the degree resulted in secure employment for the participants, while for some it led to promotion and higher study. Implications are that a degree-level youth work qualification may enhance one's confidence and practice as a youth worker and lead to career progression. However, a societal shift in the understanding and value of the profession needs to occur if the qualification is going to be recognized and rewarded in the sector.

If pay and status do not improve for OST/youth development workers, it will continue to be challenging for those same workers to pursue and obtain degrees even though positive results for staff performance and program quality are often reported. Garst, Bowers, Quinn and Weston (2021) note that pursuing degree programs can be challenging for Youth Development professionals, especially balancing demands of work and family with the academic program. However, Youth Development professionals pursuing an online Youth Development graduate degree program perceived the academic pursuits as worthwhile to their work but challenging, especially if they returned to school after a significant period away. Further, youth development professionals reported a wide variety of increased responsibilities after completing their graduate degrees in Youth Development. They also often reported job or career changes (Garst, Stephens, Parry, Bowers, & Quinn, 2023) which suggest that there is value to these degrees in some circumstances. In particular, Garst, Weston, Bowers and Quinn (2019) tout the benefits of obtaining degrees for program leaders or supervisors:

> Youth development leaders (YDLs) take diverse pathways to obtain the knowledge and skills needed for youthwork…Youth development degrees at the higher education level improve outcomes for YDLs as well as the youth they serve…The study found that graduates perceived their degrees were related to positive outcomes in professionalism (increased knowledge and application of youth development theory, heightened self-confidence and credibility in professional abilities, improvement of professional skills, career advancement, and recognition); improved organizational practices (with respect to training, staff management, and program quality); and increased community engagement (increased availability of programs and community collaboration).

Outside of the university setting, PD can have significant effects. For example, Evans, Sicafuse, Killian, Davidson and Loesch-Griffin (2010) demonstrate that PD supports self-efficacy but that youth workers report low levels of agency or program support for PD. More coordinated efforts at PD might provide more variety for participants and improve program quality. For a specific example of PD positively impacting self-efficacy, see Wahl-Alexander, Richards and Howell (2018). This study tested supplemental staff training which took the form of online modules for summer camp staff. The training resulted in an increased sense of self-efficacy but the study did not examine whether it affected youth experiences or program quality.

Bradshaw (2015) highlights the value of PD: "Professional development is vital to the success of afterschool programs …Well-planned professional development also contributes to increased staff satisfaction and retention." Given that the OST/youth development field suffers from high turnover, any efforts that could increase retention would have significant impacts for programs and the experiences of staff. Huang and Cho (2010) had earlier argued that PD can help with retention. They noted PD can be externally provided or internally. They further stated that internal forms of PD can save money but still allow growth of staff and improvement of programs. In their research, staff did not report being motivated to engage in PD in order to gain higher pay. Rather, they sought to improve their work.

Baker, Lockaby, Guterman, Daley and Klumpner (2011) found that quality PD encourages staff to desire more education/training. In describing challenges to scaling up PD efforts the authors highlighted how different individuals' jobs are at their respective sites because of how different programs are (participants, goals, location, staff and structure). In their examinations, they found staff were encouraged by training but also felt there would be barriers to implementing new knowledge. Bayly, Krehbiel, Wise, Lodl and Anthony (2024) more recently found that the impacts of PD were variable by staff experience (including differences in program and time in the field). These authors question how best to reach/teach a wide variety of practitioners. They wondered who benefits most from PD and their research showed that newer staff members benefited more. Across the board, though, people reported increases in self-efficacy.

In considering who would benefit most from PD, White, DeMand, McGovern, & Akiva (2020) make a valid argument for focusing on supervisors or program leaders. The authors argue that job stress can have cascading negative effects on afterschool programs. However, the study showed that supervisors can play a large role in decreasing stress for their staff, which means that targeted training for supervisors might be a worthwhile investment.

Benefits of Professional Development for Program Quality/Youth Outcomes

There is strong evidence that PD has a role to play in program improvement. For example, Vandell and Lao (2016) summarize it thus:

>A robust research literature has documented that high quality afterschool programs can foster academic and social-emotional outcomes for youth from diverse backgrounds. The effectiveness of these programs, however, is

> dependent on knowledgeable and caring staff who create learning environments
> that are engaging for students. Developing and retaining front line staff and
> program directors who have the mindsets and skills to do this work must be a
> priority, if programs are to achieve this mission. In this paper, we propose a
> multi-prong professional development strategy that includes specific actions at
> the program level, as well as partnerships with higher education, host schools,
> and community-based organizations and foundations. Research and evaluation
> of these strategies should be undertaken to assess their efficacy in improving
> staff skills and reducing staff turnover.

Singer, Newman and Moroney (2018) build on that argument, strengthening the evidence that PD is an important tool for improving program quality:

> We have witnessed significant contributions to the knowledge base on the
> relationship between program quality and youth outcomes (Durlak et al., 2010),
> and there is very good research on the levers for quality practice (Smith et al.,
> 2010). Most recently, OST researchers have engaged in pivotal research on the
> relationship between staff professional learning (as a function of quality) and
> youth outcomes (Vandell, Simzar, O'Cadiz, & Hall, 2016). This body of research
> does well to compel programs to strive for high quality practices to meet the
> primary goal of OST—to support participants' personal and academic
> development.

The established research is essential to continued efforts to improve PD and increase its availability. For example, Tebes (2019) contends that "practice and policy innovations that draw on this research are essential to ensuring a strong child- and youth-serving workforce that will benefit children and youth today and in the future." The author also notes that it is imperative to examine the landscape and understand the target audience before planning and implementing PD. As an example, in one study, PD that was more targeted toward staff coaching was more likely to produce positive outcomes for youth. Varied levels of support for staff produced different results. (Farrell, Collier-Meek & Furman, 2019)

The existing research on the impacts of PD also tells us that PD is an important route for program improvement but different PD is not equally impactful. (Bouffard, 2004) This is part of what is so challenging about PD in the OST/youth development field: standardization and professionalization of the field could potentially have many benefits but currently the field is so fragmented that it is challenging to find tools or approaches that work for large swathes of existing programs. One focal area is Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Newman (2020) focuses on the importance of SEL in quality programming and identifies pathways for staff development in these areas. This article highlights the ways in which they connect to foundational youth development practices.

More generally, there is no question that PD can have positive impacts on program quality: "Professional development is vital to the success of afterschool programs. Effective professional development enhances afterschool program quality by facilitating staff performance and

knowledge; in addition, professional development is vital for improving student learning outcomes." (Bradshaw, 2015). Dichaba (2019) found that encouraging lifelong learning among youth workers improves program quality. At the same time Fusco, & Baizerman (2013) examine the claims of professionalization in youth work as both a process and outcome that aims to ultimately improve the lives of young people" and find that there are both real positive effects of PD and genuine challenges to implementing it.

While it is clear that PD can have positive effects on program quality and staff, it is less certain exactly what kind of PD works best and for what results. The next section will demonstrate the wide variety of PD types that have been tested and some of the results.

Types of Professional Development Tested and the Results

Professionals and researchers have engaged in myriad PD efforts across the country, with different program types and varying results. The most commonly described PD efforts involve a higher education program or a university-community partnership; virtual or online efforts designed to be highly accessible to youth workers across wide geographical areas and with varied availability for the work; coaching models where site supervisors receive PD and then pass their learning along through coaching relationships with staff; or cohort models such as a professional learning community, which emphasize engagement over a longer period of time and the value of community in learning and growing professionally.

Universities and Higher Education

Vandell and Lao (2016) state that higher education should play a larger role in PD and education in the field. Lacking a clear definition of what constitutes a professional in this field, universities have struggled to formulate academic programs tailored to OST/youth development and workers in the field have struggled to see the value of pursuing such a degree.

> Higher education has a critical, but largely unrealized role in the development of afterschool professionals. As previously noted, afterschool programs (as well as other forms of extended education) suffer from the absence of a well-articulated and defined course of study. By developing undergraduate coursework that is specific to out-of-school-time learning and youth development, universities can help to create a pipeline of extended education professionals who share a common identity and knowledge base from which a strong field can be built. Integrating fieldwork into courses not only helps ensure undergraduates can demonstrate the practical application of theory to practice, but helps to build a pool of well-prepared afterschool staff for partner programs.

Some authors (Mahoney, Levine, & Hinga, 2010) advocate for University-Community partnerships as a way to increase PD offerings, guarantee quality and attain buy-in from youth workers. The paper advocates university-community partnerships as a tool for PD for OST staff because highly qualified staff are essential for program quality. Supervisors reported

improvements in those enrolled in the PD program especially when a fair number of staff have some college but not in a related field. Support for staff enrolling in college courses is essential, as many have little or no past college experience and others had to withdraw for a variety of reasons such as family pressures, financial issues or academic challenges. College courses that were part of this study included opportunities for reflection and feedback on experiences in the field. Formal results demonstrating links between this type of PD and program quality or youth outcomes were not provided. Nevertheless, informal feedback from site supervisors suggested positive outcomes of these university-based PD efforts.

Quinn, Bowers, Hadiandehkordi, & Garst (2021) make the following argument:

> This article supports the value of graduate academic degree programs for youth-serving professionals… The study provides empirical support documenting that a curriculum of courses for a graduate level program in youth development leadership strengthens the youth development work force by potentially enabling graduates to impact their organizations in practical, meaningful ways. As a result, we can surmise that youth are the ultimate beneficiaries of a graduate degree program in youth development leadership. Future research should explore the benefits to youth and families served by youth-serving professionals engaged in youth development graduate degree programs.

In a related article Quinn, Garst, Bowers, & Weston, (2020) state:

> "The youth development field would benefit from academically trained professionals who could apply the youth development literature to serve youth more effectively in organizations or communities. This article describes a graduate level academic degree program in youth development to: (a) increase awareness of the importance of youth programs and (b) bring attention to the fundamental learning structures that can be deployed to build human capacity in the youth development field."

In reference to graduate programs in the OST/youth development field, Ranahan, Blanchet-Cohen and Mann-Feder (2015) argue that an integrated approach is essential to make a grad program appealing to diverse youth workers from varied settings, and imply that such programs would be beneficial for program quality. Further, Shockley and Thompson (2012) establish the important role higher education can play towards stabilizing the youth workforce, and posit that coursework that is multidisciplinary, relevant to students' jobs, and supported by employers is important to the success of college programs. This integrated approach seems to be an important characteristic of higher education programs.

Some researchers (e.g., Thompson and Shockley, 2013) argue that higher education is an important piece of the PD puzzle, but suggest that instead of full degree programs, professionals in this field need access to course work or modules that are "stackable" to earn

credentials. They should then also be able to carry this course work into a degree program, should they choose to pursue that route.

> Youth development principles advocate for supporting young people, while the staff who work with them face chronic issues like heavy workloads and poor support which are linked to job turnover. Prior quantitative research has presented college-based training as a best practice to professionalize and stabilize the youth workforce. Career ladders that are credit-bearing offer youth workers a stackable credential, as well as an entrée into higher education for their personal and professional growth. (Thompson, & Shockley 2013)

One challenge with this approach is getting these credentials validated so that they carry some weight in the field and gain the workers some benefits such as increased pay or promotion.

Online or Virtual PD

Online or virtual PD has been a focus of PD efforts because of the limitations it removes, particularly around geographical barriers or scheduling challenges. Brasili and Allen (2019) note that there is widespread interest in PD among afterschool professionals but limited access (as low as 26% of youth workers report having regular access to PD). This article shares ideas for virtual PD in STEM specifically, but the authors state the strategies can be used in other disciplines. Virtual PD has the advantage of being flexible for the participants and does not raise geographic barriers that might hinder many participants. This article did not report on the results of these PD efforts.

Baizerman and VeLure Roholt (2016) also note that "online professional development provides an ideal platform for limiting barriers to participation, developing knowledge and skills, and fostering a learning community." They further argue that online, cohort-based courses are a viable method to offer professional development. OST/youth workers appreciate the convenience as well as the interactions with other professionals from a variety of organizations and locations." While the particular program highlighted in this article "focuses on positive youth development theory, other content may be offered online to expand professional development opportunities for youth workers." (Robideau, & Santl, 2020).

Another example, highlighted by Balow, et al. (2010) describes an effort in the 21st Century Community Learning Center (21C) program. For the 21C community, needs were assessed and an online professional development community was created with multimedia learning modules across a variety of topics. Results of this PD effort were not reported although the stated goals were to "support afterschool practitioners' professional development, encourage their discussion and reflection, and support positive change in their professional practice."

Cohorts and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

A host of descriptions and studies of cohorts and PLCs suggests that they may be an effective tool to use in OST/youth work. Shanahan, & Sheehan (2020) make the following statement based on their research and experience:

> For the purposes of supporting extended training to youth development staff, especially when remote office settings are a factor, a cohort-learning model is a preferred model of learning. Cohorts enhance professional youth worker relationships and foster a learning community through networking and collaborative activities, influence professional relationship building through the sharing of applicable skills and theory, and provide a CoP (Community of Practice) to discuss ideas and share resources.

Cian and Kastelein (2023) concur that this is a model for PD that works in small cohorts across a variety of topics. This model has been shown to work. A challenge or future direction the authors note is work on taking these efforts to scale.

For more general ideas about what PLCs must include, Vance, et al. (2016) argue that although PD is essential for a skilled workforce and high-quality programming, many PD opportunities are not providing adequate preparation. The authors advocate for professional learning communities with these essential components: practice opportunities to try out what you have learned in front of co-workers or coaches; reflection opportunities to reflect on your learning, think critically and share with fellow learners; and collaboration opportunities to work together, make discoveries and resolve challenges. These PD opportunities provide participants with the practice, application, feedback and reflection they need to succeed.

Sloan and Perreira-Leon (2010) describe their version of this cohort/PLC approach. They state this model provides training for leaders, who then carry the knowledge and skills forward to their staff members who, in turn, apply what they have learned to improve program quality. The authors advocate their professional learning communities as key to developing qualified staff and high-quality programs.

Coaching or Train the Trainer

The example immediately before this, while it describes a PLC, is also advocating for a train the trainer approach where supervisors engage in PD and then bring their learning back to their individual programs to model and share with staff. Many professionals have advocated for such coaching models because they do not require as many people to commit to PD experiences and they can be more flexible in terms of their implementation at the program level. At the same time, there is significant variability in execution depending on the fidelity and comprehension of the manager bringing the PD back.

Coaching is one of the three versions of job-embedded PD advocated by Wiedow (2018); the other two are PLCs and peer observation. The author argues all of these can be effective when

implemented well. Again, though, there is a lot of possible variability in the trickle-down that occurs in a coaching model. The author also notes that supervisors are key to successful PD efforts in all three of those examples. A weakness of the train the trainer approach acknowledged by Wiedow (2018) is that:

> traditionally, organizations send staff to trainings without offering follow-up support to enable them to apply the learning… To effectively develop youth worker expertise, supervisors must create a culture that allows staff to integrate their learning into practice and reflect on its application.

Severino, Meehan and Fegely (2022) discuss a train the trainer model where the PD program trained staff who would go on to coach front-line staff in afterschool. The training was specific to early literacy. The authors describe this program but do not provide data indicating any measures of program success. In another case, the author indicated positive results of a coaching model: "The [staff] strongly valued their relationships with their supervisor and on-site coaches, who served as formal sources of professional support. Individualized coaching, focused on lesson planning and facilitation skills for specific afterschool activities, was available to all afterschool staff and helped ASIs develop skills and confidence." (Hwang, S. H., Watford, J. A., Cappella, E., Yates, M., Mui, S., & Nix, J., 2020)

Other Considerations in PD

PD efforts in OST/youth work have taken many other forms as well. Below are a few other examples of attempts and, where possible, their results.

Positive and high-quality staff-participant interactions and relationships are arguably one of the most central aspects of quality OST/youth programming. Akiva, Li, Martin, Horner and McNamara (2017) tested a PD program designed to improve relationships. They found that targeted training for adult-child interactions resulted in improved relationships, connection and participation. This used self-video for analysis of interactions. Building relations is essential and simple PD can improve staff attitudes and approaches to relation-building. (Akiva, White, Colvin, Li, & Wardrip, 2022) Authors stated that relational training seems important for high quality staff but acknowledge that practice seems challenging to change—more training may be required to effect change. (Akiva, White, Colvin, DeMand, & Page, 2022)

In a similar way, a constructivist approach aimed at transformative practice and learning found that practitioners were open to change. However, it required a shift in beliefs to engage in transformative teaching and this was not equally likely to happen for everyone, especially those with initial resistance. (Baldwin, 2019) Staff receptiveness and responsiveness to training is central to successful PD so a focus in the field must be finding ways to incentivize PD so that it is seen as desirable and worthwhile by workers in the field. One way researchers have advocated to do this is by ensuring that the PD itself feels relevant and worthwhile. VeLure Roholt and Rana (2011) advocate a practice wisdom approach to professional development rather than a theoretical approach. They argue it has been successful and could be scaled up. Richmond,

Braughton and Borden (2018) suggest that a focus on culture could increase the interest of staff in engaging in PD and also positively affect program quality. Their paper reviews the importance of culture in positive youth development, youth programs, and professional development of staff. Recommendations on how best to integrate cultural responsiveness and humility in professional development of youth program staff are discussed.

Even as there are calls across the nation for standardization and professionalization, researchers and practitioners recognize the importance of the work that happens at the program level. Arnold, Cater and Braverman (2016) advocate for training staff to evaluate at the program site level. They argue this allows more consistent evaluation and focuses staff efforts. Similarly, Toledo (2018) shares a model that recommends building performance at the site level. Shared responsibility can increase buy-in and skill and help both to stabilize the youth development workforce and increase the quality of services provided to children and youth. Program level work also concerns decisions about the content taught and shared. Cooper (2013) noted that PD efforts tend to focus on the HOW (how to run a program, interact with youth, etc.) rather than the WHAT (the content). This article argues we need to focus more on the WHAT.

Wever Frerichs, Pearman Fenton, & Wingert (2018) describe a content oriented PD effort that they believe solves some broader issues around accessibility and application:

> Quality out-of-school time (OST) programs for youth are limited by a lack of professional learning opportunities for staff and volunteers that are based upon solid learning theory, affordable, and scalable for a diverse field. The Click2Science project is an innovative model for professional learning experiences that support staff and volunteers in providing high-quality science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) learning opportunities for youth. This model of professional learning emphasizes the importance of visual, social, and experiential learning experiences with reflection and application to practice. The model leverages technology and in-person support in a cycle of professional development experiences.

Barriers and Challenges to Expanding Professional Development

Fleming (2012) provides an overview of many of the issues faced during attempts to provide, systematize or improve PD. Fleming (2012) notes it is a challenge to determine what the PD needs are of a diverse and changing profession, particularly as it continues to work to distinguish itself from traditional schooling. The workforce tends to be young, underpaid and have high turnover, all of which present their own sets of challenges to providing and accessing PD. Piecemeal efforts exist to professionalize the field but these need to be expanded, standardized and researched. Angbah (2018) further notes there are limited opportunities for

professional development for youth workers and limited continuing education opportunities. She recommends universal standards so that PD can also become more consistent.

Borden, et al. (2020) highlight strengths and challenges the field will face as it works toward professionalization and improvement. They state the main challenge is the lack in the Youth Development field of a clear definition for the profession. The authors do note that an existing research base would help support the development of more coordinated PD efforts. They further assert that credentialing programs are helpful, as is partnership across sectors. Finally, they indicate that system-building holds promise for strengthening programs and PD (Borden, Ballard, Michl-Petzing, Conn, Mull, & Wilkens, 2020). Interestingly, Starr, et al. (2023) argue that "researchers and field leaders have for decades been recommending the same basic strategies to strengthen the youth fields workforce: increase pay and benefits, create clear career pathways, build a credentialing system within a distinct academic discipline, and address racial equity in workforce policies (e.g., Borden et al., 2020; Fusco, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2021; Schlomer et al., 2011; Yohalem et al., 2010)." It seems that concerted efforts to systematically administer and evaluate PD are much needed, and we have known this for decades. The question is how to mobilize to achieve these goals.

In their paper, Baldwin, Stromwall and Wilder (2015) explore causes of low program quality and find four broad categories, none of which are regularly the recipient of funding or support from state or local sources, which means they are unlikely to have resources devoted to them for PD. This suggests that an additional barrier to development of high quality PD comes at the system level.

Just as there are issues at the system level, there are challenges at the level of the individual worker. For example, Cappella and Godfrey (2019) write that "the professionals and paraprofessionals who work daily with youth in low-resource, marginalized communities are integral to youth wellbeing; yet, their professional development, and the factors that promote it, are not well understood." This paper lays out a five-layered model (individual, interpersonal, organizational, community and societal) for youth workers and argues that we need to better understand all five layers and their interactions in order to better serve youth workers and provide PD.

"Critical foundational workforce supports—clear entry points, opportunities for advancement, fair compensation, and continuous professional development—are needed to sustain the energy and commitment the workforce brings…As a field, we must explore the ways in which career pathways are more available to some potential youth workers than to others. Then we can integrate ongoing research with our individual and collective stories to find ways to redress these fundamental inequities." (Peter, 2023) Until we can address these inequities, the exact type of PD available matters less.

High variability among OST/youth workers contributes to turnover in the field and turnover in the field affects program quality as well as approaches to PD. There are inequities in the field

that affect who is able to persist in the field of youth work and who must leave. Persistence can come at personal cost. This author says that organizational and professional support is not enough. The author argues that policymakers must consider the conditions in the field in order to reduce the precarity of youth work (Vasudevan, 2019) and hence determine best approaches to PD. In a similar vein, Sutcliffe and Cooper (2023) state the following:

> It would be useful to explore whether youth work career patterns differ between graduates and non-graduates, and whether the career patterns differ in contexts where professionalization has not occurred… Finally, it would be useful to study the career trajectories and decision-making of youth workers who leave youth work after less than ten years to pursue other careers.

Similarly, Cunnien (2017) claims that PD efforts do not often take into account the complexity of human relationships or the environments in which they operate, but that they should.

High quality PD encourages staff to desire more education/training. Challenges include how different individuals' jobs are at their respective sites. Staff were encouraged by training but also felt there would be barriers to implementing new knowledge. (Baker, Lockaby, Guterman, Daley, & Klumpner, 2011)

Another aspect of the human experience that is essential is program leadership. Collins and Metz (2009) show that facilitative administrators are key to quality programs but leave open the question of how best to develop these leaders through PD. Other authors similarly advocate for a leader-focused approach to PD and program improvement, stating "among other findings, we discovered that quality improvement begins with program managers, who then lead the process of change" (Devaney, Smith, & Wong, 2012). For further evidence of the importance of program leadership, Karlström (2012) shows us that organizational characteristics are an important factor in the success of program improvement and PD efforts, but that those in leadership have heavy influence on buy-in to PD. In a separate paper, Wildschut, Oldenhof and Leistikow (2023) demonstrate that leadership is essential for high quality programming and staff development, but they show that in OST leadership is poorly defined and highly variable depending on program and position, among other things. With so many forms of PD depending on strong leadership at the program level, this finding presents a real concern for development of PD efforts.

Another barrier to development and systematization of PD for the field is that many efforts are not formally studied when they are implemented. The field has been building a research base on PD but countless other PD efforts have gone unstudied. Among the findings that exist, the following two sets seemed important to note when considering the current state of PD in the field:

1) Participant buy-in is essential for PD to have positive impacts. Online-only training was not perceived to be as effective as interventions with a face-to-face component.

Research on the actual impacts of PD on program quality is needed. (Brennan, Sellmaier, Jivanjee, & Grover, 2019).

2) "Hierarchical organizational program standards and supports, including internal self-assessments, did not appear to foster buy-in, learning, or site-based problem-solving for quality improvement." Efforts targeted program structure and content but did not appear to bring about change. (Baldwin & Wilder, 2014).

Calls for Standardization or Professionalization

In a special issue of the Journal of Youth Development, Borden, Conn, Mull and Wilkens led the examination of conditions in the field. They had the following to say:

> They identified the overarching task as one of identification of the elements that can make the field cohesive across the different settings and programs, while supporting youth in their growth through experiences that are rooted in the science of learning and development. Finally, [it] offers the opportunity to better understand the youth workers, examine different types of professional development pathways, explore the role that systems can play in support of these workers, and reflect on the challenges and opportunities raised by key leaders in the profession.

Vance (2010) lays out steps and challenges in terms of professionalizing the field, stating the following:

> Experts and practitioners in the OST field agree that the first step toward building a qualified, stable cadre of youth practitioners is to clearly describe the knowledge and skills necessary to implement high quality programming (Stone et al. 2004)… The most pressing barriers to the development of a set of core competencies specific to the OST field are fragmented professional development efforts (Astroth et al. 2004) and the diverse sectors within the OST field (NIOST, 2006).

Vance's (2010) work also highlights the tremendous variety in existing competency frameworks in the youth development field and calls for more unified competencies in order to better develop PD.

Not only is it important to have some standardization in terms of the profession as well as consistent, high-quality PD, it is important to have standardized methods to evaluate the effectiveness of PD in order to determine the best investments of human capital and monetary resources. The authors designed and tested a series of instruments that could be applied to a variety of PD experiences with diverse youth workers. These tools were intended to be widely distributed and utilized. (Buher-Kane, Peter, & Kinnevy, 2005).

In further support of the goal of standardization and professionalization in the field of OST/youth development, Curry and Schneider-Muñoz (2012) argue we need to continue to unify the field in order to allow for more professionalization (and more PD). While it is commonly believed that to improve the field of afterschool, we must professionalize the field, Moore (2013) argues that unless the workers and youth are central to decision-making and development, quality will not improve. This is an important point to consider. Although it may be true that there is value to systematization and professionalization, it probably also matters who leads those initiatives and how much buy-in there is from OST/youth workers.

While there is uncertainty about how exactly to bring about large scale change such as this, many professionals and researchers in the field recommend universal standards for the profession, in part so that PD can also become more consistent (e.g., Angbah, 2018). Dennehy, Gannett and Robbins (2006) advocate for a unified effort to create a national credential with federal oversight. They argue that federal participation will encourage states, that standard practices and expectations will encourage program participation, and these, in turn, will improve program quality.

Gannett, Mello and Starr (2009) reiterate that "a well-developed and supported credentialing program backed by state and federal mandates can impact the quality of programs." These authors argue for a credentialing system for OST/youth development because they say it will help to improve program quality across the field. At the same time, they acknowledge barriers, with funding being first and foremost, followed by a lack of full-time opportunities. Their recommendations are to make PD mandatory for 21st Century Community Learning Center staff and open to everyone, to build on existing systems and to consider funding concerns.

In a related piece, Hall and Gannett (2010) argue that systematizing a variety of factors including core competencies, a training system, a professional registry, a nationally recognized credential, career lattices and pathways, wage increases and a quality rating system that helps programs identify areas for improvement and training would help to improve program quality and professionalize the field. They explicitly advocate for a national credential, stating that "moving this work forward toward a nationally recognized credential will ultimately yield benefits for children and youth as it provides necessary support and validation for an essential and impassioned workforce."

In further support of credentials or standards, these authors talk about the possibilities for a national credential in youth work to improve program quality and youth outcomes, support youth workers and advance the field. They highlight competencies developed by organizations such as the National Afterschool Association to show the field is primed for this work. They also point out the growth of the afterschool field in recent years and the growing interest in PD. (Starr, & Gannett, 2016)

Eckles, et al. (2009) describe the North American Certification project (NACP) which aimed to standardize PD programs with standardized assessments intended to professionalize the field of

afterschool and create more consistent opportunities for PD and evaluation. They stated "the program is expected to provide a platform for addressing child care workforce development, unifying credentialing and education, increasing regulatory standards, and increasing public awareness of the contributions of the child and youth care profession." Searches for this project now return only results describing the effort in the past. It must have a new name or the effort was abandoned.

Among all the calls for standardization and federal efforts, a few studies examined NACP, this national certification initiative for PD for child and youth care workers. Curry, Eckles, Stuart and Qaqish (2010) advocate for further efforts to build consistency in PD based on the existing attempt. In a follow-up study, individuals who were certified via a different national certification program were far more likely to be rated as high performers at their programs. Various components of the certification all predicted performance. (Curry, Eckles, Stuart, Schneider-Muñoz, & Qaqish, 2013)

Amidst all the calls for professionalization, standardization and a credentialing system, Shackman (2015) looked into evaluators in the field and indicated that there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that accreditation, credentialing and certification lead to improved results, either at the program level or for individual workers. This raises questions about other areas in youth development/OST and whether there is sufficient evidence to support accreditation, credentialing and certification.

A recent effort in this area comes from Cragg (2023) who argues that a systematic approach to PD is essential for quality. In this article, a system with over 40 sites takes a systematic approach to PD in hopes of improved outcomes although the outcomes are not reported here.

Evaluating PD

There are significant challenges to evaluating PD. Most commonly, there are simply not resources designated for the purpose of assessing PD when the initial PD efforts are put forth. With no predetermined plan for evaluation and no resources to cover the costs of measuring outcomes, working with participants, analyzing data and describing findings, assessment efforts are spotty at best. This section shares a few efforts and insights regarding evaluation of PD.

Jennifer, Nancy, Stacy and Susan (2006) discuss the challenges to evaluating PD and offer a toolkit for evaluation of PD based on research with focus groups engaged in a variety of PD. Toolkits such as these, if made widely available could simplify the process of evaluation and lower the costs. In a related article, a job classification system is offered to help with evaluation of PD. If the correct job classification is selected, evaluation of PD experiences can be tailored to the job responsibilities of that classification (Jennifer, & Nancy, 2009). More targeted tools make it more likely that researchers will gather accurate data and see relevant results.

Organizational characteristics are an important factor in the success of program improvement and PD efforts and those in leadership have heavy influence on buy-in to PD and program improvement. (Karlström, 2012). In particular, "those in charge of initiative implementation need to be both patient and persistent, to build relationships at various staffing levels, to keep a keen eye open for moments of opportunity, and to be ready to act upon them when they arise." (Karlström, 2012). Another toolkit developed by researchers is the Youth Program Quality Assessment. This tool can help to measure quality and also to create consistency across diverse settings. Consistency makes it easier to deliver useful PD and to determine its effectiveness. (Smith, Devaney, Akiva, & Sugar 2009).

Even if there were abundant, high quality, easily accessible tools for assessing PD, it does not matter unless attention is given to the context in which programming occurs and its influences on quality and outcomes (Christensen & Rubin, 2022). This means that staff and program leaders who engage in PD also likely need some training in assessment if the goal is systematic evaluation of PD efforts. For example, Smith et al. (2023) argue that selection of PD methods must be deliberate and designed to match the goals and characteristics of the program. They examine five common PD approaches and note that only two of them, lesson study and communities of practice, consistently meet all of the desired characteristics and outcomes. Of those two types, only one is commonly discussed in the literature: communities of practice or professional learning communities.

Conclusion

PD is clearly an important component of work in OST but researchers and practitioners face a variety of challenges to offering and evaluating any PD offered. It is difficult to find ways to offer consistent PD with common goals when faced with programs varying so much on content, population, location, purpose and structure. Furthermore, the workforce in OST has high turnover and highly variable levels of education which means the motivation of individuals can vary significantly depending on their commitment to the field and the returns they expect to get on their investment in PD. In addition to minimal resources committed to PD in general, very few resources are generally set aside for evaluating PD, which means the field lacks a clear picture of what works and how, further limiting choices on what PD to offer and to whom. Future work should include deliberate PD efforts with built-in evaluation plans so that the field can construct a clearer picture of how best to approach PD in OST.

2024. Hilary K. Swank, Plymouth State University.
Literature Review on the topic of Professional Development in OST and Youth Work.

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