Professional Development in Out-of-School Time: A case study in Maine

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Abstract

This paper describes a case study of out-of-school time staff members involved in a professional development opportunity entitled *Links to Learning*. 16 after school professionals from four out-of-school time programs in rural Maine attended this training. Four participants representing each of the programs took part in the research study intended to discover what impact professional development has on their practice and how the knowledge gained transfers to potential learning opportunities for children and youth in their programs. This preliminary study can help to inform Maine policy makers and higher education institutions of the future needs for professional development opportunities and advanced coursework for OST staff to benefit Maine's most important resource for our future – today's children and youth.

Keywords: professional development, out-of-school time, quality, best practice standards, intentional planning, student engagement

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Literacy and Creative Arts ~ a natural combination

In a rural Maine school, the principal (a former Maine farmer) rings a cowbell over the intercom and announces "The cows are out and so are you! Have a great vacation week and we will see you back on Monday!" Then the children are released to their respective buses, waiting parents, and for some very fortunate students, to a high quality afterschool program where smiling, committed and knowledgeable staff await their arrival.

On this particular day, I too await the arrival of the children and youth so that I may observe the afterschool program as Maine's School Age Accreditation Facilitator, in preparation for their upcoming national accreditation visit by the Council on Accreditation (COA). This particular program is one of 17 programs in Maine that has obtained national afterschool accreditation, and has reached the highest step on Maine's Quality Improvement System called Quality for ME.

This rural town, the school, the community, and most of all the families and children are fortunate to have such a program. The program director is a veteran of over 20 years. The program has its own dedicated spaces within the school building, which is a luxury for most school age programs in Maine. Because of this, the rooms appear child-friendly, and reflect the personalities of the children and youth who use them before and after school. In the K to Grade 2 room, children's artistic creations add to the child friendly atmosphere. In the older youths' space, the children actually plan the arrangement of the room each year based upon their needs and interests. In addition to their own dedicated spaces, children and youth have access to the gym to meet their physical needs, the school library as a quiet place to do homework or just relax and read a book, and a state of the art computer room where children and youth can play math games or refine their typing skills.

This afterschool program is not exactly like all Maine afterschool programs. It is a model for what other afterschool and youth development programs can and should be - a collaboration of supports and relationships between those who truly believe in preparing today's children and youth for the future. High quality out-of-school time programs do not happen overnight. It takes building relationships with school personnel and the larger community, it takes a talented leader with a vision, and it takes dedication from often underpaid part-time staff who truly love the

work that they do, and feel that they really make a difference in the lives of Maine's youth. Of the staff members employed in this high quality program, approximately ½ have been employed with the program for over 5 years, which is unusual in a field where the split-shift schedule requires them to work before the school day begins, and return again after the school day ends. Yet these part-time out-of-school time professionals are committed individuals who take pride in their work. In addition, they are willing to take advantage of opportunities to gain the knowledge and skills once the workday ends, in order to perform their work to the best of their abilities, and to engage the students in meaningful learning experiences.

In Maine, there have been limited opportunities in the past for professionals who work in out-of-school and youth development programs to find professional development related to the afterschool field. Up until recently, only a few curricula specific to working with school age children and youth have been available. In 2013, recognizing the need for professional development in the field of out-of-school time, Maine Roads to Quality Early Care and Education Professional Development Network first offered Maine's Youth Development Credential in coordination with the Maine Afterschool Network, Maine's Cooperative Extension (4H), Maine's Center for Community Inclusion and Maine's DHHS Office of Child and Family Services. To obtain Maine's Youth Development Credential, out-of-school time professionals must compete 135 hours of training including the following courses:

- Working with School Age Children and Youth
- Partners in Caring: Caregivers and Families
- Foundations of Health, Wellness and Safety
- Building Inclusive Youth Development Settings
- *Links to Learning* (developed for Maine by NIOST)

In addition to completing the courses, professionals must submit competency statements in a portfolio format as a reflection of their learning and competence in the areas of: guidance toward healthy relationships; child and adolescent development; health, safety and wellness; observation and assessment; curriculum and activities; learning environments; program planning and evaluation; cross-cultural competence; connecting with families, schools and communities; and professionalism. The Youth Development Credential (YDC) candidate is then observed working in direct care with children and youth, and parents are surveyed for their assessment of YDC candidate's competencies. The increasing interest in Maine's Youth Development Credential over the first year speaks to the need for professional development for out-of-school time professionals. For Maine, we see this as the first step in expanding the availability of youth development specific courses for out-of-school time staff.

Introduction

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of how out-of-school time professionals perceive professional development as impacting their practice, a qualitative case study was conducted of 4 participants who were taking part in a *Links to Learning* training as part of working toward their Maine Youth Development Credential. Through this study, the researcher also hoped to understand what, if any, additional supports are needed by out-of-school time professionals (beyond the training modules) to improve their youth development practices. Finally, the researcher hoped to learn how intentionally planned learning activities (such as those activities planned as part of the *Links to Learning* Training) impact the engagement and learning of children and youth in the programs where the participants worked.

Conceptual Framework

According to previous research in the youth development/out-of-school time field, the

out-of-school time workforce is not easily identified or understood. To begin with, the field does

not have one consistent name to describe the profession (youth development, after school, out-

of-school time) or what the work entails for those professionals (practitioners, youth workers,

staff members) who work with our children and youth in these various settings, which makes the

field difficult to research. Most importantly, to professionalize the workforce, it is important to

understand the various ways in which out-of-school time professionals enter the field, and

defining the qualifications necessary for those individuals who staff our out-of-school time

programs. As described by Patricia Cole (2011):

> In the space of an afternoon, an afterschool worker may perform many roles – homework tutor, mentor, athletic director, games master, role model, reading coach, top chef, bridge to parents, and above all, an adult who develops positive relationships that can change children's lives. Program staff is a critical ingredient of the quality of afterschool programs, which are increasingly seen as means to support youth development and school success. But what qualifications – education, training, and experience – should staff members possess? (Cole, 2011, p. 12)

Considering the various responsibilities of the out-of-school time professionals, as a state,

we must consider the ways in which we can most effectively support those professionals who

work in Maine's Afterschool Programs. The Cornerstone for Kids adaptation of the Forum for

Youth Investment's Workforce Logic Model (See Figure 2) offers a framework for

understanding the potential needs of Maine's out-of-school time staff in diverse after youth

development settings. (Yohalem, Pittman & Moore, 2006). Such an understanding can further

define the need for continuing to create and provide accessibility to professional development

opportunities and supports necessary to move the youth development field forward in Maine.

FIGURE 2 – Workforce Development and Impact Logic Model
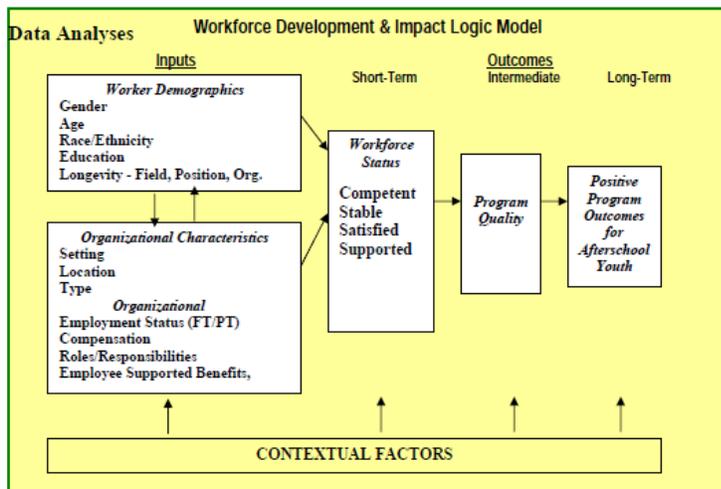
Adapted from the Forum for Youth Investment Logic Model

(www.cornerstones4kids.org. 2006)

Methodology

Beginning in October of 2013, 16 out-of-school time professionals from various afterschool and youth development programs took part in this offering of *Links to Learning*. The participants represented staff at all levels from afterschool group leaders to directors from four programs that were all part of one consolidated school district. As part of the training, pre and post surveys were given to all out-of-school time staff members to help the trainer understand the knowledge base of training participants, the OST program they represent, their role in the program, as well as their years of experience and previous training in youth development. In the post survey, training participants were asked about their interest in future professional development opportunities such as Maine's Youth Development Credential. From the 16 training participants, four out-of-school time professionals where selected through purposeful sampling to take part in this study. The research participants had also mentioned interest in continued professional development including obtaining their Youth Development Credential.

The research study participants represented each of the four afterschool programs. In addition, the research study participants came from a variety of educational backgrounds including a high school graduate, a practitioner with some college coursework, and a practitioner with an Associate's Degree in Early Childhood Education, and a practitioner with a Bachelor's Degree in a related field. Responsibilities in activity planning in their programs also varied among the research study participants.

Participants chosen for the research study were interviewed by the author/researcher beginning in January 2014. The researcher met the four research study participants at a place chosen by the participant, where they could take part in the one hour interview without being disturbed by alternative responsibilities. Participants were given information about the study as well as consent to be audio recorded as part of the research process. The interview recordings were then transcribed and coded by the author/researcher in an effort to gain the practitioner's perspectives of how the *Links to Learning* professional development opportunity informed their thinking, their teaching, and their understanding of best practices in youth development.

It is important to note, that the author of this article and researcher was responsible for overseeing the *Links to Learning* training as the Trainer of Record. What this means, is that as a new trainer was facilitating this training for the first time, the researcher also acted as the Trainer of Record, observing the newly trained facilitator on multiple occasions. While observing the trainer, the researcher was able to also observe the learning of the out-of-school time professionals at various points in the training. In an attempt to guard against researcher bias, the researcher did not engage in research activities until after the *Links to Learning* training had been completed. Another measure used to prevent researcher bias was member checking, having the

research study participants read and validate that their responses were adequately represented once coded and described in written form.

Key Findings

The coding of the participant responses described the impact of the *Links to Learning* training in three main areas: Participants as Learners; Participants as Teachers; Afterschool Student Experiences.

In each of these areas, themes became evident as a result of the interview responses that were similar among the various research study participants. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Findings Areas of Impact	Reported Practices Impacted	Participant Excerpts
Participants as Learners – Impact on Knowledge and Understanding	1. Learning information from training materials and seasoned trainer 2. Learning from other professionals in the field 3. Sharing of activity plans 4. Understanding of Youth Development	"I enjoyed it very much, I found it was a great way to learn how to connect the lesson plan to education as well as meeting new people in the same profession to share ideas." *Katie* "The training really opened my mind to see how we could include the domains in the activities that we plan to do with children and youth." *Lexie*
Participants as Teachers – Impact on Practice	1. Intentional planning based upon MLR standards 2. Variety of activities offered 3. Shared knowledge of attending training with team members of the same program	"It brought techniques to our staff, I find that it helped to make our planning process go much easier, and when it actually came time to do the lesson, it went easier and smoother." *Katie* "I use the planning sheet that we did. It helps me see what they (children and youth) are learning from the activity." *Dana*

Afterschool Student Experiences - Impact for Student Learners in the Program	1. Voice and choice of activities based upon student interests 2. Increased student engagement in learning activities 3. Opportunity for student reflection on learning	"We did a parachute activity that one of the participants shared, but we put our own little spin on it. We made it an open ended activity where kids were able to use their own creativity during the activity." *Sandra* "Now I explain to children when we are doing an activity, did you know this is science? Why do you think this activity is related to science? *Dana*

The following areas of impact are based upon the interview responses of the research study participants.

Participants as Learners - In this category, participants reported what they gained from this learning experience during this face-to-face training. Examples in this area, connecting with professionals in the same field, sharing of learning activities and ideas between training participants, and gaining resources from the *Links to Learning* materials offered during the 45 hour training.


Participants as Learners – Gaining Knowledge and Resources
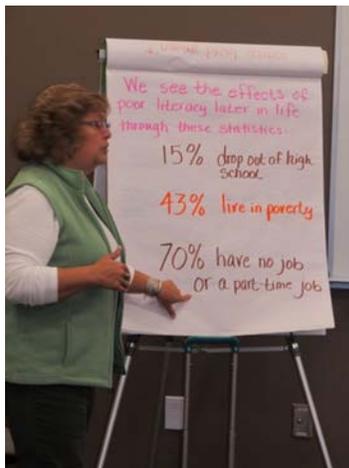
Statistics resulting from lack of literacy skills

Participants as Teachers – This category explains participants' reported impact of the *Links to Learning* training upon their own teaching practices, such as changes in the way they do planning or carry out activities in their after-school programs. (see Figure 4 - Blueberry webbing activity plan).

Figure 4 - Sample of Shared Blueberry Activity Planning that includes Literacy, Science & Health
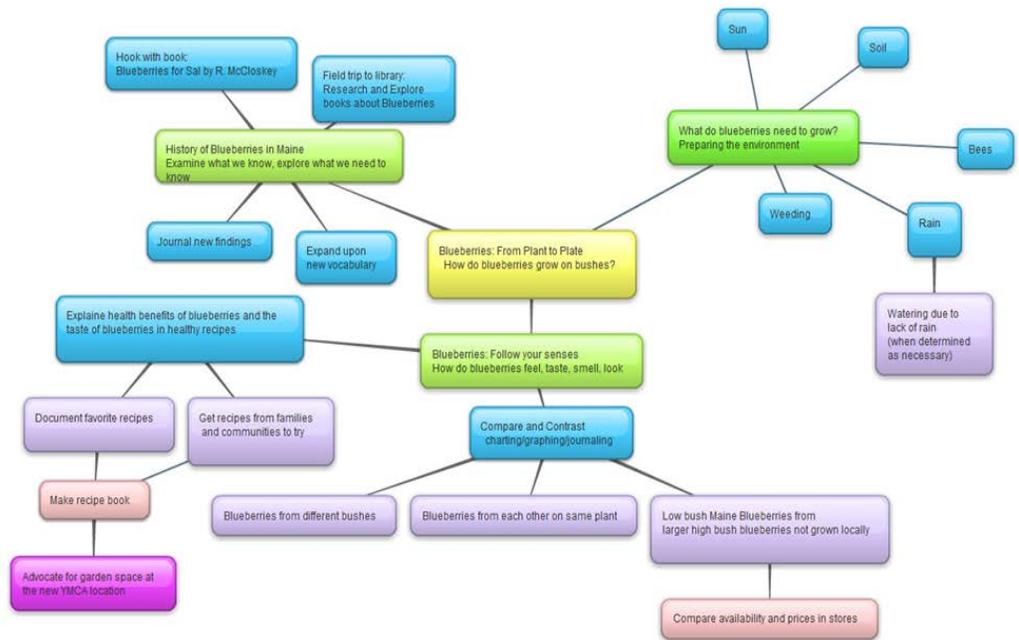
Afterschool Student Experiences – For this category, participants of the *Links to Learning* training reported how their change in activity planning and afterschool practices impacted student experiences and learning. Such effects included level of engagement and learning in particular knowledge areas which compliment school day learning.

Out-of-school time experiences

Math Activity – Estimating the # of candy corn in a jar, and weights of the pumpkins

With regard to each of these categories, participants described in detail ways that the *Links to Learning* professional development opportunity impacted their learning and practices, as well as what it meant for the children and youth in their program.

Participant as Learner

Benefits of Training as a Learner

Participants reported benefits in terms of their own professional development, learning new techniques from the training materials as well as their learning from the trainer and their peers in the afterschool field.

Challenges of Training as a Learner

Participants reported challenges as a learner during the Link's to Learning Training. For instance, time to fit the training and homework activities into their schedule due to other responsibilities were reported. In addition, for some participants the terminology used in the curriculum was unfamiliar to them and thus, reported as a challenge.

Continued Education and Support

Participants reported that they would like to pursue additional training as they work toward obtaining a Youth Development Credential (YDC) which includes the *Links to Learning* training as part of the credentialing requirements. Participants also reported an interest in the availability of additional support including working in groups – a "cohort" format including face to face and Moodle sites to work on development of YDC Credential Competencies.

Enjoyment

Participants reported enjoyment of the learning experience during the *Links to Learning* Training.

Program Activity Planning

Participants reported changes in the way they plan activities in their programs. Activity planning templates were used throughout the training in which out-of-school time professionals had to plan an activity in a specific domain, try it in the afterschool program, and bring a copy of the activity plan in to share with their peers. For instance, detail and organization of program activity planning based upon the template use were reported as a new learning process by out-of-school time professionals.

Shift in Perspective & Understanding

Out-of-school time professionals reported shift in perspective such as a new way of thinking about their programming, ways to promote program improvement, intentionally including educational hands on learning activities as part of their afterschool program, an improved understanding of youth development,

developmentally appropriate practice, planning from children's interests and individualized needs.

Participant as an OST Teacher

Knowledge and Techniques

Participants reported increased knowledge of youth development, new ways of thinking about planning activities, new techniques for detailed activity planning and providing learning hands on learning experiences that link with learning that happens during the school day.

Materials and Resources

Participants reported materials and resources from the *Links to Learning* Curriculum Guide as useful in their afterschool program planning.

Professional Peer Sharing

Participants reported benefits from peers attending the *Links to Learning* Training including activity plans that were copied and shared among the out-of-school time professionals. In addition, participants reported that the opportunity to share ideas with other professionals in the afterschool field as beneficial.

Technical Assistance and Support

Participants reported benefits available to out-of-school time professionals/programs in putting techniques learned during the *Links to Learning* training into practice. Such additional supports including coaching, mentoring, modeling, observation, additional training referred to as "technical assistance" offered by the trainer and the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development

Network's Youth Development Coordinator and Maine Afterschool Network Staff.

Understanding of Domains/Quality Benchmarks

Participant's reported understanding and comfort of planning their program activities in various domains (social/emotional development, literacy, arts, STEM, social studies and community, physical development and well-being aligned with the Maine Learning Results and Common Core standards for English and Math. In addition, participants reported comfort and understanding of linking afterschool activities to nationally research based quality benchmarks such as National Afterschool Accreditation standards, School Age Care Environmental Rating Scales (SACERS).

Afterschool Student Experiences – Impact for children & youth attending OST programs

Expanded Learning

Participants reported a positive impact for students as a result of their change in practice in the afterschool program. Participants described increased student engagement during program activities that were intentionally planned to link children's learning to one or more of the learning/developmental domains. Participants also reported expanding upon or complimented school day learning through afterschool programming and activities.

Individual Student Needs

Participants' reported ability to plan activities based upon individual student needs and interests, and to provide an inclusive school age setting.

Program Quality

Participants reported that as a result of the *Links to Learning* Training, the

learning experiences and activities that they now offer to children and youth has

impacted the overall quality of their afterschool program.

Youth Development

Participants reported benefit to the youth in their afterschool programs based upon

the participants increased understanding of youth development, the experiences

that typically developing youth might be interested in, the skills that typically

developing youth gain at various ages. Information gained regarding resiliency,

giving students a voice in activity planning and reflecting upon activities were

also reported as skills gained by participants that impact students experiences in

the afterschool program.

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