

The Readiness of the Out-of-School Time Workforce to Intentionally Support Participants' Social and Emotional Development

A Review of the Literature and Future
Directions

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This paper reviews the evidence on staff practices and quality programs that foster character development through social and emotional learning. The paper describes the state of the OST workforce, and barriers and opportunities to adding social and emotional learning to their job description. Specifically, the paper provides an overview of the literature on the characteristics of staff practices that yield positive youth outcomes and the readiness of the OST workforce to implement intentional opportunities for social and emotional learning. We explore current and potential future efforts in the field to prepare staff to incorporate practices that support social and emotional learning. The paper concludes with future directions for the field and recommendations for a research agenda to explore and understand the supports for staff that ultimately foster character development through social and emotional learning.

DRAFT

Introduction

There is a newfound interest in children's positive social and emotional development as a part of their enrichment and educational experience in both traditional PK–12 educational and out-of-school time (OST) settings. It is a newfound interest as opposed to a wholly new endeavor because the very philosophical foundation of our public education system honored the development of the whole child as a key part of the education experience (Dewey, 1916). In addition, youth development programs in OST settings have aimed to support positive development for more than two decades (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002). More recently, there has been a flood of efforts that delineate how adults in educational and OST settings can support children's social and emotional development (Devaney, 2015b). These efforts are likely due to a combination of factors, including the following: response to good research and practice to date on children's social and emotional development and the links between positive development and academic and workforce outcomes; the backlash against accountability and standards in core content areas; and, most recently, the new language in the Every Student Succeeds Act, which honors the education of the whole child (Moroney & McGarrah, 2016).

The aforementioned "flood" of efforts to support children's social and emotional development has come in many forms and with many names: (positive) youth development, character development, social and emotional learning (SEL), 21st century skills, and Foundations for Young Adult Success—among other constructs and terms to denote traits; attitudes; and skill sets such as grit, growth mindset, and noncognitive factors (Devaney, 2015b). This paper does not attempt to detangle these different but related frameworks. Instead, the focus is on three framings

that are especially pertinent to the OST workforce today: character, SEL, and youth development.

Traditional character education programs were described as promoting core values and providing opportunities to practice morality in caring environments that involve families, the school, and the community (Lickona, 1996). A modern view of character development maintains that character, among other aspects of development, is situationally driven and not fixed (i.e., it depends on the situation and the competencies the individual brings to the situation) (Nucci, 2001). Effective character development programs include opportunities for staff professional development on design and implementation strategies and have strong components of SEL curricula (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Today, character education is defined by Character.org as the intentional practice to “support the social, emotional, and ethical development of students” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Character.org further suggests that character education programs support the development of young people’s sense of fairness, responsibility, and grit, among other attitudes and skills that are also the goals of some youth development and SEL programs. SEL is the process by which individuals develop the attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs to succeed in school and in life. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines five core social and emotional competencies that are critical to success in school and in life: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2016). In school settings, SEL programs create the positive conditions (e.g., safe and supportive places, high expectations, support from adults, structured and cooperative learning environments) that ultimately contributes to children’s engagement,

prosocial behavior (and reduction in antisocial behavior) and academic success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Finally, youth development, sometimes called positive youth development, is both the natural process of human development and also the strengths-based *approach* to youth work practice (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). Youth development programs champion a strengths-based approach as opposed to a prevention mentality; they intentionally bring in family, school, and community partners to ensure programs are contextually relevant and celebrate and showcase the community's assets (Anderson-Butcher, Stetler, & Midle, 2006; Benson, 2003; Hamilton et al., 2004). Ideally, youth development programs are designed to be developmentally aligned and to provide opportunities for skill building that is embedded into the content of the program (Deschenes, McDonald, & McLaughlin, 2004; Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005).

The underlying frameworks that define character development, SEL, and youth development are not the same, although they all stem from common disciplines of psychology and human development. There are, however, common implementation practices and outcomes across frameworks. The remainder of the paper focuses on the readiness of the OST workforce to *implement SEL practices* that ultimately support participants' social and emotional development (including character). Given the interrelated nature of these three frameworks, this paper is guided by the framing question:

What are the capacity and readiness for the out-of-school time workforce to support participants' positive development (including character) through SEL?

The first section of the paper describes youth development (also sometimes called positive youth development to distinguish it from the natural process of human development) as a grounding framework in OST (Hamilton et al., 2004). The paper then builds on the interrelated structures between youth development, SEL, and character, and staff members' role in these process frameworks. The paper concludes with recommendations for future practice and research to support the OST workforce in supporting participants' positive development.

Quality Youth Development Programs in Out-of-School Time Settings

In order to frame the conversation around workforce preparedness to implement SEL, it is first important to understand the history of OST. OST programming has deep roots in a tradition of youth development. Importantly, the field has invested heavily in defining and measuring quality in youth development programs. Not surprisingly, researchers have found that participants benefit from youth development programs in OST settings when they attend regularly and the programs are implemented with quality (Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente, 2010; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Vandell et al., 2007a; 2007b). High-quality youth development programs in OST settings includes some agreed-upon core components: a safe and supportive environment with contextually relevant offerings via local partnerships, where participants have a sense of belonging, positive relationships and shared norms, and opportunities for skills building and efficacy (Kauh, 2011; Lerner et al., 2005; Phelps et al., 2007; Smith, Peck, Denault, Blazevski, & Akiva, 2010; Vandell et al., 2007a). High-quality youth development programs allow youth participants' opportunities to explore their interests, engage in learning and reflection, and build skills and knowledge (Lerner, Brittan, & Fay, 2007). Further, high-quality youth development programs in OST settings can offer a unique opportunity for participants to engage in

opportunities for SEL (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). Ultimately, when youth feel safe and supported and have a sense of program ownership, they can choose and inform activities, which allows them to be engaged in skill building and their own success in the program (Vandell et al., 2007a). These quality youth development practices in OST are foundational and create the ideal conditions for supporting young people to practice social and emotional learning and skill building and to develop positively.

So how does quality connect to the topic at hand—the development of character through SEL? In reviews of structured youth development programs, researchers have found that high-quality programs both create the conditions for and promote what are often called the five C's of youth development: confidence, competence, connection, caring, and *character* (Roth, Malone, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Lerner et al., 2005). Character development has been a part of historical youth development practice and is in fact central to many youth development organizations' mission. For example, YMCA, scouting, and 4-H programs all promote character development as an integral part of their youth development programming. Because youth development is foundational tenet for many OST programs, character development is often a desired positive outcome of structured youth development programs that intentionally support skill building through SEL practices.

Youth development is a foundational practice that encourages adults to see participants with a strengths-based lens, celebrates and includes the community, and intentionally fosters positive development through structured activities. Character development may be one of many possible processes and outcomes of a high-quality youth development program. The question for

researchers and practitioners alike is this: What does the intentional practice of supporting social and emotional development (in which character is a part) look like? In addition, OST programs are quickly adopting or claiming ownership to the language and spirit of SEL. The following section details the relationship among youth development, SEL, and character development and how that relationship is dependent on intentional and high-quality practice.

Intentional SEL Practice

In 2007, amidst a flurry of activity in the field of OST to define and measure quality of structured youth development programs and to tell our OST story with sometimes misaligned academic outcome metrics, Durlak, Weissberg, and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis, which would later become multiple CASEL reports and peer reviewed articles in *Child Development* and the *American Journal of Community Psychology* (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Durlak et al., 2007; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). The first report, *The Impact of After-School Programs that Promote Personal and Social Skills*, outlined the findings suggesting that high-quality OST programs (1) promoted participants' development of social skills, including self-confidence, self-esteem, and bonding to school, and (2) reduced risky behaviors, which may imply sound decision making (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). The authors specified that these outcomes were present only in high-quality programs defined as being logically and developmentally **sequenced, active** and hands on, **focused** on skill building, and **explicit** in the intention of skill building—or SAFE. This singular brief triggered not only fieldwide interest in SEL but also a sense of validation that “Yes, this is what we do in OST.” Since 2007, SAFE has been twisted this way and that to fit youth development and other OST programs’ definitions of quality and their implementation strategies. Most relevant has been the ongoing dialogue over whether youth development and SEL are the

same and if so, can we check the box on whether we know how to implement high-quality practices that support SEL, or not. The answer is: yes and no.

Yes, high-quality youth development practice is absolutely foundational to supporting young people's social and emotional development, and the development of character is a part of that.

However, saying we already know how to do it does not do justice to our real understanding of high-quality SEL, or actually recognize what we may not yet know about high-quality SEL practice and character development in OST. Youth development programs in OST provide youth opportunities to build relationships in safe and supportive environments and to create self-determined opportunities based upon their own strengths and interests. No doubt skill building and character development may be a consequence of this work, and for OST programs that endeavor to implement and support general positive youth development, there is no need to go further.

But for those programs in which character development and SEL are primary goals, program leaders need to identify and be intentional about how they prepare staff to implement high-quality opportunities for character development through SEL and be concrete in how they envision implementation.

If OST programs with a foundation of youth development are laying claim to implementing SEL and/or character development but are not intentionally implementing practices that support SEL and character development, then they likely aren't implementing practices with consistency or

hiring prepared staff or training staff to implement high-quality opportunities for SEL. Program leaders and staff need to acknowledge and own intentionality in implementation in programs where that is the goal. Further, staff hiring, preparation, and ongoing support are critically important in implementing high-quality and intentional programming (Vandell & Lao, 2016).

Multiple studies have pointed to staff experience, preparation, characteristics, and their role in fostering positive relationships as the catalysts in implementing high-quality programs that promote positive youth outcomes (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Smith et al., 2010; Vandell, 2013; Vandell & Lao, 2016). Figure 1 shows the interrelated factors that theoretically influence intentional practice in supporting SEL. Vandell (2013) suggests that the role for staff in implementing high-quality programs includes developing positive relationships, providing developmentally appropriate activities, and intentionally providing opportunities for skill building and engagement through choice and autonomous experiences. Smith and colleagues (2010) describe this relationship between setting level program quality and positive youth experience as the *point of service*: “Point of service focuses on the coexistence and correspondence between staff practices and youth experience that is likely to produce positive developmental change” (p. 359). As we train staff to intentionally support skill building and SEL, researchers, practice leaders, and staff need to recognize that defining quality implementation for SEL and character development may be an area we need to explore more fully. For the past two decades, youth workers and other professionals in the OST workforce have been prepared through various mechanisms to provide high-quality *youth development* experiences in OST, which again is primary and the right foundation to build on for intentional

opportunities for SEL. The following section details the characteristics of the OST workforce and its support of young people's positive development to date.

Figure 1. Interrelated Factors That Influence Intentional SEL Practice



The Out-of-School Time Workforce

First, who is the workforce? The OST workforce comprises almost one million individuals from a variety of preparations and backgrounds from college students to parent volunteers, teachers, specialists, and youth-work professionals (Miller & Gannett, 2006; Vandell & Lao, 2016). Broadly defined, a youth worker is “an individual who works with and on behalf of children and youth to facilitate their personal, social, and educational development and enable them to gain a voice, influence, and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence” (Garza & Yohalem, 2013). Recent scans suggest that the OST workforce is primarily composed of young professionals (ages 18–25) and those who are retired or late career and newly entering the OST space (Vandell & Lao, 2016; Yohalem, Pittman, & Edwards, 2010). The OST workforce experiences high turnover, receives relatively low compensation for demanding work, and is staffed significantly by part-time staff (Vandell & Lao, 2016; Yohalem et al., 2010). This creates a great challenge in efforts to consistently prepare and expect staff to

implement high-quality practice. It also poses a significant barrier to youth and staff forming meaningful and long-term relationships which is critical to both high quality programming and associated social and emotional development (Vandell & Lao, 2016).

Nearly half of staff in OST programs have a two- or four-year degree in a variety of disciplines related to youth work, including education, child development, and social work (Vandell & Lao, 2016; Yohalem et al., 2010). A movement toward professionalizing the OST workforce currently is led by associations such as the National AfterSchool Association, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, the National Summer Learning Association, 4-H Extension, Every Hour Counts, and local entities such as the Partnership for Children & Youth in California and the Partnership for Afterschool Education in New York City. In addition, there is an emergence of degrees specifically focused on youth development practice at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Minnesota among others, as well as state-driven credentialing systems for child care settings. There is promise for more explicit preparation and career pathways for youth workers in the near future.

It should come as no surprise that the qualifications and motivations of the staff working in afterschool programs matter, and that high-quality programs employ staff who are “especially qualified,” intrinsically motivated, and develop positive relationships with youth and families (Huang, Cho, Mostafavi, & Nam, 2008). High-quality programs have hiring practices that are structured, use formal and informal recruitment strategies, and align desired staff qualifications with needed skills (Huang et al., 2010).

The Relationship Between Youth Workers and Participants' Social and Emotional Development

So why is the adult role in delivering high-quality programming and as an actor in positive relationships so primary to young people's social and emotional development? Why is preparation of the OST workforce to deliver SEL so essential to developing character? Despite the lack of consistent support, preparation, or remuneration for the OST workforce, we have ample evidence that staff are a key to program quality, young people's positive experience in programs, and their positive outcomes, including their social and emotional development. Staff play a critical role in the recruitment, retention, and engagement of youth in programs that ultimately support their social and emotional development. The following sections feature the literature on relationships among youth and staff participation in programs, staff engagement and youth engagement, and characteristics of positive relationships between youth and staff. All of these are related to participants' positive social and emotional development. Additionally, Table 1 shows results of a literature scan that includes studies of multiple OST types (structured OST and extracurricular activities) that describe, aim to change, or show effects of OST programming on participants' social and emotional development and related outcomes.

Table 1. Literature Scan of All OST Types

Reference	Program Type	Age/Grade	Staff Contribution	Youth Outcome(s)
Lerner et al., 2005	4-H programs, youth development organizations	Primarily Grade 5/early adolescent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Positive & sustained relationships with youth▪ Implementing activities that build important life skills▪ Creating opportunities for youth to use life skills as both participants in and leaders of valued community activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Confidence (self-worth & positive identity)▪ Character (personal values, social conscience, values diversity, interpersonal values & skills)

Reference	Program Type	Age/Grade	Staff Contribution	Youth Outcome(s)
Larson & Walker, 2010	Youth development programs; community and school-based arts & leadership programs	High-school-aged youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging responses are engaging to youth Problems as opportunities for youth to grow/learn Ensure that youth are incorporated into the solution Advocate on behalf of youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth leadership Youth engagement Problem solving
Vandell & Lao, 2016	Afterschool programs	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must make the program appealing for youth Caring staff, commitment to enrichment opportunities, knowledgeable, engaging Commit to program development & self-improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop skills & make friends Efficacy & belonging Social & emotional outcomes for youth
Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015	Afterschool programs, OST settings, including extracurricular activities, camps, museum & library programs	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong relationship with youth participants Ensure youth feel safe, have a sense of belonging, & feel there are opportunities to develop for the future Offer freely chosen, enjoyable-for-youth activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive self-perceptions Positive social behaviors & positive relationships with peers Noncognitive skills (persistence, teamwork, emotional regulation). Reductions in problem behaviors (truancy, delinquent acts)
Vandell, Simzar, O'Cadiz, & Hall, 2016	Afterschool programs, focused on STEM	Primarily elementary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong beliefs in the importance of STEM activities Strong efficacy when implementing STEM activities Participated in professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher levels of social competency (in relationships with peers)
Hall, Yohalem, Toleman, & Wilson, 2003	Afterschool programs	Varied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive relationships with youth (guidance; interest in youth; be responsive, attentive, & nonjudgmental) Youth development at center of organizational development High expectations for youth participants Hold youth to clear standards & affirm youths' potential Implement activities with inclusive opportunities for youth to demonstrate new skills & receive feedback Make sure youth have a feeling of choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connections with caring, encouraging staff Positive relationships with peers Autonomy and self-direction

Reference	Program Type	Age/Grade	Staff Contribution	Youth Outcome(s)
Vandell, 2013	Afterschool programs	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop positive relationships with youth for youth & peers ▪ Developmental activities that develop youth skill sets ▪ Promote youth engagement ▪ Work toward youth obtaining skills & knowledge ▪ Provide structure, with opportunity for choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Autonomy ▪ Positive behavioral outcomes (increased social skills with peers, prosocial behavior, engagement) ▪ Decrease in behavior seen as destructive (aggression, misconduct)
Vandell, Reisner, Brown, Pierce, Dadisman, & Pechman, 2007	Afterschool programs	Elementary and middle school youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide youth physical & emotional safety, structure, positive relationships with peers; establish social norms ▪ Foster partnership between the program, school, families, & community ▪ Build a positive environment (engages youth, opportunities for growth, leadership, independence) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prosocial behaviors & social skills ▪ Reduction in aggressive behaviors
Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005	School-based extra-curricular activities, religious activities, community-based clubs, sports, service groups	Ages 10–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensure that activities promote prosocial values ▪ Build leadership & problem-solving skills ▪ Implement hands-on & cooperative activities ▪ Engagement with family & community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prosocial behavior
Fredricks & Eccles, 2006	Various school-based extracurricular activities	Grades 7–12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide guidance as supportive, adult mentors ▪ Create opportunities for youth to feel they belong ▪ Have age-appropriate program structure ▪ Implement challenging & meaningful activities ▪ Create opportunities for skill building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Positive peer relationships ▪ Higher levels of self-worth
Riggs, Jahromi, Razza, Dillworth, & Mueller, 2006	School-based afterschool academic achievement & social skills program	Grades 1–6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide a safe environment for youth ▪ Create opportunities for building social competencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased social competencies ▪ Decreased problem behaviors

Reference	Program Type	Age/Grade	Staff Contribution	Youth Outcome(s)
Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003	Various school-based extracurricular activities	Grades 4–7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Form positive relationship with youth ▪ Ensure youth build positive relationships with peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interpersonal competence in middle adolescence ▪ Strong relationships with peers ▪ Decreased risky behavior
Ettekal, Callina, & Lerner, 2015	Organized activities	Grade 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensure youth are respected ▪ Positive relationship between staff & youth ▪ Foster positive relationship among peers ▪ Encourage youth to participate in key decisions & demonstrate respect by showing interest in youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Respect for adults & staff from youth ▪ Respect for other cultures ▪ Positive social interactions with peers
Jagers, 2001	School-based social & emotional competency building programs, extra hour of afterschool time	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Model moral competencies ▪ Provide leadership development opportunities, cultural empowerment ▪ Daily social & emotional learning modules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social & emotional competency ▪ Moral self-efficacy ▪ Pro-social behavior with peers ▪ Self-control

The Relationship Between Youth Participation and Staff Participation

Program staff have a positive influence from the get-go of a young person's program experience.

Youth are more likely to enroll in programs where there are known staff members, and are more likely to stay in programs where staff also are returning. Further, participants are more likely to enroll in and come back to programs where they feel safe, have a sense of belonging, have choices of programming, and are engaged in activities (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). All of the practices described here are components of OST program quality that staff members are critical players in implementing. Not surprisingly, the more youth attend programs, the more they experience the benefits of programs and specifically the developmental outcomes of interest (e.g., improved social skills, positive behaviors, engagement, and decrease in risky behaviors (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Vandell, 2013; Vandell et al., 2015). So, the more

consistent staff are and the higher the quality of the programs they offer, the more youth attend and the more likely they are to experience the benefits of programming.

[**The Relationship Between Staff Preparation, Engagement, and Youth Engagement**](#)

Some research has found that higher levels of staff education and more structured and organized programming lead to higher levels of staff engagement, which leads to higher levels of youth engagement (Miller, 2005; Vandell et al., 2015). For example, researchers involved in the Massachusetts After-School Research Study found a positive relationship between staff members' educational attainment and program quality indicators (e.g., youth and staff engagement), and also between staff educational attainment and participant outcomes (i.e., homework completion) (Miller, 2005). The conundrum is that the OST workforce does not have one direct educational trajectory. Few degree programs exist in youth development, SEL, character development, or related disciplines, and OST jobs do not adequately compensate individuals to pay back student loans (thus, may not always attract an educated workforce). Traditional education pathways are one route to creating a prepared workforce, but there are other pathways. There is some evidence that staff educational level has little impact on program quality but that staff members' participation in a quality-improvement process does, suggesting that in-program professional development and reflection is paramount to supporting quality (and thus, youth outcomes, theoretically) (Smith et al., 2010). Because staff come from a variety of backgrounds and preparations, staff professional development is another feasible pathway to ensure that staff have the tools to implement high-quality opportunities for SEL. In fact, Vandell, Simzar, O'Cadiz, & Hall (2016) found a relationship between staff participation in professional development and youth participants' development of social competencies. Few studies have endeavored to make this meaningful connection between the relative value of formal

postsecondary preparation, professional learning, and program quality in OST. While we do the work to influence and potentially transform postsecondary programs in the next decade to improve traditional education and OST opportunities for positive development for all young people, we can more immediately support professional learning systems and create alternate credentials that are meaningful and engaging for the adults who have such a significant impact on youth in OST programs.

For example, we may learn from the early childhood and emerging child care fields how to create multiple preparation pathways for youth work professionals. The early childhood field is a step ahead of the OST field in the sense that it has been focused on the workforce and quality programming with an eye toward positive child development for decades. Many states have a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) for early childhood programs, which has created the needed infrastructure for support, both to the program quality and the workforce. Several states are currently working to integrate licensed school-age OST programs into the early childhood QRIS in their state. In fact, the most recent Child Care Development (Block) Grant legislation includes language that suggests an increased allocation for both professional pathways and learning and quality improvement for child care settings. In some states, there are grants to support quality improvement in licensed child care settings that are part of the QRIS, so those OST programs that serve as school-age programs and are licensed (often Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCAs for example) may have access to professional development funds for staff.

This is an opportunity, or a moment in time, to take what we know from more than two decades of research and practice in early childhood and the research on the unique aspects of OST youth

development, SEL, and character development to make informed decisions about how to support a workforce in implementing high-quality OST and to create meaningful and relevant career pathways for adults who make youth work a career. For example, the early childhood field has created mechanisms to foster professional learning and preparation through the Council for Professional Recognition (2016), which houses a degree registry, listings of professional learning opportunities, an online learning community, among other resources for early childhood staff; the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood National Center (2016) provides equitable access through funding for educational opportunities for early childhood professionals. The OST field may benefit from a similar structure to support ongoing professional learning and to supplement formal postsecondary opportunities to professionalize and advance the OST workforce similar to the early childhood field.

The Characteristics of a Positive Relationship Between Youth and Staff

So where does this leave us? We know that staff who are known entities attract youth to enroll in programming, staff who stay and offer high-quality program activities retain youth in programming, and youth participation is likely to afford opportunities for positive social and emotional development. We also are aware that there are parallel structures and systems that support the workforce in early childhood. Let's focus on one aspect of quality that is especially pertinent here: the relationships between staff and youth in programs. First, we must acknowledge that adults (staff in this case) also benefit from positive reciprocal relationships (Lerner et al., 2006) and that when both youth and adults, or both parties in a relationship, are experiencing all of the real and perceived benefits of a relationship, they are likely to be more satisfied in their circumstance (Lerner et al., 2006). A handful of OST studies deeply explored the interactions between youth and youth workers and found that intentional, facilitated

relationships between youth and youth workers were central to program quality (which we know is key in promoting youth outcomes) (Chaskin, 2009; Larson & Walker, 2010; Sullivan & Larson, 2010). In addition, Pierce, Bolt, and Vandell (2010) found that positive staff-child relationships in an OST program were associated with positive academic outcomes and increased social skills for those participants.

What do these positive relationships look like? They are characterized by shared norms, high expectations, stability and continuity, and connectedness to each other's lives (e.g., school, community, family) (Hall, Yohalem, Toleman, & Wilson, 2003; Vandell et al., 2007a). The positive outcomes associated with positive adult/youth relationships has been well studied in traditional education settings, and specifically when adults have high expectations of the youth with whom they work. A longitudinal study of middle school students found that youth who reported that their teachers had a positive perception of them had increased academic success, increased self-esteem, and decreased anger (Roeser & Eccles, 1998). In addition to high expectations, staff are successful in creating positive relationships with participants when they are respectful; provide youth with guidance; show a genuine interest in youth; and are responsive, attentive, and nonjudgmental (Ettekal, Callina, & Lerner, 2015; Hall et al., 2003). In OST settings, organizational development and staff practices should be grounded in a core philosophy of youth development to foster positive and respectful relationships (Deschenes et al., 2004; Hall et al., 2003).

We have learned that staff need to be educated in a related degree or prepared and continually provided opportunities for professional development *and* engaged *and* need to stay in low-

paying, high-demand jobs. They need to implement high-quality programs that reflect youth interests and to be in partnerships with the family and community. All the while, they need to do so with the utmost care and responsiveness to ensure that all participants feel safe and have a strong sense of belonging, have opportunities to form positive relationships and practice skill and knowledge building in any number of content areas, and have opportunities for efficacy and leadership. Now, we are saying they should be ensuring that participants have explicit opportunities for SEL in order to support their positive development and character. This is a tall order. Let's consider whether the OST workforce is ready to implement SEL.

Readiness to Implement

As a field, are we ready to support the OST workforce as it develops this next layer of expertise? Are members of the OST workforce ready and prepared to implement programs that support participants' social and emotional development, including character? In 2015, the National AfterSchool Association conducted a scan of its members asking them to respond to questions focused on their value, interest, ability, expertise, and needs in implementing OST opportunities that supported SEL. Not surprisingly, the findings suggested that OST programs place a high value on SEL and report implementing opportunities for SEL, but responses were mixed on whether staff felt equipped to implement SEL. The majority of respondents indicated that they wanted more resources and professional development on SEL (National AfterSchool Association & AIR, 2016). Across the country, PK–12 education systems, schools, and OST programs are endeavoring not only to implement opportunities for SEL and character development but also to assess social and emotional competencies. It is critical that we take stock of where we are in OST organizational practices that support staff and their implementation of SEL, program implementation, and the readiness and comfort level of staff in implementing SEL.

The National AfterSchool Association, along with the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), has developed core knowledge and competencies for afterschool and youth development professionals (National AfterSchool Association, 2011). Intermediary organizations have recently designed tools to support staff member implementation of SEL, reflect on SEL practice, and to determine their readiness to assess social and emotional development (Devaney, 2015a; Moroney & McGarrah, 2016; Smith, McGovern, Larson, Hillaker, & Peck, 2016). These resources only scratch the surface if they are not accompanied by organizational buy-in, ongoing and aligned professional development, and staff inclusion and readiness for this new endeavor. We know from research that adoption of new practices at scale—or “diffusion of innovation” in research speak—is most effective when the problem is visible or tangible, when the solution is doable (e.g., requires small effort on the part of the individual or is relatively simple), and when the innovation or new practice has been tested and is supported by peers (Gawande, 2013; Rogers, Singhal, & Quinlan, 2009). Coburn (2003) suggests that bringing an education initiative to scale requires more than just putting it in lots of classrooms—it requires a depth and spread of implementation that gets to the core of the ideas by changing norms and beliefs, not just activities, by getting people on the ground involved in solving the problem. Something similar needs to happen with the OST field. SEL and related practices need to be made relevant to the workforce; the language and practices need to be made accessible; and the OST workforce needs to be meaningfully engaged in defining high-quality SEL in OST settings in order for successful and widespread adoption of SEL practice and character development.

Future Directions for OST in Practice: A New Job Description

At this juncture, we may consider how we can support staff in implementing SEL, while at the same time avoiding the youth work pivot. Over the years, we have asked youth workers to be instant specialists in prevention programming, arts, environmental education, literacy, academic enrichment and Supplemental Education Services, STEM, and life skills to name a few. Staff who are primarily part time and with low pay have had to pivot from one important initiative to another, often with little preparation or background, and as such have experienced trend fatigue with each new and important initiative. Throughout this time, our pervasive mission has been to support children and youth in their positive development. As we explore, identify, and implement practices to support staff in their preparation to implement high-quality SEL and character development, we need to acknowledge: (1) this effort builds on the OST field's fundamental mission of supporting youth development, and (2) if the goal of a program is to provide opportunities for youth to explore the arts, then by all means, keep up the good work. An entire content-varied and rich field does not all have to simultaneously pivot to a new mission and content—only one that makes sense for an organization in its history, context, and future direction.

Perhaps we don't need to redefine the role of every youth worker, but instead we can make a new job description for youth workers who specialize in SEL. This role would be similar to academic liaisons who connect the OST program with in-school learning and ensure that activities are aligned and working in conjunction with the school. A youth worker focused on SEL would ensure that programming is infused with both embedded and explicit SEL practices.

This approach presents not only the opportunity for programs to have SEL-focused staff members but also another career trajectory for youth workers.

The following recommendations for next steps represent the collective voice of field leaders' good thinking on the future directions in research and practice. Building on the core question presented in the Introduction of this paper, we asked field leaders: *What is the next step in the field to prepare the out-of-school time workforce to support participants' character development through SEL?* The following themes emerged from the field leaders responses.

[Organizational Support Toward Sustainability](#)

Youth-serving organizations, schools, and other agencies that house OST programs should ensure that they can support the value of SEL from the outset. There needs to be organizational buy-in to foster settings (and adults in the settings) that support positive development and to invest resources in the supports that staff need (e.g., professional development) to learn or bolster SEL strategies. From the beginning, organizations must consider sustainable organizational support for SEL in consideration of the issues of staff turnover previously mentioned in this paper. Organizations also may consider how they will evaluate the effectiveness of staff practice in implementing SEL. There exists great controversy around using youth-level measures of social and emotional competence to gauge staff practice, while we know that continuous-quality-improvement practices that include staff reflecting on their own implementation improve not only quality programming but also staff engagement.

Adoption of Frameworks and Knowing What That Means

There are two lines of thinking on adopting a common framework and language to describe the process of SEL and associated outcomes of social and emotional competencies, with the framing of workforce preparation for implementing high-quality SEL. First, there are some who assert that we need to agree on a common framework and shared understanding of language. Second, others are comfortable with “locally” adopted frameworks. At the very least, there must be consensus that *within* a program, or system of programs, where staff may have job mobility, that there be a common framework and clarity of language. There are efforts underway in both in-school and OST SEL to move toward consensus building in this space for a variety of reasons, but most primarily to detangle and clarify strategies for staff and buy-in from stakeholders.

Culture and Context

We need to explicitly explore and critically address issues of cultural bias. SEL and character are culturally defined and may function differently in different contexts. We need to do more than just acknowledge this challenge. We need to start having the critical conversations about the appropriateness, relevance, and application of SEL and character in a variety of OST programs serving a wide range of people. We not only need to pay credence and very good attention to this space, but we also need to start having conversations that include youth, family members, staff, and community members on the strategies and competencies that are relevant and valued by a community. Moreover, we need to pay attention to how different contexts (e.g., a small program, a rural program) influence opportunities for staff to implement high-quality SEL and how high-quality SEL is defined in those contexts. The Asia Society and Policy Studies Associates are leading a co-ideation process around 21st century competencies with systems builders across the globe (Stewart, 2015). This may be one method to ensure the relevance of efforts to support SEL

and aligned staff supports as we move forward in creating a more responsive and culturally reflective approach to SEL across contexts.

Adult Social and Emotional Competence

The OST workforce has a wide and varied job description. Not unlike other fields today, we know we have to add social and emotional competencies to the job qualifications list. We want OST staff to know themselves and to be able to work well with others by being good communicators and collaborators. These are all core competencies of a good employee, team player, and someone who can form ongoing and positive relationships that are critical to young people's positive experience in OST and positive development. We also expect staff to be able to role-model social and emotional competencies (and the strategies for SEL, such as reflection) with youth and colleagues in their programming. This additional expectation of the workforce may be a cumbersome hiring shift for some organizations that have historically hired a steady stream of part-time staff members with varying levels of youth-work experience and education. This new goal (not just in the OST workforce) to shift not only to an experienced and prepared workforce but to an experienced, prepared, *and* socially and emotionally competent workforce will take time and careful thought because in the end we are all developing and can use support in our ongoing positive development. Building off the previous topic of explicitly addressing culture and context in OST programs, we also need staff voice in this conversation to acknowledge staff members' experience with SEL; the contexts where they live, work, and play; and how their background and culture contribute to their practice. In the short term, ensuring that the OST workforce is meaningfully engaged in the conversation around SEL and its relevance, and aware that their social and emotional competence influences their work, the quality of programs, and young people's experience is a feasible and very important first step.

Professional Learning and Development

Critical to professional development for the OST workforce is messaging. There appears to be confusion in the field on terminology and frameworks, and SEL has been misconstrued as a completely new concept when in fact the theoretical origins of SEL, youth development, and character are the same. So as to avoid the dogma of another new thing, and the associated youth work pivot, we may consider messaging that SEL is youth development done really well, with additional intentional practice.

This paper presents an overview of the varied formal and informal preparation that OST staff, in addition to their own intrinsic strengths and interests, bring to programs. To professionalize the OST workforce, the OST field should support, design, and implement varied and ongoing professional learning and development for OST on awareness and strategies to implement SEL programs in OST settings. Staff and programs will come with varying levels of experience, resources, and prior knowledge in SEL. In an effort to address this variety, professional learning opportunities may vary by model of delivery (coaching, technical assistance, workshops, online tools and resources such as communities of practice and UCourses, shared resources, and examples of best practice) and by method of transfer (online, in person, resource sharing) to address not only diversity of experience but also learning style, and to accommodate the often part-time workforce. OST programs also should consider program participants, context, and offerings to contextualize training. For example, staff who work with youth from prekindergarten through middle school may participate in professional learning that is offered by developmental stage. Programs that are offered in conjunction with other supports for youth and families should include professional learning opportunities on how programs and initiatives align and how to

collaborate toward shared goals. Common agreement on a framework, language, and reflective buy-in are all a-priori to professional development; otherwise, it may end up being confusing, dismissed, or in the worst case, disrespectful.

[Intentionality](#)

Likely, one of the most important next steps for the field of OST and ultimately the workforce is to define and understand intentional SEL practice. Broadly defined, intentional practice is the purposeful implementation of practices and strategies to support SEL and character (as opposed to general quality practices that may result in SEL and character). Intentional practices also are responsive to the developmental stage of youth in the program, their readiness to learn, and the culture and context of the program and community (Deschenes et al., 2004). The development of such intentional practices can be done program by program by planning activities based on information continually gathered from participants via focus groups, surveys, interviews, and via other forms of informal communication. Intentional activities are designed to be open to and inclusive of youth, family, and community voice in programming. As noted previously, the field has a history and systems to support quality practice that may result in positive youth development outcomes, but we are yet to adequately define and adopt SEL practices that support character development and other social and emotional outcomes by developmental stage, in a variety of contexts, and that reflect, respect, and honor cultural diversity.

[Connections to Other Fields](#)

The OST workforce is not alone in its exploration and preparation to implement SEL practices. As a result of a multitude of factors—including the groundswell of interest and support for SEL in PK–12 settings and the recent Every Student Succeeds Act—the field of education is also

grappling with the issue of both local and scaled implementation of SEL and preparing teachers to implement practices that support SEL in schools. Similarly, higher education and workforce development programs are eager to define and support skills pathways to ensure today's children are prepared for tomorrow's jobs. Ideally, the fields of OST, PK–12 education, higher education institutions, and those who support workforce readiness may come together both to define the interrelated skills pathways that exist between fields and to collaboratively prepare a more generalized education and OST workforce that has a shared understanding of SEL and implementation of practices that support social and emotional development.

Future Directions for OST: A Research Agenda

There is still much we do not know about implementation of SEL in OST and the OST workforce in general. This paper references basic research, scans, commentary, and collective voices for next steps in practice and research. The following proposed research questions are based upon the gaps identified in this paper, and from field leaders' recommendations for further research. The research questions fall into three main categories: implementation studies, studies on the characteristics of the workforce, and impacts of SEL programming on adults.

Implementation studies on SEL practice in OST to define what the OST field needs to do and know. The following are example research questions:

- What does high-quality SEL practice look like?
- What are levers of implementation uptake at the program and staff levels?
- How does uptake and practice vary in different contexts and within and across cultures?
- What are the relationships between implementation of high-quality SEL and other practices?

Studies on the OST workforce, what staff members know, need to know, and how they learn best. Some example research questions are as follows:

- What is the OST workforce's current knowledge on SEL, character development, and related frameworks?
- What are the factors (e.g., buy-in, confidence, comfort level) that influence staff in their implementation and uptake of SEL in OST?
- What (resources, professional learning) does the OST workforce need in order to implement high-quality SEL practice?
- What methods of professional development are most impactful on SEL practice?

It would be interesting to learn about the impacts of implementing high-quality SEL practice on the adults in the program. Example research questions include the following:

- How does implementing high-quality SEL impact job satisfaction and retention?
- How does implementing high-quality SEL translate to adult practice? How does it change adult SEL skills—do staff who learn and implement SEL become more socially and emotionally competent themselves?

Finally, it is clear that we need to include youth, staff, and family voice in defining both practice and the resulting research agenda around high-quality OST and intentional SEL practices and resulting outcomes. This will ensure that both practice and research approaches are relevant and respect differences. Research can support the OST field and their workforce by studying the value of different forms of workforce preparation on SEL initiatives, and in building the knowledge base around high-quality SEL practice in OST. As a field, we need to come together

around terminology and expectations, and to ensure that the resulting messages are clear, relevant, and accessible. The OST workforce is prime for supporting SEL in OST programs but needs significant support in terms of resources, professional learning, and creating professional pathways.

Also, in support of staff, the OST field should remember that supporting young people's positive development is not new, but that implementing intentional opportunities for SEL does merit further definition and support. OST staff will champion SEL in support of participants social and emotional development, and character development as a part, if we can honor and build upon decades of good work instead of suggesting it is yet another pivot. As LL Cool J says, "Don't call it a comeback: We've been here for years" (Smith, 1990).

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