Building and Retaining High Quality Professional Staff for Extended Education Programs

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Abstract: High quality afterschool programs foster academic and socio-emotional development in middle childhood and adolescence. The success of these programs is dependent on the skills and competencies of program staff. High quality programs require staff who are able to sustain supportive relationships with young people, foster positive relationships among students, and provide engaging, challenging activities that build on student interests. This paper outlines the core competences and mindsets of staff as the cornerstone of high quality programs and proposes strategies to develop these staff proficiencies more broadly. Testing these strategies can provide rich opportunities for researchers to collaborate with practitioners to design and implement effective approaches to professional development in extended education settings.

Keywords: professional development, afterschool programs, program quality, staff development, extended education

Introduction

Over the last two decades, countries around the world have looked to extended education programs to support the education and healthy development of young people outside the school day. These efforts have taken a variety of forms, including academic tutoring programs that prepare youth for high stakes entrance exams (Bae & Jeon, 2013), recreation centers that provide youth with places to hang out with peers (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000), and afterschool child care programs that offer safe places for children while parents are at work (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). Recently, contemporary afterschool programs have adopted a broader mandate of fostering the development of a variety of academic and socio-emotional competencies (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Fraij & Kielblock, 2015; Jones, 2012). These contemporary programs are often part of a broader vision of extended education that seeks to link the afterschool hours, schools, families, and communities to support positive youth development and to reduce achievement gaps associated with income and race.

In conjunction with the expansion of the scope of afterschool programs, a robust research literature has developed to assess whether these programs are having positive effects on academic, social, and behavioral functioning. Meta-analyses and research syntheses show consistent evidence of the beneficial effects of high quality afterschool programs on both academic functioning and socio-emotional outcomes (Durlak et al., 2010; Vandell et al., 2015). These studies underscore that when students regularly attend high quality afterschool programs, gains are observed in both academic and social outcomes, especially among low-income, ethnic minority children. However, when program quality is low or when attendance is low or sporadic, these gains are less apparent, and, in some cases, negative effects of afterschool school programs are reported (Bennett, 2015; Durlak et al., 2010; James-Burdumy et al., 2005).

In much of this research, program staff is identified as a critical factor underlying high quality programs (Larson, Walker, Rusk, & Diaz, 2015; Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008; Vandell et al., 2015). The purpose of this paper is to draw on current research to examine the characteristics of the today's afterschool workforce, the mindset and core competencies that these staff need to work effectively, and potential strategies for developing these competencies. We draw primarily on evidence from the U.S. context, but also consider implications for extended education more broadly.

The Afterschool Workforce

In the United States, over 850,000 frontline staff function as *teachers* or *activity leaders* in afterschool programs (Parsad & Lewis, 2009). These frontline staff are responsible for leading activities that foster learning and development for some 10.2 million ethnically and economically diverse students. They typically work at public school sites and provide three or more hours of supervised, organized activities following the traditional school day. Their programs often serve 80–100 students each day, with activity leaders working directly with groups of 20 or more children.

Activity leaders are ethnically diverse, young (most often,18–25 years of age), and relatively new to their position (working in the field for less than two years). Many are college students who have some prior experience working with children or adolescents as youth coaches, summer camp leaders, and volunteers in community-based organizations. Activity leaders often view their jobs as pathways to other careers. Most have limited formal training in the principles underlying extended education (Vandell, Simzar, O'Cadiz, & Hall, in press).

Activity leaders typically work about 20 hours per week at the program site and earn $11 to $15/hour to supervise 20 or more children and deliver programming in one or more academic and enrichment categories (Khashu & Dougherty, 2007). These wages are only slightly above the minimal wage in the U.S., even though demands of the job are high.

Activity leaders are supervised by *program directors* or *site coordinators* who have wide-ranging responsibilities that include planning daily lessons and activities to be implemented by the activity leaders, handling registration and attendance

paperwork, developing and overseeing site budgets, communicating regularly with families, coordinating volunteers, working with community partners, developing behavior management plans, and collaborating with classroom teachers and administrators at the host school. Although these are complex responsibilities, there are no specific certifications or clearly demarcated educational program to prepare site coordinators for their myriad of managerial and instructional duties. Due to budget restraints of the programs, most rely on a few days of induction training, one- or two-day conferences and staff meetings led by their school districts or community sponsor.

Typically, site coordinators are recent college graduates and have some work experience in education and/or child care (Khashu & Dougherty, 2007). Some began their work in the afterschool field as volunteers or activity leaders. They typically earn an hourly wage of $15–$20, well-below the average starting salary of $50,000 for recent college graduates in the U.S., especially college graduates with substantial managerial responsibilities. One implication of low salaries, coupled with demanding job requirements and limited opportunities for career advancement, is high staff turnover. Activity leaders and site coordinators routinely leave the field to find easier or higher-paying jobs. In the State of California, about one-third of the activity leaders in publicly funded afterschool programs work at program sites for a year or less (Vandell et al., in press).

The effects of high staff turnover are far-reaching. High staff turnover means that directors are routinely interviewing and hiring new staff. Programs must prioritize their training budget to on-going staff orientations for new hires, limiting opportunities for more advanced professional development for the more experienced staff who would benefit from additional training. High staff turnover also undermines the strength of relationships between program staff and students, a core component of high quality programming, which serves as the foundation for positive youth outcomes. Not surprisingly, when staff turnover is high, student turnover is high (Huang & Cho, 2010).

A necessary step in achieving a stable professional work force in the extended education field is providing salaries that are more commensurate with the work demands. However, the funding model for the publically funded programs does not enable programs to pay increased salaries. With federal and state grant caps around $1200-$1500/student per year, and programs serving 80–100 students per day for 180 days, publicly funded afterschool programs in the U.S. are resource-challenged and must dedicate staff and resources to seeking additional funding sources. In California, for example, grant caps for programs serving low-income students have resulted in allocations of $7.50 per day per student (California Department of Education, 2015). From that allocation, programs must fund all full-time and part-time staff salaries, training activities, teaching materials, and evaluation costs as well as overhead costs paid to the host organization for space, utilities, and administrative expenses (Partnership for Children and Youth, 2015). Programs that serve middle-income students typically cover these operating costs by fees charged to families that often result in double the revenue per student.

Increased salaries alone are necessary, but not sufficient to ensure a skilled, committed, professional work force (Huang & Cho, 2010). Site coordinators and front

line staff also need particular mindsets, core competencies, and background experiences that prepare them to work in extended education settings.

Core Competencies and Mindsets of Effective Activity Leaders and Program Directors

In this section, we draw on prior research to identify professional competencies and mindsets of staff in high quality programs (Bouffard & Little, 2004; Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 2009; Temescal Associates, 2015). The identification of these proficiencies suggests an over-arching set of goals to guide the education and preparation of afterschool staff as professionals. Many of these competencies and mindsets are relevant for summer learning programs, youth organizations, and extended education more broadly.

A Deep Understanding of the Ways in Which Afterschool Programs and Extended Education Should Differ From the Traditional School Day

Central to the power of afterschool programs is the recognition that these programs differ in fundamental ways from the traditional school day (Halpern, 2002; Noam, 2003). One critical difference is that attendance is voluntary, not mandatory (Larson, 2000). This means that extended education programs must be settings that appeal to young people. If the activities are not interesting and engaging, if the staff do not have genuine and caring relationships with the youth, if peers at the program are hostile, indifferent, or culturally insensitive, youth "can vote with their feet" and simply stop attending the program (Hansen & Larson, 2007; Simpkins, Delgado, Price, Quach, & Starbuck, 2013). Students are not free simply to stop attending their regular school day classes if they find the teachers to be uncaring or their classmates to be hostile or the content to be boring. Afterschool programs are held to a higher standard!

In their quest to offer programing that engages young people, staff at high-quality programs utilize hands-on, project-based learning activities that are more free-flowing than are typical in the traditional school day (Noam, 2003). These activities evolve over several days or weeks, build on youth interests, require focused attention, and build up skills sequentially. Their content can be wide-reaching and include sports, the visual arts (painting, drawing), the performing arts (dance, music, drama), and culinary arts (Larson, 2000). Other programs build on youth interests in science (Krishnamurthi, Ottinger, & Topol, 2013), community service, and volunteer activities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The key point is that high quality programs operate in a more informal space in which students have greater freedom to follow their interests and passions.

Done right, afterschool programs are complementary to the traditional school day by providing a more intimate learning environment, new or different learning spaces, more time, supplementary materials and/or experiences and a more informal

environment to explore, grow, get excited about learning and gain a sense of efficacy and belonging. This environment may be particularly beneficial for students who struggle during the traditional school day because it provides an alternative path to develop their skills and make friends, helping them gain a sense of efficacy and belonging (Heckman & Sanger, 2013). Relatedly, high quality programs can be a source of supportive relationships with positive adult role models (Larson et al., 2015). Indeed, students report that a primary motivation for attending programs is that the afterschool staff genuinely care about them (Vandell, O'Cadiz, & Hall, 2012). Building and sustaining supportive relationships with students is an important mission of high quality extended and expanded learning programs, a mission that is often secondary during the traditional school day when the focus is on academic skills.

A Commitment to Providing Low-income and Ethnic Minority Students with Enrichment Opportunities

In the U.S., middle- and high-income families devote significant time and money to their children's participation in organized sports, music and arts lessons, science clubs, chess clubs, and academic tutoring (Duncan & Murnane, 2013). Parents believe these investments are worthwhile (Lareau, 2011), and a large body of research has documented the benefits of these extracurricular activities for both academic and non-academic outcomes (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). Because of a lack of money and transportation, low-income and ethnic minority students are much less likely to have access to fee-supported extracurricular activities (Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Reardon, 2011). An important mission of publically funded afterschool programs is to provide low-income children with access to extracurricular experiences that can similarly motivate and excite student interests. This means that afterschool programs should NOT simply be longer school days.

Substantive Skills and Knowledge About the Activities That They Lead

The rich array of enrichment activities that programs *could* offer afterschool provides site coordinators with an opportunity to make good use of the skills and interests that activity leaders bring with them to the programs. These skills can be as diverse as line dancing, knitting, soccer, gymnastics, guitar, chess, and computer programming. The point is that the staff have pre-existing skills and programs should take advantage of this expertise. Having staff oversee activities in their areas of expertise and passion may positively affect staff retention, a researchable idea.

In the United States, afterschool programs are expanding their activities to include STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) offerings (National Research Council, 2015). In some cases, programs are benefiting from partnerships with science museums and universities where staff have considerable knowledge of the science underlying the activities that they are doing with their students (Bell, Lewenstein, Shouse, & Feder, 2009). In other cases, activity leaders are required to lead lessons on topics in which they have little background knowledge. This results

in inaccurate information being conveyed and a lack of connection between the activities and underlying understanding of scientific concepts (Vandell et al., in press). Mis-matches between staff background knowledge and program offerings also can occur when staff is asked to supervise homework in areas that they lack substantive background knowledge.

One way that program directors might ensure that their staff have the necessary substantive skills is to hire a diversified staff who *collectively* represent the skill sets that the program needs. Programs can then use in-service trainings, college coursework, and professional development conferences to expand the staff's repertoire of skills, activities, and projects. A fertile area for future research is the study of this differentiated staffing model versus the standard approach.

Skills and Competencies in Motivating and Engaging Students

Leading activities for 15–20 youth at the end of the school day requires activity leaders and site coordinators to be highly skilled at motivating and engaging young people who have diverse interests and who are not obligated to participate (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 2009). Program staff can develop their skills by understanding motivational and learning principles derived from readings and observations, but these need to be coupled with hands-on practical experience working with young people under the daily supervision of master teachers who model good practice and provide quality feedback, as needed (Huang & Dietel, 2011; Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 2009). This type of classroom instruction, paired with a year-long apprenticeship with highly skilled teachers, has been effective in the preparation of classroom teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Currently, there is no analogous supervised field experience in the afterschool field in the United States.

Commitment to Seek and Use a Variety of Resources for Self-Improvement and Continuous Program Development

Staff in high quality programs have easy access to a rich set of resources to use in their work and are committed to actively using them for continuous program improvement (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 2009; Reisner, White, Russell, & Birmingham, 2004). To this end, professional organizations and governmental agencies have developed curriculum materials for afterschool settings (California Department of Education After School Division, 2014; National Afterschool Association, 2011). Groups also have developed quality standards to guide program development, foster core competencies among staff and promote continuous improvement at both the site-level and the broader program-organization level. Afterschool standards in the State of California, for example, are informed by the Learning in Afterschool and Summer (LIAS) principles: learning should be *active, collaborative, meaningful, build master*y and *expand horizons* (Temescal Associates, 2015). These principles are summarized in an easy-to-use rubric that program line staff can use to identify the quality of their program practices. By using this self-assessment tool, even new staff can become familiar with what these core principles look like at different levels

of progress (early, developing and mature) and the rubric allows line staff to track progress towards their growth in these areas.

Strategies for Implementing a Comprehensive Approach to Professional Development

To date, professional development for both site coordinators and activity leaders is idiosyncratic, subject to the varied needs and resources of each program (Bessant, 2012; Bouffard & Little, 2004; National Afterschool Association, 2011). Without a consistent and coherent set of expectations about the core competencies that front-line staff and program directors need, professional development is haphazard and fragmented. Individual staff members may take the initiative to enroll in college courses related to the work that they are doing at programs, but these classes are not part of a recognized sequence of courses or body of knowledge specific to youth development needs during the afterschool hours, and there are very few of them offered. At the site level, programs may offer their staff an opportunity to attend a conference or workshop, but again, the content often fails to build upon a recognized body of knowledge or set of competencies which results in a coherent educational program. Clearly, a more coordinated, systemic approach is needed. What follows is an outline of a proposed professional development system that draws on efforts at the program site, as well as stronger partnerships with universities, school systems and community-based organizations.

Site-Level Efforts

A coordinated and differentiated hiring strategy. For programs that have flexibility in staffing enrichment activities, it can work to the program's advantage to hire staff with different skills sets; for example, artists, musicians, engineers, and athletes each have substantive knowledge and experience in different content areas. Hiring staff with a broad array of skills in sports, music, art, and science enables programs to make learning more interesting and engaging. It gives programs an opportunity to leverage the collective strengths and passions of staff, likely leading to an increase in staff sense of belonging as well as staff retention.

Strategic use of staff meetings and planning time. Regular staff meetings that include ongoing skill development increase staff feelings of efficacy and competence (Vandell et al., in press). Opportunities to share best practices and to learn that others are going through similar challenges builds a sense of shared purpose and is linked to staff retention (Huang & Cho, 2010). Finally, dedicated time for planning activities, especially planning that involves collaboration with teachers at the school site, is associated with staff feelings of efficacy and competence as well as gains in student academic outcomes (Bennett, 2015).

Educational Partnerships with Universities

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.

For almost ten years, the University of California, Irvine has been working to create such a shared knowledge base with its Certificate in After-School Education (CASE) program http://ucirvinecase.weebly.com. To earn this certificate, undergraduate students complete six four-unit university courses, totaling 180 hours of class time and a minimum of 70 hours of field work. The introductory course in the certificate program provides a theoretical grounding and foundational knowledge in historical and current issues in afterschool education. For their second course, students select between child development, adolescent development, or multicultural education, depending on their interests and career plans. Students then have several options for their three "content" courses, including coursework that examines teaching and learning in mathematics, science, literacy, arts, sports, or tutoring in out-of-school contexts. Finally, students enroll in a CASE capstone course in which they put what they have learned into practice during a minimum of 50 hours of fieldwork at an afterschool program. More than 300 students are enrolled in CASE coursework each year, with 40 to 50 students receiving their certificates each year. After graduation, program participants have been employed in the afterschool field as well as admitted into teaching credential programs to become classroom teachers.

The development of on-line classes and on-line degree programs provides an important access point into university-level coursework for the staff in the afterschool and summer learning field. Two of the courses in the CASE program ("Foundations in Out of School Learning" and "Educational Technology") are available on-line. Plans are underway for the remaining courses in the Certificate program to be re-structured to include on-line versions that would be available to non-matriculated students.

Another way that higher education can contribute to the development of afterschool professionals is evident in a program developed by the California State University system. Cal State has developed a teacher pathway program that incentivizes and supports the preparation of undergraduate students who first work in afterschool programs in high-need communities and then receive their post-baccalaureate credential as a classroom teacher. Recognizing the afterschool teaching experience as a pathway to classroom teaching helps to create a mindset among future and current teachers that the skills and competencies used afterschool are important to being successful in the classroom.

Graduate-level coursework also has the potential for improving the quality of afterschool programs and may be particularly valuable for site coordinators who already have undergraduate degrees. These courses may also provide important links with traditional education programs. One of the required courses in the Masters of Arts in Teaching program at the University of California, Irvine is ED 245, Learning Inside and Outside of School, which requires readings and fieldwork related to out-of-school settings. In this course, graduate students who are preparing to be teacher-leaders and administrators in local schools examine the role of afterschool settings as a context for learning.

The preparation of prospective activity leaders and directors and the inclusion of extended education within university corpus are not the only ways in which universities can contribute to the professionalization of extended education. The systematic study of extended education, which includes afterschool and summer learning programs, offers rich opportunities for research. Faculty and graduate students can become engaged in evaluations of specific afterschool and summer programs as well as undertaking general programs of research in these settings. Leveraging the interests and skills of these faculty and students, in conjunction with insights and feedback from practitioners, can help advance our understanding of effective (and ineffective) afterschool practices as well as effective (and ineffective) strategies for developing high quality staff.

Partnerships with Host Schools

In the U.S. context, 90% of the over 11,000 federally funded afterschool programs are located in public schools (Afterschool Alliance, 2015). In some cases, this proximity has resulted in close partnerships between afterschool programs and the school day programs, but in other cases, there are minimal connections (Bennett, 2015). Teachers have their own conferences and in-service training workshops; and afterschool staff have their own conferences. Student achievement data, curriculum materials, and equipment are not shared. Teachers and program staff attend different faculty meetings.

Bennett (2015) has found higher levels of student achievement in those schools in which afterschool programs work closely with their school-day staff and leadership to identify high-need students, plan how those needs will be met afterschool, and identify curriculum and activities that will foster remediation by giving students new ways to learn material. In order to help systematize collaboration between schools and afterschool programs, Bennett has determined that afterschool staff must become respected partners of the classroom teachers. This partnership is facilitated, in part, by an awareness that high-quality afterschool programs contribute to gains in student achievement and improved behavioral outcomes, over and above changes associated with the traditional school day.

Partnerships with Community-Based Organizations

In the United States, community-based organizations and private foundations have a long history of partnerships with extended education programs. Many of the early programs serving low-income youth in the United States were developed by charitable organizations like the Children's Aid Society and the Boys' and Girls' Club (Halpern, 2002). Recently, with funding from the Soros Foundation, ExpandED schools (formerly The After-School Corporation, or TASC) has been a leader in offering high quality afterschool programs in New York City. Many of the approaches to staff professional development proposed in this paper are practiced by these programs.

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation also has been a major force in efforts to improve the availability of high quality afterschool programs in the United States. The Foundation has been instrumental in the establishment of statewide afterschool networks in 48 of the 50 states. To receive the afterschool funding from the Foundation, states are required to establish and maintain partnerships between afterschool programs, school districts, institutions of higher education, and state and local government officials. Funds from the Foundation also support meetings at the regional and statewide level, as well as participation in national meetings. A central role of each of the statewide networks is supporting the professional development and training of high quality staff in the state.

An example of the work of one statewide professional development network is the Power of Discovery: STEM2 Initiative in the State of California. With funds from the California Afterschool Network, the California Department of Education, and several private foundations, ongoing professional development in the form of materials, on-site coaching, workshops, and staff meetings were provided to staff at more than 200 programs in five regions of the state. The effects of this initiative on staff beliefs and competencies, STEM programming, and student outcomes, are being evaluated.

Conclusions

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. Many of these same strategies may have merit for other forms of extended education such as summer learning pro-

grams, youth clubs, and camps, and we hope this paper may serve as motivation in these areas as well.

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