

Fostering positive youth and staff development: Understanding the roles and experiences of the afterschool workforce

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Abstract

Informed by strengths-based perspectives and systems theory of social settings, this mixed-methods study focuses on the experiences of the afterschool workforce employed by a large, urban community-based organization. Through directed content analysis of semi-structured individual and small-group interviews with afterschool instructors (ASI), this study sheds light on the roles, experiences, challenges, and supports of ASIs. Results demonstrate that ASIs navigate multiple roles in the afterschool setting, acknowledge the challenges of youth and families, experience several sources of professional support through the people and resources in afterschool, and articulate long-term professional goals related to their current work. In addition, concurrently collected quantitative survey and administrative data about ASIs' overall work experiences and satisfaction are analyzed to examine the extent to which they confirm and complement the qualitative results. Implications for practice and policy are discussed to highlight how these findings may be used to strengthen the youth-serving workforce in urban communities.

KEYWORDS

afterschool, mixed-methods, staff development, strengths-based, youth-serving workforce

1 | INTRODUCTION

Approximately one in four families with school-aged children enroll in afterschool programs (ASP), which provide safe, supervised, and educationally enriching services (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Low-income and racial/ethnic minority families are more likely to enroll their children in ASPs, as they provide critical childcare supports for little or no cost (Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Joselowsky & Thomases, 2011). Publicly funded ASPs serve youth for up to 15 hr a week by providing programming during the out-of-school times when the rate of the neighborhood and juvenile crime is high (McCombs, Whitaker, & Yoo, 2017). A large body of research demonstrates that high-quality ASPs promote positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for youth (e.g., Cappella, Hwang, Kieffer, & Yates, 2018; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Pierce, Bolt, & Vandell, 2010; Tebes et al., 2007). These programs cultivate positive youth development (Larson, 2000; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003) through academic enrichment, leadership development, civic engagement, and promotion of life skills (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Frazier, Cappella, & Atkins, 2007; C. Smith, Akiva, McGovern, & Peck, 2014). Although there is robust literature focusing on the development of youth attending ASPs (e.g., Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011; E. P. Smith, Osgood, Caldwell, Hynes, & Perkins, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2018), the development of afterschool staff working in these educational settings, is less well understood.

2 | DESCRIBING THE AFTERSCHOOL WORKFORCE

There is a general consensus that afterschool instructors (ASI) are critical to the success of programs through their contributions to the overall afterschool quality and student outcomes (Davidson, Evans, & Sicafuse, 2011; Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007); in response, there is a growing body of work capturing these frontline perspectives (e.g., Larson, Walker, Rusk, & Diaz, 2015). Kuperminc et al. (2019) examined a national sample of ASIs across 740 program sites and found that positive staff-youth relationships were significantly associated with positive youth-reports on aspects of program quality, such as engagement, belonging, and safety. To contextualize the daily contributors to program quality, one qualitative study (Larson & Walker, 2010) identified common dilemmas and scenarios faced by program leaders; this included challenges related to engaging and motivating youth, behavior management, interpersonal conflict, and constraints around time and resources. These accounts suggest the importance of ASIs for youth development, as well as the need to capture ASI experiences—their challenges, contributions, and skills—as one way to understand how to improve practices to advance youth development (Larson et al., 2015).

Afterschool educators are different from traditional educators (i.e., teachers in day school) in a number of ways. First, afterschool educators may have little prior experience working in positive youth development or education (Vandell, Simzar, O'Cadiz, & Hall, 2016). Second, ASIs are typically younger and earlier in their career trajectory than traditional educators; many are under 35-years-old “youth work professionals” in positions with high turnover (Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006). From a developmental perspective, young adults hired as ASIs may be navigating more personal and professional changes, identity conflicts, and critical decision-making moments related to higher education and employment (Arnett, 1999; Erikson, 1968), often with little social support (Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber, 2005). Lastly, ASIs are more likely to be from the local communities in which they work and have similar backgrounds to the youth they serve (Peake, Gaffney, & Surko, 2006). In sum, working in ASPs can be a meaningful early-career opportunity for young adults—offering mentoring and skill-building in a highly familiar context. However, ASIs are not traditional educators; more research is needed to understand the full complexity of their experiences.

3 | GUIDING PERSPECTIVES AND FRAMEWORKS

There has been a recent movement to examine the experiences of the understudied youth-serving workforce, such as afterschool, by taking a “whole-person approach” (Cappella & Godfrey, 2019). Understanding the various ecological factors that influence the development of ASIs can inform approaches to further strengthen and develop their skills (Kuperminc et al., 2019). To contextualize the experiences of ASIs, researchers are encouraged to examine the staff's *individual* skills, professional *interpersonal* connections, *organizational* characteristics of their workplace culture and climate, and other *community* and *societal* macro-level aspects that influence their work (Cappella & Godfrey, 2019). Supporting afterschool staff in this holistic manner may be one mechanism through which to better serve youth. For example, afterschool staff develop lessons and facilitate activities, which are key components of afterschool quality (Durlak et al., 2010). Supporting staff so they develop these individual skills in a positive organizational environment would enable them to become effective educators and cultivate strong relationships with youth, which is associated with improved youth psychosocial (Kuperminc et al., 2019) and academic outcomes (Pierce et al., 2010). Thus, this comprehensive approach highlights how understanding and investing in staff members' development can also lead to better serving youth. Additionally, it is important to understand afterschool staff in terms of their characteristics, the barriers they face, and the supports they receive, not only to promote positive outcomes for youth but also to support the development of the ASIs themselves, as they are crucial members of the community.

This study leverages two frameworks from community psychology—strengths-based perspectives (Maton, Schellenbach, Leadbeater, & Solarz, 2004) and systems theory of social settings (Tseng & Seidman, 2007)—to explore the experiences and development of the afterschool workforce. Typically, these perspectives are used to consider *youth* in ASP, however, there is an opportunity to extend and apply these perspectives to understand the development of the afterschool staff. A *strengths-based perspective*, in contrast to a deficits-oriented approach, recognizes the inherent strengths that already exist and seeks to build upon them (Maton et al., 2004; Frazier et al., 2019). Just as youth can be the recipients of services as well as community assets (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003), we can extend that logic to ASIs. The extant literature largely views ASIs from a deficits-based perspective and highlights the challenges and problems they face. Thus, an alternative is to utilize a strengths-based perspective to value ASIs' inherent skills, identify their potential, and foster positive development for these early-career staff (Perkins, Crim, Silberman, & Brown, 2004). For instance, although ASIs tend to be young with little professional experience, that can be viewed as a strength and perhaps the reason why they are able to effectively identify with youth and develop positive relationships (Kuperminc et al., 2019). Organizations that recognize ASIs' strengths can further build their capacity through professional development and support, which would enhance the overall afterschool environment.

The *systems theory of social settings* (Tseng & Seidman, 2007) highlights the potential of relationships and interactions (i.e., social processes) over and above structural characteristics and resources to influence development. Typically, this framework is applied to the adult–youth relationships in educational settings to understand youth outcomes (e.g., Cappella et al., 2018; Kuperminc et al., 2019). However, it is possible to extend this theory to better understand the importance of relationships for afterschool staff in promoting their professional development. These social processes may include relationships with youth as well as interactions with other ASIs, supervisors, and adults/parents in the community. Each of these connections can be seen as potential sources of support and key professional influences (Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

4 | CURRENT STUDY

In this current study, we conducted research with one large community-based organization (CBO) providing afterschool programming in an urban region to better understand: (1) the roles of ASIs, (2) the experiences of ASIs as they work with youth and families, and (3) the challenges and supports ASIs experience in their work. To address these research aims, this concurrent mixed-methods study (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2006) utilized data from three

sources collected simultaneously at the end of one school year: qualitative individual and small-group interviews, quantitative surveys, and quantitative administrative data. Semi-structured individual and small-group interviews were conducted with ASIs to understand their roles and responsibilities, professional development, stressors, and supports. The quantitative survey and administrative data were descriptively analyzed to examine the extent to which they confirmed and complemented the qualitative results. Ultimately, we aimed to deepen the understanding of afterschool staff—an understudied community resource—and how CBOs may support their professional trajectories as they serve youth and the community.

5 | METHOD

5.1 | Setting and context

The current study was conducted in the context of a 6-year research–practice partnership (RPP; Henrick, Cobb, Penuel, Jackson, & Clark, 2017) between a university and one multiservice CBO located in the northeastern United States. The CBO's strengths-based mission, guided by a youth and family development approach, is to address the effects of poverty and increase opportunities for mobility in historically disinvested neighborhoods via evidence-informed, program interventions (Gleason, Yates, & Davey, 2017). The organization serves over 30,000 individuals each year (Yates, Nix, Coldiron, & Williams, 2015) across 90 programs for youth, families, and adults, staffed by 1,200 employees, in three urban areas with low levels of educational, economic, and environmental opportunity (Yates, Mui, & Nix, 2020). This RPP, guided by participatory leadership approaches (Kaner, 2014) and a commitment to community-based, mutualistic research relevant for policy and practice (Tseng, 2012), specifically focused on the inputs, outputs, and influence of the CBO's afterschool workforce.

Focusing specifically on afterschool, the CBO manages 24 programs, located in under-resourced neighborhoods that serve 3,600 youth per year. These ASPs are situated in traditional public schools ($n = 17$), charter schools ($n = 3$), or community centers ($n = 4$). The focus of these ASPs is to offer academic enrichment and social-emotional programming; supper and athletic activities are provided as well. All of the ASPs are free and operate for approximately 3 hr after each school day.

The CBO utilized several strategies to recruit and engage residents of the local community as afterschool staff. The CBO offered on-ramp programs for community members; once employed, the CBO provided afterschool staff with opportunities for leadership and career development. Many staff currently in leadership positions at the CBO experienced similar trajectories. First, they attended the CBO's ASPs during their youth. Then, after aging-out of afterschool programming, they remained engaged through volunteer or paid internships during high school and college. Eventually, they became paid part-time ASP aides and group leaders, and some were subsequently promoted into full-time positions such as site or regional directors. As adults, many live in the same urban neighborhood they currently work in and some serve youth in the very programs they attended (Hwang, Weaver, Cappella, Kieffer, & Yates, 2020). In sum, by providing comprehensive services (e.g., education, youth development, mentorship), training opportunities, and employment to individuals from the local community, this CBO aims to strengthen indigenous human resources and contribute to community health.

5.2 | Participants

The ASIs working with youth in grades 3–8 at the five afterschool sites that were part of the larger afterschool research-practice partnership were invited to participate in this study. Of the 19 ASIs who consented to participate in the study in the fall, 17 remained eligible in the spring (one ASI left the role and the other became an afterschool athletics coach). All 17 ASIs completed the surveys and semi-structured individual and small-group interviews at

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of the afterschool instructor qualitative sample ($n = 17$)

Demographic characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
African American	6	35
Latinx	11	65
Female	9	53
Age range (years)		
≤20	2	12
21–25	6	35
26–30	5	29
31–35	2	12
36–40	1	6
≥41	1	6
Education		
High school diploma or GED	1	6
Associates degree	6	35
Some college (not completed/in progress)	9	53
Bachelor's degree	1	6
Years of experience as an ASI at this CBO		
0–1	6	35
2–5	4	24
6+	7	41

Abbreviations: ASI, afterschool instructor; CBO, community-based organization; GED, general educational development.

the end of the school year. Participants in this study were employed at three elementary and two middle school program sites, which serve low-income students (87.1% eligible for free/reduced-price lunch). Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of these 17 ASIs. All ASIs identified as African American ($n = 6$) or Latinx ($n = 11$), with approximately equal numbers of females and males; these demographic characteristics mirror the backgrounds of the youth attending the ASPs. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 41 or over; the majority were under the age of 30 ($n = 13$). All participants had at least a high school degree: six had an associate's degree, nine had some college, and one had a bachelor's. Most participants were part-time staff with less than 5 years of experience as ASIs ($n = 10$), which is typical of this workforce (Yohalem et al., 2006). This sample reflects the characteristics of the overall afterschool workforce employed by the CBO.

5.3 | Data collection procedures

5.3.1 | Qualitative data

Participants engaged in semi-structured interviews as individuals ($n = 2$) or in a small group ($n = 6$; ranging from two to four participants per session) based on scheduling preferences and availability. Informed consent was obtained before any research activity and participants were assured that their participation and data would be kept confidential and no identifiable information would be released. All research protocols were in accordance with and approved by the research team's university-based Institutional Review Board.

The 13-member research team was composed of faculty, doctoral students, and master's students in community psychology, general psychology, and human development from a nearby university. The researchers were racially,

ethnically, and linguistically diverse, and the majority grew up in urban environments. In preparation for qualitative data collection, researchers attended half-day trainings that involved didactic instruction on the interview questions and facilitation goals, followed by role-plays with feedback. Researchers in this data collection effort had spent time at all five afterschool sites and developed familiarity with the afterschool staff and CBO. They also attended trainings at both the university and CBO addressing topics such as ethics, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity when conducting research.

Four researchers, who were part of the larger study team, facilitated the individual or small-group interviews in the spring. Two researchers (a lead facilitator and note-taker/secondary facilitator) co-led each interview and followed a semi-structured interview guide. The goal of the interviews was to shed light on the ASIs' overall job experiences, including their perceived roles, professional development opportunities, daily stressors and supports, and professional relationships. Examples of guiding questions include: "Tell us about the goals you have for yourself as a group leader. What do you hope to gain from this experience? Where do you hope to go from here? Who or what supports you in your role to overcome challenges?" Interviewers were trained to ask all questions in the interview guide (both main questions and probes) so all participants would be asked the same questions. Additionally, the facilitators asked follow-up questions when participants' responses were unclear or needed further elaboration. All interviews were conducted at the ASIs' afterschool site in a quiet room before the youths' arrival. Each interview lasted 30–60 min (mean = 42 min) and was audiotaped with two devices to ensure quality recordings. Participants were provided with light refreshments. Rather than providing incentives to the individual ASIs, the five participating afterschool sites each received an incentive of \$400 for time spent on research activities. After each interview, researchers recorded brief field notes to document observations or details not captured in the recordings; field notes were used to facilitate transcription and codebook development.

5.3.2 | Quantitative data

Two sources of quantitative data were collected concurrently with the qualitative interviews in spring 2016. The first survey was the Program Staff Survey (PSS; Vandell, 2005), which was completed by the 17 ASIs who participated in the qualitative study at the end of the school year. The research team collected responses from the ASIs at a convenient time when youth were being supervised (e.g., during snack) or before youth arrived in the program. The PSS is a widely used instrument specifically developed for ASI to assesses their job satisfaction, support, and workplace climate via nine items on a 4-point Likert response scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 4 = *strongly agree*; Vandell, 2005). The internal reliabilities of the PSS ($\alpha = .85$) were adequate.

The second quantitative data source was an annual staff satisfaction survey collected by the CBO in spring 2016. This survey provided an opportunity for the CBO's entire afterschool workforce to provide their views about the overall organization. The demographics of these participants are unknown because the staff completed this survey anonymously online. However, 67% of the afterschool staff ($n = 264$), representing all 24 afterschool sites, completed this survey. Survey questions (23 items) were on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *very dissatisfied*; 4 = *very satisfied*) and addressed topics such as satisfaction, workplace compatibility and culture, professional development, and supervision. Given that this was not a research instrument composed of formal constructs, but rather administrative data typically used for internal purposes, we did not calculate internal reliabilities.

5.4 | Data analysis

5.4.1 | Qualitative data

After the interview responses were transcribed verbatim by two research assistants, checked for quality and accuracy by another research assistant, and de-identified to protect the confidentiality of the participants,

the researchers conducted directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and followed guidelines of consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill et al., 2005) to examine the interview transcripts. All analyses were conducted in NVivo version 11 (2015), a qualitative data analysis software. In contrast to conventional content analysis in which codes are not preconceived and only emerge from the data (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002), we used directed content analysis to build upon extant theory and empirical work (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Before analyzing the interviews, we developed a broad set of a priori coding domains based on the interview guide. These codes were revisited and revised throughout the analytic process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to reflect the themes articulated by ASIs in the interview transcripts, the researchers' field notes, and the emerging relationships among the codes during the systematic analytic process. The primary domains (i.e., nodes) used for this initial review were "ASI roles and goals" and "ASI supports and challenges."

To maintain rigorous standards and internal validity, the iterative coding process was guided by the CQR approach (Hill et al., 2005), which reduces the influence of an individual's bias by engaging in collaborative decision-making at all stages of the coding process. Specifically, three researchers independently reviewed all transcripts, categorized emergent domains, created a preliminary coding manual to operationalize these themes, and independently identified discrete units of text corresponding to themes. Specific subcodes within the broader domains were created and included in the final coding manual when the consensus was achieved on their definitions and importance. Analytic memos capturing questions, discrepancies, and themes were maintained by each researcher throughout the coding process to document thoughts and concerns as they arose in real-time and were addressed in team meetings. The research team worked collectively to resolve coding discrepancies, leading to coding manual revisions when necessary. Two researchers then recoded all transcripts to identify the prevalence of each theme and normative examples.

Lastly, a stability check was utilized to verify that the themes accurately reflected the data. An external auditor (i.e., external peer reviewer) was trained and then independently coded 30% of the text using the revised, final coding manual (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). Remaining coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved via consensus among all of the coders. Percent agreement averaged across all coded transcripts was 97.6%, demonstrating substantial reliability (McHugh, 2012).

5.4.2 | Quantitative data

For both the PSS and administrative data, we examined the means and standard deviations of the items. Means contributed an overall understanding of ASIs' perceptions of satisfaction, professional support, and workplace environment; higher scores indicated more positive experiences. Standard deviations revealed the degree of variation in ASI responses for each item.

5.4.3 | Mixed-methods approach

In this concurrent mixed-method study, the qualitative and quantitative data were first analyzed separately and then integrated during the interpretation phase (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006). When themes across data sources overlapped, we examined the extent to which the quantitative results triangulated or converged with the qualitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Additionally, we considered how the quantitative findings contributed new information to complement the experiences shared by the ASIs in the qualitative interviews (Sandelowski, 2000). Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative data provide a broad and in-depth understanding of the experiences of ASIs employed by one CBO.

6 | RESULTS

The purpose of this mixed-methods study, conducted in partnership with a large, urban CBO, was to better understand the roles and experiences of ASI as they work with youth and families—including their challenges and supports. In this section, we first report four key themes that arose from the semi-structured qualitative interviews. The themes are the following: (1) the multifaceted role of ASI, (2) ASIs' ability to acknowledge the challenges experienced by youth and families, (3) multiple sources of professional support for ASIs, and (4) the ASIs' articulation of long-term professional capacity and future goals. Perceptions of the challenges and supports that ASIs encountered in their role are presented to portray their holistic experiences. When appropriate, particularly illustrative quotations that capture the overall sentiment voiced by the participants about each theme are shared in the following sections. Direct quotations are included from 14 of the 17 ASIs who participated in the qualitative interviews; although three ASIs were not directly quoted, they confirmed statements (e.g., "oh yeah," "same, me too") or repeated sentiments conveyed by other ASIs in their own words. Thus, the below quotations are drawn from a range of participants across sites and demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, age, experience) to ensure that a diversity of perspectives are represented. The results section concludes with a presentation of how the results from the directed content analysis are triangulated or complemented by quantitative survey and administrative data.

6.1 | The multifaceted role of afterschool instructors

ASIs echoed across the interviews that they consider themselves to be "mentors" and "role models" as they strive to facilitate lessons, keep the classroom environment safe, and support youth's academic and social-emotional development. Since youth "look up to...whatever we say or do," one staff remarked that they adopt roles similar to that of "social workers" and "confidants," even if those roles are "not necessarily in our job description." One ASI commented:

I've had kids come talk to me about crazy stuff (emphasis added). Like, that they probably didn't talk to their parents about. Like, real stuff... and I like that! Because I can give them real advice that will really help them... [so] that they won't go the wrong way about it.

For some, this motivation to adopt roles beyond an afterschool facilitator is driven by their connection to youth because they are part of the same community. As one ASI said, "We're from the area too, so that's also a good thing. Like, I live two blocks from the school so I see these kids even when I'm off of work."

The CBO offers programmatic strategies and protocols to facilitate this process of ASIs developing close relationships with youth. For example, the CBO typically assigns ASIs to stay with a cohort of participants as they move up to the next grade the following year together. One staff member explained, "Our eighth graders, I've had them since fifth grade... by the time we got to this point, our bond is amazing." Opportunities like these, which are enabled by the CBO's program design, encourage ASIs to simultaneously build trusting relationships and support younger members of their community.

Beyond articulating roles that they identify with, ASIs also made the clear distinction that they are not teachers—which comes with both advantages and disadvantages. One ASI shared how this is a challenge: "[After] spending 8–9 hr in class [and] seeing an afterschool teacher who is not really a teacher, they're just like, 'I don't really care about this'." Another ASI said, "Sometimes they forget that afterschool is not just dancing, basketball, and games... [we also] work on education and community [building]." Other ASIs considered not being a teacher to be an advantage as a youth "get out of their comfort zone a lot more with us, so we understand them a lot more than their day school teachers." One ASI views their role as a unique opportunity and describes their instructional

approach as striving to create a situation where youth are “having so much fun that [they] don't...realize that [they're] learning.” This demonstrates how ASIs hold a diverse range of views about their roles as educators—and, to a certain extent, an ambivalence as well. Although this unique role makes it challenging to earn respect from youth, it also presents an opportunity to approach learning and instruction in a new, engaging, and creative way.

Building on this finding, ASIs had varying relationships with the day school, as the principals and teachers also noted that ASIs were not teachers. At several sites, the CBO partnered closely with the day school and ASIs felt highly integrated. For example, one ASI said, “We [translate] for parent–teacher conferences, we help with dismissal, we go on day school trips... we have a really big involvement in the school.” ASIs at these sites also collaborated with the day school teachers in a complementary way “to make sure that whatever [the ASIs are] teaching in afterschool correlates with whatever is [taught] during day school.” However, at other sites the CBO did not have as strong a partnership with day school; one ASI commented that there was a “barrier [in] the relationship between nonprofits and schools.” Another ASI noted that the day school teachers, with whom they shared classrooms, marked resources (e.g., blackboards, tables) as “off-limits” so ASIs and afterschool youth were not able to use them. These divergent experiences with the day school reinforced ASIs' sense that they have a different role and status than teachers—one that could lead to conflict or complementarity.

6.2 | Acknowledging the challenges of youth and families

Across the interviews, ASIs recognized the challenges that their youth and families faced but also articulated their strengths-based perspective as the starting place for their work. One ASI remarked, “A lot of kids don't think that they can be anything... I just want them to... know that they can.” Another staff member who grew up in the same community as the program participants explained, “When I was growing up... my teachers [in school] kinda didn't look like me.” He found that to be a “barrier” when he was younger because those teachers “couldn't relate” to his experience, seeing him from a deficit-perspective as a kid “from this 'quote-unquote' low-income neighborhood.” He ended by suggesting that, because of his racial and socioeconomic background, he recognizes the potential in the youth in his care and feels like they can relate to him.

Staff noted several challenges when working with youth, especially with respect to classroom management and the inclusion of English learners (EL) in afterschool activities. One staff commented on how it is difficult at the group-level “...to help them stay on task ... on what we're doing at the moment because if it's not like something like super fun you lose them quickly.” Another mentioned how “some of the kids can be extremely difficult. But ... there's a reason why they are difficult—so it's like, I'm gonna find out,” demonstrating patience towards and an effort to understand the youth. For EL students specifically, the staff was aware that they may feel like outsiders or be hesitant about speaking up. Many ASIs remarked that they sought to cultivate a classroom community where youth “look out for each other,” “are really supportive,” and say, “Oh, I wanna be a translator!” Thus, ASIs articulated goals of creating positive, inclusive classrooms to engage all youth, including ELs, in the classroom.

Staff acknowledged the challenges of not just youth, but also their *families*, and demonstrated sensitivity towards both of them. One ASI said, “...we don't know what's happening. [The parents] might be low on rent” or “don't have the money to bring” snacks for their children. Many ASIs recognized that this can leave the children “off-balance” when they arrive to the program, so staff prepares snacks and other resources for the participants to share. When a student called one ASI his “stepdad,” the ASI was cautious about his response because “I don't know what their situations at home are like. I don't know if there's a dad. I don't know if that's a relationship that they crave.” This, paired with a dedication to supporting program participants, revealed that staff had an awareness of the needs of both youth and families.

6.3 | Multiple sources of professional support for ASIs

ASIs consistently reported that interpersonal relationships—both formal and informal, with adults and youth—were their primary source of support. These vertical and horizontal relationships that ASIs both benefit from and contribute to create a web of professional supports that aided them in their day-to-day responsibilities.

6.3.1 | Vertical relationships—top-down

The ASIs 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. The ASIs appreciated how the coach gave positive praise and “never puts us down,” while also providing good, critical feedback. Coaches were generally described as “fabulous,” “helpful,” “awesome,” and “a great resource.” One ASI explained, “I don’t even want to remember what it was like [before having a coach]. She’s a godsend.” Still, ASIs emphasized that developing these relationships took time; some ASIs expressed that in the beginning they “had to get used to” their coach.

The interviews indicated that afterschool supervisors were highly committed to their supervisees, with a willingness to provide the necessary time, materials, and a direct line of communication. According to one staff member, the supervisor “supports us in... every aspect” and leaders at this CBO have an “open-door policy” that ASIs describe as “amazing” and indicative of having “a really good team.” By providing support and open communication to their workers, supervisors in this CBO model effective leadership. Supervisors also provide informal professional development opportunities by involving ASIs in programmatic decisions, expecting them to act as role models for students and mentors for newer staff members.

6.3.2 | Vertical relationships—bottom-up

The ASIs viewed the youth to be an important part of their support system. ASIs strived to build caring, lasting relationships with program participants and suggest that their bonds are a source of encouragement. Students notice when ASIs are absent and ask questions like, “Where were you? Why didn’t you come?” When one ASI’s sister passed away and she was missing for a few days, she came back to find that “[the students] had these big giant cards... and that melted me...” Staff also suggested that youth inspire them to improve their own lives so that the participants know “he’s from the same exact place that I’m from, like, and he wasn’t afraid to be different.”

One ASI cited relationships with both current and former program participants as an inspiration that “keeps me coming. I’ve been here 10 years.” One staff member said that “I understand that we get paid and all that,” but he was most motivated by the sense of “accomplishment” he feels when program alumni return to visit saying, “Oh, I appreciate you.” In those moments, the ASI suggested that he feels impactful because “I just influenced this kid from ... going a bad way.” Another ASI echoed this sentiment, explaining, “The biggest reward to me is when a former student comes back and visits.” Multiple ASI expressed that former students sometimes returned to become their coworkers and “are group leaders now.” They said those kinds of relationships were encouraging and a source of strength.

6.3.3 | Horizontal relationships

An integral component of the ASIs’ professional support system was the network of informal relationships they developed with other ASIs. Providing technical, physical, and emotional support to one another, one ASI shared

that their coworkers are “more than just coworkers... We're more like family. So, we... lean on each other.” The CBO fosters opportunities for staff to form these personal and professional relationships through community-building (i.e., opportunities for bonding and socialization) and staff meetings. The ASIs and their group aides can recognize when their colleagues are “feeling down” or “not in the best mood ever,” and will often step in to “help each other; we feed off each other's energies.” When ASIs are uncertain about how to complete tasks, they often turn to their coworkers, “using each other as resources.” ASIs also act as informal mentors to one another. One ASI described his relationship with a newer ASI by saying, “he's younger than me so he's like my little brother.” The ASI explained that the relationship was personal as well as professional, saying that he is “coaching him in life and that doesn't stop at work.”

6.4 | ASIs' long-term professional capacity and future goals

Many of the ASIs are emerging young professionals at a pivotal time in their career trajectory, as they work part-time in afterschool, navigate higher education, and plan for long-term goals. One ASI, upon reflecting on their first year at the CBO remarked, “I was... the youngest one at the time, so nobody respected me and... I had to grow. I had to watch. I had to learn. I had to be told “no.” I had to ... earn my creds and my respect...” Another ASI said, “... looking back, there were times that, being a newbie, like you didn't even know if your position was secure.... you're like, okay, am I working this summer? ... cuz, you know, senior staff ... get priority.” However, with time, the provision of tailored trainings, and scaffolded activity facilitation support, the ASIs came to experience afterschool as a space in which they could cultivate the professional skills needed to positively influence youth and articulate their own ambitions. One ASI reported that being in this role “helped me bring out a lot of talents that were, I guess, suppressed.” Some staff vocalized intentions to pursue leadership positions within the CBO and/or wanting to coach “other group leaders to be great group leaders” and supervisors supported ASIs' desire for professional growth. As one ASI put it, “I've been here for so long so like I'm kinda like one of the mentors [to the other ASIs]... so, our supervisors, they'll look to like me and... some of the other senior staff ... to help make decisions and brief us on things first, before like the other staff get it.” Since that ASI also has goals of becoming an ASP director, the opportunity provides him with valuable experience to pursue his goals.

Many current staff were program participants when they were young, which is an essential part of their professional trajectory and motivates their desire for leadership. As one ASI expressed, “Just a few months ago, I was a student. Now, they're my students and I can help them a lot more than anybody [else] can.” Many ASIs started as program aides or summer interns, giving them time to learn and feel comfortable in the classroom before becoming full ASIs. Since each ASI is also “essentially a supervisor to the program aide,” ASIs also develop leadership skills and learn to delegate. Several supervisors at these sites started with the CBO as program aides or group leaders, received supervision, coaching, and training, developed requisite skills and leadership, and were internally promoted. One participant noted the interconnection among supervisors, staff, and youth:

Like, even my supervisor... She also worked as a group leader so she helps us and gives us advice on what we should do because she was in our shoes at one point, you know? She was in our shoes and she makes sure she gives us that mentorship as well. So we have to mentor the kids, and [the supervisors] mentor us.

Staff asserted that being employed as an ASI spurred reflection on and preparation for their own career paths. Staff reported learning the necessary skills for future jobs, such as patience and flexibility. Illustratively, one staff member explained that “being here for so long has helped me get another job [working with people with developmental disabilities]. If I didn't have the experience that I had here, I wouldn't have gotten that other job either, so I'm thankful for that.” Several staff members articulated goals of working in public service to assist the community. One staff member reported wanting “to be a lawyer,” explaining his “major goal...to make sure that there's ...

correct laws being put into place that's going to help ... everybody." Many ASIs expressed a desire to work in the education field in the future, with one noting that her primary goal was to have "a great impact on kids." For example, as one ASI noted, "This past year has taught me a lot, working with children... It's preparing me to become the educator I want to become." Another ASI emphasized that "this program helped me to finish school faster than I probably would have if I were working full-time or somewhere else." Although the ASI noted that the flexibility of having a part-time job was key to graduating from college, he also suggested that there was something unique about working in ASPs that "pushed me to finish school." These experiences working in afterschool positively influenced ASIs' professional trajectories, as many aspired to continue in the field of positive youth development.

6.5 | Quantitative findings

We collected two sources of quantitative survey data concurrently with the qualitative findings. First, the 17 ASIs who participated in the qualitative interviews also completed the PSS (Vandell, 2005). The mean score across the nine items in the spring was 3.54, which falls between *agree* and *strongly agree* (i.e., between 3 and 4 on a 4-point scale), indicating positive responses. The item "I enjoy working here" had the highest score ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.39$, range 3–4), followed by "I have enough opportunities to talk and share ideas with other staff" ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.47$, range 3–4), and "I get the support and feedback I need from my supervisor" ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.61$, range 2–4). All responses to the item "Afterschool staff members support each other and work as a team" were either *agree* or *strongly agree* ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.51$). The following two items had the lowest scores on the PSS: "I have the space I need to do a good job" ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.77$) and "The director involves staff in important decisions about program operations and design" ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.59$). Although these item mean scores were positive, they ranged from *disagree* (2) to *strongly agree* (4).

The second quantitative data source was the satisfaction survey administered by the CBO and completed by a broader sample of afterschool staff working across all sites ($n = 264$). Findings demonstrated that ASIs were generally satisfied with their work experiences ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.60$; 3 = *satisfied*, 4 = *very satisfied*). The two highest-scoring items were the following: the organization "provides and promotes an environment that respects diversity (people, culture, and ideas; $M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.53$)" and there was a "clear link between my work and the agency's mission and values" ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.55$). Responses to questions focusing on ASIs' relationships with their supervisors report that supervisors were supportive ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.67$), provided clear and constructive feedback ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.71$), and encouraged staff to expand their professional skills and continued to teach and challenge ASIs ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.79$). Regarding their future, staff reported that this CBO provides an opportunity to build a career ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.77$) and a place where they can imagine themselves working in the next 2–3 years ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.80$).

7 | DISCUSSION

This study's qualitative findings reveal the challenges and opportunities ASIs encounter as they navigate multiple roles, acknowledge the challenges of youth and their families, receive relational support from and provide assistance to supervisors, colleagues, and youth, and articulate a vision of their own future leadership and goals. Quantitative results from the qualitative participants and a larger sample of the CBO's afterschool workforce affirm the qualitative findings related to supportive relationships in afterschool and developing future goals. Additionally, quantitative results provide new information about overall high levels of satisfaction. Taken in concert, these findings provide insights into how ASPs cultivate the capacity of the frontline staff within the mission and goal of supporting positive youth development. In this section, we highlight salient themes to contextualize these findings and share lessons learned for youth-serving organizations in urban contexts that aim to address the needs of both youth and staff.

Although the work of ASIs is multifaceted and challenging, participants in our sample clearly demonstrated strength-based perspectives throughout the qualitative interviews. Afterschool staff juggled multiple roles, yet still felt driven to go above and beyond to support and mentor their students. Some ASIs discussed how not being a teacher was a challenge, but others felt that their role provided a unique opportunity to get to know the youth. The ASIs demonstrated the capacity to view these potentially frustrating situations *and themselves* through a positive lens and recognize their own unique abilities and strengths to manage these situations. The theme from the qualitative interviews related to a sense of accomplishment at work was supported by the high levels of satisfaction, enjoyment, and professional fit at work as measured on the quantitative surveys.

Afterschool staff built meaningful relationships with youth, acknowledged the challenges faced by families, and viewed youth and families through a strengths-based lens. Many ASIs mentioned how the youth themselves were a source of support. Staff also discussed navigating difficult circumstances such as behavioral difficulties or student engagement in activities and financial and food insecurity with families, but rather than being judgmental and using a deficits-based lens, they displayed sensitivity and awareness. Previous studies have noted the high degree of personal similarity staff have with youth (Yohalem et al., 2006), and that youth workers turn to their own experiences to connect with youth (Halpern, 2000). However, how these similarities contributed to positive outcomes was unknown (Kuperminc et al., 2019). Our findings suggest that ASIs have intimate connections with the communities they serve due to their shared experience and understanding. Some ASIs attended the CBO's programs when they were young. The CBO hired former program youth and trained them to be current afterschool staff, recognizing the strength and potential of community members as indigenous resources (Atkins, Graczyk, Frazier, & Abdul-Adil, 2003). New staff became the mentors and role models serving youth in the very programs they attended; some then continue into administrative and leadership positions. In these roles, staff are committed to viewing youth and families through a strengths-based lens in part because their educators were unable to do that for them when they were growing up and they realized how important it is. This example of strengths-based capacity-building reveals how youth and staff development is an interconnected, cyclical process.

Additionally, the ASIs in this sample demonstrated how support from colleagues, supervisors, and youth was a salient resource. Through these key social supports and influences (Tseng & Seidman, 2007), ASIs experienced a sense of caring and belonging, which is characteristic of a rich and robust relational environment (Maton, 2008). Programs and activities (e.g., coaching, co-facilitation) facilitated relationships and improved interactions among the multiple human resources in the setting. Although the extant literature focuses on staff–youth relationships, our study extends this by underscoring the importance of relationships among staff. In the qualitative interviews, ASI thrived in this environment and often cited social support from colleagues and supervisors as the reason for their positive experience at work; this was evident in both the survey completed by the qualitative participants and the administrative data representing the CBO's full afterschool workforce. This finding builds upon prior work, which notes that the presence of close-knit relationships is an indicator of robust social support (Lin & Peek, 1999). Additionally, this informal mentorship provides mentees with psychosocial and professional support necessary for professional development (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

ASI voiced feelings of involvement and engagement in their current role and many desired to be community leaders in the future. The qualitative and quantitative data together reveal how staff felt supported to expand their skills and report how their current position supports their long-term careers. This may suggest that ASIs are experiencing a process of psychological empowerment as they acquire skills to increase agency and achieve their goals (Maton & Salem, 1995; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). The ASPs invest not only in the youth they serve directly but also in the staff, many of whom come from the under-resourced neighborhoods in which they work. Generally, career mobility is rare for youth workers and is commonly referenced as a challenge (Davidson et al., 2011; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Approximately half of the youth-workers report a lack of promotion or advancement in their afterschool jobs (Davidson, et al., 2011). However, a commitment to internal capacity-building which includes the opportunity to advance, increased responsibility, more recognition, and greater compensation, correlates with positive outcomes for afterschool staff (Peake et al., 2006). These investments may

then contribute to distal impacts on the community if ASIs continue to work in the field of positive youth development, education, or community improvement.

7.1 | Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This study contributes insights into the experiences of urban ASI, an understudied part of the educational workforce. Our findings characterize the overall levels of satisfaction alongside how ASIs encounter challenges, multiple sources of support, and positive opportunities in their current role and across their trajectories. In addition to fostering youth development, these frontline workers are, like others in related careers, experiencing their own personal and professional development (see Cappella & Godfrey, 2019). Prior work has shown the importance of afterschool staff in cultivating positive youth outcomes (Davidson et al., 2011; Vandell et al., 2007). This study contributes to the literature by illuminating the complexity of the roles, responsibilities, and experiences of youth-serving professionals employed across five ASPs. Results indicate that supervision, coaching, and professional development enrich ASIs' experiences; given that ASIs are deeply committed to the youth they serve, increasing investments in ASIs may be an effective approach to ultimately advancing youth development.

Limitations include the small size of the qualitative subsample, which threatens the study's validity. However, efforts were made to ensure that participating ASIs were reflective of the broader workforce. Qualitative results were shared with CBO leaders, supervisors, and staff (i.e., expert panel); through this process of respondent validation (Torrance, 2012), the expert panel confirmed that results were applicable to the CBO's afterschool staff as a whole. We also leveraged quantitative survey data completed by the qualitative sample to triangulate results when possible to ensure robust, internally valid results. Additionally, we used administrative data to examine if findings from this small sample were supported by the broader afterschool workforce employed by the CBO. For themes addressed by both the qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys (i.e., professional support, future goals), findings were corroborated, which partially mitigate these limitations. Additionally, this study only focused on the efforts of one large CBO in one urban area; although this limits generalizability, these findings may provide a model for CBOs similar in size, services, and mission to support afterschool staff and youth.

Future research may build upon this study by explicitly focusing on how CBOs may cultivate practices to build ASI capacity and empower the youth-serving workforce. Future empirical work should aim to collect multi-informant outcomes; rather than focusing solely on program quality or youth-reports, staff perspectives should be collected as well. Social network approaches may also be implemented to systematically capture and measure the relational environment in afterschool settings. Using this methodological approach allows for the examination of the associations between supportive relationships and staff development outcomes. As viewed through a strengths-based lens, young adult staff *and* the youth they serve are not mere recipients of CBO services; they are assets, resources, and "indigenous leaders" (Glickman & Scally, 2008). With proper investments and increased efforts to strengthen the afterschool profession (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017; Larson et al., 2015), ASIs can spark systemic change in the broader community (Su & Jagninski, 2013). Thus, policies that provide funding for these efforts and increase opportunities for professional development, especially as ASPs with positive youth development missions continue to expand in urban areas, would greatly support the mission of such CBOs. Ultimately, we aim for the dissemination of these findings to support future research, policy, and practice efforts to cultivate the potential of the non-traditional youth-serving workforce, so they may develop skills and become change agents not only for youth in the program, but for themselves and potentially the broader community.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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