

Once We Know It, We Can Grow It **Highlights for Funders¹**

Reasons to Focus on Quality

- Quality programs produce positive results. Intentional quality assessment and improvement support academic learning and social-emotional development.
- Poor quality is not neutral. Children in poor quality programs risk being worse off than if they were not in the program.
- Quality can be measured, and quality control can be achieved through tools that specify the end goals, while allowing flexibility in the means used to meet them. The quality approach applies to all programs serving children without being over-prescriptive in the details of how those programs serve them.
- The quality framework promotes accountability and articulates value that is both consistent across programs and relevant to funder and grantee guidelines and standards. It applies across programs, whereas outcome measurements cannot.
- The formula of quality redirects discussions among those interested in improving systems that provide and support opportunities for youth beyond common vision and values to actionable steps. It does the same for grantees.

Quality Practice

Quality non-formal learning programs are strategically focused on the dynamic intersection of program features, youth worker expertise and youth engagement at the point of service. The quality accountability measures being used across the field of youth programming allow for a range of assessment tools suited to different organizational needs.

Non-formal Learning

Learner-initiated participation in structured settings where individuals control the learning objectives while the means of learning are determined by the programs or organizations. Not formal learning (school), or informal learning (life), but the kinds of activity we tend to fund as grant makers.

Quality Program Features

Relying on observable practice at the point of service, they are:

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

¹ *Once We Know It, We Can Grow It: A Framework for Quality Nonformal Learning Opportunities and Youth Work Practice*, Joyce Walker, Deborah Moore and Cecilia Gran, University of Minnesota Extension and Youth Community Connections, 2009

Youth Worker Expertise

The staff's capacity to influence program participant experience through wise, intentional application of knowledge gained from a combination of study, experience and reflection to address an issue or situation. It includes the capacity to see complexity in practice. Staff development and apprenticeship are critical to quality programs.

Youth Engagement

Quality programs demonstrate high levels of observable youth engagement in settings where young people actively define their interests and pursue their own learning.

Point of Service

The dynamic place where young person, youth worker and program meet – the key point of interaction and experience capable of influencing youth development.

Roles

An ecological view of the systems surrounding youth programs illustrates the roles and relationships of the stakeholders involved. Agencies and foundations that fund nonformal learning opportunities for young people are in a powerful position to advance quality improvement through conditions they put on the granting and acceptance of funds. (See page six of the Executive Summary.)

Challenges

Systemic planning and design v. point of service reality and efficiency

Examples of system-level movements, such as professionalization of the field, or creating quality standards, risk setting up a conflict between scientific research on one hand and locally planned and suited, community/youth-responsive point-of service work on the other. Finding ways to facilitate mutually constructive interplay between these levels in the pursuit of quality can be challenging.

Consistency and accountability v. flexibility, innovation and community responsiveness

Establishing measures of quality that accurately apply across the field of youth programming risks creating a 'one size fits all' mentality that could ultimately counteract efforts to advance individual program quality. Striking a balance between the variety in opportunities for youth and a universal commitment to quality can be challenging.

A Note About Systems

There are a wide range of factors, at a multitude of levels, to consider in grant making and evaluation. This paper expresses the view that programmatic services and outcomes cannot be isolated from the systems that deliver them. Not all grant making should focus on systems, but no grant making can disregard them either. System quality matters. It affects everything else we care about as grant makers.