Getting the Right Fit:

Designing a Professional Learning Community for Out-of-School Time

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A skilled workforce is critical in high-quality out-of-school time (OST) programs (Smith, Devaney, Akiva & Sugar, 2009). However, the workshops commonly used to train OST staff are not adequately preparing practitioners to deliver quality programs that can benefit youth (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Smith et al, 2009).

This issue is evident from ongoing discussions about how to train OST staff to respond to youths' developmental needs while creating a learning environment distinct from school (Bouffard & Little, 2004; Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a practice-focused alternative that has a track record of improving the way staff work with youth (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

PLCs, though relatively new in OST, are growing in popularity. For instance, the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality encourages programs to create PLCs for continuous quality improvement (Smith et al.,

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Table 1. Professional Learning Community Sample Agenda

Learning Targets

- I will reflect on my program's strengths and challenges and then develop at least one strategy to address a challenge.
- I will practice at least one new facilitation strategy that I can use in my program.

Activity	Description
Check in and debrief on progress since last session	Check-in questions: What's one thing you've been thinking about since we last met? What's one thing you've done to make progress on the goal you set last session?
Introduction of new content	Facilitator introduces and shows examples of new activity.
Time to practice new content	Working in small groups, participants taking turns role-playing different parts of activity. Facilitator circulates.
Debrief practice	Discussion or write-up in small groups and then in the large group: What felt easy? What didn't feel so easy? What might feel different when you take this back to your program?
Homework, feedback, reflection, closing	Homework: schedule observation of another participant's program Feedback: session evaluation form Reflection questions: I learned… I will… I would like to know more about….

2012). In California, district and state partners created several PLCs in an effort to improve OST staff knowledge and practice in specific content areas such as science and character education (Public Profit, 2015).

Typically, a PLC engages a cohort of 10 to 15 professionals in multiple workshops to address a shared goal (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010), such as problem solving, improving practice, or learning new skills. The goal, along with the length and frequency of PLC workshops, depends on the group's needs. For example, we evaluated a school district PLC for front-line staff aimed at improving math activities; this PLC opted for monthly three-hour workshops over a six-month period. McKenzie (2014) identifies six phases in the life cycle of a thriving PLC: building group understanding, acquiring expertise, practicing skills, solving problems, contributing new knowledge, and creating original products. At the end of this cycle, the PLC either renews itself or disbands. Table 1 is a sample PLC agenda from a session during the "practicing skills" phase.

To maximize a PLC's benefits, facilitators must employ training techniques different from those used in traditional workshops. We interviewed experienced PLC facilitators to get guidance on how to structure PLCs to meet the needs of OST staff and programs. This article may be most beneficial for organizations that have some PLC experience. A set of practice guides on PLCs by Public Profit (see box on page 23) may be more informative for organizations just beginning to explore PLCs.

Methods

Interviews with six PLC facilitators revealed best practices for designing a PLC for OST staff. Interviewees work with OST providers, have many years of experience facilitating or coordinating PLCs, and have been recognized by OST leaders as prominent facilitators. We interviewed:

- A trainer and consultant with over 15 years of experience facilitating local, statewide, and national PLCs. Her expertise covers public-private partnerships, exemplary afterschool practices, and healthy behaviors.
- The founder of a research and training organization who facilitates PLCs with senior managers in the education sector, notably for summer and expanded

PUBLIC PROFIT PRACTICE GUIDES

Public Profit practice guides on PLCs are available at http://www.publicprofit.net/Professional-Learning-Communities-In-The-Expanded-Learning-Field.

learning. She has nearly five years of experience facilitating PLCs and nearly 15 years of experience working with youth-serving organizations.

- The founder of an organization development consulting firm who has over five years of experience partnering with foundations and school districts to organize PLCs on youth development, socio-emotional learning, math, and organizational capacity building.
- A district partner who, as part of the district OST team, supports roughly 75 OST programs. In the last five years, she has collaborated with an external facilitator to lead PLCs on science, math, healthy behaviors, socio-emotional learning, and support for English learners.
- A program manager at a youth-serving organization who facilitated PLCs for OST staff for three years. She worked closely with school districts and community programs to offer PLCs covering OST science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) topics.
- A researcher and school district consultant who has been facilitating PLCs on such topics as STEM, program quality, and evaluation since 2008. Currently, she facilitates PLCs at the county, regional, and state levels.

In individual one-hour interviews, these facilitators responded to questions about PLC structures, PLCs' benefits to participants and their organizations, and the valuable supports PLCs offer to OST staff. (See box Sample Interview Questions.) After we recorded and transcribed each interview, we developed descriptive codes related to the interview topics (Saldaña, 2009). For example, under "PLC benefits" we used the codes "learning results" to mark what participants learned and "organizational results" to capture benefits to organizations. In the next round of coding, we used focused codes to define the sub-categories in each topic area (Saldaña, 2009). Using this analytic method, we found key design features of PLCs and ways to modify these features for the OST field.

The interview evidence is drawn from the perspectives of facilitators who collectively possess over 50 years of PLC experience. However, the findings cannot represent the perspectives of all PLC facilitators; each facilitator's experience—and each PLC—is unique. Our findings represent the best practices that emerged from interviewees' responses to the specific questions we asked.

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

PLC Structure

- What is the typical structure of the PLC that you facilitate?
- How do you see PLCs differing from other professional development models that you are familiar with?

Benefits of PLCs

- What components of a PLC do you find particularly successful?
- How have you seen programs benefit from having staff in PLCs?

Supports for Successful PLC Experience

- What organizational supports do you think staff need to implement what they learn in their programs?
- What recommendations would you offer to a program that is interested in leveraging its staff's PLC participation to make program-wide changes?

Design Features of OST Professional Learning Communities

The experts we interviewed identified three essential PLC components and five additional features that can be modified according to participants' needs and the PLC's goals.

Essential Components of a PLC

The first step in designing an effective PLC is to understand the model. In interviews, expert PLC facilitators defined three essential elements of any PLC experience: practice, reflection, and collaboration (Figure 1). Prior research indicates that these three components are deeply connected to the iterative learning cycle of a PLC: critical interrogation of youth work practices, applying new lessons, and reflection on how practices are developing (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

Practice

McKenzie (2014) includes practice and risk-taking opportunities in a collegial climate as a defining feature of PLCs. One interviewee noted that practicing during PLC sessions helps participants "build their confidence and their knowledge." Because many adults learn by doing, practicing may help knowledge take hold. According to our experts, participants also learn from modeling that occurs during PLC sessions. For example, after watching the facilitator model an activity, participants may take turns facilitating the activity for their peers. They thus learn both content, such as science knowledge, and skills, such as facilitation techniques.

Reflection

Fusco (2012) asserts that reflection is one instructional strategy that is consistent among multiple education modes, such as on-the-job training and peer networks for youth workers. PLC facilitators demonstrate new content with the expectation that participants will use it in their programs and reflect on their implementation during subsequent sessions. Interviewees said that this process helps participants assess their progress and increases accountability for using new content.

To lead reflection, facilitators may ask participants to share how the implementation of a previously practiced activity went, focusing on what went well, what didn't go well, and what to change next time. Said one interviewee, "Any time where we can build in time for people to reflect … that builds the expectation that you are supposed to leave here with something, because we are going to come back and talk about it." Opportunities for reflection are often successfully built into on-site coaching, as discussed below.

Collaboration

When asked to evaluate the strengths of PLCs as compared to other professional development modes, interviewees stressed that sharing challenges and best practices is one of the biggest benefits. In well-facilitated PLCs, participants have the opportunity to "collaborate and network with others, build consensus, problem solve … [and gain] access to resources broadly defined and vis-à-vis the relationships they have developed." Collaboration may take place in a structured conversation such as a "think, pair, share" activity, or it can be a more informal opportunity to connect with peers, such as sharing challenges and best practices during a PLC discussion. Interviewees said that PLCs can also build participants' confidence and self-efficacy. Through collaboration, participants can learn from their peers and build the collegial relationships required by a successful PLC (Lieberman & Miller, 2011).

Figure 1. Essential PLC Components

Figure 2. Modifiable PLC Components

Modifiable Components of a PLC

In addition to the three critical components, interviewees identified five PLC features that can be modified to match the needs of an organization: participant type, curriculum, co-leadership, coaching, and organizational support. Figure 2 outlines these five modifiable features. Table 2 is a PLC decision guide. Starting from the goals of the PLC, it outlines recommendations for incorporating the modifiable components. The discussion of each component below begins with the experts' broad observations and concludes with practical advice.

Participant Type

One consideration in planning a PLC is who will participate. Facilitators recommended choosing participants based on the PLC's desired goals. They noted that the organizational roles of PLC participants will affect how sessions are structured and what the group can accomplish, as shown in Table 2.

A recent white paper on OST PLCs indicates that, when PLCs are focused on improving access to and the quality of content-specific enrichment activities (such as STEM or gardening), participants are most likely to be OST staff with youth-facing roles (Public Profit, 2015). The goals are accomplished by having front-line staff learn to implement a curriculum, by providing training on facilitation methods, and by offering site-level supports such as coaching. Interviewees noted that, in this type of PLC, site supervisors may support participating front-line staff through, for example, activity observations and coaching, but that the PLC's focus on instruction does not generally make it a good fit for program leaders. One respondent observed that, even when program leaders don't participate in the PLC, "there's a need for someone at the leadership level to provide ongoing coaching … that reinforces what's happening at the learning community." To provide this kind of support, site supervisors should be aware of the content covered in the PLC.

Interviewees noted that PLCs for higher-level staff have different goals and therefore different structures. PLCs for site supervisors and other administrators center on innovative approaches to organizational and systemic improvements. Typically, administrators from various organizations attend a series of discussion-based meetings and exchange ideas through resource sharing, newsletters, topic briefs, and similar means (Public Profit, 2015).

However, interviewees did describe benefits to blending participant types. As one seasoned facilitator put it, "In my view, in expanded learning, it's really important to have both program-level and site-level administrators or leaders in the room because they offer very different perspectives." Bringing together voices that represent different facets of the same goal can be a powerful

Table 2. Decision Guide for Modifiable PLC Features

GOAL	To improve access to and quality of content-specific activities for youth	To develop site-level support for knowledge transfer, coaching, and reinforcement with front-line staff
PARTICIPANT TYPE	Front-line staff	Site supervisors
CURRICULUM	• If primarily less experienced front-line staff, yes • If primarily more experienced front-line staff, no	No
CO - LEADERSHIP	With structured, scaffolded experience, could develop into co-leadership model	Yes
COACHING	Coached by facilitator and by site supervisor, including on-site opportunities	Could incorporate peer coaching, including on-site opportunities
ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORTS	**Receive organizational supports:** • Paid time to plan and attend meetings • A list of approved content areas • Strong program structure • Vision for how new skills align with program goals • Elective participation • All needed materials	**Receive organizational supports:** • Paid time to plan and attend meetings • Strong program structure • Vision for how new skills align with program goals • Elective participation • All needed materials

To build frameworks for advocacy, networking, or growing the legitimacy of the OST field	To build multi-level buy-in, collaborative problem solving, resource sharing, or leadership development pathways
Program administrators or other managers or directors	A blend of all participant types
No	No
Yes	Yes
No	Site supervisors coach front-line staff
Receive organizational supports: • Paid time to plan and attend meetings • Strong program structure development • Vision for how new skills align with program goals • Elective participation	**Depending on role, participants receive and provide supports:** • Paid time to plan and attend meetings • A list of approved content areas • Strong program structure • Vision for how new skills align with goals • Elective participation • All needed materials

tool for collaboration on best practices, problem solving, and resource sharing (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). Interviewees also noted that participation by both groups can signal that an agency is deeply invested in staff development, perhaps spurring even greater change. Nonetheless, blending PLC participant types may make PLC logistics more challenging; for instance, it may complicate finding the right schedule, structure, or frequency of meetings.

The responses of our experts suggest that, to determine the appropriate participants, facilitators can plan backward from the PLC's goals: What is the ultimate purpose of the PLC? At what level—youth, staff, supervisors, or system—does the focal issue have the most immediate or greatest impact? The answers to these questions will help determine who should participate. For example, if the goal of a PLC is to improve science enrichment quality, then the level of impact is youth; consequently, the best group to tackle this goal is staff who work directly with young people. If the goal is to expand the reach of science enrichment activities in a youth-serving organization, then a PLC for site supervisors, or one that blends front-line staff with program managers, might best support that goal. When issues affect multiple levels, PLC facilitators can choose which level to address first and then organize a PLC to address the highest priority goal before bringing in other participants or organizing subsequent PLCs.

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Because goals should drive decisions about participant types, there is no incorrect approach—only informed planning to support the goal. Ultimately, whatever the form the PLC takes, it needs, as one interviewee noted:

> commitment on the part of the [organization's] leadership team, no matter what. Once you get their buy-in, and they're committed to being consistent, continually shifting the emphasis from them to the participants, pretty amazing things happen. To me that's what's driven the success. The participants really see the benefits.

Curriculum

The choice of whether or not to use a curriculum is linked to the goals of the PLC and the participant group, as illustrated in Table 2.

Interviewees recommended using a curriculum in PLCs for front-line staff. In this model, the PLC facilitator leads participants in learning a specific student curriculum or a set of activities (Public Profit, 2015). The experts said that use of a curriculum helps to build participants' content knowledge and facilitation skills. As one respondent put it:

> We concentrate the training of the PLC on the theory, framework, the facilitation practice, the process modeling, [and] maybe demonstrating one or two activities or bringing a video from the field.… People get tools that they get to go back and replicate on their own.

The experts said that a curriculum is rarely necessary when PLC goals emphasize knowledge sharing, collective problem solving, and exchanging best practices. These goals align well with PLCs for program administrators. In such PLC sessions, participants may reflect on challenges and successes and address common issues in planning, implementation, or coordination, such as aligning content to socio-emotional learning activities or eliciting buy-in from school teachers. As one interviewee recounted, such PLCs focus on "coming together to dialogue and reflect on our practice as consultants and trainers and coaches. We're not necessarily really teaching content."

Finally, the capacity of potential participants, including their level of content expertise, prior youth development experience, and available time outside of PLC sessions to learn and practice, should be taken into account. For participants entering the PLC with little or no content expertise or with little youth development experience, using a curriculum can help to structure learning and practice. However, for more experienced front-line staff, strict adherence to a curriculum may not be as useful because they generally have greater capacity to explore content in a less structured way than do newer front-line staff. They may be ready for some level of co-leadership.

Co-Leadership

Traditionally, PLCs for school educators use a model in which participants co-lead or are actively involved in shaping the community, from goal setting to facilitating sessions (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). Research suggests that youth workers also benefit from non-hierarchical, flexible, participatory training methods such as co-leadership (Fusco, 2012). When asked about the importance of participant involvement in early decision making, some of the interviewees agreed that active participant involvement is critical to a PLC's success—but they said that time is needed to build participants' capacity to engage in a highly collaborative training environment. Said one facilitator, "The backbone of a PLC is ... creating comfort in that kind of environment, and then defining roles and responsibilities for the constituents of the collaborative learning space." After establishing a strong sense of collaboration, this facilitator went on, "for sustainability, a key part of PLCs is distributed local leadership."

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Interviewees asserted that the extent to which participants are involved in shaping the PLC agenda depends on participants' experience in the field. A school district facilitator, for example, said that the district refers to its model simply as "learning communities" as a way to make clear that participants do not play a significant leadership role. This respondent said that this level of involvement is a good fit for inexperienced front-line staff:

> It is important over the course of our sessions to build a community and a community of practice with the people in the room ... but, for the most part, we [the district office] are really driving the content ... because of the experience and the skill set that a lot of the afterschool workforce [in the district] are coming in with.

Even when the PLC model for front-line staff is more structured than other PLC types, it nonetheless offers a more interactive, iterative experience than does a one-time training.

One way to give front-line staff more leadership is to scaffold their learning to help them become facilitators. The OST field can benefit when practitioners act as leaders and experts (Hill, Matloff-Nieves, & Townsend, 2009). Adult learning theory (Knowles, 1988) also supports co-leadership models: As participants are more involved in the PLC process, learning becomes more self-directed, relevant, and aligned to participants' own goals. Co-leadership is thus integral to PLC design. Interviews echoed this point: "PLCs ensure that learning is meaningful and relevant when people are constructing it based on their own needs," one expert noted.

Interviewees recommended shaping co-leadership opportunities to PLC participants' experience and capacity. One said, "PLCs should look different depending on who the participants are ... but a big challenge is that people aren't used to [taking on] leadership roles." As shown in Table 2, a strong co-leadership structure may work successfully in a PLC for managers with experience in facilitating professional development. For front-line staff who are new to the field, who have not had leadership experience, or who are not given adequate planning time, a more structured PLC experience may be necessary. These participants may grow into leadership roles over time.

Coaching

Interviewees emphasized that coaching is a key support for PLC participants. Coaches and participants should both surface immediate solutions to implementation challenges and set long-term plans around participants' goals. These conversations may include questions such as, "What do you think could be the solution to the challenges we saw today? What is your goal, and what is your resistance? What will you do next to address these barriers? What will you do in the next six months?" For example, the facilitator of a gardening PLC may visit a participant's site to check on progress toward creating a youth garden, to understand what is hampering full implementation of a recommended garden design, or to co-create a plan for gardening for the remainder of the semester. In coaching conversations, interviewees stressed, the true work of problem solving and visioning should come from the participant. "It's our philosophy to draw out solutions from them," said one facilitator. "The coach comes in and gives their input, but it's really not meant to be a one-way process at all."

On-site coaching offers facilitators the opportunity to understand how participants take PLC content back to their sites. One interviewee said:

> It's really helpful for us to see what people think they are supposed to do after a PLC [session]. The coach

gets to be an extension of [the session] just to verify what is happening on the ground. It's another form of assessment.

On-site coaching is the primary means by which facilitators determine whether and how PLC participants are putting their learning into practice. The experts agreed that this knowledge has implications for how PLCs move forward.

Implicit in the idea of coaching as assessment is coaching as contextualization. Asked about elements critical to PLC participants' success, one interviewee stressed that understanding participants' context is key to helping them move their skills forward.

> There is such a range in where staff are coming from in terms of their skills. Whether they're having big challenges or doing well ... I've seen so much improvement with just one coaching visit, [but] you can't really know what's going on in the classroom until you get there.

Though evidence from interviews suggests that incorporating coaching into a PLC for OST front-line staff can positively affect participants' learning, Kasad, Agrawal, and Kelekis (2014) find that creating a sustainable and scalable coaching model is a common challenge. Interviewees noted that funding constraints are often a barrier to providing coaching from experts such as the PLC facilitator. In that case, interviewees suggested, site supervisors could provide increased support. Site supervisors can support front-line staff in PLCs even if they are not deeply familiar with the PLC content. "At the site level, site supervisors can be sitting and observing classrooms and holding basic coaching conversations," said a PLC facilitator. This respondent noted that site coordinators must see coaching as part of their role for this strategy to be successful.

Organizational Supports

Talbert (2010) argues that a lack of system-level supports, such as time and materials, can keep an organization from creating the conditions necessary for a PLC to thrive. Our interviewees said that organizations looking for a return on their PLC investment in the form of stronger staff practices and higher-quality programs must first create the conditions that front-line OST staff need to practice and share their new skills. Too often, they said, front-line staff return to organizations that are not structured to provide the supports that will help them implement new practices or share insights with colleagues. One expert expressed the need for organizational support in this way: "All the changes that really occur in programs have to happen at the site level…. Ultimately, whether it works or doesn't work, the litmus test is what's changing at the site level."

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The experts we interviewed suggested that organizations must offer participating OST staff—particularly those who work directly with youth—the following supports:

- **Paid time to plan and attend meetings**. Designated planning time allows staff to anticipate potential implementation challenges.
- **A list of approved content areas.** Staff can select the content that interests them, and the organization will benefit by choosing mission-aligned content.
- **A strong program structure with established routines.** Helpful structures include dedicated space for programming, ample staff, and a consistent program schedule.
- **A vision for how new skills align with program goals.** Staff are more likely to use new practices if they understand how these practices contribute to organizational goals.
- **A choice in the PLC process.** Staff are more likely to fully engage in a PLC if they can decide whether to participate and choose the content they will learn.
- **All needed materials.** Without sufficient materials, staff can't deliver new content or practice new skills.

Some of these supports may also be applicable to program administrators.

According to our experts, site supervisors are critical allies to help PLC participants share the expertise they have gained. Site supervisors can coordinate the recommended supports and arrange time for knowledge sharing by, for example, giving the PLC participant time on the monthly staff meeting agenda or rearranging schedules so that staff members can observe one another.

Interviewees urged site supervisors to stay abreast of the content covered in the PLC by checking in with staff

and staying in contact with the facilitator. Site supervisors who are aware of the concepts covered in the PLC are better equipped to support their implementation. One facilitator who suggested regular check-ins with staff said:

> They need, at the site level, to have a site coordinator who is both invested and supportive and checking in with that staff member—checking in with them specifically on their [professional development]. "Oh, I know that you went to the science learning community—and I know that because I am cc'd on all the invitations. What did you do this week? Have you got any thoughts on how you want to implement this week?"

When planning a PLC, facilitators may want to consider how to advocate, on participants' behalf, for necessary organizational supports. A few interview respondents shared ways to use the PLC recruitment and application processes to signal to site supervisors the need for organizational supports. During recruitment, facilitators can ask site supervisors to describe the supports available to staff. Similarly, PLC applications can clearly define how much time supervisors must invest to stay familiar with PLC content.

The promise of PLC learning is more likely to be fulfilled with key organizational supports, a supportive site supervisor, and careful facilitator planning. The facilitator of a STEM-focused PLC described the changes she's seen accomplished through the PLC:

> The quality just skyrockets, in my view. In the last year, I've seen real transformations in 25 to 30 programs, in terms of staff retention, program quality—any way you could measure it. The culture—that's a big part of it. The culture really changes in very positive ways, where people understand their roles and expectations … and a commitment to the organization has increased. The outcomes for kids are way better, in terms of retention, even in the older grade levels. Everywhere I look, there are important changes, most being driven by the [PLC] process."

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High-Impact PLCs for OST Providers

Prior research demonstrates that PLCs are practice-oriented, collaborative, content-rich, and iterative in that they rely on a learning cycle of questioning, learning by doing, and reflection (DuFour, 2004; Stoll et al., 2006). PLCs for OST youth workers can offer a multi-faceted professional development experience to support the multi-faceted layers of their work.

Purposeful planning can contribute to the success of PLCs in the OST field. The expert PLC facilitators we interviewed noted three key elements of a PLC that should be structured in particular ways to reap the biggest benefits for OST staff: opportunities to apply new skills, collaborative work, and guided reflection. Other PLC elements can—and should, according to our experts—be adapted to participants' abilities and needs and to the goals of the PLC; these include the type of participants, curriculum, co-leadership, coaching, and organizational supports. The decisions made on these features may influence other elements. For example, coaching may contribute to participants' increased ability to co-lead a PLC, or the participant type may influence whether to use a curriculum.

This study surfaced best practices for designing a PLC suited to the OST profession:

- Let PLC goals determine who participates
- Base curriculum decisions on PLC goals
- Scaffold learning to help PLC participants to become facilitators
- Train site supervisors to be coaches
- Enlist site supervisors to provide organizational supports

When thoughtfully planned, these factors are a recipe for a high-impact PLC for OST providers.

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