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A Network Wide Approach to Professional Development: Professional Development in Out-of-School Time

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Overview

Out-of-school time (OST) is a growing field that includes after-school, evening, weekend and summer positive youth development and workforce development programs. Research demonstrates that OST professional development is a powerful intervention that enhances program quality and student impact (Weiss, 2005, 2006).

Out-Of-School Time

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (2000) defines OST programs as "encompassing a wide range of program offerings for young people that take place before school, after school, on weekends, and during the summer and other school breaks" (p.1).

Out-of-school time programs have existed for many years yet are currently the focus of much local, state, and national attention. In today's society, many children live in households with two working parents or a single parent or guardian, and need adult supervision after school and before dinnertime. Moreover, children often need support as they work toward grade-level promotion, high school graduation, standardized test performance and matriculation to college. They should be developing workforce skills, interviewing successfully for jobs and attaining better employment. Out-of-school time programs are a venue uniquely suited to nurturing these personal, academic and civic goals and preparing children to thrive in today's world.

Professional Development for Out-Of-School Time Staff: Overview

Importance

Many studies have explored and suggested frameworks for quality out-of-school time programs. The perhaps most frequently cited element of quality is effective staff.

Research demonstrates that in OST settings, there is a positive connection between staff professional development and staff quality. A 2002 evaluation of BEST (Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers) concluded that participation in BEST trainings strengthened staff participants' understanding of youth development and helped their organizations serve youth more effectively (Center for School and Community Services, 2002).

Defining Professional Development

Professional development for OST staff is a comprehensive term that can refer to a variety of education, training and development opportunities. Peter (2009) defines OST PD as:
a spectrum of activities, resources, and supports that help practitioners work more effectively with or on behalf of children and youth. Professional development formats include workshops, conferences, technical assistance, apprenticeships, peer mentoring, professional memberships, college coursework, and additional diverse offerings. (p. 36)

Content and Competencies

The first step in creating and facilitating effective OST professional development is to identify appropriate youth worker competencies□what adults working with children and youth need to know and do in order to deliver high-quality developmental programming. Astroph, Garza and Taylor (2004) suggest that youth worker trainings should focus on a series of basic competencies. These include understanding child and youth development and implementing age-appropriate activities; developing positive relationships with and empowering youth; respecting cultural and ethnic diversity; decreasing risk factors and maintaining safe learning environments; interacting with families, schools and communities; and presenting staff as professional and positive role models.

Research and Theoretical Background

To ensure impact, OST professional development must also incorporate multiple areas of research and theory pertaining to adult education. Adult learning theory integrates Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which pertains as much to andragogy (adult learning) as to pedagogy (childhood learning). It asserts that different adults have different learning styles and thrive in a diversity of teaching environments.

Implementation Strategies

The OST field uses the research and theory described above to suggest specific professional development implementation strategies. Several organizations and authors have published promising practices for implementing trainings and workshops, still the prevailing OST professional development format. Child Trends (2009) emphasizes presenting information with a clear rationale for its importance, demonstrating new practices within the workshop session, offering opportunities for practice and feedback and providing ongoing support and follow-up training. Additional publications focus on the importance of integrating staff interests and input into all workshops.

Evaluation

Lastly, there has been some progress in evaluating out-of-school time PD beyond levels of participant satisfaction. In their 2004 article entitled "Promoting Quality through Professional Development: A Framework for Evaluation," Bouffard and Little suggest a five-level approach to evaluating OST professional development, beginning with staff satisfaction and ending with youth impact. Bouffard and Little also emphasize the importance of "backward planning" when preparing and implementing the evaluation (proceeding from outcomes and working back to activities).

Professional Development for Out-Of-School Time Staff: Challenges

Diversity in the OST Workforce

Despite the progress detailed in the previous section, the challenges associated with designing, implementing and evaluating professional development for OST staff are substantial. The first challenge is the diversity in the out-of-school time workforce. Unlike classroom teachers, who often come from a single academic discipline with specific and recognizable credentials, OST workers have backgrounds in education, social work, sociology, urban studies, art, science, history and other fields of study. Huebner, Walker and McFarland (2003) add that, "With the absence of common educational prerequisites and pre-service training for practice, youth workers often appear to be an eclectic group of savvy, street-smart, youth-loving adults committed to the success of young people more than to the agenda of an agency or pro¬gram" (p. 206).

Moreover, there is little consistency within the OST field in terms of job titles and responsibilities. In one nationwide study, 351OST staff listed a total of 208 distinct job titles on a questionnaire about job roles and responsibilities (Le Menestrel, & Dennehy, 2003). The diversity of staff backgrounds, education and titles makes it difficult to design professional development activities that can effectively accommodate such a heterogeneous audience.

Retention

An additional challenge related to the OST workforce is staff retention. According to Stone, Garza and Borden (2006): Many youth organizations with limited assets continue to strive to develop and retain a high-quality workforce. Despite best intentions, a landmark report produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2003), has documented heavy workloads, long hours, high vulnerability to burnout, and high turnover among employees of youth development organizations. (p.)

Staff satisfaction and retention complicate the issue of workforce and professional development in an unfortunately circuitous way. Because of circumstances that are frequently beyond their control, such as low salaries and minimal pathways for advancement, it can be difficult for OST administrators to retain qualified staff. Therefore, these administrators are often—and understandably—reluctant to invest in effective, long-term professional development for their workers.

Standards and Criteria

A third and related challenge is that there are still no standardized education or performance criteria to which out-of-school time staff are held accountable. While there are currently efforts to establish national youth worker standards (as described previously), there is no formal or centralized consensus regarding what OST staff should know, be able to demonstrate or participate in to procure appropriate skills and knowledge.

Content

Related to the issues of youth worker standards is the inadequate focus on child development and learning theory in OST professional development (PD) activities. Quality OST programs often integrate the theories of Piaget, Dewey, Erikson, Gardner and Vygotsky that pertain to child development, developmental psychology, developmental scaffolding and teaching and learning. However, many PD strategies do not reference these or others' theories of education.

Implementation and Evaluation

A final challenge, connected to the previous two, is how to successfully implement professional development activities so that out-of-school time staff understand and integrate theories of teaching and learning, develop authentic relationships with program participants and contribute to effective programs and positive youth outcomes. OST professional development activities do not consistently utilize a robust theoretical research base, and therefore they often rely on the intuition of individual organizations, program planners and facilitators. OST PD opportunities lack diversity (and the ability to accommodate diverse learning styles) and are generally presented in the form of conferences and workshops. Lastly, efforts to evaluate OST professional development generally end at participant satisfaction: surveys ascertain the degree to which attendees were satisfied with the topic, presenter and learning environment rather than pursue evidence of participant, organizational, program and student impact.

Professional Development Promising Practice: Peer Networking Meetings

Through its peer networking meetings (PNMs), the Out-of-School Time Resource Center (OSTRC) has attempted to address the promising practices and challenges inherent in OST professional development. The OSTRC crafted and has been hosting PNMs since January 2005. The goals of the meetings are to cultivate partnerships, mentorships and a sense of belonging to a professional community as well as to provide practical skills and knowledge that is applicable to the workplace.

The PNMs offer informal networking, a panel discussion led by peers and open dialogue among the participants, a mixed group of OST professionals ranging from upper-level and mid-level managers to direct-service staff and capacity builders. Each meeting follows a set agenda, and also incorporates participant introductions and announcements (to promote networking) and discussion in small break-out groups. Recent topics include fundraising and finances; challenged youth: risks, traumas and special needs; and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math). Participants receive follow-up emails, including minutes and participant lists, and are added to the OSTRC's monthly newsletter distribution list.

The OSTRC regularly implements surveys, observations and focus groups to obtain general feedback, ascertain acquisition of skills and knowledge, measure extent of workplace application and measure additional progress toward program goals. PNM participants consistently report that they enjoy the meetings, acquire applicable skills, and develop sustained partnerships with other individuals and organizations. Attendees also speak highly of the good feelings, camaraderie and sense of belonging generated by the meetings.

The OSTRC consulted literature from the fields of informal learning, formal education and professional development—as well as its own mixed-methods research—to create its peer networking meetings. The meetings integrate theories of adult learning, diverse teaching strategies and OST staff competencies to provide sessions that are well managed, comfortable, relevant to the participants, rich in content and pedagogically effective. Moreover, the OSTRC routinely conducts PNM evaluations that measure staff and program impact as well as immediate satisfaction and increases in skills and knowledge. These evaluations, which are uniformly positive, confirm that the PNMs are meeting their diverse goals and objectives.

Conclusion

In summary, out-of-school time professional development is critically important for program quality and student achievement, yet it is still underdeveloped. Some of its challenges, such as defining the workforce and agreeing on content and on youth worker competencies, are being steadily addressed. However, more effort should be applied to designing and implementing research-based OST PD, evaluating its impact and ensuring its sustainability. The Out-of-School Time Resource Center's peer networking meetings are one effort to address these fundamental needs and challenges.

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