Professional Development and Training for Afterschool Staff

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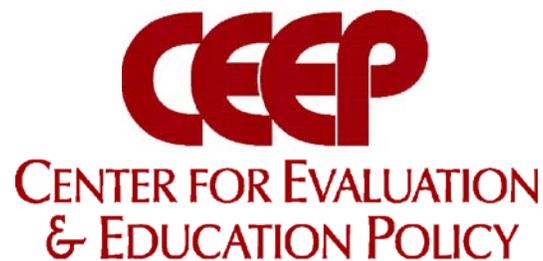
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A good deal of research has identified characteristics of after school programs that appear to be related to enhancing students' academic and social development. Despite the overall quantity of research in this area, few studies have examined the way in which professional development and training for afterschool staff impact the quality of after school environment. The following review describes available research on the types of professional development and training for after school staff that have been associated with staff retention and positive academic and social outcomes for the youth. Research conducted in this area suggests that the following features of staff development activities determine the extent to which they lead to high quality programming: (1) the number of hours offered; (2) the modes through which staff development opportunities are offered; (3) the topics covered in staff development offerings; and (4) the extent to which staff development opportunities overcome scheduling and funding constraints. Each will be discussed in more detail in the pages that follow.

Hours of Professional Development and Training Offered

In general, the literature suggests that staff should attend 20 or more hours of training in order to create high quality programming. For example, one study (Vandell et al., 2004) showed that the most promising programs included an average of 51 hours of training per year for program directors; and an average of 21 hours of training per year for activity leaders. Sometimes staff members were required to attend training sessions while other times the sessions were voluntary. Vandell et al. (2004) state, "Generally, the promising programs in our study offered an impressive and diverse array of in-service learning opportunities for staff. They made a concerted effort to hone staff skills in the content of the activities they taught, modes of instruction, behavior management, and awareness of young people's personal or developmental characteristics" (Vandell et al., 2004).

The Indianapolis based organization AYS, Incorporated represents a great example of an organization that successfully addressed the problem of staff training and turnover. For example, they solved this problem by creating their own training center so that staff could attend training every week. They asked their staff to take 20-40 hours of training classes yearly and awarded those who attended more than 40 hours with a "Golden Apple pin" (AED, 2006). Staff received the pin at the annual all-staff training and then wore it on their nametag. Programs where staff completed

more than 30 hours of training received a "Golden Apple" certificate to hang up in their program. AYS further encouraged staff to attend training sessions by paying for their training. Additionally, they had a very low turnover rate of site coordinators because they surveyed staff about training, gathered survey results, and met with site coordinators in focus groups.

Strategies for Delivering Professional Development and Training

The literature on staff professional development recommends numerous strategies for training. Miller and Gannett (2006) describe four promising strategies for professional development in after school programs that include: coaching and on-site technical assistance; evidence of concrete change; engaging young people in staff development efforts; and an organization mindset that values and supports professional development. First, coaching can be provided by external experts or by specialists within the program. Miller and Gannett (2006) note that "line staff can benefit from strong coaching and modeling within the program without attending off-site training. A strong orientation program and ongoing supervision can help ensure the benefits of coaching are maintained over the long run." Second, the authors report, "When we looked at initiatives where programs had received grants that they could apply toward physical, tangible changes to their program environments in addition to training and technical assistance, we saw that staff buy-in to the program improvement effort increased." Third, Miller and Gannett (2006) argue that an effective but often overlooked strategy for professional development is to ask youth what they would like in the program and to use their answers to determine topics for professional development. Miller and Gannett claim that "the most successful training model is one that goes vertically up through the organization so that all program stakeholders, including youth, are engaged in the professional development process." The fourth promising strategy for professional development in after school is an organizational mindset that values and supports professional development. Miller and Gannett argue that a program committed to ongoing professional growth is one that values all stakeholders in the process. Successful programs invest in the growth and development of their staff and youth. However, "training and technical assistance alone will not contribute to continuous program improvement, unless staff feel valued, appreciated, and respected. Within a climate of teambuilding and shared decision-making, everyone should feel that they are making a positive difference for young people and their families" (Miller & Gannett, 2006).

Recommended Topics for Training

Training for after school staff generally falls into one of three categories: basic training, in-service training, and day-to-day training. The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (2000) suggests that all new staff members should attend basic training sessions which address such topics as "program philosophy, mission statement, and/or goals; program policies; child and youth development; behavior guidance; activity/ curriculum planning; First Aid and CPR; detecting and reporting child abuse and neglect; and activities and curriculum specific to the program (e.g., tutoring, homework help, arts activities, sports, clubs). However, one study states (Raley et al., 2005) that "while state licensing requirements often mandate training in CPR, first aid and child abuse prevention, research has found that training in child development, curriculum planning and group management are most valuable for enhancing the daily work of instructors."

The second type of training, in-service trainings, are offered to all program staff and should be offered during weekly, bimonthly, or monthly staff meetings. Possible ideas for in-service training sessions can include: "working with young people who have special needs; building relationships with parents and families; effective homework help strategies; conducting creative arts projects; mentoring; and specific conflict resolution techniques to use with young people" (The National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2000).

In one study (Vandell et al., 2004), researchers focused on promising after school elementary and middle school programs to assess the extent to which they enhanced students' development and well-being. From studying these promising after school programs, the researchers found that the programs realized the importance of providing in-service training for their staff. Vandell notes, "Training was provided in a variety of areas, including content areas (math, science, fine arts) and procedural issues (classroom management, conflict resolution, understanding diversity). In some cases staff members were required to attend training sessions; in other cases the sessions were voluntary." According to the study (Vandell et al., 2004), the most common in-service sessions in elementary and middle school programs focused on classroom management and academic enrichment. Training sessions for middle school programs also included "conflict resolution, diversity training, and youth development (e.g., information about normative patterns of cognitive, personal, and social development among youth) (Vandell et al., 2004)."

Training was typically offered to directors and paid staff rather than volunteers. Directors and paid staff often received training in academic enrichment and classroom management as well as youth development. When training was offered to volunteers in elementary programs, it usually covered the topics of classroom management, academic enrichment, and activity planning. In the middle school programs studied, directors and paid staff typically received training in conflict resolution, academic enrichment, classroom management, and youth development. In contrast to elementary school programs, middle school programs more often offered training to staff on the topics of fine and performing arts and as well as training opportunities for their volunteers (Vandell et al., 2004).

Another recent study (Seligson et al., 2004) examines a newer concept that involves applying relationship psychology and emotional intelligence to professional development for afterschool staff. Some organizations have started participating in psychological experience training to develop mutual trust and interdependence among coworkers. Such programs increase self-awareness, self-regulation, and emotional connections among workers. The Bringing Yourself to Work training workshops, for example, encourages afterschool program directors to reflect on their interpersonal relationships. In these workshops, "they are trained to know themselves and each other as individuals with strengths and weaknesses, fears and troubles, before they interact with the [the youth in their programs]. This high level of relational awareness allows educators to better understand how differences in cultural background, communication styles, gender identity, and interest play out and how best to facilitate understanding across these differences" (Seligson et al., 2004). These kinds of skills could have an added value in after-school programs because staff could model healthy communication and problem solving skills for youth. The capacity to listen to one's self and others helps staff to hear what children, coworkers, and parents are truly saying and what is needed to improve the emotional climate of the program. This study further suggests that program directors can open the channels of communication by creating specific times and activities when staff members can reflect and share experiences with youth.

The third type of development, referred to as day-to-day professional development, typically involves top staff training less experienced staff through a formal mentorship, informal coaching, or modeling approach. This is an effective approach because "…top staff can impart the intangibles of youth work in ways that might only be superficially covered in trainings (Raley et al., 2005)." A program can also create "intentional learning communities" where staff develop monthly learning

goals in which they pinpoint best practices that they will acquire and incorporate into their work. At staff meetings, staff can share personal goals and discuss the progress they have made toward reaching their goals.

Resolving the Cost and Scheduling Problems of Professional Development

Many of the challenges related to staff training are cost and scheduling conflicts. To solve the problem of cost, some directors have turned to larger organizations (i.e., schools and partnering agencies) to include program staff in training sessions (Raley et al., 2005). In order to deal with scheduling problems, some directors have established staff in-service days. Additionally, Raley et al. (2005) state that "for larger initiatives, coordinating training opportunities citywide can be beneficial. For example, the Philadelphia Beacon managing agency hired a consultant to identify a wide variety of low-cost training sessions offered through the United Way and other local organizations. The consultant created a calendar of opportunities, and Beacon staff members were free to select trainings that fit their interests, needs, and schedules." Furthermore, to accommodate the schedules of outside activity providers who often work a few hours a week, some directors have chosen to incorporate staff in training and meetings through either one-on-one sessions or group trainings and meetings at the beginning and end of activities.

Conclusions

The limited amount of research on features of effective professional development points to a number of program strategies and practices that can be applied to after school programming efforts in order to improve the overall quality of programs. Although it is clear that none of these practices in and of itself offers the "magic bullet" for implementing a high-quality program, those that offer professional development opportunities for staff and create an environment that is conducive to staff growth are more likely to help students develop socially and progress academically. The successful implementation of a high-quality after school program is a complex endeavor and an ongoing process. Program staff who seek to enhance the quality of their programming efforts may be best served to prioritize their professional development needs and then adopt various strategies to obtain the training they need.

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