"Who Wouldn't Want to Be in a Better Situation?": The Effects of Institutionalized Barriers on Youth Worker Expertise

Erica Van Steenis, University of Colorado, Boulder, erica.vansteenis@colorado.edu

Abstract: Youth workers perform a range of complex services in afterschool settings and in support of positive youth development. Research highlights that quality professional development experiences can improve outcomes for youth workers, children and youth, and afterschool programs (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). The wide range of professional development initiatives include continuing education and credentialing programs, pre-service and in-service training, and distribution of resource like newsletters (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). Scholars and practitioners agree that the field must offer more professional development opportunities for youth workers. While agreement exists across the field that youth workers must have access to quality professional, questions persist about how to best *design consequential learning experiences* that capture the complexities of the practice (Hall & Jurow, 2015). I advance the argument that professional development efforts would do well to consider the effects of institutional challenges.

Keywords: youth worker, professional development, consequential learning

Introduction

Youth workers experience a dearth of on-the-job professional learning and development opportunities (Huebner, Walker, & MacFarland, 2003). Yet, research highlights that quality professional development experiences can improve outcomes for youth workers, children and youth, and afterschool programs (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). The wide range of professional development initiatives include continuing education and credentialing programs, pre-service and in-service training, and distribution of resource like newsletters (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). Scholars and practitioners agree that the field must offer more professional development opportunities for youth workers, but while agreement exists across the field that youth workers must have access to professional development experiences, questions persist about how to best *design consequential learning experiences* that capture the complexities of the practice (Hall & Jurow, 2015).

Evidence of positive outcomes from youth worker professional development

Professional development initiatives typically follow a similar rationale: to expose a group of workers to knowledge that builds expertise, authority in the profession, and social legitimacy (Balzerman & VeLure Roholt, 2016; Quinn 2004). Huang and Cho (2010) drawing on past studies of youth worker professional development argue that:

> Professional development is important for retaining qualified staff because it provides opportunities for growth and can improve worker satisfaction. Furthermore, professional development increases staff efficacy and feelings of competency, thereby bolstering motivation and a sense of belonging in the program. (p. 11)

Indeed, the value of professional development ranges from the improvement in program quality to enhancing the sustainability of quality youth workers to improving outcomes for children and youth (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). For instance, institutions like Center for 4-H Development, Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers (BEST), and Academy for Educational Development (AED) have conducted studies on youth worker professional development, showing the many positive outcomes. Bowie and Bronte Tinkew (2006) drawing on AED's study report that "three-fourths of post-survey youth worker respondents indicated that training had a 'great deal' or 'good amount' of impact on their ability to handle the multiple roles…and responsibilities expected of them" (p. 2). In another study completed by the Center for 4-H Development, youth workers reported burnout as the main reason they leave the field. Professional development initiatives, this study found, could reduce feelings of overwhelm, leading to a more sustainable workforce.

Consequential youth worker professional development

Project context

The span of promising research on youth worker professional development informs my study of a school-district professional development initiative. In spring 2019, administrators from a school district in the Rocky Mountain West created a professional development initiative for youth workers (called site specialists by the district) in an effort to advance the wide-ranging goals of the district. At the time, the school district maintained 46 afterschool programs managed by site specialists. In the lead up to the professional development, two administrators named Michael and Farshid conducted a needs assessment of 46 site specialists and their site staff. The results of the needs assessment led Michael and Farshid to design a systems-focused curriculum, including how their staff and youth utilize the afterschool program space, how they structured daily afterschool activities, and how youth move from one activity to the next. A framework called Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) and youth worker core competencies informed the district's systems focus. Systems in the case of this professional development meant site-level program structures, including the way youth and staff interacted and used the space.

The district's professional development goals also drew from the New York Department of Youth & Community Development's Core Competencies for Supervisors of Youth Work Professionals framework (n.d.). This set of core competencies focused specifically on management level youth workers like the site specialists. According to this framework, supervisors of youth workers, who are often youth workers themselves, should adopt a systematic approach to ensure that all staff consistently embrace positive child and youth development practices.

Michael and Farshid designed 8 sessions, and they hypothesized that youth workers' systems and self-efficacy would improve through participation in the professional development. The systems focus drove the long and short term goals of the professional development efforts, including that site specialists: 1. increase their ability to effectively self-assess systems and student routines; 2. learn how to create foundational systems that effectively address students' social, emotional and academic growth with current resources; 3. identify and harness resources that allow for building foundational systems and routines that contribute to students' growth; 4. increase their ability to support and train staff within the system & routines to increase overall social, emotional and academic growth. In the case of this study, the district's projected outcomes aligned with research, which showed the positive outcomes of youth worker professional development including improvement of practice, reduction in staff turnover, and deeper professionalization (Huang & Cho, 2010; Zhang & Byrd, 2005). The goals supported district administrators' vision that quality professional development initiatives could retain strong values-based leaders and more fully support children and youths' social emotional learning across the district.

I partnered as a researcher with the district when administrators became interested in conducting a study on their initial professional development efforts. Together, we asked a wide-ranging set of research questions that reflected both short term and long-term research goals including: 1. What do site specialists learn throughout the professional development series? 2. What were the significant ways in which program specialists reflected on what they learned and how did they apply it in the field? These research questions focused on the centrality of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) – that the site specialists develop their belief in their capacity to facilitate strong programming and increase the effectiveness of their front-line staff.

A sociocultural view of youth worker professional development

As my research with the district progressed, I observed the necessity of a more expansive framework for analyzing professional development outcomes. Up to that point, like past research on youth worker professional development, my analysis focused on site specialists' personal learning based on their acquisition of new knowledge and skills – especially as guided by the core competencies framework taken up by the district. Site specialists, however, raised issues with the institution in which they worked – the school district, and so, I found that my analytical framework needed a sociocultural lens. Growth and development involve the alignment between peoples and their institutional contexts (Rogoff, 1995), so it is important to understand the types of institutional experiences that limit or support the consequentiality of their learning. Specifically, I utilize Rogoff's (1995) community plane of analysis and Hall & Jurow's (2015) consequential learning to analyze the outcomes of the district's professional development. Taken together, these frameworks advance the view that learning hinges on the relationship between the personal and institutional.

In their study of girl scouts, Rogoff (1995) and colleagues' (Rogoff et al., 1995) used a sociocultural approach to studying learning and development across three planes: personal, interpersonal, and community. Their framework illuminates the ways in which micro interactions are shaped by broader systems and policies. I use Rogoff's (1995) community plane of analysis specifically because it involves the institutionalized practices that inform people's participation in activity without forgetting the essential role of persons and their interpersonal relationships in shifting institutions.

Similarly, Hall and Jurow (2015) argue that in order for learning to be consequential it must be (a) historically contingent; (b) related to one's changing form of participation in a community of practice that is also changing; and (c) developed and acknowledged through interactions with people and tools, over time, and across settings" (Hall & Jurow, 2015, p. 176). They find that for learning to be consequential there must be alignment between the contribution of individuals and their contexts. Echoing Latour (1983), Hall and Jurow (2015) state that "powerful ideas are like trains – they run only where material practices have already created rails along which they can travel" (p. 177). Similarly, for professional development to become more consequential, youth worker learning must be considered not just at the personal level of self-efficacy. Professional development efforts would do well to consider how institutional contexts (mis)align and impact youth worker learning and development. I bring to focus the unique features of the school district setting – a less studied domain in out-of-school time research.

Methods

For this study, I employed a qualitative analytical approach, collecting participant observations, interviews, and survey data to learn about the nature and outcomes of the professional development effort. I paid particular attention to how youth workers described their sense of resourcefulness and adaptability in terms of knowledge and skill attainment. I employed a research approach that drew on participant observations, interviews, and survey data to learn about the nature and outcomes of the professional development effort. To design the data collection, I worked with Michael and Farshid, adopting an open-ended orientation to exploring what the youth workers learned and how they developed. The goal was to gather data from this first professional development to inform future iterations.

Participants

This study included four site supervising youth workers named Daniel, Barrett, Elise, and Ray and Michael and Farshid. Daniel, Barrett, Elise, and Ray each had years of experience working with youth but less experience in the supervisor role.

Data sources

Participant observation

I collected observations of professional development sessions, noting the curricular activities, facilitator roles, and participation patterns (Spradley, 1979). Participant observations primed me to learn more about youth worker professional development at the school district level. I typed field notes, paying particular attention to the effectiveness of curricular design, the challenges facing site specialists, and the reflections they had about their field practice. I also debriefed with Farshid and Michael each week, reflecting together on the curricular design of the professional development and the participation patterns. Based on these observations, we made adjustments to the next sessions.

Pre-and post-learning cycle survey

Michael and Farshid asked me to construct a survey protocol that could quantitatively capture the site specialist's views of their practice before and after the professional development. Their interest in such data related to their goal to offer future iterations of professional development. The survey protocol included two parts. The first was informed by Harjte et al. (2008) and Ross et al.'s (2011) use of the Working with Youth Competency Scale. The second included Schwarzer and Jerusalem's (1995) General Self-Efficacy scale. Survey data, even with a small N=4, highlighted youth workers' perception of their-knowledge and self-efficacy. Limitations included the small number of participants and a lack of a comparison group. Yet, this protocol acted as a model that could be taken up in future iterations of their professional development efforts.

Interviews

I constructed protocols and then collected and analyzed the data over a year long period. I designed the interview protocol in collaboration with Michael and Farshid. The interviews focused on participants' development of expertise and how the professional development contributed to it. Questions fell into the following categories: Feedback about the professional development series, application of site systems, on the job support, and self-efficacy. Example questions included: "Tell me about what you found most useful from the PD learning cycle? Why?" and "Who, if anyone, supports your growth as a program specialist?"

Data analysis

My analysis was anchored in interpretive qualitative methods, which Erickson (1986) describes as meaning-making processes of participants in context. This method of inquiry allowed me to focus on what site specialists described as important and worthy of consideration; I tried to capture site specialists "local meanings" of their experience in the professional development (Erickson, 1986, p. 119). The conceptual purposes for conducting the professional development, which I constructed alongside Farshid and Michael, guided my preliminary analysis of data. In my initial stage of data analysis, I focused most intently on field note, interview, and artifact data to make sense of the professional development curriculum, including the multiple activities and opportunities for collaboration. I used the constructs of systems management, self-assessment, and resourcefulness to guide this analysis of field notes and artifact data. I then triangulated patterns from the coding process with the survey data. I began by examining the self-reported increase in competency scale results, which showed an increase across all constructs between the pre-and post-surveys. The self-efficacy scale scores reflected a similar increase between the beginning and end of the professional development.

After learning that the site specialists had reported an increased view of their competencies, I revisited the interview and field note data. I drew on patterns that arose from the coding process – for instance, the site specialists exemplified routine expertise through their on the job performance. They also used adaptive methods of *flexible decision making* that exemplified their picking effective strategies to creatively approach institution wide challenges. I focused on the site specialists' participation in the institutional domain of their work (the school district) to track how institutional realities constrained and deepened their expertise. They could self-assess systems and perform the tasks of their jobs, but they also struggled with constraining contextual elements of their jobs. My initial analysis did not include an institutional lens, but patterns arose across the data indicating that site specialists faced institutional challenges. At this point in my analysis, I brought in Rogoff et al.'s (1995) conception of the community plane of analysis. I coded for how site specialists approached the institutional demands which they faced, including the challenges and constraints. Doing so, pointed to how site specialists used their expertise to adapt flexibly to institutional challenges.

Findings

The professional development led to a renewed sense of self-confidence in the youth workers, which they described in terms of greater control over site-level systems and adaptiveness in the face of challenging situations. Daniel, Barrett, Elise, and Renee each identified useful aspects of the professional development series, particularly those elements that helped them reorganize their programs to best utilize their teams and physical space. They also reported tensions and challenges related to institutional challenges over which they had little control, which limited the impact of the PD. Challenges at the institutional level became a common thread that frustrated the site specialists even as they built confidence in their systems.

Positive outcomes: A systems level approach

The professional development series yielded positive outcomes for the participating site specialists. Michael and Farshid's curricular design built toward each site specialist's implementation of a new "site level system," in which they were supposed to redesign an element of the programmatic structure that site specialists had found problematic or in need of improvement. They enhanced their programs by making incremental changes.

Daniel, Barrett, Renee, and Elise each approached their site level systems changes differently. Daniel worked toward a simplified hourly schedule so that his staff and participants had more freedom to choose how they wanted to participate. Barrett focused on the social emotional learning structure of his program by intentionally creating time for staff to check in with a number of children each day. Elise structured her program time so that her team had more time to fulfill grant obligations for their program. Renee used an organizational system for identifying youth by using a card with each of their names. A month after the professional development series ended, I interviewed each site specialists to ask them more about the outcomes from their site level systems changes. Each reported that their new approach yielded positive results.

Daniel's simplification of the hourly schedule and structure of his afterschool program maximized the time that youth could engage actively outside. The simplification included that his staff worked with different groups of children and with different programs each day. He found that this structure gave youth more voice and choice in how they wanted to participate across the program. His choice to restructure the program from his perspective led to his staff feeling more useful and less frustrated with problematic participants. The schedule changes helped to create more sustainable routines for staff: they interacted with different kids every day, keeping them fresh rather than dealing with the same children each day, and they gained skills working with different age groups.

Barrett's systems change included attention to children's socio-emotional coping mechanisms. According to Barrett, his afterschool program included many students who could benefit from "control and

management of their emotions in a healthier way than they are currently." The systems change included having each staff member check in with five students at the beginning of the afterschool program day. Barrett witnessed positive outcomes from the staff's continued check ins with five children each day. He highlighted: "It has definitely helped our 2nd and 3rd grade group, which often struggles more with it. We've watched especially 5-6 of them grow emotionally." The check ins led to quick changes and better relationships between staff and the children. Barrett noticed over time that the staff came to him less; he also noticed that staff checked in more with parents about both good and bad things.

A change in her site's tracking card system that Renee led to relief in the "bottleneck" and "hotspots" that she and her staff had dealt with for months. The afterschool program Renee managed included over 200 children that participated across multiple different programmatic contexts on any given day. These included afterschool care and enrichment opportunities where children could explore their interests. Tracking cards represented each child in the program and allowed the site staff to keep track of where each child was throughout the day. Renee found that reorganizing the card tracking system to have the children pull their cards as soon as she arrived lead to significant positive outcomes to programmatic flow and transitions.

Elise's program began to run smoother when she realized that "something as simple as which door the kids use can solve so many issues." She found that she used to "complain about little things going wrong in the program" never realizing "that it's because we never had a system in place. So, I was really complaining and it was my fault the entire time." Elise changed the schedule of her program so her staff had more time to fulfill grant obligations and provide more choice to the children regarding their participation at the site. Elise found that even though some parents expressed frustration with the changes, the extra time children had to play outside and participate in the grant funded program led to positive outcomes. This new system also allowed Elise to work with her staff more one-on-one to provide them with feedback on their performance.

In each case, the site specialists described a successful system change. They followed these explanations with an expression of accomplishment. They used the children, parents, and staff as markers of the positive outcomes of the system changes. For instance, Renee, Elise, and Daniel described that their staff experienced less frustration with new systems and expressed a sense of control and agency over their programs and staff. They all found that behavioral issues with children decreased, allowing their staff to move positively interact with the children. Furthermore, the survey results potentially reinforce the sense of confidence gained by the site specialists because of their participation in the professional development. They reported both a higher sense of self-efficacy and competency across all scales.

Institutionalized challenges
Discussion of institutional challenges came up throughout the professional development sessions, sometimes as an undercurrent to the official task or topic. These institutional (district-level systems) challenges included staff retention and turnover, space allocation, and licensing related issues that created frustrations for site specialists. Site specialists voiced their frustration with misaligned institutional systems in most predominantly in interviews.

Staff retention and turnover
The site specialists saw staff retention and turnover as hurdles to their success. Many of their staff attended high school and college or had other commitments, forcing them to leave before the school let out for summer. Elise explained that although her site level systems changes resulted in success:

> Elise: A struggle we recently had is staff turnover. I lost two staff members. So we're in, like survival mode, you know 60 kids and three of us. You know so we're kind of just doing what we can."

Daniel further highlighted the tensions that exist for site specialists when their staff leave earlier than anticipated:

> Daniel: I do understand that a lot of our staff members are like high school and college kids, and they have finals and stuff like that. And we talked about this in late April...leading into final's week, and of course we have people that are going to be requesting time off...to study more, even though we said two weeks in advance you know, that won't be granted…I don't want them to leave, because it's like if you, if they're good staff members you don't want them to go.

Daniel also recognized the challenges of being employed by the district: "it's a very part-time job, you know? It's like a rough shift, it's like three o'clock to six." Furthermore, Daniel and Elise's experience with staff show the potential strain that losing staff early in the year can have on site specialists. Across the district, staff retention

remained a priority. Yet, the strain of staff leaving early and the lack of authority site specialists can exercise in the process can perpetuate the problem.

Barrett described the issue further and a system for addressing the staff turnover issues, most especially the strain put on him as a site a site specialist:

> Barrett: I know our HR staff are continuously going through new resumes and they try to keep us updated on it but every time we go to hire someone it feels like it is a different process. I know there have been staff that have waited a month between getting hired and actually starting because of fingerprints. We have definitely lost a lot of people like oh I got a job...I can't wait another two weeks. I think this is a great job for people going to college but it has to be recognizable that these people are going to leave a week or two before school gets out.

Barrett believed that "only 1 and 5 [staff]will stay past a year or two…getting them past 6 month or a year mark is really difficult." These issues with staffing reflected the district's capacity and ability to hire long term staff that they could pay and schedule in a sustainable way.

Space allocation

During multiple sessions and across interviews, Daniel brought up the issues he had experienced with the utilization of space in his program. His school had consistently allocated the basketball gym to other parties like basketball teams etc. Daniel's experience with space utilization came up multiple times in the sessions, and he focused on his experience with displacement throughout his interview. He explained that at his school: "We get kicked out of the cafeteria, like once a week...it changes our back up plans...change every time. It's not like we have, oh, we don't have the cafeteria we're going to go to the library. Like we go to the library they got like 90 kids doing a music rehearsal right after school."

Daniel described that the leaders of his school and those who structure school-wide programming paid inadequate attention to the needs of the afterschool youth. Many people utilized the space including the community, and Daniel experienced a lack of communication information about scheduling. He went on to explain that this directly affected staff and youth's behaviors: "Staff are like, 'We're pent up in this cafeteria, we can't go outside, they can't run around.' So the kids are going crazy.... And then they're like, 'Why am I doing this job?' And that leads to staff turnover." What Daniel describes here is that his job would be easier if there were alignment with space allocation between him and the heads of his school. This indicates that Daniel is unable to focus on the youth and fully do his job because he is managing the issue and taking care of his staff and youth who experience displacement. When I asked him what this experience was like, he said the space allocation issues led to staff confusion: they "wouldn't know like when we're in the cafeteria. When we have all our space they know exactly where to go and what to do. And where to be and how to set-up how to break it down." The result of this for Daniel was a desire to leave the school and potentially the district. For Daniel, the stress of these issues began pushing him out of the district. He acknowledged his talent as a youth worker, but he believed that the institutional demands affected his ability to become a fully realized practitioner.

District level and licensing requirements

The ratio of staff to children challenged site supervisors as they worked to flexibly structure their programs. Renee described the district licensing requirements for ratio as "systemic" with not any one person responsible for challenging her as a site specialist in this way:

> Renee: Again, it's a licensing thing, like kids can't be unsupervised at any time. So if I have a fifth grader who wants to walk down the hall and have a drink from the water fountain, I can't just say, yeah, cool, take a hall pass, which is what they do in day school. I have to physically have an adult with eyeballs on the child at all times, which is hard because then you've got somebody stepping out and you know how kindergartners are. One goes to the bathroom and then it's dominoes...it is a little frustrating sometimes."

The district's requirement is also that a child can never be out of a staff's site. This requirement results in staff being pulled from groups, forcing Renee to rearrange her groups at any given time. Renee explains that she wishes she could give the children "a little more independence…if I have K through five, I'm pretty sure you've got a bathroom by yourself. She sees that for ECE, three and four-year olds, totally different." She sees that her program is less successful when "one person is constantly in the hall watching kids go back and forth to pee and drink, you know?" Renee describes the impact on her practice, nothing that she does not have the staff or bandwidth to

always cover the requirements of licensing. Although she intended to always adhere to the policies and procedures, her ability to do so was directly linked to her energy, resources, and perceived abilities as a practitioner.

Renee faced further obstacles beyond her control regarding district licensing. In our interview together, she described another layer of challenges she faced with district requirements, regarding her summer program:

> Renee: Again, they gave us too many kids over a license, but we didn't know that until almost too late. So, for example, we have some kids who are um, IEP or high behavioral needs. So, we have this kid, he's extremely volatile and violent...legit, almost tried to kill our principal this year. He is registered into our program for next year. For the sake of equity and the district's vision, collaboration, accountability, inclusiveness -- all these things -- we have to consider that he gets access.

The tension Renee described here is that district vision and licensing requirements directly contradict each other, putting her in a challenging position. She could deny access to the child with the IEP, but she recognized the potentially discriminatory outcomes of that choice. District policies required Renee to take on the youth, but she did not feel safe doing so. Renee described a struggle between regulations and professional judgment. Renee, who is an experienced practitioner, anticipated problems that could arise by taking on this student in her program without adequate supervision. She also knew that following protocol was necessary in this instance because of issues of discrimination.

Discussion and conclusion

The data show that in each case they had positive outcomes related to their personal management practices and program level systems. In each case of an institutional challenge the site specialists also describe flexible and creative ways to address the issues at hand. Barrett's well-informed staff hiring and training strategies are an example. Similarly, Elise utilized her staff intentionally giving them appropriate roles and responsibilities when she experienced significant turnover at the end of the year. All of the site specialists expressed an orientation of adaptability showing that their developmental capacity existed well-beyond the routine expertise of the job. At the same time, these data demonstrate the negative consequences of institutional challenges on youth workers even in the face of their experience with the professional development. The site specialists spoke about the trickle down of institutional structures and requirements that directly impacted their programs. Their cases highlight the space, staff, and youth related adaptability they had to exercise, but also feeling the deep effects on their practice. For instance, each time a staff leaves, Daniel, Barrett, Elise, and Renee must begin a new hiring and training process. Or, when Daniel and Barrett faced a reallocation of program space, they were forced to restructure the plans for the day. These disruptions affected their sense of authority in the district and over their domains. They expressed concern about these institutional challenges but responded in creative and flexible ways.

The positive outcomes reinforce the importance of designing quality learning experiences where youth workers can try on for size different approaches to their practice. I argue that while their adaptive expertise developed because of institutional challenges (Bransford et al., 2006), site specialists' experienced deep impact on their learning and development. The institutional context – the school district posed unique constraints on the site specialists' practice. Given these findings, I propose two combined approaches to professional development efforts.

The first is that professional development efforts include institutional level analysis and training modules for navigating institutional challenges What would it have meant to the youth workers to have their institutionalized concerns included in the design of the professional development? Doing so would provide alignment between the youth workers' experiences and their learning, making the professional development more consequential. Training efforts could include problem solving exercises about district mandates that are misaligned with on the ground programming, miscommunications between institutional leaders and youth workers, and various space allocation issues. They could also build youth worker expertise for conversing across domains and stakeholders in the schools in which they work.

Secondly, professional development efforts must be grounded and draw on youth worker experiences. Research on professional development efforts thus far has done more to highlight the links between training and program quality rather than capturing the voices of youth workers through qualitative investigations of their experiences. Qualitative research that evaluates professional development initiatives in such a way that is inclusive of youth worker's perspectives would lead the field to learn more about what kinds of professional development and training efforts are most valued by the practitioners themselves (Bouffard & Little, 2004).

In closing, this study surfaces the unique affordances and constraints of working within a school district. The district setting seems to offer professional stability in regards to funding and an assurance of programming.

Yet, there also exists precarity that reflects the broader field of out-of-school time programming – a general lack of investment and sense of value in the profession of youth work. As reflected by the stories of Daniel, Barrett, Elise and Renee, the institutional challenges they faced surfaced the constraints that could come up in school districts. Yet, their experience in the professional development series also showed a broader investment in youth workers, seeing them as valued staff who deserved quality training. We must value youth workers' experiences and take an institutional view of youth worker development to legitimize a historically undervalued profession.

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