

Once We Know It, We Can Grow It

Quality Nonformal Learning Opportunities and Youth Work Practice

There is growing agreement that quality matters in multiple dimensions of nonformal learning in the nonschool hours. Quality influences the participation of youth, the satisfaction and retention of youth workers, and the impact programs have on young people, families and the community. This paper presents a framework to advance quality youth work in daily practice as well as to promote quality as the driver for systems-level investment and support for nonformal learning experiences.

The focus on quality as a uniting and advancing force for the nonformal learning sector begins to address issues like systems-level accountability as well as help practitioners, supervisors and organizations strengthen their circle of influence in ways that a sole focus on outcomes cannot.

Reasons to Focus on Quality

Quality is a concept known and valued by general audiences in many distinct sectors from business to health care. It has been chosen as a driving theme to foster improvement and assure positive results. Given the highly diverse social settings and complex community contexts, family priorities, and accountability demands that characterize the nonformal learning sector in the United States today, quality can be a stimulus to create system alignment and strengthen programs and organizations.

There is general consensus that young people need high-quality, structured, nonformal learning opportunities during their out-of-school time. Investments in promoting quality pay off. The strong evidence that regular participation in voluntary, high-quality, nonformal learning opportunities supports the academic learning and social-emotional development of youth is increasingly tied to intentional quality assessment and improvement on the part of youth workers and the organizations that support them. In an analysis of 73 programs, those programs identified as sequenced, active, focused and explicit showed positive effects on almost every youth outcome—school performance, social behavior, attitudes and beliefs—whereas programs absent these quality features showed no effect on any outcome.

Poor quality is not neutral. Young people may do better learning on their own rather than be part of poor quality programs. Mentoring studies show that short or erratic pairings and poorly prepared mentors can negatively impact young people. While questionable quality may be preferable to unsafe or harmful options, it is usually the young people who bear the burden when quality is substandard. Both research and practical wisdom recognize that high quality is essential to maximize learning and development for young people, to optimize impacts or return on investment at the community level, and to avoid the unnecessary consequences of poor quality.

Quality youth work is best understood by observing what takes place in the dynamic intersection of young people, youth workers and program activities. Fortunately, there is now a variety of observational tools and measurement frameworks that assess program strengths and areas needing improvement. This means that investments in quality can establish baseline assessments and build improvement strategies based on reliable observation over time. It also means that quality control can be achieved by specifying the end goals and not necessarily the means. Because quality is measurable, malleable and marketable, a concerted effort to improve the quality of nonformal learning programs across Minnesota can yield improved outcomes and more powerful learning experiences for all our young people.

Advancing Nonformal Learning

The vision guiding this work is that by age 21, Minnesota's young people will be ready for the responsibilities and rewards of economic self-sufficiency, healthy family and social relationships, community involvement, and lifelong learning. To achieve this vision, nonformal learning opportunities must be recognized as a critical part of the fabric of learning and development for all youth. To communicate with the public, policy makers, parents, business people, families and community organizations, the nonformal sector needs a common language and united sense of purpose.

Nonformal learning is generally described as intentional opportunities that are voluntarily undertaken, clearly focused, learner-centered, appropriately structured, highly interactive and typically infused with a healthy dose of fun. The broad array of life experiences that occur outside the formal school setting and beyond the informal learning world of home and family are incredibly powerful in their ability to shape the social, emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual dimensions of life.

Youth work, as part of the nonformal learning sector, is the interactive practice of shared teaching and learning that organizes around the needs, interests, aspirations and well-being of young people. Youth work happens when youth and caring adults come together for purposeful conversation and activity in programs and other encounters in the community. It takes place in a vast variety of settings associated with recreation, leisure, sports, arts and culture, clubs and social groups, community service, faith-based programs and individual pursuits of all kinds. It is a learning arena where quality can be observed, measured and strengthened. The dynamic place where young person, youth worker and youth program meet is the point of service, the key site of interactions and experiences that have the capability to influence youth development.

In the United States the term *youth development programs* is used to describe nonformal learning opportunities based on a strength-based philosophy and a way of working with young people that is respectfully grounded in everyday life, builds from where young people are, and honors the partnership between youth and adults in the learning process. Other names applied to nonformal learning programs and activities in the U.S. include afterschool, out-of-school time, youth development work, school enrichment, complementary learning or simply youth programs.

Knowing and Growing Quality Practice

Quality practice looks at the dynamic intersection of quality program features, youth worker expertise and youth engagement. It suggests that systems and organizations that want to improve the quality of youth programs must look strategically at all three elements of practice: quality program features, effective youth engagement at the levels of participation, passion, voice and leadership, and effective youth worker expertise in relationships and decision making.



Quality Program Features

The determination of the quality of program features relies on measurement of observable practice at the point of service—the space and place where youth workers meet young people in a program setting.

There is considerable agreement on the strategies most successful in supporting quality program features:



- Intentional focus on youth development outcomes
- Building connections and relationships
- Deliberate program structure, design and delivery
- Intensity of contact
- Continuous reflection and data-driven change

The Forum for Youth Investment has described 10 observational tools that can be used to assess program quality. As a result, we have increasingly reliable ways to be accountable for quality in program features.

Youth Worker Expertise

Achieving quality practice further requires youth worker expertise. What youth workers “do” matters. A recent study found that expert youth workers responded to dilemmas of daily practice in more youth-centered ways and routinely balanced multiple considerations whereas novices saw fewer options at their disposal. Expertise is widely understood to be the wise, intentional application of knowledge gained from a combination of study, experience and reflection in order to address an issue or situation.



Expertise requires one to work at the upper limit of the complexity demanded by the situation. Youth workers can

be guided to hone their expertise in ways that increase their effective reasoning and problem-solving abilities which then improve the quality of their work with young people. Support for quality youth work practice requires education and professional development at a systems-wide level. From organizational level staff development and apprenticeship opportunities to advance degrees, systems can build career pathways and make top quality performance possible.

Youth Engagement

For young people to receive the benefits of participation in high-quality programs, they must come in the door. Programs and opportunities that are highly engaging to young people build on developmental needs for voice and choice. This is especially true as children mature and begin having more say in what they do in their free time. Engaged young people are less defined as *clients* to be *served* and more meaningfully considered as partners, co-creators and key contributors to program decision-making and success.

People talk about youth engagement in different ways. For some, youth engagement is about increasing participation in and connection to youth opportunities of all kinds. Others want youth to find a spark or passion that gives meaning to their lives. For still others, youth engagement is about creating opportunities for youth voice in decisions that affect them and about leadership and partnerships between youth and adults to make communities better places for all. The model here shows youth engagement as a dimension of quality practice characterized by active youth participation, passion, voice and collective leadership in opportunities created by and with young people.

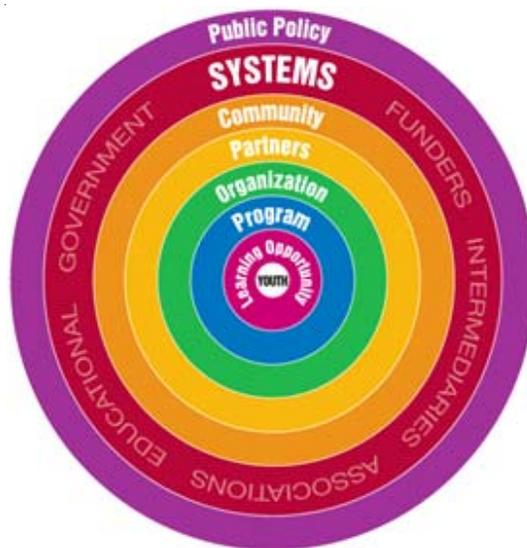
Rings of Engagement



Monica K. Sullivan, Rebecca H. Sims, August 2014, University of Minnesota, Center for Youth Development

Systems Support for Quality

Investments in nonformal learning and quality practice have high yield for the youth development field at both the program and systems level. At the program level, we know quality programs can have a positive effect on young people, their families and the community. For systems and policy makers, it is significant that the field has a robust set of tools to measure quality. These tools can serve multiple purposes such as self-assessment, quality improvement planning, organizational reviews, guides for professional development and more. The choice of the specific measurement instrument should be made based on which tool is most suited to local organizational needs.



While the up-close perspective can inform daily practice in individual programs, a broader view is needed to inform the quality conversation at the systems level. An ecological view of the systems surrounding and influencing youth development programs reveals the important role foundations, funding agencies, education and training programs, businesses, government and policy makers have in structuring opportunities and supporting options for quality improvement.

Three things are important in any consideration of systems support and systems change:

1. Quality considerations go well beyond program boundaries. Policy and system efforts must consider larger field-building issues such as workforce recruitment and retention; continuous learning and professional development of youth workers; the role of collaborations, intermediaries and networks in advancing the field; and the levers practically and

politically available to motivate change. Quality efforts must be designed so that field-building efficiencies don't inadvertently get disconnected from point-of-service quality.

2. The rich variety of programs and organizations in the field presents opportunities as well as challenges. One challenge is to establish measures of quality and accountability without falling into a "one size fits all" mentality that could threaten flexibility, innovation and community responsiveness. The value of having an incredible variety of choices for youth must be balanced with the desire to have universal quality targets.
3. System investments in accountability involve evidence of quality improvement, program outcomes, youth outcomes and community-level impact. Programs depend on intentional designs and clear outcomes that are evaluated. Quality assessment and improvement usually occur at the point of service. At a systems level, program impacts can be identified for the nonformal sector and progress charted at the community level.

Funders - The agencies, organizations and foundations that fund nonformal learning for young people are in a powerful position to leverage change through conditions they put on the granting and acceptance of money. Wise funders consult with experienced people in the practice, policy and research world to sort through some of the thorny issues raised in the previous section before making major course changes.

Education and Training - Training in the basic skills and competencies necessary for direct service youth work should be available on a non-credit or academic credit basis in order to respond to the different needs of youth workers. These trainings should be encouraged under the auspices of professional associations, academic institutions, intermediary organizations and for-profit businesses.

Professional Development - Youth workers, agency leaders, volunteers and organizational staff need time and opportunities to develop expertise and grow in their jobs. Opportunities must be available, accessible in terms of cost and distance, and designed in many different formats to meet the needs of different learners. Novice and experienced youth workers need to understand the career pathways in the field as well as the education, training and professional development opportunities available to them.

Policy - Policy makers in many places and at many levels can influence the nonformal learning sector. The field is particularly sensitive to the directions and priorities of local communities where programs exist on a daily basis. A great deal has been learned from other countries about the positive and negative impacts of statutory requirements and regulations, voluntary incentives and field-driven moves for change. In our communities, it is likely that consensus-building processes are necessary to forge agreements around major policy issues that affect the field.

Conclusion

In the development of this framework for systems to use in efforts to stimulate and support quality practice in nonformal learning programs, some controversial issues surfaced. There is a growing consensus about the significance of quality as a driver for success as well as the critical need to embrace common terms that communicate the work being done in youth programs across the community. Perhaps most important, the process of creating this framework affirmed the vital role that systems play in determining the priorities and measures of success for youth work. This framework for quality nonformal learning and youth work practice provides guidance for the next steps in our journey to quality.

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This is a summary of the white paper, *Once We Know It, We Can Grow It*. The original, full-length paper with endnotes and references can be found at: www.extension.umn.edu/YouthWorkInstitute/Quality.html

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