empowering youth work supervisors

with Action Research Strategies

by Margo Herman

Supervising youth workers is a challenging, demanding job in a complex field. Too frequently youth workers get mired in reacting to the everyday crises that dominate their work, finding it difficult to rise above the daily demands to reach a place where reflection can help guide their work. Strategies based in action research can empower youth work supervisors to invest in their own growth and in the continuous improvement of their programs.

The strategies proposed in this article were crafted as my project in the Afterschool Matters (ASM) Practitioner Fellowship in Minnesota, 2009–2010. These strategies fit with the goal of the ASM Fellowships, which support out-of-school time practitioners to study effective practices and share program improvement strategies (Hill, Matloff-Nieves, & Townsend, 2009). Grounded in action research and qualitative data analysis, the strategies are designed to encourage a proactive and reflective approach to supervising youth workers.

Action research is a kind of inquiry typically conducted by practitioners rather than professional researchers. It is a form of professional development in which ordinary practitioners investigate and evaluate their own practice by raising significant questions in order to find ways to improve a situation. More and more practitioners are investigating collaborative work and making their stories public in order to strengthen understanding about the field (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Youth work supervisors can use action research to capture stories, enable their supervisees to share experiences, and facilitate problem solving.

One method of capturing stories and experiences is qualitative data analysis. Qualitative data often come

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from fieldwork, and the analysis is distinctly non-statistical. Qualitative researchers make firsthand observations of activities and interactions, sometimes engaging personally in those activities as "participant observers." They collect extensive data from multiple sources such as observations, interviews, and document reviews; they then organize and translate the results into a readable narrative with themes, categories, and case examples (Patton, 1990). When qualitative data are used in action research, youth workers' stories become powerful tools for personal and program improvement.

Though some youth workers have been using action research in their practice, few action research projects have been specifically directed at youth work supervision. This article presents a sequence of strategies for using action research in youth work supervision (see box). My priority in designing the strategies was to encourage and empower a reflective and participatory culture, based in action research, for youth work supervisors.

The strategies can be pursued within the action-reflection cycle illustrated in Figure 1 (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). This cycle can serve as a framework for continuous improvement as youth work supervisors engage with staff to investigate and evaluate specific issues and then to create and modify new actions based on ideas identified through the five strategies. The potential of action research becomes real when issues are linked with action and people give meaning to the action (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). The five suggested strategies can be viewed sequentially and in tandem with the action-reflection cycle, which provides a model for using the data gathered to move in new directions.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE SUPERVISION PRACTICE IN YOUTH WORK ORGANIZATIONS

Strategy 1. Analyze youth work practice outside your organization by reading field research, seeking practitioner stories, and connecting with a peer network.

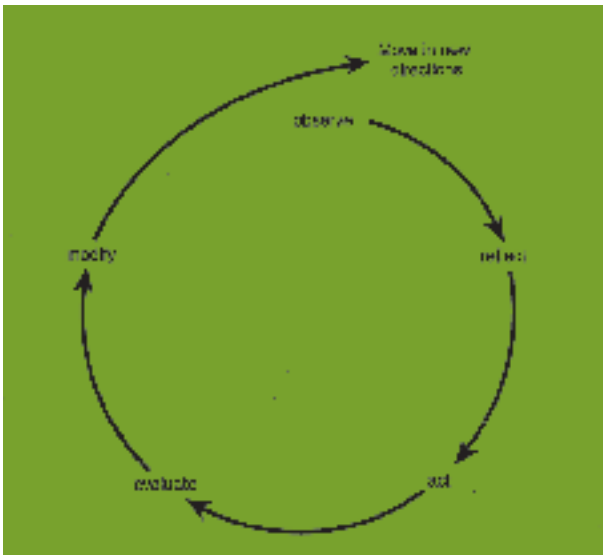
Strategy 2. Learn and apply qualitative data analysis and action research tools, collecting data by intentionally observing staff over time and by interviewing staff to enhance understanding of the dilemmas and tensions they experience.

Strategy 3. Identify themes and reflect on the issues that emerge from strategies 1 and 2 to illuminate issues to be addressed with staff.

Strategy 4. Incorporate the issues identified in strategy 3 into internal staff development interactions such as staff meetings, one-on-one meetings, or learning circles.

Strategy 5. Coach and mentor staff on the themes, dilemmas, and issues that emerge in strategy 3.

Figure 1. The Action-Reflection Cycle



Implementing the Five Strategies to Improve Supervisory Practice

Strategy 1. Analyze Youth Work Outside Your Organization

The first strategy is to analyze youth work practice outside one's own organization by reading field research, seeking practitioner stories, and connecting with a peer network. Discovering research and practitioner stories from the field of youth development can foster ideas that elevate a supervisor's viewpoint above the day-to-day busywork. The knowledge of novices and experts, academics and practitioners can be combined to inform youth work practice (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 2001).

A number of journals and newsletters feature practice stories from youth work organizations—stories that can deepen supervisors' expertise in youth work practice. For example, "Shining a Light on Supervision" from the Forum for Youth Investment (Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, & Craig, 2010) features exemplary

youth work supervision practices. The article says that satisfied youth workers, in contrast to their dissatisfied peers, were more likely to report getting the supervisor feedback they needed to do their job. "Some differences in practice may come down to whether someone is fortunate to have a good supervisor" (Wilson-Ahlstrom et al., 2010, p. 2). Examples of specific types of staff meetings and interactions with frontline workers are included in the article to help define exemplary youth work supervision.

Other youth work resources focused on sharing practitioner stories are available from the Forum for Youth Investment Ready by 21, Harvard Family Research Project, National Institute on Out-of-School Time, University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development, the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition, and other national and local organizations. All of these organizations are easily found on the web; many offer email updates by subscription. Many also offer webinars, an additional option for tapping into practitioner expertise and stories.

As I pursued my action research project to develop the five strategies, journal articles from the Forum for Youth Investment were instrumental in shaping and validating the concepts. I also consulted chapters from works by McNiff and Whitehead (2006), Hubbard and Power (1991), Patton (1982, 1990) and Ryan and Bernard (1985).

I was also helped by consultations with youth work supervisors and peer participants in the ASM Fellowship. Peer networks are another powerful way to empower youth work supervisors through shared learning. If no network already exists, youth work supervisors can take the initiative to convene, say, a quarterly meeting over coffee to share stories and discuss challenging situations.

Strategy 2. Learn Qualitative and Action Research Tools

The second strategy is to learn and apply qualitative analysis and action research inquiry tools. The field of youth work, like other professions, is finding value in qualitative data drawn from fieldwork. Qualitative data can be helpful in creating new action strategies to enhance quality; the data connect research with practice and vice versa. Qualitative methods encourage gathering data from multiple sources including open-ended interviews and direct observation. Qualitative data can also come from practitioners' own fieldwork (Patton, 1990). Additional data can be collected to enhance the interviews and observations, such as e-mail notes, assessment data, photos—any variety of supporting information.

Interviewing provides an effective way of changing practice problems into evolving questions for action research. How inteview questions are asked determines the quality of answers, so the skill of interviewing to gather meaningful insights rather than predetermined responses is worth refining. The questions that lead to further pondering about an issue or dilemma are like a "grow light" for new thinking (Hubbard & Power, 1991). Michael Quinn Patton's book *Practical Evaluation* (1982) includes a chapter on thoughtful interviewing, which describes a variety of types of interviews, provides specific interviewing strategies, and suggests how to word questions. Interviewing staff about how they regard their work—noting how they describe difficulties and tensions—can provide essential insight into staff and supervision issues. A good interview can increase the base of understanding between supervisor and staff (Hubbard & Power, 1991).

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Observing staff can be as simple as briefly recording interactions and conversations between staff and youth, noting tensions, difficulties, and dilemmas that surface. The observations can be recorded casually and unobtrusively; it takes only a few minutes to jot notes that include facts as well as assumptions and opinions. The notes will be collected for use in strategy 3 and may be shared with staff in strategy 4.

Action research in the ASM Fellowship required observations and interviews. My research included a set of observations of staff and supervisors at a local Boys & Girls Club, in which I collected information and noted my opinions about interactions between staff and supervisors. Then I interviewed supervisory staff in this and other programs, asking about the skills and perspectives that make the biggest difference to new managers. The readings assigned to us in the ASM Fellowship about how to interview and how to record observations (Hubbard & Power, 1991; Patton, 1982) were invaluable.

Youth work supervisors who set aside 15–25 minutes twice a week to record quick entries would, over the course of six months, acquire a substantial amount of data. At this point, building the collection of observations and interviews is more important than analyzing the data, which is the task of strategy 3. When these data are placed in the action-reflection cycle (Figure 1), they set the stage for supervisors to reflect on the issues identified and consider how to craft new actions to address them. Looking back at observation and interview notes collected over an extended period of time helps to illuminate issues and dilemmas.

Strategy 3. Identify Themes and Reflect on Issues

The third strategy involves identifying themes and reflecting on the issues that emerge from strategies 1 and 2 in order to find the issues to raise with staff in strategy 4.

Strategies 1 and 2 will result in the collection of a great deal of data. Strategy 3 is the time to stand back and take the view from the balcony above the dance floor of daily activity, watching for patterns and checking interpretations (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

Strategy 3 starts with collecting all the data notes and spreading them out on a table. Supervisors begin to make sense of the data by reviewing the collection, searching for similarities, differences, and repetitions. Ryan and Bernard (1985) suggest marking different themes with different colored pens to begin analyzing the content. The voluminous raw data can be organized into color-coded groupings with major themes, categories, and illustrative case examples extracted through content analysis, as described by Patton (1990). This process is like interviewing the data—asking what goes together, organizing color-coded note cards to identify where questions emerge, and looking for commonalities and interpretations.

As our ASM Fellowship cohort gathered and interpreted our qualitative data, we learned that everything is potentially data. The data I collected on supervision practices included not only notes on interviews with supervisors and on observations of staff-youth interactions, but also notes on self-reflections, research by others in the field, notes from focus groups, and workshop evaluation comments. Other types of data for other fellowship projects included transcripts, case studies, journal entries, phone conversation notes, e-mails, texts, performance evaluations, student work, assessment results, and photos. Many sources can be considered qualitative data.

I transferred the data I collected through observations and interviews at the Boys & Girls Club onto note cards that I could shuffle around and color-code into themes, re-arranging the groupings to see where the data suggested an interpretation. This collating and theme-building process took a block of time, but when I laid out all the data and started color-coding common ideas, within an hour I experienced an "aha" moment as themes emerged. The specific themes that emerged from my data were:

- There is value in having a network of peers in youth work supervision.
- The shortage of resources in youth work has a significant impact on staff.
- Youth work supervisors play a critical role in supporting staff, enhancing their ownership and loyalty, and ensuring that their work has an impact.

These themes informed the development of my action research strategies for youth work supervisors. When the results of the qualitative data analysis are put in the action-reflection cycle (Figure 1), continuous improvement begins. Reflecting on the observations can lead to new actions and directions.

> Sharing the themes that emerged from observations and interviews with staff opens the door for interactions that set new directions.

Strategy 4. Take the Issues to the Staff

In strategy 4, supervisors incorporate the issues identified in strategy 3 into internal staff development interactions such as staff meetings, one-on-one meetings, or learning circles. Sharing the themes that emerged from observations and interviews with staff opens the door for interactions that set new directions.

If the current staff meeting structure allows for professional development, supervisors could share practical issues that were illuminated by the qualitative data, working with staff to wrestle with those issues. This work can lead to new ideas for practice in the organization. If staff meetings do not include professional development time, supervisors might add time or consider a new vehicle, perhaps based on an idea from one of the

outside resources discovered in strategy 1. Though time and money will always be short, this approach has the potential to involve staff in creating solutions to common issues.

For my purposes, I used strategy 4 to incorporate my data into a workshop curriculum for the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. The workshop, Leadership Matters, provides a wide variety of resources for youth work supervisors, a small part of which includes the five suggested strategies and the action-reflection cycle.

Youth work supervisors can reflect on which staff-supervisor interactions will encourage staff to think broadly, reflectively, and strategically about program issues. The interaction can enhance rapport between supervisors and staff. Supervisors can show staff how the action-reflection cycle helps the group identify new strategies. Staff members can try it out, setting new directions, observing and evaluating the changes, and then modifying the approach based on what they learn. Optimism about supervisors' willingness to try new approaches based on qualitative data may be a key to increased staff engagement.

Strategy 5. Coach and Mentor Staff

Strategy 5 involves coaching and mentoring staff about the themes, dilemmas, and issues that emerge in strategy 3. Staff members need to learn why, when, and how to implement the new directions they identified in strategy 4. Supervisors focused on developing staff maximize talents and resources, build power by sharing power, coach and mentor to create power in others and to increase the leadership capacity of the whole group, and build confidence by setting goals and providing performance feedback (Turning Point Program, 2006).

This perspective can help supervisors engage with staff to patiently and reflectively guide the action-reflection cycle through implementation and then evaluation. Modifications to new directions will emerge, perpetuating the action-reflection cycle. During this process, supervisors' accessibility will affect employee satisfaction (Bryant, 2011), a necessary ingredient in the ability to implement new ideas.

Supervisors who explore a variety of ways to support and mentor staff are likely to more fully engage staff in crafting new directions. The range of internal professional development opportunities includes "on-going informal resources such as newsletters, on-line discussion boards, and 'brown bag' lunches for staff members to share ideas and expertise" (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006, p. 1). Developing staff involves bringing out the best in others (Turning Point Program, 2006). Supervisors who take a coaching and mentoring role will ensure that the suggested strategies and the action-reflection cycle are meaningful to staff in their particular work environment.

One of the youth work supervisors I interviewed in developing these strategies said that she started viewing herself as a coach and mentor rather than strictly as a supervisor focused on corrective action. She began to explore resources that would help her learn how to coach and mentor staff; more importantly, she shifted her expectations to model reflective practice herself and to become more accessible to staff. A focus on developing strengths and talents, as well as providing opportunities for staff to engage in the process, are key.

Action Research as a Tool for Organizational Improvement

These suggested strategies are intended to empower youth work supervisors to try some concrete tools. They encourage a strategic, reflective, and proactive approach to supervision.Though time and resources are undoubtedly short, making action research part of organizational practice has powerful potential for continuous improvement. Not only will supervisors improve their own practice, but they will also engage in meaningful analysis of their organization. Staff will become an integral part of solutions to complex problems. As issues are illuminated and addressed over time, the long-term implications for the organization are significant. The return on investment will be realized several times over in staff satisfaction and staff retention.

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NEW FROM NIOST

a new approach to accountability

Creating Effective Learning Environments for Programs

by Wendy Surr

Nearly 20 years into the era of results-based accountability, a new generation of afterschool accountability systems is emerging. Rather than aiming to test whether programs have produced desired youth outcomes, an increasing number of afterschool funders and sponsors are shaping more flexible, collaborative, and lower-stakes accountability systems.

Could they do even more? By designing accountability systems that fully embrace the notion of afterschool programs *as learning organizations* and by using research from organizational development, education, and youth development to create effective learning environments, funders and sponsors can help programs to improve quality—and therefore, to succeed in their goal of achieving better outcomes for young people.

Accountability in the Age of Outcomes

The 1990s, a time of national investment in afterschool, were also a time of increasing accountability. Passage of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 ushered in a new era of *results-based accountability* (Office of Management and Budget, 1993). Programs could no longer count delivery of services as evidence of dollars well spent; funders expected to see measurable youth outcomes (Fuhrman, 1999; Kane, 2004; Walker & Grossman, 1999). These outcomes were driven not by the goals of afterschool programs but by the interests of constituent groups that were looking to afterschool to solve societal ills ranging from poor academic

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performance to juvenile delinquency (Halpern, 2005). To ensure the value of their investments, many funders created accountability systems to test whether programs were producing the desired youth outcomes.

Eager for new private and public dollars, many afterschool programs began collecting data on youth's standardized test scores, grades, school attendance, and delinquency records, even when these outcomes didn't align with what programs were trying to accomplish. As large cities expanded the numbers of afterschool slots and sites, compliance led to creation of large-scale data management systems, new technologies such as swipe cards, and new mechanisms for gaining access to public school records. Some afterschool programs created administrative positions dedicated solely to managing youth outcome data (Fiester, 2004).

Just a few years into the outcomes accountability era, warning signals emerged. Researchers questioned whether the outcomes chosen by funders were appropriate, realistic, or even desirable goals for afterschool programs. Some expressed concern that funders hadn't acknowledged the supports programs would need to yield the results funders were looking for (Walker & Grossman, 1999). Others argued that outcomes measurement offered an opportunity for programs to focus on learning and improvement toward outcomes that were meaningful to their mission (Schilder, Horsch, Little, Brady, & Riel, 1998; Surr, 2000). Despite these reactions, youth outcomes—with an increasingly academic focus—remained a key focus for many accountability systems. When funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) was included in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, afterschool programs became even more explicitly focused on helping at-risk youth achieve school success.

In his paper *Confronting the Big Lie* (2005), Robert Halpern railed against the trend toward an academic focus in afterschool programs. Citing the 2004 evaluation of 21st CCLC (Dynarski et al., 2004), which failed to show academic effects for participating youth, Halpern argued that schools, not afterschool programs, should be accountable for academic outcomes. Forcing programs to focus on academic outcomes sidetracked them from their true purpose: to support the healthy development of individual children and youth (Halpern, 2005). Similarly, an article released by the California Committee on Afterschool Accountability argued that afterschool programs should be valued as "unique institutions" (Piha, 2006, p. 8) supporting healthy youth development and a wide range of learning goals.

For many funders, results-based accountability has fallen short of hopes. Much of the research conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the aim of showing the impact of afterschool participation on academic achievement, particularly standardized test scores, did not meet stakeholder expectations (Bodily & Beckett, 2005; Dynarski et al., 2004; James-Burdumy et al., 2005; Kane, 2004). As researchers began to explore more deeply the relationship between program quality and youth outcomes (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Grossman, Campbell, & Raley, 2007; Miller, 2005; Raley, Grossman, & Walker, 2005; Scales et al., 2003), their results supported what many in the afterschool field already believed: that quality is essential to outcomes.

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A New Generation of Accountability Systems

As a result of the growing consensus that program quality is essential to positive youth outcomes, the afterschool field has renewed its focus on how best to improve quality (Granger, Durlak, Yohalem, & Reisner, 2007; Stonehill & Little, 2008). Rather than testing whether programs have produced youth outcomes, an increasing number of afterschool funders are shaping flexible, collaborative accountability systems designed to help programs measure a range of early and intermediate outcomes that are better aligned with program goals and to strive for higher program quality.

A key feature of these new lower-stakes accountability systems is a subtle but significant shift from viewing program improvement as an "add-on" to expecting programs to engage in self-assessment and to report on continuous improvement efforts. Though producing better youth outcomes remains a priority, funders using these new ac-

countability systems recognize that program quality and efforts to improve it are the essential means to achieving this goal. Many public and private funders are now integrating self-assessment into their accountability requirements. State-administered 21st CCLC programs provide some of the most compelling examples of this shift.

- In Massachusetts, 21st CCLC grantees are required to engage in continuous program improvement using the Afterschool Program Assessment System (APAS), an integrated set of quality and outcome tools developed in partnership with the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST). Grantees are required to share what they are learning from their APAS data. They must report on how they are using their data to guide program improvement and to increase their capacity to produce 21st century skills in youth (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).
- The Michigan Department of Education 21st CCLC program uses a "low stakes accountability and improvement system" (Smith, 2005, p. 5) developed in collaboration with the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. Programs are expected to use the Youth Program Quality Assessment for self-assessment and to demonstrate that they are using data-driven improvement plans and engaging in organizational learning.
- 21st CCLC grantees in Rhode Island are required to engage in continuous improvement using a customized version of the High/Scope assessment tool (Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2006).
- New York requires 21st CCLC grantees to use the New York State Afterschool Network's Program Quality Self-Assessment twice a year for planning and ongoing program improvement (New York State Education Department, 2011).
- The Colorado Department of Education uses the standardized Monitoring and Quality Improvement Tool to evaluate its 21st CCLC grantees. These grantees are required to use this tool once annually as an internal self-assessment for planning and quality improvement (Colorado Department of Education, 2011).

Funders that require programs to engage in self-assessment and to use data to improve their quality essentially have adopted a view of afterschool programs not simply as deliverers of services but as learning organizations.

Public agencies are joined by large private organizations in a trend toward promoting self-assessment and continuous improvement as core components of their accountability systems. For instance, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America strongly encourages its sites to use its Youth Development Outcome Measurement Tool Kit (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 2007). The United Way of America, one of the few funders that promoted a flexible, collaborative approach to measuring youth outcomes from the beginning (United Way of America, 1996), has for the past two decades supported affiliates to use outcome data in order to improve program quality (Hendricks, Plantz, & Pritchard, 2008). Currently NIOST is supporting the use of APAS by United Way affiliates in Philadelphia, Boston, and Atlanta. These affiliates are using components of APAS to help programs identify appropriate outcomes, assess quality, and use data for continuous improvement.

Growing evidence suggests that engaging in self-assessment can indeed lead to higher quality and be associated with better outcomes for young people. As explained by Weiss and Little (2008), self-assessment is associated with a "cycle of adaptation" in which afterschool sites collect and analyze data to bring about desired quality improvements as part of an ongoing process. Two qualitative studies (Pechman & Fiester, 2002; Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, & Pittman, 2007) suggest that afterschool staff are likely to view self-assessment findings as more credible and useful than results provided by external evaluations. Other afterschool studies have found that use of quality data motivates change (Akiva & Yohalem, 2006). Site-level engagement in self-assessment is likely to spawn changes in programming (Akiva & Smith, 2007; Harris, 2008; Smith, 2005) and, ultimately, improved outcomes (Sheldon & Hopkins, 2008).

Though self-assessment can help programs improve, simply engaging in self-assessment may not guarantee positive results. In fact, a study of self-assessment in healthcare names a number of factors necessary to bring about the positive effects of self-assessment, such as good alignment between self-assessment tools and desired areas of change, an open and trusting environment between frontline staff and supervisors, and constructive feedback and support during and following self-assessment (Bose, Oliveras, & Edson, 2001).

Afterschool Programs as Learning Organizations

Funders that require programs to engage in self-assessment and to use data to improve their quality essentially have adopted a view of afterschool programs not simply as deliverers of services but as *learning organizations.* Peter Senge (1990) describes learning organizations as dynamic institutions that expand their capacity to achieve results by engaging managers and employees in a process that helps them strive for personal mastery, create mental models, adopt a shared vision, promote team learning, and practice systems thinking.

A more recent interpretation of Senge's work (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008) suggests that organizations can be most effective if they create a supportive learning environment where employees feel a sense of psychological safety, are encouraged to appreciate differences and new ideas, and have time for reflection. In successful learning organizations, "leaders actively question and listen to employees—and thereby prompt dialogue and debate" (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008, p. 113). Organizational change must happen at the ground level, not just at the top. Moynihan (2005) suggests that organizations are more likely to learn from their data when "routines of data collection and dissemination are followed by routines of information use" (p. 203) through learning forums.

A look at research findings from studies in education (Eccles & Roeser, 1999; Pianta, 2003; Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Pressley et al., 2003), youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), organizational learning (Garvin, Edmonson, & Gino, 2008; Senge, 1990), and practitioner self-assessment (Bose, Oliveras, & Edson, 2001; Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, & Pittman, 2007) suggest that many of the practices recommended for supporting learners cut across disciplines. While there are variations in specific beliefs and approaches, three main domains of effective learning environments appear to be common across disciplines: supportive social environments, opportunities for skill building, and appropriate structure and expectations (Figure 1).

Accountability Systems Designed to Support Afterschool Programs as Learning Organizations

The new generation of accountability systems is bridging the arenas of continuous quality improvement and accountability. By acknowledging the central importance of quality, aligning outcomes with program practices, and using self-assessment as a driver for change, the funders and sponsors using these approaches to accountability are likely to produce better results than will funders that require afterschool programs to report on academic and other long-term outcomes for youth.

For decades, the field of afterschool has sought to support children's positive development by creating quality standards for developmentally appropriate environments and by executing research-supported practices for advancing children's learning. These same principles can support the development of afterschool programs as learning organizations striving to improve quality.

Figure 1. Elements of Effective Learning Environments

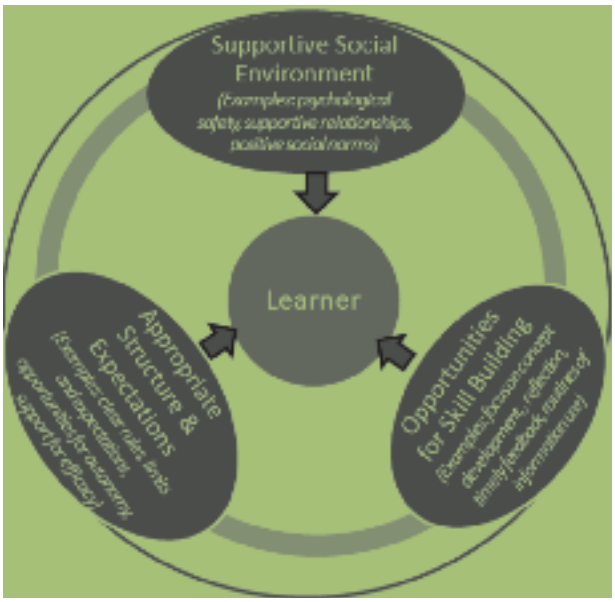
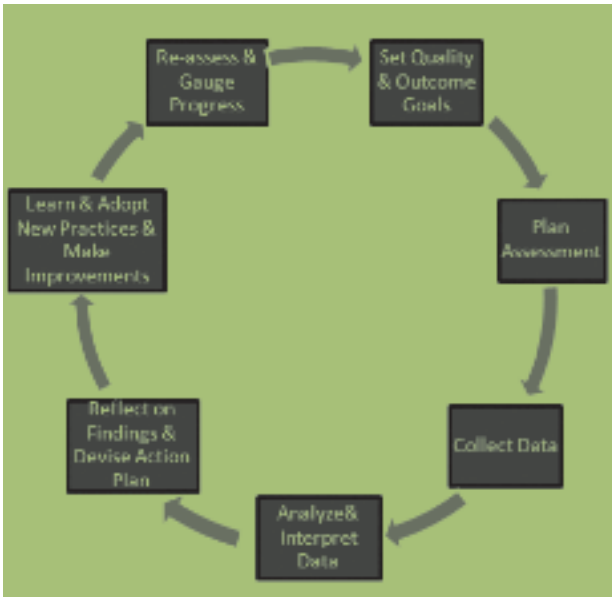


Figure 2. Cycle of Afterschool Organizational Learning and Improvement



Supporting a Cycle of Afterschool Program Learning

Many funders, sponsors, and intermediary organizations, recognizing that programs need to learn, provide support, resources, and training to help programs use self-assessment. However, if architects of accountability systems are serious about improving program quality with an eye toward producing better youth outcomes, they should explicitly embrace the notion of afterschool programs as learning organizations.

Funders and sponsors that want to support programs as learning organizations could begin by recognizing the steps of the cycle of organizational learning and continuous program improvement (Figure 2). Many afterschool researchers and groups suggest a similar cycle, whose key steps are goal setting, planning, data collection, analysis, reflection, improvement, and reassessment (NIOST, 2011; Sheldon & Hopkins, 2008; Surr, Behler, & Milla-Lugo, 2009; Weiss & Little, 2008).

Accountability System Elements to Support the Learning Cycle

Drawing on research in organization development and education, funders and sponsors, in partnership with intermediary organizations, could explicitly support each step in this cycle by providing the key elements associated with effective learning environments (Figure 3). Afterschool programs receiving this combination of supports are more likely to become fully engaged "learners" and therefore to execute the quality improvements needed to produce positive youth outcomes.

Figure 3. Accountability System Elements to Promote Afterschool Learning and Improvement

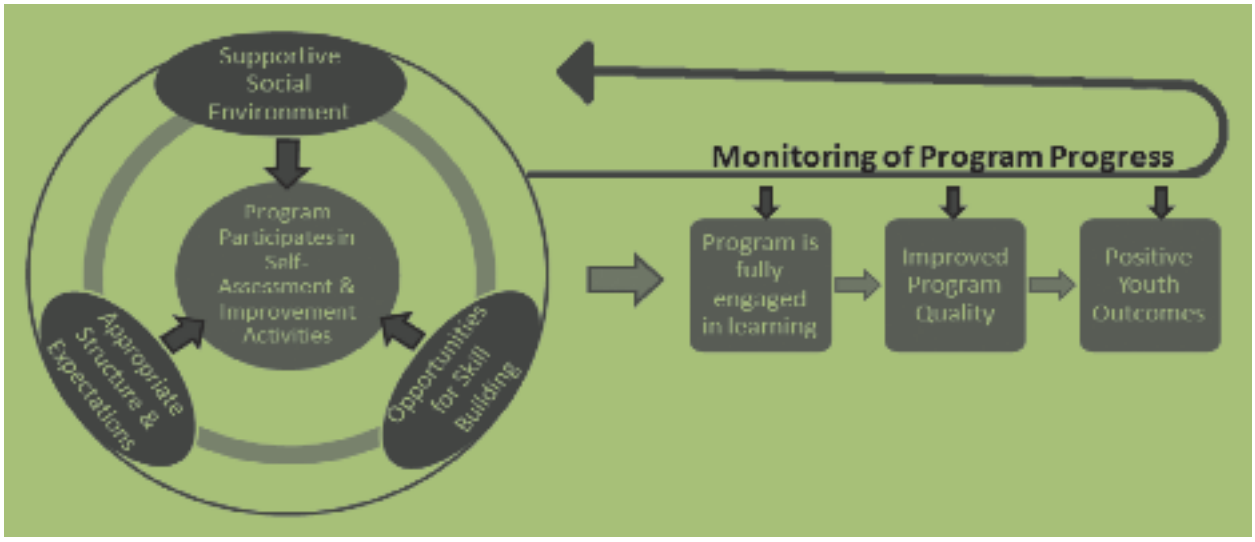


Figure 4. Accountability System Element: Supportive Social Environment

Supportive Social Environment

Research suggests that learning is more likely to take place in a supportive social environment (Akey, 2006; Benard, 1996; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Connell & Gambone, 2002; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Pianta, 2003). Afterschool funders and sponsors have traditionally relied on intermediary organizations to support programs by providing training, coaching, and technical assistance. This approach has many advantages: programs get support from individuals with true expertise in the field while feeling free to acknowledge areas of weakness without fearing loss of funding. Figure 4 suggests how funders and sponsors can retain their monitoring role while fostering a supportive social environment for programs.

Safe psychological environment. A lower-stakes funding environment, in which funders do not penalize programs for reporting less than desirable results and refrain from comparing programs publicly, may help programs to engage more authentically in self-assessment.

Encouragement, feedback, and problem-solving help. Program leaders need support, constructive feedback, and help with improvement priorities from an external, seasoned expert. Traditionally this supportive person has been a coach, trainer, or technical assistance provider from an intermediary organization. Funding that enables these external supports to continue will benefit program learning.

Opportunities for peer support and positive social norms. Many state and city initiatives provide peer networking opportunities. Funders, sponsors, and intermediaries can help to create positive social norms for assessment by, for example, publicizing examples of how programs are integrating continuous improvement into their practice.

Opportunities for Skill Building

Program assessment and improvement are not innate skills. In fact, the skills needed to self-assess, collect data, and interpret and use that data represent a completely different skill set from the curricular, instructional, and administrative competencies afterschool professionals are expected to have. By providing opportunities for program leaders to master these skills and requiring that they demonstrate how they are incorporating assessment into their everyday practice, funders and sponsors can increase the likelihood that programs become learning organizations, achieve higher levels of quality, and ultimately produce better youth outcomes. Figure 5 and its description below suggest how funders, sponsors, and intermediary organizations can promote program skill building.

Build assessment literacy. Many (probably most) program administrators need to build skills in identifying appropriate outcomes, selecting measurement tools, using data management systems, and analyzing and interpreting data. While many funders and intermediaries provide one-day workshops and general support for these activities, program leaders need more explicit, intensive, and extended instruction to master these tasks (Lukin, Bandolos, Eckhout, & Mickelson, 2004). One recent initiative, the Boston Capacity Institute, works with youth-serving organizations to assess and strengthen their data collection and performance management systems through a rigorous two-year support process (Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston, 2011). Such intensive and focused interventions are comparatively rare. When providing programs with assessment literacy internally is not feasible, funders could encourage cohorts of funded programs to pursue "insourcing," in which programs share an external evaluator while practitioners focus on learning to understand and use actionable data (Miller, Kobayashi, & Noble, 2006).

Figure 5. Accountability System Element: Opportunities for Skill Building

Help programs integrate self-assessment into ongoing practice. One of the more promising methods of self-assessment is observation followed by structured reflection and a discussion of practice (Seidman, Tseng, & Weisner, 2006; Smith, 2005; Surr, Behler, & Milla-Lugo, 2009). Yet few program directors know how to conduct an observation, and fewer know how to lead staff in reflection on and discussion of practice. Another critical skill is the ability to articulate clear goals and devise realistic action plans on an ongoing basis (Moynihan, 2005). Funders and sponsors can help by asking leaders to communicate their improvement goals, to create written action plans that are clearly linked to their data findings, and to articulate how they are incorporating assessment into everyday practice.

Help directors learn to lead improvement efforts and engage staff in the assessment process. To facilitate program improvement, change must take place on the

front lines where staff members deliver programming to youth. Funders and intermediary organizations should set the expectation that assessment efforts will engage frontline staff and should teach administrators to train their staff in self-assessment.

Provide professional development that uses research-based instructional practices. Too many professional development workshops rely on written materials, slide presentations, and lecture rather than using the instructional methods research says will engage practitioners. Adult learners, like children and youth, respond best to teaching practices that are developmentally appropriate, that engage them in interactive and cooperative learning, and that help them construct meaning and build understanding from their existing knowledge and skill base.

Appropriate Structure and Expectations

Research suggests that effective learning environments balance a high degree of structure, rules, and routines with opportunities for learners to contribute, make decisions, and exercise their autonomy (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Funders and sponsors are in a unique position to offer programs the right blend of structure and flexibility and to set expectations that will lead to success. The building blocks of appropriate structure and expectations are outlined in Figure 6 and below.

Offer voice, choice, and opportunities for contribution and decision making. Like children and youth, afterschool practitioners need voice and choice in order to engage fully in learning. Giving them at least some choice in selecting areas for improvement and allowing them to target short-term outcomes appropriate to their programs will increase buy-in so that the data collected will reflect program goals and actually be used to inform practice. When appropriate, offering program administrators and staff the chance to contribute to or give feedback on accountability expectations will enhance their motivation to meet those expectations.

Set reasonable expectations for data collection. When they collect too much data, administrators and staff have difficulty understanding and using the information (Fiester, 2004; Harris, 2008; Sternberg, 2006). If practitioners are involved in decisions about which and how much data to collect—if they are encouraged to limit the amount of data they collect and to articulate the research questions the data will help them answer—then they will be more likely to use assessment data for change.

Figure 6. Accountability System Element: Appropriate Structure and Expectations

Offer enough time on task. Program improvement must be recognized as an integral piece of quality youth programming. Funders must, therefore, provide money to allow programs to dedicate *paid* staff time to assessment and improvement. Otherwise, these activities will continue to take a back seat to program operations and other daily responsibilities. Ideally large programs would dedicate one experienced staff person to lead assessment and improvement activities.

Set high, achievable, and developmentally appropriate expectations. As we know from the fields of education and youth development, one key element for effective learning is communicating, and holding learners to, high expectations (Benard, 1996; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Learners respond best to expectations and learning goals that fit their developmental levels, are appropriately challenging, and can realistically be achieved (Akey, 2006; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Most afterschool programs will experience more success if, rather than striving for better student test scores, they promote appropriate short-term outcomes—such as youth engagement, social skills, and problem solving—that are linked to longer-term academic outcomes. Funders that set clear, high, and appropriate expectations for programs can motivate administrators and staff to keep improvement efforts on the front burner.

A New Direction for Accountability Systems

In the end, programs have to be held accountable for how they are benefiting the youth they serve. Given the overwhelming evidence that high-quality programs are essential to helping our children learn, funders and sponsors should uphold high expectations for quality, and, ultimately, for appropriate and realistic youth outcomes. But high expectations and accountability for outcomes alone are not enough. Accountability systems that embrace afterschool programs as learning organizations and offer them the structure, skill-building opportunities, and support they need to improve quality are most likely to succeed in their goal of achieving better outcomes for young people.

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