

A Systematic Review of Program Quality in the Field of Positive Youth Development

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Abstract: The purpose of the study was to examine areas of competency for quality programming in the field of youth development. Program Quality is one of the new foci of evaluation capacity building (ECB) efforts that has not been clearly defined in the literature. For the purpose of this study, the researchers operationally defined program quality as the program characteristics, indicators, and implementation practice that stakeholders including researchers mutually agree upon. These program quality components are interlinked. It is critical to help youth practitioners think through the logical connection among the components of program quality. This can be partly achieved through professional development, which equips practitioners with competencies necessary to perform their tasks. Implementation of quality is associated with program staff's ability to influence program structure and process. Staff expertise is not defined by only their knowledge and skills but also their ability to respond to challenges and problems they face daily at work. Through a systematic literature review, the authors identified key areas where program quality in the field of youth development can be effectively impacted by staff training activities; these areas then served as the components of a proposed staff training model. The latter consists of four components: child/youth development, social ecological theory, program management, and program theory. These components were found to be critical for quality programming.

Keywords: Program Evaluation, Staff Training Model, Positive Youth Development (PYD), Program Implementation, Program Theory, Program Quality

1. Introduction

1.1. What Is Program Quality

Program quality is one of the new foci of evaluation capacity building (ECB) efforts. The focus on the logic model and program outcomes without attention to program quality has produced scant evidence of better evaluation practices [1, 2]. Therefore, the attention of ECB efforts has geared towards program quality. This change is supported by evidence that program staff who engage in program quality assessments achieve greater program effectiveness, and ultimately better program outcomes [3]. The discussion of program quality is, however, hindered by the fact that it is not clearly defined in the literature [4, 5]. A clear definition is needed to allow discussion of program quality and its

beneficiaries. For the purpose of this paper, program quality is defined as key program characteristics that program stakeholders (both internal and external) and researchers agree are critical to program success. According to Skaff et al., practitioners and scientists need to empower community leaders and stakeholders to be involved in the design of evidence-based programs [6]. Quality must be defined through the process involving a dialogue among the stakeholders included in programming [4].

Program quality is inherently context specific. Thus, it must meet the specific needs of a target population [7, 8], fit the environment [9], and support the specific goals of the program itself [10]. Socially constructed needs are culturally relative and, therefore, should be determined by the context and culture [11]. This makes it hard to generalize program quality from one program to the next although there are some

mutually agreed upon criteria within the literature that seem to be universal. For instance, the basic needs including physical safety, psycho-social, exploration, and discovery needs are universal and represent the contribution of researchers about the understanding of child and youth's growth and development [12]. The basic needs must be part of the setting standards regardless of the environment in which a program operates. As a result, a quality program must meet the basic needs and the social constructed needs of young people [12].

Researchers have argued that program quality goes beyond the identification of program quality features, and that there is a need to fully understand how to successfully implement these features [13]. Thus, mutually identified program characteristics and indicators of program quality must be supported with implementation practices that lead to quality. Program staff should pay attention to what the program is doing and how program activities contribute to the program's theory to ensure program quality [14]. Implementation of quality is associated with program staff's ability to influence program structure and process [15]. Knowledgeable and well-trained staff are among the key predictors of sustainable program quality [16]. Staff training has been identified as one avenue that improves staff members' understanding of program quality and experience in implementing quality practices [17].

1.2. General Definition of Staff Training

Staff training is a process by which employees acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to perform a task or job better [18]. Staff training is designed to enhance short-term and/or long-term job performance of employees [19]. As a result, employees become more proficient to produce more and/or higher quality work. They become qualified to work in positions of greater challenges and responsibilities [20]. Staff training is required for employees to systematically develop their knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to meet program expectations [21]. Moreover, staff training not only provides the skills and knowledge to improve job performance, but also aligns employees' behaviors and attitudes with the vision, goals, and objectives of the program or organization [20]. Staff training is based on the premise that the development of competences – knowledge, skills, and attitudes – is necessary for organizations to grow [21, 22] and/or to meet programs outcomes. Staff training is a process that should be planned and continuous [23]. The training activities should be carefully designed with the purpose of influencing the individual employees' job performance or tasks [24]. In brief, staff training enhances staff quality, which is a critical component that leads to high-quality programming [25]. As a result, many researchers and staff, themselves, have called for training for those working with youth.

1.3. General Impacts of Staff Training

Staff training is necessary to reinforce youth workers' knowledge of theories, the rationale of programs [26], and

youth developmental needs [27]. Otherwise, youth workers may lack sound knowledge grounded in theories, research, and best practices. Staff training can create a common understanding of youth development [27], which aims at meeting youth developmental needs and building competencies to enable them to transition successfully to adulthood [28]. For instance, Weissberg and O'Brien found that staff training improves youth professionals' knowledge about 4-H youth development programs [29]. Additionally, staff training equips professionals with varying skills--management skills, communication skills, listening skills and leadership skills--that are necessary to meet the divergent needs of youth [30] and sustain the quality of a program implementation [29].

Staff expertise is not defined by only their knowledge and skills but also their ability to respond to challenges and problems they face at work [31, 32]. Many youth workers struggle to handle youth with antecedents of violent behavior [13] and issues related to race [33]. As a result, staff members need to gain knowledge of the dilemmas of youth work [34], which have been classified into categories and subcategories [13].

Staff training exposes youth workers to best practices to reduce barriers to achieving outcomes [35-38]. Some of the youth development best practices consist of considering age, developmental stage, and cultural appropriateness when designing programs [39]. The same authors further argue that practitioners should be able to support and provide youth with opportunities for physical and psychological safety, relationship building, community involvement, and skill building. Staff training helps youth workers understand and assess programs in terms of the keys to quality youth programs. Research has shown that most assessments of program quality include measures such as relationships, environment, engagement, social norms, skill-building opportunities, and structure [40]. In addition, quality positive youth development programs, according to Eccles and Gootman, are associated with the following factors: climate 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 [41].

Staff training helps youth workers engage youth as partners and develop activities that meet their developmental needs and interests. Youth workers need to learn how to design and implement learning activities that give rise to close bonds with the staff members. Research has documented youth-adult relationships as a key factor for youth retention and success in positive youth development programs [42]. As can be seen, staff training has been a determinant used to equip youth workers with the necessary competency to achieve high levels of implementation, which is crucial to achieving program outcomes [43].

In an era of increasing needs and limited resources, staff training can serve as a platform where youth workers build networks to share and discuss work related information and

find solutions to implementation inconsistencies [30]. For instance, staff training can serve as a platform to discuss barriers to youth development practice such as time limits of programs, lack of resources, policies, directives, work overload, and so forth. Staff training can be a powerful platform to solve complex problems.

In addition, staff training helps youth workers understand program logic by building connections among program assumptions, resources, activities, and desired program outcomes. It helps youth workers understand the testable mechanisms that explain why program outcomes are achieved. This competency is critical to achieve and sustain program quality (5).

Further, staff training helps identify challenges of overcoming staff resistance to change [39]. Changing has always been hard. As a result, many practitioners continue to use approaches with youth that have little or no evidence of effectiveness and are often very harmful to the society [44, 45]. The youth development approach is an evidence-based approach that demands time and effort, which makes it hard to embrace [39]. Staff training is an avenue to foster change and adoption.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a paradigm shift from other youth service fields that focus on youth assets or strengths instead of problems [46, 47]. Many youth workers have little background in positive youth development [30]. Additionally, many youth staff enter the field without specific job training [48]. They often rely on their prior experiences, which are unrelated to work with children [49]. Because youth staff are the frontline workers, it is necessary for them to understand the philosophy and core components of positive youth development [27]. They have the potential to influence positively young people's academic, social, and emotional achievements as well as their career choice and self-portrait [30]. Staff training improves youth staff's self-confidence [50]. According to Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew, youth staff possess a unique characteristic – “sigfluence: a positive, significant, long-term interpersonal influence over youth”—that can be developed through trainings as they help young people transition successfully to adulthood [30, p. 2].

Programs can no longer afford to rely only on youth staff's best instincts and prior experiences to promote healthy, thriving young people [51]. Over time, the course of inexperienced and untrained youth staff can negatively influence the competency level, strength, and effectiveness of a program [52]. Limited or inadequate staff training may affect youth staff's competency and confidence to implement program components effectively, which in turn may lead to burnout [53].

Research has shown that staff training is one of the key elements in the overall effectiveness of a program's ability to promote positive youth development [54-56]. Youth staff who receive training are reported to have higher levels of competency [27, 57] and feel more relatable and more confident to work with youth [57].

Despite the importance of staff training for program outcomes, little research has studied the link between staff

training and program quality. Among the few who investigated this relationship, two scholars found it to be significant [58, 59]. To sum-up, staff training equips youth staff with knowledge of relevant theory and research regarding youth's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development; risk and protective factors; and principles of adolescent development.

1.4. Core Components of Positive Youth Development Program Trainings

Staff training can help youth workers who are from different educational backgrounds to have a common understanding of the core principles and practices of positive youth development [49]. Having the ability to support youth development while simultaneously acting as partners to youth still remains a challenge for youth staff [60]. According to Huebner et al., youth staff should be able to understand and articulate the content of youth development work and deliver it appropriately where youth are engaged and interactive while experiencing developmental and learning growth [27].

Positive youth development consists of an array of activities, practices, mandates, and aspirations that are both confusing and promising [27]. The identification of core competencies is the first step toward creating a well-trained workforce to deliver quality programs [61]. Core competencies are the required knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for youth staff to produce and deliver high quality programming [48]. Core competencies can be used as practice standards for youth staff and a guide for staff training efforts with the perspective to provide high quality youth programming [61, 62]. They can serve as a guide to design training for youth staff [54]. However, establishing core competencies for such a diverse youth-service field is challenging.

A review of 14 field-based competency frameworks on content, structure, and usage in system-level initiatives resulted in considerable agreement in terms of the content [62]. Vance's work found substantial agreement on the following contents: Child/youth development, positive guidance, families and communities, program management, professionalism, and communication [48]. According to Vance's study, a substantial agreement occurs when at least 80 percent of the considered frameworks included a particular competency area. As can be seen, there is common understanding that youth staff should understand the principles of child and youth development and be able to implement them at the program level. Second, they should use positive guidance to manage youth's conduct. Third, they should build relationships with communities and organizations that support youth programs. Fourth, they should demonstrate management skills such as time management and resourcefulness when implementing a program. Finally, they should show professionalism by following the program rules and committing to professional growth. In addition, many youth workers acknowledge their priority needs for training in experiential learning methods

and child & adolescent development [63].

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disabilities (NCWD) for youth synthesized the competencies of youth service professionals in 10 competency areas: knowledge of the field, communication with youth, assessment and individualized planning, relationship to family and community, workforce preparation, career exploration, relationships with employers and between employer and employee, connection to resources, program design and delivery, and administrative skills [64].

In addition, Fordney and Jones suggested the following recommendations for positive youth development training programs [65]. First, staff training for youth staff should consist of information on the characteristics of effective teachers, effective communication skills, and how to create learning opportunities and activities for youth to develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Second, youth staff should understand they have a greater role in the youth lives they serve than just lecturing and learn how to be a positive role model for them. Third, they need to understand that facilitators who appreciate life are more effective in impacting people's lives.

Additionally, staff training should focus on motivating the potential implementers, youth staff members. Although the implementers' motivation is essential to youth learning [66], this important objective is usually missing from most programs [67]. Few program trainings include trainees' motivation as part of their objectives [68].

Moreover, self-efficacy could be an important program training goal because implementers with high self-efficacy are more confident in implementing innovative lesson plans [69]. According to Turner et al., high self-efficacy is associated with implementation [70]. Therefore, attention should be given to practitioners' sense of competency for facilitating quality implementation.

Further, reflection should be encouraged among implementers. Since positive youth development programs emphasize the importance for youth to acquire self-reflection skills, it is necessary for youth workers to have the opportunity to understand and practice these skills. Although research has found that implementers who have strong self-reflection are able to integrate theory into practice [71, 72], few program trainings incorporate self-reflection in their curriculum [65, 73]. It is important to provide staff with opportunities for skill demonstration, modeling, and feedback as well. Youth workers need to be able to express their opinions, challenge existing assumptions, and develop a shared language and understanding of development [74].

Staff training should involve activities that can equip youth staff members with best contemporary instructional strategies to deliver educational contents [75]. Educators' teaching style should promote active, youth-centered learning [76]. They need to have the ability to shape the learning environment in such a way that it promotes engagement, participation, understanding, creativity, and critical thinking. The use of technologies can enable educators to reshape the learning environment in which learners engage in a complex

and rich network of resources and information [76].

Helping youth workers to attend advanced trainings, which reflect the culture and experience of youth in a community, can strengthen the development of youth program staff [77], and further increase the quality of instruction for the potential youth development practitioners. According to Smith et al., educational organizations should focus on high-quality instruction [3].

An interagency collaboration between local colleges, universities and organizations or programs can enhance quality and credibility in the positive youth development field [78] by developing jointly an agreed upon, standardized youth development curriculum. A similar interagency partnership can also pool resources to train youth workers [79]. Some researchers suggest that there is a need to standardize the common practices in the field [27]. By building a network of experts for staff training, youth development professionals taking a critical step toward creating a well-trained workforce to deliver program quality with effective youth development practices [80]. The most influential youth programs are based on a developmental framework that uses trained staff, provides appropriate structures, and encourages supportive relationships [41]. Overall, deliberated programming and well-trained staff are critical to support and provide children and youth with opportunities to grow intellectually, socially, emotionally, and civically or morally.

The purpose of the study was to examine the intersection of staff training and program quality in the field of youth development. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How is program quality defined in the youth development literature?
2. How is staff training described in the youth development literature?
3. How is program quality and staff training addressed in the positive youth development literature?

2. Method

This was a systematic review of literature in the positive youth development field. The systematic literature review method was used because it provided a high-level overview of high quality, relevant, evidence-based research in youth development, which were identified, selected, and appraised using the following criteria [81].

2.1. Eligibility Criteria

The researchers reviewed relevant articles in youth development specifically those on positive youth development that addressed staff training and program quality. Articles that included "youth development" and "staff training" and "evaluation" were examined to determine if they addressed program quality measures such as youth participation, youth engagement, adult-youth relationships, appropriate structure, fidelity, and alike. Peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed articles were considered with the purpose

of capturing as much relevant available information as possible in the study. These articles address most importantly program structures and program process that lead to successful implementation. Articles that focused on preventing youth's problems were excluded.

The researchers included in the study afterschool and community-based interventions that support staff training. In addition, training implementation and evaluation interventions that identify and promote youth development practices that lead to program quality were included.

All designs including, but not limited to, research survey designs and pre-post designs—empirical designs, and theoretical designs were considered in the study aiming at including as many available relevant studies as possible. Non-randomized designs were included because they are more common in the field. The article search was conducted in English. Only articles that were written in English were included in the study.

2.2. Search Strategy

The articles included in the study were searched in Google scholar. Additionally, the Journal of Extension, the American Journal of Community Psychology, the Journal of Youth Development, and PubMed Journals were included in the search because of their overall focus on youth development. Their publication years included those dated from 1970-2016. The researchers used the following key words for the search: “staff training in youth development,” “program implementation,” “program quality and positive youth development”, and “core competencies for youth workers.” In addition, useful articles from the reference lists of the selected studies were also included. The titles and the abstracts of all searched articles were examined for relevance before their inclusion in the study. Overall, 207 articles were searched, but only 124 (59.90%) met the eligibility criteria.

3. Results

3.1. Staff Training as Factor of Program Quality

This study found that staff training is a well-researched area. However, little research has focused on the relationships between staff training and program quality [27]. Among the few studies that researched the association between staff training and program quality, two found them to be correlated [41, 59].

In addition, research has shown a lack of consensus about the core competencies that youth workers should possess in order to fulfil their duties properly. Therefore, three core components were chosen by the researchers, among the research finding lists that were believed to have a greater impact on program quality implementation. These core components: program management, child/youth development, and program theory, should enable youth workers to establish logical connections between program structures and program processes, which are essential for program quality.

These three core components convey an integrated information base about program processes (fidelity, adaptation, and participation) and program structures (group size, staffing structure, physical environment). For instance, the core component “program management” provides youth workers with solid knowledge in youth participation, implementation fidelity, and regulation of youth-external systems interactions. Whereas, program theory prepares them on implementation fidelity and adaptation. The core component “child/youth development” provides youth workers a foundation in youth participation, implementation adaptation, program structure, and youth-external system (family and community). As can be seen, in most cases the learning outcomes are similar and, therefore, overlapped. As a result, the contents that were believed to have stronger ties with core components were development activities. For instance, program management includes youth participation, program theory includes fidelity and adaptation, and finally child/youth development includes program structures and youth-external system interactions.

However, to make the model more comprehensive, the researchers unfold the youth-external systems interactions component separately from child/youth development and program management through the lens of the social ecological theory, which has increased the number of competencies in the staff training model to four components. The first component of the staff training model is program management.

3.2. Program Management

Program management is essential to ensure quality participation. It involves mutuality planning and teaching, which build a trustworthy learning environment favorable to youth participation, which in turn is necessary for learning and growth. A key outcome of an effective program management is youth participation.

Youth Participation

Youth participation is a multifaceted variable, but with no consensus about its dimensionality [82]. This multidimensional concept implies active engagement in a program. According to Lerner et al., it is the contribution of youths to their surrounding world [83]. The most contemporaneous measurement of the youth participation dimension includes dosage, duration, breadth, intensity, and consistency [82].

Research has reported participation as an important variable of youth development program quality [10]. Youth gain more from participation when their learning experiences extend over time in terms of intensity, duration, and breadth [84]. However, youth participation requires a safe haven, fun activities, and mutuality in teaching and learning to occur.

Research has shown that staff members with strong behavioral management skills provide a safe environment conducive to development of peer and youth-adult relationships [85]. Youths who develop positive relationships with adults are more engaged and less likely to drop out [85]. In addition, a physically and psychological safe environment

increases youth learning and participation [86]. According to McLaughlin, adolescents should spend their time in a way that fosters learning and social development [87].

Research suggests that fun and challenging educational activities attract youths [85]. Fun and challenging activities facilitate peer relationship development and learning whereas boring activities inhibit participation and learning [88]. Therefore, learning methods and activities that foster voluntary participation are encouraged. In addition, learning methods that tailor youths' learning styles and offer opportunities for skill-building are encouraged since recreational and skill-building activities are attractive to young people [85, 87]. Further, well-delivered intervention fosters enthusiasm and commitment in participants [89].

Further, mutuality in teaching and learning is critical for youth participation. Therefore, staff members need to work together with youths as partners. Setting norms together with youths is ideal to help them know in advance how to interact, share, learn, and grow together. According to Larson and Walker, sharing norms, expectations, and limits with youths on acceptable conduct creates a predictable, secure environment for healthy development of adolescents [13]. Youths are more likely to commit to guidelines issued from collaborative work with staff [90].

3.3. Program Theory

The second component of the staff training model is program theory. Program theory is the mechanism by which program interventions are conceived to achieve the desired outcomes [91, p. 209]. According to Weiss, program theory is also the connections between the program assumptions and what actually occurs at "each small step along the way" [92, p. 35]. There is an emergent need to help staff think through these connections [93]. Program Theory is an avenue that fosters program adoption and implementation with fidelity.

3.3.1. Fidelity

Fidelity is a multidimensional variable of program quality, which can be measured in terms of adherence, dosage, quality of delivery, participants' responsiveness, and program differentiation [94]. A comprehensive picture of fidelity can only be captured by using all the dimensions [95]. Other researchers argue that fidelity can simply be measured by either adherence, dosage, or quality of delivery [96]. According to Fagan et al., it is an imperative to deliver programs as planned in terms of dosage, integrity, and responsiveness [88].

For this review, program differentiation, which is according to [94], the identification of unique features and core components of programs, fits well with the purpose of this article. Core components can be determined by surveying program designers and/or conducting component analysis, which helps to know which components have the most impact [94]. Detailed information about core components are necessary to avoid drifting away from what was originally planned and to facilitate the evaluation [97,

98]. The deviation from implementation fidelity is a major concern [94, 99]. It becomes difficult to assess the theory behind the importance of core components of a program if they are not implemented with fidelity [100]. In essence, for implementation to be effective, it needs to be congruent with theory, content, and methods of delivery.

3.3.2. Adaptation

Another aspect of program theory is adaptation. Adaptation can be necessary to meet changes in developmental needs and interests despite the fact it conflicts with fidelity. Youth development programs must be developmentally appropriate and/or stage-environment fit [101]. In addition, fidelity can sometimes conflict with youths' increased desire for independence and choice [85]. However, adaptation needs to be aligned with the rationale of a program and carefully assessed during the implementation [102]. Adaptation must preserve the core components of a program in order to achieve the intended outcomes [102]. In other terms, adaptation should be theory driven. In addition, adaptation may fail if the theory is not sound or valid [103]. Similarly, lack of quality of adaptation leads to implementation failures [100]. Therefore, science-based strategies must be used to regulate adaptation to prevent decrements in program effectiveness [104].

However, adaptation can happen by inserting additional components to the original program and/or implementing the original components differently from previously prescribed [105]. The additive adaptation has been reported to associate with program effectiveness and often happens in conditions of high fidelity [106].

3.4. Child/Youth Development

Another component of in the staff training model is child and youth Development. Child/youth development provides youth workers with insights about positive youth development, which is a strength-based approach of child/youth development. The latter is based on the principle that children/youth participation stimulates growth and development. In addition, youth establish mutual relationships with their surrounding world. However, these relationships need to be mutually beneficial for growth to occur. Therefore, children and youth should be provided with opportunities and appropriate structure to thrive.

Program Structures

The structure of programs is very important for an effective child and youth development. An orderly learning environment is necessary for children and youth to develop positively [41]. Structure helps with categorizing program elements and practices [7]. A sequenced, active, focused, explicit (SAFE) program is the best predictor of positive effects on youth developmental outcomes [107]. Greater structure leads to higher quality implementation [85]. The greater the structure, the greater is youths' life satisfaction [108]. However, program activities should be broken down into manageable, age-appropriate, and varied blocks of instruction [85]. Appropriate structure supports skill-building

activities, positive relationship development, and a sense of belonging, which result in the development of the six Cs of positive youth development-- competence, connection, confidence, character, caring, and contribution [109-111].

Staff youth ratio may vary from program to program. However, research suggests one adult to four young people as staff-ratio average for any program [110]. A reasonable staff ratio can foster high quality adult-youth and peer relationships. Appropriate staff ratio gives youth a chance to receive appropriate attention—frequent and in-depth interactions, which are the basis of positive youth development [107].

The program size can also potentially influence youth's behaviors in youth development programs [84]. No specific size has, however, been found in the literature. Research has suggested that program size be kept as small as possible [112]. Small program size is essential for program effectiveness [113]. In fact, young people who engage in structured activities achieve better outcomes than in unstructured activities [114].

3.5. Social Ecological Theory

The fourth component of the staff training model is social ecological theory. The latter emphasizes the importance of interactions between youths and the real world. The lives of adolescents and children are tied with diverse peer groups including friends, classmates, siblings, and neighborhood children [115]. Their interactions occur across different social domains as they learn and grow. These social domains or systems are classified into mesosystem, exosystem, and chronosystem [116]. The latter are respectively defined as family's environment, outside of home environment, and the physiological changes that occur within individuals over time as they grow [116].

However, youth need to have abilities and adequate skills to navigate through these diverse social systems. They must learn how to develop and sustain positive and supportive relationships with people from different social ecological learning environments. They need to develop skills, competencies, moral beliefs, and self-confidence in order to become active participants in the modern culture [117]. They need to be able to “work within social networks, pool knowledge within a collective intelligence, negotiate across cultural differences that shape the governing assumptions in different communities, and reconcile conflicting bits of data to form a coherent picture of the world around them” [117, p. 20]. These skills are necessary for youth to “participate fully in public, community, and economic life” [118, p. 9].

Therefore, youth workers need to understand relationships between individuals and settings [119]. Youth benefit from meaningful interactions. They experience a sense of growth and progress in developing skills and abilities when offered opportunities for meaningful interactions across the social systems [120].

Research has documented the importance of regulating the reciprocal relations between people and their diverse social

environment to capitalize on youth's potential for systematic change-- plasticity. The latter can be achieved by altering individual-ecology relationships [83]. These relationships must be mutually advantageous for adaptive developmental regulations to emerge or occur [83]. These mutually advantageous relationships are the premise for a promising future distinguished by “positive contributions to self, family, community,” and the society as a whole [83, p. 12].

In addition, youth developmental work should focus on improving the “fit between the capacities of youth and the assets” for healthy, thriving development that exist in their diverse social ecologies [83, p. 15]. The potential for healthy, thriving development among youth can also be achieved by aligning their strengths with resources for positive development available in their divergent social ecologies, with the assumption that youth-asset relations can be shaped in distinct and yet successful ways by divergent youth and community contexts [83].

4. Conclusions

There was evidence in the literature that supports the needs for staff training of youth development professionals in quality programming in order to improve youth outcomes. The literature has shown that some researchers have found that staff training correlates with program quality. Many agree that staff training is needed to improve understanding of program quality and experience in implementation practices. Well trained staff are among the key predictors of sustainable program quality. However, few agree upon which competences that are needed to implement and sustain program quality. Given the findings of this study, four areas of competence were identified: child and youth development, social ecological theory, program management, and program theory, as critical components for staff training of youth development professionals in the delivery of sustainable program quality.

5. Recommendations

The researchers recommend more studies on program quality in the field of positive youth development. These studies may focus on determining a common definition of program quality, its features and core practices. Further studies are also recommended to further study competencies that youth development professionals need to achieve program quality. Additionally, more studies are needed to research the relationships between staff training and program quality. Given the results of this study, the researchers propose the following model of staff training for program quality that can be used for both research and professional development purposes. From a research perspective, this staff training model should be studied to verify its structural validity. From a practice standpoint, it should be examined in terms of its real world applications (e.g., training design, cost effectiveness).

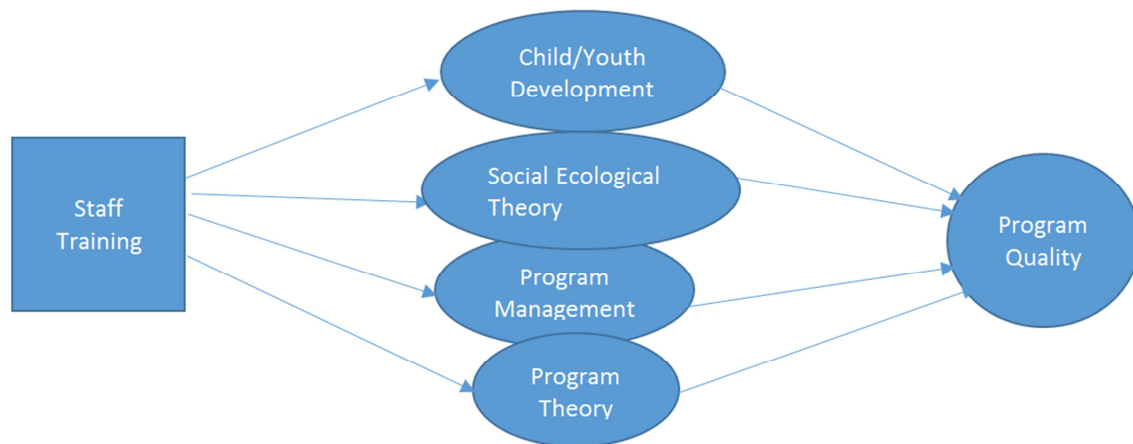


Figure 1. Norze-Cater Staff Training Model of Youth Development Program Quality.

6. Implications

The use of the newly developed model may enhance the preparation of youth development professionals in quality programming. Many staff who enter the field of positive youth development have knowledge deficit in quality programming. Inadequate staff preparation can lead to burnout and poor job performance, which ultimately affect program outcomes. This model may be used to improve the outcomes of positive youth development programs including afterschool and community-based programs and camps for youth, and at the same time facilitate their evaluation. This model can also be used to guide research and future staff training and development for youth development professionals in the area of quality programming. As can be seen, program quality is relatively new to many practitioners and researchers in the field of positive youth development. This model should help with further discussions among researchers and practitioners in the arena. Furthermore, the model can be used by officials to enforce policies that support program quality. Stakeholders such as parents and elected officials are interested in the future or quality of the development of the children and youth. They may demand or enforce policies that foster healthy development of children and youth. The investment in youth is made possible through a combination of highly competitive federal, state, and local grants foundations, private donations, community organizations, and families.

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