The afterschool field is well positioned to deliver high-quality services and demonstrate effectiveness at scale because a strong foundation has been built for continuous improvement of service quality.

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Afterschool quality

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A consensus on quality

Following a decade of sustained investment, the afterschool field has developed a set of best practices, and the number of afterschool policies focused on quality has grown both in cities and in states following federal guidelines for quality improvement in 21st Century Community Learning Centers and school-age child care.[1] Emerging consensus on several core components of afterschool service quality is supported by innovation by afterschool leaders and a scientific evidence base. In particular, shared standards that describe best practices for instructional staff and site managers, and the application of these standards at scale through afterschool quality improvement systems (QIS), represent important translations of evidence-based practice into policy.

Evidence base

Because of the efforts of a number of leading funders, researchers, and state/local policy leaders, investments were made to identify best practices across prior studies and through new evaluation

and research. Although this process of validation is incomplete, we have learned a great deal about the key attributes of high-quality afterschool programs. For example, the National Research Council provided a critical synthesis of program features that supported positive youth development across a wide range of adolescent skills.[2] These features included: physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts.

Vandell and colleagues have provided a number of important studies that demonstrate relationships between features of afterschool programs for elementary-aged students and school-success outcomes. Important features included positive and supportive relationships between staff and children and a diverse array of age-appropriate activities.[3]

Two important meta-analyses summarized the evidence across rigorous evaluations of afterschool programs focused on academic achievement and social and emotional learning.[4] In particular, the Durlak and Weissberg (2010) summary of findings across 75 evaluations indicated that four features were related to program effects: sequencing of content, active learning opportunities, a focus on specific skills, and the explicitness of learning objectives.

Our research on the Youth Program Quality Intervention demonstrated that program managers who lead staff teams through a continuous improvement sequence can change the quality of adult–child interaction and instruction in afterschool settings.[5] Further, these effects were achieved at scale and despite structural challenges such as staff turnover and low staff education levels.
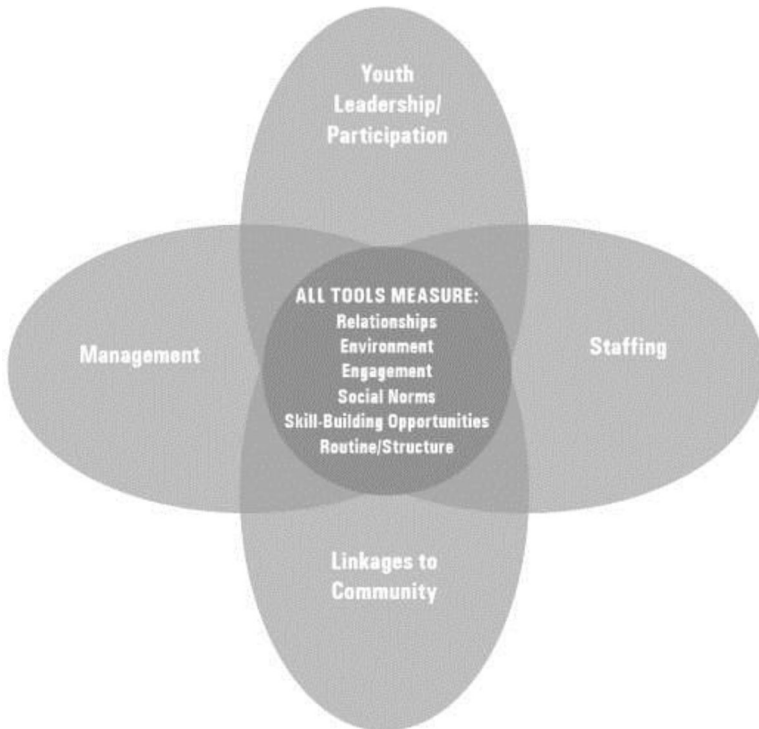
Quality standards

A standard for practice is a description of good practice (for example, staff make children feel welcome by using their names at each day as the program begins). Standards for afterschool services are available from many other sources (The California Afterschool

Network http://www.afterschoolnetwork.org/post/california-after
-school-program-quality-self-assessment-tool; David P. Weikart
Center for Youth Program Quality http://www.cypq.org/assessm
ent; National AfterSchool Association http://naaweb.org/resourc
es/core-compentencies; National Institute for Out of School Time
http://www.niost.org/ASQ/asq; New York State Afterschool Net-
work http://www.nysan.org/content/document/detail/3056/) and
can include assessment tools that support efforts to measure per-
formance.

Agreements about core aspects of afterschool service quality are
evident when looking across these types of sources. Figure 2.1 is ex-
cerpted from Yohalem et al. (2009), who compared domains of best

**Figure 2.1. Shared standards for high-quality afterschool ser-
vices across ten quality assessment tools**

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Source: Excerpted from Figure 2 of Yohalem et al.[6]

practice across the most widely used quality assessment tools in the field.[6] In Figure 2.1, and in many quality standards documents that we have reviewed (the Weikart Center has conducted 29 item-level crosswalks with afterschool/summer standards and quality measures, as well as school day standards including The Danielson Framework, and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System [CLASS]), there are at least three areas of consensus.

A first area of agreement across quality standards is a central focus on the quality of adult–child interaction. For example, in Figure 2.1, the areas of practice shared by all quality measures are those focused on (a) how youth experience the program setting on a daily basis and, especially, (b) what the adults are doing to interact with children and youth. The quality of relationships, youth engagement, social norms, skill building, and program routines are all closely tied to the practices of afterschool professionals as they are enacted at the point of service where adults and young people meet. This focus on adult–child interaction, or instruction, is reinforced by a larger evidence base from the early childhood and school day fields.[7]A second area where definitions of quality tend to agree is related to content—or rather independent of content. Most afterschool quality standards are "content neutral" in the sense that best practices can be implemented irrespective of the content or subject matter (for example, math, dance, or service learning). We are not suggesting that subject matter is unimportant. However, afterschool programs are clearly valued for their ability to deliver many different types of content, and so program standards have not typically included explicit guidance about subject matter. The opportunity to follow the interests of children and youth—and to engage a wide range of expertise from local communities—is a unique and defining strength of afterschool programs.

A final area of agreement is related to the practice of managers. Most standards documents include some attention to the role that program managers play as leaders of organizational culture and climate, staff developers, and managers of continuous improvement processes. In particular, the role of the program managers has been defined to include continuous improvement of staff

practices.[8] Specifically, the implementation of self-assessment of performance against quality standards and planning for improvement action based on quality assessment data are widely adopted best practices.

Quality improvement policies

Building from shared standards, QIS have emerged as federal, state, and local policies that regulate and support afterschool service quality.[9] The exact number of QIS currently active in the field is not known precisely, but the number of state and local QIS almost certainly numbers in the hundreds, affecting quality in thousands of programs and perhaps millions of children and youth.[10]

Several aspects of these QIS policies represent another area of consensus in the field. First, these policies often require routine reporting of performance data against quality standards—as well as other types of information such as attendance, youth outcomes, and quality ratings generated by external assessors—and support program managers to lead continuous improvement processes based on these data. Further, QIS frequently require use of observation-based data collection methods with performance feedback to the staff who are observed.

Perhaps the most critical attribute of QIS is the central role of quality intermediary organizations.[11] These organizations represent capacity to support site-level continuous improvement at scale (for example, across many program sites) by supporting both the quality assessment process and delivery of training and technical assistance. This combination of both assessment for accountability and improvement supports is important because assessment without adequate support for subsequent improvement actions has been identified as a weakness in other education accountability policies such as No Child Left Behind and the Quality Rating and Improvement Systems in the early care and learning field.[12] Importantly, QIS in the afterschool field are typically structured for lower stakes accountability purposes, seeking to raise performance of all programs rather than eliminating poor performers.[13]

Leading-edge extensions from quality standards

Extending from the relative consensus on quality standards, important areas of innovation are emerging.

Practical theory

If agreement on quality standards is a point of strength for the field, the clear specification of how these attributes "produce" child development is underdeveloped. Nevertheless, practitioners and researchers are developing and validating practical theories that link qualities of afterschool experience to youth skills. This work draws upon what we know from empirical studies but also contextualizes that evidence base in specific program designs in such a way as to more readily support selection of performance measures, interpretation of data, and real-time performance improvement.[14]

Figure 2.2 represents a practical theory template that has emerged from our work with afterschool systems.[15] The Quality, Engagement, Skills, Transfer (QuEST) model describes the quality of youth learning opportunities first in terms of instructional practices and the given subject matter content. In turn, high-quality learning opportunities should engage youth, or stimulate interest and motivation. Repeated sessions with high-quality instruction

Figure 2.2. QuEST: A logic model template for skill development and transfer theories
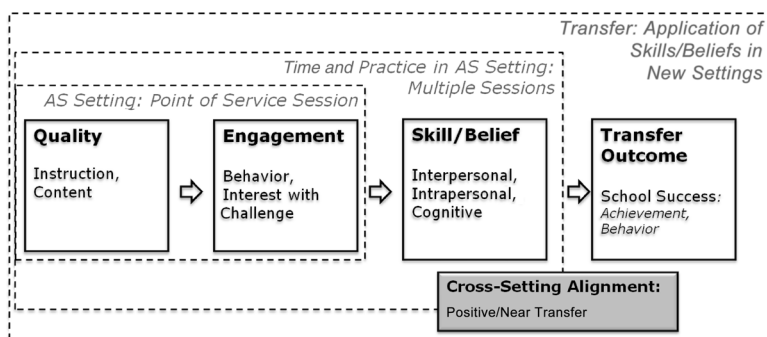
Source: Excerpted from Figure D1 of Smith et al.[15]

and content and high youth engagement should result in mastery experiences that promote the development of specific skills. Emphasis on development of specific skills should promote transfer to other settings, such as schools.

The QuEST model draws on an evidence base suggesting that (a) setting qualities influence development, (b) motivation is an important correlate of learning, (c) skill building requires intentional adult supports and time to practice those skills, and (d) skills learned in one setting do not automatically transfer to a different setting. A practical theory template such as QuEST allows local actors to fill in details about their specific program designs (for example, how they define quality) and the specific skills they are trying to build.

Designing program experiences with specific skills in mind implies that we can both demystify "outcomes" talk and more intentionally define specific skills and the settings in which they appear. Here we note three areas where practical theory and evidence are being used to extend the consensus on quality standards.

Time

The consensus on quality has yet to pay sufficient attention to the issue of time and how program designs imply sequential opportunities for adult modeling of specific skills as well as youth practice. Larson's work emphasizes that youth development happens in both long and short cycles (arcs and "hot" episodes) and that program designs that integrate adult support through challenges (for example, difficulties that arise when planning a service project) are where skills advance.[16] Although point-in-time quality assessments for best practices are widely used in the field, standards for quality and corresponding assessments of best practices should probably be extended to describe program designs with intentional sequencing of youth experience over time. Figure 2.2 implies that afterschool program leaders should be asking about which specific skills they intend to grow and how many sessions it will take to provide sufficient practice on those skills.

Connections to schools

Another issue raised by the QuEST model is that skills are deeply context dependent and do not automatically transfer across settings, despite the fact that afterschool effectiveness is often defined in terms of school day success.[17] To the extent that two settings, afterschool programs and school day classrooms, provide continuity of expectations (for example, norms for social interaction; introduction and extension of subject matter) and relationships (for example, communication between school day and afterschool teachers), we can expect skills learned in one setting to transfer to the other.[18] Afterschool leaders should be asking how afterschool settings can extend school day content ("positive" transfer) and how relationships between adults in the two settings can be deepened ("near" transfer).

Social and emotional skills

In addition to asking "how" skills transfer from afterschool to school, another pressing question is "which" skills are most important to transfer across settings. Although academic skills (for example, STEM) have been an important focus over the past decade, interest in social and emotional skills is growing. This is true both because afterschool programs seem well aligned with the emphasis on the quality of adult–child interaction and because social and emotional skills may be a pathway to school success. Theory suggests that emotional regulation and prosocial skills may set in motion virtuous cycles of interaction between students and teachers, improving school success (for example, attendance, behavior, grade promotion, achievement) through improved relationships and self-regulation. An extension of quality standards to include explicit attention to social and emotional development may also be important because low-quality afterschool experiences may undermine social and emotional skills.[19] Afterschool leaders are exploring ways to explicitly embed opportunities for social and emotional skill development in program designs.[20]

Conclusions

Over the past decade, the afterschool field has attained significant agreement on a set of evidence-based practices. These standards for high-quality service have been translated into policy through QIS focused on continuous improvement of service quality. Practitioners and researchers are also extending from quality standards to include a more explicit focus on how program designs target skill mastery, increasing the likelihood of skill transfer to other important settings, especially schools. The afterschool field is well positioned to integrate these extensions from quality to skill building, at scale, because continuous improvement infrastructure is already widespread in the field.

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Commentary

Karen Pittman

FORTY-FIVE YEARS ago, I had the opportunity to join a hand-picked group of college students to spend a week prepping to work with seventy-five teenagers who signed up for eight weeks at an educational camp in Michigan. We cleaned, painted, bonded, and bought supplies. Most importantly, we learned about the principles and practices of active learning.

David Weikart, the camp's owner and the founder of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation—the organization that proved the importance of quality early childhood education—made sure that we not only embraced but understood how to execute every aspect of the High/Scope camp experience. That experience ranged from intentional room assignments (designed to reduce cliques and encourage cross-age, cross-culture friendships) to full group folk dance and folk singing sessions (done daily, to give all campers large group experiences where they could learn and practice new skills in a public, noncompetitive environment) to workshops (offered by the counselors but selected by the campers, to provide daily practice in choosing to learn and in evaluating the experience).

My continued summer immersions into the power of active learning diverted me from a career in teaching, which in comparison seemed heavy on learning content but light on learning practice. I failed, however, to find nonschool settings in which to practice my new skills. At that time, youth programs were heavy on activities but light on learning. Being neither fish nor fowl, I stumbled into a career which, in hindsight, has been all about making quality matter.

I left High/Scope with pads full of notes on quality, the Qu in the QuEST model and anecdotes on the engagement (E) levels of the

campers who, almost without exception, were transformed from unsure or uninspired students into hungry, confident, and engaged learners.

What I didn't leave with was as firm a sense of what this powerful learning experience produced beyond learning confidence, and of whether or how the experience translated into success "back home." The specific skills (S) and transfer success (T) were not as well specified.

So as important as it is that we now have consensus on quality standards and improvement policies, what excites me is the focusing effect that the practical theory advanced by the QuEST model provides.

First, the field now has a mandate to press researchers to give us definitions and measures of the specific "power skills" or "gateway skills" that contribute to youths' success at mastering whatever knowledge, skill, and behavioral goals are set by them, us, or others. The definitions have to be practical and specific, and the measures quick and linked to observed behavior.

Second, programs now have a responsibility to specify and monitor the things they do to build these skills. Are practices being used as regularly? Are staff using them intentionally? Are youth responding as expected?

Third, practitioners now have an opportunity to partner in a very different way with the systems—education, workforce training, and prevention—that have primary accountability for improving "big" outcomes. As the importance of these gateway skills is recognized, these systems will be looking for ways to (1) expand their definitions of quality to include practices that strengthen these skills, (2) assess and improve staff capacity to execute these practices, and (3) partner with organizations with demonstrated track records.

Researchers have shown that quality matters when it happens. But, as we know, evidence of effect doesn't typically come with a sufficiently detailed story about how to produce that effect. To date researchers have fallen short on the practical measurement front. The next frontier, which I am pleased to report, is being actively

blazed by the Weikart Center and others, requiring arm in arm work with practitioners to develop observable measures of these power skills that can be (a) logically linked to the types of concrete practices and experiences out-of-school time programs create and control, (b) realistically expected to improve within a typical program arc (for example six months), and (c) intuitively, if not formally, linked to the behaviors and outcomes educators, employers, and policy makers want improved.

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