

## Theory of Action in Practice

*Claudia Weisburd and Tamara Sniad from Foundations, Inc. describe the use of a theory of change and a theory of action to help address questions about how to develop and evaluate professional development for after school staff.*

For 10 years, Foundations, Inc. has been conducting professional development in the field of after school. Most recently, we have expanded our professional development activities from training providers on our written curricula to developing staff more broadly in the contexts of their own programs, including YMCA programs, parks and recreation programs, and many others. Last year, under a grant from the C. S. Mott Foundation, we offered professional development to close to 1,000 after school practitioners nationwide in a variety of full- and multiday formats, including a series of 3-day Afterschool Academies. All of our sessions present after school education as a distinct form of engaging with children and youth and offer core methodologies to facilitate learning and development.

As we describe below, we developed both a theory of change and a theory of action<sup>1</sup> to articulate our approach, define our intended impact, and design a comprehensive evaluation strategy to measure the impact of our professional development programs. In the long term, we aim to change practice and develop staff as educators in the field of after school.

### Identifying Desired Outcomes of Professional Development

With help from the Bridgespan Group,<sup>2</sup> we modeled an overall theory of change (ToC) to represent our beliefs about how the

1. A *theory of change* identifies the process(es) through which a given type of social change is expected to occur. A *theory of action* maps out a specific pathway in that theory of change, or an organization's role with respect to achieving that change, based on an assessment of how it can add the most value to the change process.

2. The Bridgespan Group is a nonprofit organization applying leading-edge management strategies, tools and talent to help other nonprofits and foundations achieve greater social impact. Their work with Foundations was generously supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies.

professional development that we provide will lead to positive outcomes. Through the ToC development process, we identified our ultimate goal as improvement in learning and development for low-income children through their participation in high quality after school programs. The ToC highlighted that frontline staff skill is a core factor in high quality after school programs, along with other key factors, such as supervision, resources, and program infrastructure.

### Identifying a Focused Set of Professional Development Activities and Staff Competencies

As part of our ToC, we developed a theory of action (ToA), or a plan for how our actions will affect the desired youth outcomes. These actions focus on our methods for building staff skills, as well as the program-level practices and characteristics that help staff to sustain what they have learned.

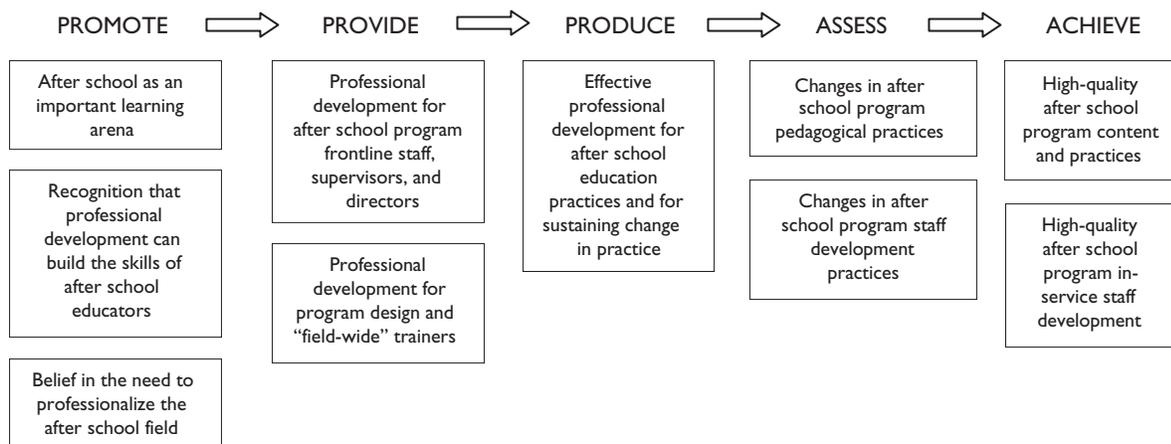
Our ToA pushed us to consider how to address staff who range widely in education and experience. We also faced the task of determining the fundamental competencies that define skilled after school educators. Unlike the field of education, in which instructors acquire an agreed-upon body of skills and knowledge via college curricula and supervised student teaching, an agreed-upon set of skills for after school providers is still evolving. Staff competencies that shape the content of our own workshops include competencies in linking to school content, building relationships, addressing the whole child, and using nonformal teaching methods.

### Identifying Indicators of Change

Our ToA helped us develop indicators to measure whether our professional development has effects on practitioner and program levels—such as articulated and substantial learning objectives, positive learning environments and relationships, and resources devoted to staff development. We plan to evaluate degrees of change and measurement over time and relate that change to program infrastructure to capture other systemic factors.

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### Foundations, Inc. Theory of Action



### Thinking Like an Educator

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also may be developed to more thoroughly document students' integrative thinking.

- *Consider the challenges and opportunities of taking such a course to scale.* The course will soon be required in several of our master's programs. This will enable faculty to explore whether and how the course works with a large group that includes many students who, at least initially, may be less enthusiastic about its agenda.
- *Repeat the entire process in the development of a second core course.* A new group of faculty members is currently engaged in the planning phase of "CoreCourse II: Thinking Like an Educational Reformer." This course will continue many of the features of the first but will move the focus from elementary to secondary education, include more macro perspectives (i.e., politics, economics), and explicitly address the work of educational reform.

We believe that students and faculty together are refining an approach that offers future educators a thicker engagement in a number of different disciplines and ultimately promises to further professionalize the field.

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#### Uncovering the Complexities of Evaluating Impact

Finally, the ToC and ToA process has highlighted the complexities of evaluating the impact of professional development in after school. First, direct professional development is one part of a complex system needed to improve staff skills and build program quality. Professional development sessions may be excellent, but without other parts of the system, effects may not be manifested or sustained in practice. Second, adult learning and change are ongoing processes, which may require a trial and error approach and time for ideas to percolate.

We are now conducting training in different "dosages" and with different groups. Our training content includes ongoing staff development to address the goal of sustained change. Evaluation data collected from close to 700 diverse participants suggests that this is the right track: Two thirds of our participants are responsible for training or supervising staff in their programs, and three

quarters say they intend to use the materials we provide. A key component of our evolving outcomes assessment strategy is to collect follow-up data to identify whether intentions are translated into sustained action. Over the next 2 years, we hope to better understand what constitutes professional development that produces change, demonstrate the value of such professional development, and move the field toward improving staff capacities to provide high quality after school experiences for children and youth.

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### HFRP Resources for Professional Development

A new guide for after school providers, *Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School*, has been produced through a partnership between HFRP, United Way of Massachusetts Bay, and BOSTnet. This comprehensive, easy-to-read guide is a critical resource for any after school provider looking to create or expand a family engagement program. [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/families](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/families)

The Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation Brief, *Promoting Quality Through Professional Development: A Framework for Evaluation*, examines professional development efforts for out-of-school time staff and offers a framework for their evaluation based on the work of Donald Kirkpatrick and Thomas Guskey (see also Questions and Answers, page 12). [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief8.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief8.html)

The After School Evaluation Symposium, held in September 2005 and sponsored by HFRP and the C. S. Mott Foundation, included a plenary session on *Developing and Evaluating Professional Development Efforts for After School*. This session featured panel presentations by researchers and practitioners, as well as discussion sections focused on the state of and future directions for professional development and its evaluation. [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/conference/index.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/conference/index.html)