

A Dynamic Framework for Understanding the Complex Work of Quality Out-of-school-time Programs

by Kim Sabo Flores



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The Robert Bowne Foundation

The Robert Bowne Foundation supports quality out-of-school time programs that support the literacy development—engagement in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in order to better understand oneself, others, and the world—of children and youth in New York City especially for those living in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. We do this through direct service grants as well as grants for programmatic and managerial technical assistance, evaluation, advocacy, research and publications.

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Kim Sabo Flores is the director of the Studio for Participatory Evaluation and Development (The Studio) and has been working in the field of evaluation for the past decade, with a particular focus in the area of youth participatory evaluation. Drawing upon her training in developmental and environmental psychology, Dr. Flores introduces hundreds of adults and young people, their programs, and their communities to the empowering impact of creative and sustained participation, reflection and evaluation. In addition, she has worked with numerous foundations to help build their evaluation capacities, supporting them to measure their “community” impacts and progress toward achieving their missions. Her unique approach highlights the performatory nature of participatory evaluation and the contribution of performance to human learning and development. As founder and principal of The Studio, Dr. Flores generates collaborative projects that educate both program staff and their funders about ways that participatory evaluation can help to build organizational capacity. Dr. Flores is also a senior research associate in the Children’s Rights Research Group and has conducted several large-scale evaluations for UNICEF that examine the extent to which children’s rights are being implemented within various countries.

A Question of Quality

Throughout their 100-year history, out-of-school-time programs have focused on the recreational, artistic, educational, and academic needs of children in the United States. They have offered homework help, study rooms, libraries, sports, and hands-on creative activities that promote the development of “the whole child.” While many out-of-school-time programs used their own developmental approaches, it wasn’t until the mid-1980s that these approaches were validated and promoted by social scientists as quality practices proven to support positive youth development.

By the early 1990s, many community-based out-of-school-time programs were using positive youth development approaches that reflected social science research. During the 1980s, social science researchers had begun to explore why some adolescents adopted “risky” lifestyles while others did not. They examined the environments and social settings in which youth lived, environments that included community-based organizations and youth programs that attempted to improve the quality of life for all residents (Sabo, 1999). These explorations revealed that, whereas preventing high-risk behaviors was surely beneficial, it did not necessarily develop young people’s academic, social, or physical skills. The studies concluded that youth programs and organizations needed to place equal emphasis on helping young people understand life’s challenges and responsibilities while developing the skills they needed to succeed as adults (Sabo, 1999). This new emphasis brought a massive conceptual shift from thinking that youth problems were the principal barrier to youth development to valuing youth development as the most effective strategy for preventing youth problems (Pittman & Cahill, 1992). Rather than seeing youth as problems, this positive developmental approach views them as resources. It builds on their strengths and capabilities to allow them to develop in their own communities. This new understanding of and relationship to youth development resonated with practitioners. In many cases it mirrored approaches already used in out-of-school time programs.

However, by the mid-1990s, the increasing academic achievement gap began to drive radical changes. Government agencies, private foundations, parents, and school officials began to pressure out-of-school-time programs to step up their educational efforts and to relate more closely to schools and school systems (Halpern, 2003). Out-of-school-time practitioners were required not only to shift their focus away from the development of the whole child, but also to revert back to thinking about young people as deficits or “problems” to be fixed.

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While many out-of-school-time programs attempted to hold fast to their philosophies and practices of positive youth development, they simultaneously scrambled to hire and train more professionals who could help them meet the increasing academic requirements. Many simply did not have the capacity to make this shift in mission and practice. Thus, by the mid-1990s, many programs were in serious jeopardy of losing their funding.

At this time, I was consulting with the Robert Browne Foundation (RBF), a long-time supporter of out-of-school-time programs in New York City. The foundation’s consultants, staff, and board members, along with many community-based organizations, watched as innovative programs closed their doors or restructured their practices to reflect a more traditional educational model. RBF’s stakeholders had deep concerns about how these changes might affect both society’s views of young people and programs’ support for positive youth development.

As more and more government funding went to programs that were located in schools and focused on academic achievement, RBF considered how to combat the tide and rally funders to support

“quality” community-based programs that promote the development of the whole child. RBF staff and consultants began thoughtful conversations about why we believed such programs were vital to young people’s development. These dialogues encouraged us to question our understanding of “quality” programming. What exactly were we talking about when we said programs were “high quality” or “good”? We needed to examine and better articulate our values about out-of-school-time programs.

In order to accomplish this mission, RBF needed to learn from practitioners in the field. We set out on a reflective inquiry process that included multiple stakeholders and practitioners. What we believed would be a fairly brief junket turned into a five-year study. One principal question guided our inquiry: What are the keys to quality out-of-school-time programming?

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The Reflective Inquiry Process

The Robert Bowne Foundation has always valued knowledge generated by practitioners in the field. Therefore, a key component of our research was to develop a community of learners. This community included academics in the field of out-of-school time, executive directors and staff members from ten out-of-school-time programs, RBF technical assistance providers, and RBF staff. We invited these individuals to participate because they all had a strong commitment to developing quality out-of-school-time programming and were interested in having a voice in the broader field. Though a few participants dropped in or out over the five-year period, RBF staff and the executive directors of the programs being studied remained constant participants.

During our first several meetings, the learning community developed a set of principles, outlined in Figure 1, about quality out-of-school-time programs.

However, we were interested in discovering what these principals looked like in practice. Therefore, RBF supported a study of promising practices in quality out-of-school-time programs.

This study took place in two phases. Phase 1 examined promising practices in five out-of-school-time programs. It went beyond program practices to explore aspects of organizational effectiveness that supported quality programming. Phase 2 expanded on findings from Phase 1 to study the extent to which quality programs were bolstered by organizations that had characteristics of “learning organizations.” These characteristics will be defined later in this paper.

Figure 1: *Quality in Out-of-School-Time Programs*

Quality out-of-school-time programs:

Have deep roots in their neighborhoods. For example, children of immigrants might explore the values and cultures of their home and adopted cultures through literature, song, dance, and art.

Support children to *do things*. Children might conduct science experiments, do community service in a local nursing home, or builds boats and then row them on the river.

Are youth-centered. Youth provide leadership and take a central role in designing activities. Such programs affirm adolescents’ selfhood and solidarity with others through, for example, group sharing and service projects, or they might help shy pre-adolescents “come out of their shell” by performing in a play they have composed with their peers.

Integrate literacy into a wide variety of activities, from sports to career exploration to the arts and beyond. Such integration not only engages children but also shows them that literacy is not a set of isolated skills useful only in school.

Figure 2: Indicators of Organizational Effectiveness in High-Quality Out-of-School-Time Programs

Mission/Vision

- Program has a clear mission statement.
- All staff members know the mission of the organization or are able to articulate its basic premise.

Management/Leadership

- Leaders continuously find new ways to fund the program.
- Program has an effective budgeting strategy.
- Managers are involved in policy and advocacy for youth in the fields of out-of-school time and/or youth development.
- Program policies and procedures are responsive to the needs of staff, children, youth, and families in the community.
- There is ongoing resource development and management.
- Program values, philosophy, and principles are shared with staff members and are embedded in activities.
- Managers understand child and youth development.
- Program has strong leadership and management practices, including mentoring other programs, time management, planning, budgeting, fiscal practices, and supervision.
- Board of directors comprises members whose skills are useful to the program.
- Managers work well with board and use its members' expertise effectively.

Philosophy of Ongoing Learning

- Program has a philosophy of ongoing learning and improvement that is manifest in a specific approach or practice with managers, staff, and youth.
- Continual growth, improvement, and evolution are supported at all levels.

Planning and Evaluation

- Program engages in ongoing formal or informal monitoring and evaluation activities.
- Adequate time is set aside for planning and evaluating.

Policies and Procedures

- The administration has policies and procedures in place and provides sound management of the program.
- Responsibilities of each staff member are clearly defined in written job descriptions.

Staff Recruitment, Supervision, and Development

- All staff members are professionally qualified to work with children and youth.
- Staff members (paid, volunteer, and substitute) are given an orientation to the organization and job before working with children and youth.
- Staff training needs are assessed, and training is relevant to the responsibilities of each job.
- Staff members receive regular, ongoing support and feedback to build a positive work experience.
- In-service training is provided on site at regular intervals, and staff members have the opportunity to attend professional training outside the program.
- Regular staff meetings are scheduled and include opportunities for staff members to share ideas and resources.
- Staff members participate in self-evaluation and in an annual observation by their supervisors.
- Professional development is aligned with the educational philosophy of the program.

Methods

Phase 1: Quality and Organizational Effectiveness

Equipped with our new principles of *quality*, several members of the learning community—three RBF staff members and two technical assistance providers—developed a list of 20 current and past RBF grantees that we all agreed had high-quality activities. However, after studying the list, we agreed that, while all had high-quality programs, few had effective organizational structures.

This discussion raised an entirely new issue: the relationship of organizational effectiveness to quality out-of-school-time programming. The learning community agreed that only an *effective* organization could support and sustain a *high-quality* out-of-school-time program. We therefore read materials on organizational effectiveness, organizational development, and capacity building. Based on our readings, we developed a list of indicators of organizational effectiveness, shown in Figure 2.

These indicators were used to rate the 20 grantees that had been identified as having quality literacy programs. The three RBF staff members and two consultants, all of whom knew the grantees well, rated each program on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest rating, on each of the indicators. Inter-rater reliability was established when three out of five raters agreed. When there was disagreement, extensive dialogues established consensus. This rating process identified nine programs that had effective organizational practices; they scored 4 or 5 from all five raters in at least four of the six areas of organizational effectiveness.

In 2002, we invited these nine programs to participate in an in-depth study that focused on their organizational capacities. Research methods included:

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- Interviews with 18 executive and program directors
 - Focus groups with a total of 35 staff members
 - Three observations of each program

In the first year of the study, data showed that all of the case programs had effective practices in most of the areas of organizational capacity we had defined. Indeed, they exhibited most of the traits defined as *high-quality* both by the literature on organizational effectiveness and by RBF stakeholders. Reviewing the indicators led the learning community to make statements such as, “Yes, they have a strong mission statement. Yes, they hire qualified staff. Yes, they have staff meetings.” But it was clear that something much deeper was happening in these programs. Some underlying value was linking these specific quality practices.

For example, all of the case study organizations had a fundamental and pervasive commitment to ongoing human development and learning that encompassed both staff members and young participants. Professional development practices mirrored learning practices used with young participants, and all staff were seen as learners. In addition, managers saw their organizations and programs as entities that needed to grow and develop along with the individuals.

We saw these values and practices related to human and organizational development in programs’ creative approaches to both staff development and organizational learning. During interviews with key stakeholders, one executive director stated:

I think our program works well because it is really democratic. It really values the work of the people in the program. We don't have a top down management structure. Much of our planning happens in a very participatory way. As a result, the staff are very invested and stay a long time, making many contributions. This models the way in which we work with children. I think it is about valuing the contribution of all of the people involved.

Intrigued by the findings from Phase 1, the learning community became interested in the ways in which organizations were supporting personal and organizational learning and development.

Phase 2: Learning Organizations

The findings from Phase 1 elicited a number of questions that we wanted to address in Phase 2:

- How and why had these organizations developed these philosophies and practices?
- What could we learn about these practices that might support other organizations to learn and grow?
- Could these practices support a new understanding of organizational effectiveness for the field of out-of-school-time learning?

The learning community agreed that only an effective organization could support and sustain a high-quality out-of-school-time program.

Phase 2 of the research, conducted 2003–2005, included a more thorough examination of professional development and organizational learning practices. This information was of particular interest to RBF because of its long-standing commitment to building organizational and program capacities. RBF offers multiple professional development opportunities, trainings, and workshops; it also provides long-term management and programmatic support. RBF wanted to better understand the constructs that support ongoing organizational learning and growth.

Organizations were selected for Phase 2 of the study based on the same set of criteria defined for Phase I related to program quality and organizational effectiveness and on their ability to incorporate a broad range of technical assistance into their program practices. Three RBF consultants and technical assistance providers, each having worked with RBF grantees for many years and each with strong knowledge of those organizations most able to use the TA providers' services were part of the selection committed for Phase two case studies.

In a rapidly changing society and economy, Senge (1990) argues, organizations need the flexibility to grow continuously.

Not surprisingly, all nine grantees chosen for Phase 1 of this research were considered for Phase 2. However, four programs were eliminated because they were not operating as typical afterschool programs. Some operated only during the summer; others were programs that also provided technical assistance to build the capacities of other afterschool programs. The four programs were also significantly different from the programs that provided direct services to children in afterschool, so that direct comparisons would have been difficult. Two other programs lost their funding and closed due to the challenging funding climate in New York City. This left three programs from Phase 1 that were available to participate in Phase 2. We therefore considered two additional grantee programs for inclusion. Both were a good fit for the study because they had quality afterschool programs and high levels of organizational effectiveness (based on indicators developed in Phase I) and were exceptional at integrating their learning from technical assistance on capacity building in to their program practices and structures. Including these two organizations gave us a total of five case study sites for Phase 2.

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Executive directors and staff members from each of these organizations were invited to become part of our learning community; they participated in all sessions in which research data and findings were reviewed and analyzed. For Phase 2, we used the same site visit structure employed in Phase 1: interviews with executive directors and directors, staff focus groups, and observations. All 12 executive directors and program directors were interviewed, and all 55 staff members participated in focus groups.

However, the learning community felt it was important to use Phase 2 to look outside the traditional paradigms for understanding out-of-school-time programs in order to explore new models and frameworks of success. Phase 2 methodological instruments were designed using Peter Senge's five disciplines of a learning organization as articulated in his books, particularly *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). According to Senge, learning organizations are:

...organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. (p. 3)

Figure 3: Learning Organizations

From Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990)

Systems Thinking: Ability to think and operate systemically, to comprehend and address the whole organization as a dynamic process rather than in terms of its individual parts.

Personal Mastery: The discipline of “continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively” (p. 7). “Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs” (p. 139). Personal mastery is not just a competence or a skill; rather it is an ongoing process of learning, a lifelong discipline of growth and development.

Mental Models: Ability to unearth the mental models held by staff members and hold them under rigorous scrutiny. Opportunities for “learningful conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others” (p. 9).

Shared Visions: Ability to unearth shared “pictures of the future” that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance (p. 9).

Team Learning: “The process of aligning and developing the capacities of a team to create the results its members truly desire” (p. 236). When people learn together as a team, they move beyond personal mastery or shared vision toward a whole. In this way, the individual is no longer seen as the primary unit of learning or growth; rather, learning is understood as a group or team activity that supports individual and organizational learning.

In a rapidly changing society and economy, Senge (1990) argues, organizations need the flexibility to grow continuously. He challenges his audience to think past “survival learning” or “adaptive learning” toward “generative learning,” in which the learning enhances the capacity to create. Senge articulates five disciplines that characterize generative learning organizations. All five concern a “shift of mind from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future” (Senge, 1990, p. 69). The five disciplines are:

- Systems thinking
- Personal mastery
- Mental models
- Shared vision
- Team learning

RBF staff and stakeholders considered these five disciplines to be an important framework for understanding ongoing organizational learning (see Figure 3).

Research Findings

Phase 2 of the study yielded several key findings related both to the unique attributes of these organizations and to their outcomes.

As unique organizational attributes, we found that:

- Case study organizations developed into learning organizations by using positive youth development strategies.
- Each of the case study organizations exhibited five key characteristics, similar but not identical to Senge's five disciplines, that buttressed ongoing organizational learning.

These attributes contributed to the following organizational outcomes.

- Staff in each of the case study sites reported high levels of personal fulfillment. Therefore, staff retention levels were extremely high; the average length of employment was five years.
- The level and intensity of ongoing professional development in these out-of-school-time organizations meant that staff members were highly trained and qualified for their jobs.

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- Because the activities in these case study organizations were continually created and re-created based on the passions and interests of the staff, the programs tended to be unique and innovative.

Unique Organizational Attributes

Positive Youth Development Strategies

The idea of the *learning organization* is becoming synonymous with *organizational effectiveness* (Karash, 2002; Senge, 1990; Wheatley, 2006). In this post-modern world of continuous change, there are no clear paths to success. Ongoing learning processes are paramount to continued effectiveness (Karash, 2002).

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Given this new paradigm of organizational effectiveness, it is not surprising to find that highly effective organizations with high-quality out-of-school-time programs are also learning organizations. However, not one of the program leaders had ever heard the phrase *learning organization*, nor did they know of Peter Senge. Rather, these organizations were using *positive youth development* practices and theories to support the development of the organization and its staff members.

While learning organizations and positive youth development would seem to have little in common, upon examination they show many similarities. For example, both:

- Are concerned with the relationship between individual and organizational growth. In other words, they employ a systemic understanding of development that focuses on the simultaneous growth of the organization, programs, staff, and youth.
- Focus on building systems and environments to support growth. For example, safe environments are often developed to promote positive risk-taking.
- Are committed to strong, flexible teams.
- Believe in open, critical, and reflective discourse.
- Value the unique contributions of individuals while requesting even greater levels of personal mastery. Staff members are supported to build on their assets and to explore new understandings of who they are and what they are capable of, both individually and collectively.

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Within case study organizations it was clear that there was a strong relationship between the quality of the out of school time program and the overall effectiveness of the organization. In other words, all staff members, from the executive leadership to line staff, were employing these quality youth development approaches throughout the organization.

Five Unique Attributes

Because case study organizations did not use learning organization theory, their practices, while related to learning organization theory, did not map directly onto its structures. The research findings therefore required a new theoretical frame. To more accurately understand the work being done by these organizations, two theories were used as an analytical framework: Senge's (1990) five disci-

plines of a learning organization and positive youth development practices, underpinned by socio-cultural theory (Honig & McDonald, 2005; Holzman, 2000).

These theories of organizational learning and youth development were used as a framework because they both substantiated the five key characteristics that were observed in all five case study organizations and because it has been argued that socio-cultural theory provides a solid framework for understanding how positive youth development practices support ongoing youth development (Honig & McDonald, Holzman, 2004). Each of these unique attributes will be explored in detail below.

Systems Thinking

We live in a universe where relationships are primary. Nothing happens in the quantum world without something encountering something else. Nothing exists independent of its relationship. We are constantly creating the world—evoking it from many potentials—as we participate in all its many interactions. This is a world of process, the process of connecting, where “things” come into temporary existence because of relationship. (Wheatley, 2006, p. 69)

Case study organizations were seen and understood by both staff and managers to be whole systems in a constant state of growth and development. Leaders were just as committed to the growth of the organization as they were to the growth of its individuals. Staff members' comments indicated that they also understood the relationship between the growth of the organization and the growth of the staff:

We get to grow and change with the progress of the program. And we are all a part of all of that.

The whole organization's structure... that is why I stay. And I get to help create what it is.

Case study organizations had multiple structures in place to ensure that all staff members participated in developing the entire system: the organizations and programs themselves, and the children and families being served. For example, at the organizational level, most case study organizations engaged staff members in long-term organizational planning. They also had mechanisms in place for obtaining ongoing staff feedback. At the program level, all case study sites regularly engaged staff members in developing, monitoring, and evaluating the programs, often through weekly meetings and participatory evaluation procedures. At the individual level, several of the organizations required young staff members, who were often members of the communities being served, to develop personal goals both for their work and for their lives. At the client level, children and families were engaged in regular assessments of the program through surveys, focus groups, and conversations.

Shared Thinking, Critical Discourse, and Reflection

If an organization seeks to develop life-saving qualities of adaptability, it needs to open itself in many ways. Especially important is the organization's relationship to information, particularly to that which is new and even disturbing. Information must actively be sought from everywhere, from places and sources people never thought to look before. And then it must circulate freely so that many people can interpret it. The intent of this new information is to keep the system off-balance, alert to how it might need to change. (Wheatley, 2006, p. 83)

Many researchers have studied the relationship between evaluation and organizational learning, arguing that these two practices are inextricably linked.

In all five case study organizations, researchers regularly observed shared thinking and critical discourse as prevalent activities in staff meetings, professional development trainings, informal conversations, and evaluation practices. One organization, for instance, held ongoing discussions about what *literacy* meant to staff members, youth, and parents. The teachers had a strong commitment to questioning and re-questioning their understanding of literacy, believing this practice to be vital in building their skills. Through this continuous exploration, staff members became equipped to support young people in their literacy development, helping them to see how literacy related to all aspects of their lives.

A second example of shared thinking and critical discourse occurred in a program that hosted many conversations throughout the year about teaching methods and multiple learning styles. Program staff members were constantly challenged to reflect on their teaching approaches. During staff meetings and peer-to-peer observations, staff members were encouraged to think critically about their work in order to improve their practices—not only as individual teachers but as a group.

According to staff members, practices such as these valued and built on the experiences of all participants rather than being didactic in nature.

There is an openness here and opportunities to develop your own ideas.

You can develop your own curriculum and there are opportunities for you to grow.

Although all case study organizations conducted evaluations of their programs, most of them also formally used the evaluations for shared thinking and critical discourse. Rather than being seen solely as accountability reports to funders, evaluations were integrated into organizational structures as key aspects of program monitoring and improvement. Case study organizations not only commissioned outside evaluations but also spent time and energy building the capacities of staff members to conduct evaluations themselves. In all but one of the case study organizations, staff members learned to create evaluation questions, develop methods, collect and analyze data, develop recommendations, and write reports. All of the organizations valued evaluation and understood it to be an opportunity for ongoing learning and organizational growth.

Many researchers have studied the relationship between evaluation and organizational learning, arguing that these two practices are inextricably linked. It is probably no coincidence that all but one of the case study organizations were involved in a four-year evaluation capacity-building initiative supported by RBF. The one program not involved in this initiative was a science program that used ongoing inquiry as a key learning strategy for staff and youth participants. This program also was involved in a two-year participatory evaluation process that focused specifically on building staff evaluation capacity.

Strong, Flexible Teams

We are beginning to see organizations that are learning how to use the power of self-organization to be more agile and effective. There are increasing reports of organizations that have given up any reliance on permanent structures. They have

eliminated rigidity—both physical and psychological—in order to support more fluid processes whereby temporary teams are created to deal with specific and ever-changing needs. They have simplified roles into minimal categories; they have knocked down walls and created workplaces where people, ideas, and information circulate freely. (Wheatley, 2006, p. 82)

All of the case study organizations brought staff members together to discuss their successes and challenges and to support one another's personal and professional growth. More importantly, they worked continuously to build their staff teams. As staff members reported:

A big part of why we are so successful is because we have everyone engaged as a whole. There are a lot of people, and we are joined together and support each other.

People work hard, and there was a sense of camaraderie and teamwork.

We work in teams; we provide support to one another.

We work as a team; we push and pull, but together we get it done.

All case study organizations used apprenticeship models, either informal or formal, in which one team member was paired with another to share particular skills or practices. The roles were never stagnant. At any time the relationship could flip so that the mentor became the apprentice. While key staff members were often more advanced in particular skills and therefore able to teach and mentor others, during a subsequent session they might find themselves in the role of learners.

Two programs in particular demonstrated strong models of reciprocal learning. One case study organization supported staff members to develop their own areas of inquiry and to conduct research projects that would drive curriculum development. Each teacher, or group of teachers, worked on their own projects and developed activities. Then they tested the activities with their coworkers, who provided feedback to help make the activities successful. Finally, the developers taught their coworkers to use the activities in their classrooms.

In another organization, staff members generated curriculum activities to incorporate literacy into their art practices. They talked through curriculum activities in team and staff meetings and in informal settings. Once the activities were developed, teachers observed each other's classrooms. In this way, the teachers developed many creative and innovative activities. They learned from one another and guided one another's practices.

Building on Staff Assets While Supporting Continuous Growth

Vygotsky showed that development is created by social units, that learning and development are social-cultural joint activities of being who we are and who we are becoming. People learn and grow because they are supported to “perform a head taller than they are” (Holzman, 2000). In all of the case study organizations, staff members were selected because they had something unique to offer the program, whether that was African dance, music, art, science, sports, martial arts, or many other skill sets. The organizations immediately put these talents to use as staff members created curriculum based on their interests and passions. As they further developed their skills and interests, the teachers integrated their new learning into the curriculum.

In all cases, staff members related to each other as a “family,” or as a “community,” but most of all as “learners” who were capable of being and doing anything they desired. In this way, they came to understand their own power and abilities. Of their professional and personal development in the organizations, staff members said:

We are motivated to keep excelling and growing in our own fields, to keep growing as artists.

It is wonderful because you are expected to use your intelligence.

No one is telling me how to do it. I can use my creativity.

They find your strengths and use them and challenge you to be a better human being.

The leaders of each case study organization employed their knowledge of positive youth development to create structures that could support ongoing professional development. Most out-of-school-time staff are young, often coming from the local community. Case study organizations therefore saw ongoing staff development as part of their mission.

As staff members pursued their own paths of development, they were encouraged to incorporate their learning into their work at the program.

In one case study organization, for example, all staff members were artists of one type or another. The program supported their artistic study by, for example, giving them time off to go to classes or by finding resources to help them attend college. As staff members pursued their own paths of development, they were encouraged to incorporate their learning into their work at the program. One young man who was studying the cello created ways to teach literacy using the cello. In such ways, individuals’ development was linked to ongoing program development.

Another case study organization created a “program within a program” to support staff members’ job readiness. Rather than focusing solely on staff members’ current jobs, the program

sought to build their skills so they could leave the organization and move on to more skilled and higher-paying jobs.

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Creating Safe Environments in Which Risks Can Be Taken

When all of the groups’ members are given the responsibility of “Growing the Group” and of performing a “head taller” then safety is part of the work that the group does. In other words, the group cannot grow if the environment is unsafe, so the development of the groups is to create an environment in which the group, and all of its members, develops. (Holzman, 2004)

The practices described above support the development of safe environments in which executive directors, program directors, and staff members felt they could take risks together, try new things, and make mistakes. Staff members made the following comments:

My supervisor never made me feel stupid to ask him questions. We treat each other in the same way we would treat the public. We are educators and this is how we treat everyone.

We all have the same job description, so we improvise and help each other. There is always a comfort that people will help you.

This is a place where you can fail.

The executive director is so supportive. He is always there to support me. He allows me to make mistakes and allows me to be creative.

Organizational Outcomes

Clearly the case study out-of-school-time programs are effective learning organizations. But the question remains: **What does being a learning organization have to do with good programming for children?** It turns out that these out-of-school-time programs produced significant outcomes for staff members and young participants.

Long-term stability resulting from low staff turnover. One of the greatest challenges faced by out-of-school-time programs is staff turnover. Programs often have trouble retaining staff because the pay is low and the staff members are generally young and in a highly transitional stage of life. However, staff members in the case study programs had been in their jobs for an average of five years. They reported that they were satisfied and challenged by their work. Because of their ongoing reflection and evaluation, staff members could see and understand their impact on the children and their communities; they therefore found their jobs to be fulfilling. The staff members also valued the opportunities for personal growth and development that the programs offered.

Highly trained staff members. Another challenge for out-of-school-time programs has been the ability to hire competent and educated staff members. In the five case study programs, staff members were exceedingly competent at their jobs. In addition to being engaged in ongoing professional development throughout their tenure with the programs, many received bachelor's or master's degrees while working in the programs. Such learning opportunities supported staff members to use their existing skills while building new ones.

Creative and innovative programming. Program stagnation has presented another problem for out-of-school-time programs. Many programs offer the same activities from year to year, and students become bored. However, in the case study programs, staff members created activities based on the ongoing development of their interests and skills. The children and youth in these programs thus benefited from innovative, highly creative, and passionate programming.

The Ongoing Collaborative Creation of Developmental Organizations

What makes these programs high quality is not the existence of a vision or mission statement, but the co-creation of these statements with staff members and their participation in bringing them to actuality

Hierarchy and defined power are not what is important; what's critical is the availability of places for the exchange of energy. (Wheatley, 2006, p. 72)

The value of the approach taken by these five out-of-school-time organizations lies not so much in *what* the staff members create—vision statement, mission statement, curricula, activities, safe environments, and so on—but in the *processes* by which they create. What makes these programs high quality is not the existence of a vision or mission statement, but the co-creation of these statements with staff members and their participation in bringing them to actuality. It is not only knowledge but the activity of producing knowledge. It is not only the social roles being played, but the environment that allows staff to take risks and perform “a head taller.” It is not only the quality of the curricula and activities, but the process of developing the curricula

and activities. It is not only the number and type of professional development activities available, but the ways in which the organization relates to staff members as learners and supports them to grow and learn. It is not only the existence of a safe environment, but the process of creating a safe environment.

Most socio-cultural theorists posit a relationship between learning environments and the quality of learning and development that actually occurs (Honig & McDonald, 2005; Holzman, 2004; Rogoff, 1994). However, few theorists have paid attention to how such environments are developed. The work of Lois Holzman and Fred Newman is an exception. They argue that developmental environments need to be continuously created and re-created through “joint ensemble activity,” as development is the activity of ongoing creation of the environment and group (Newman & Holzman, 1993). “Learning and development occur by the ongoing process of creating environments or groups for joint activity, in which everyone can perform past where they are at the moment” (Holzman, 2004, p. 5).

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All five case study out-of-school-time programs have created processes to engage managers and staff members in the activity of creating environments in which learning and development can flourish. The ongoing and inclusive activity of creating these environments is what made these out-of-school-time organizations *high quality*.

These organizations related to both staff members and young participants as assets, seeing them as having something to contribute to the growth of the organization. Positive youth development practices were front and center both in programming and in organizational development. These learning organizations thought of staff and youth not as problems to be fixed but as assets to be tapped.

Supporting the development of such learning organizations can actually reinvigorate the shift that occurred in the 1990s with the advent of positive youth development, continuing to focus on assets rather than on deficits and on systems of development rather than on individual problems. The out-of-school-time field needs such reinforcement at this critical point during when we are being pushed and prodded to return to the old framework of “fixing” young people and “remediating” their problems.

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