teaching the *what* as well as the *how*

Content-Rich OST Professional Development

by Benjamin Cooper

Across the nation, adults gather in classrooms. As sign-in sheets circulate the room, school teachers, out-of-school time (OST) staff, and youth workers of all stripes cram into child-sized chairs, coffee cups in hand. They ready themselves to think and talk about their work, to learn something new and useful. From CPR to conflict resolution, from curriculum standards to mentoring, professional development is a fact of life for educators at all levels and in all contexts.

Although a significant amount of research has evaluated the efficacy of professional development, most focuses on school rather than OST settings. A recent literature review notes, "The irony is that, while school teachers are increasingly called upon to become more proficient in subject matter, we expect OST staff to improve student outcomes . . . without adequate subject matter training" (Hill, 2012, p. 6). Indeed, the irony is furthered by the fact that so little research has focused on content-specific OST training. As OST programs are increasingly pressured to connect their activities to school day learning, identifying and implementing best practices in OST professional development has become increasingly important. Many practitioners and researchers have answered that call, but their work is likely to focus on evaluating the pedagogy of professional development rather than its content.

This article examines the literature on best practices in content-specific professional development and then aligns this work with the practices of a citywide afterschool chess program run by After School Activities Partnerships (ASAP) in Philadelphia. This analysis shows that implementing content-specific professional development based on best practices can lead to long-lasting and content-rich OST programming.

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Studying Best Practices in Professional Development

OST practitioners need external perspectives and fresh ideas in order to evaluate and improve their own programming. Without such research, ineffective and unimaginative activities will persist, and true gems will remain undiscovered. High-quality professional development directly affects the group most responsible for creating those programmatic gems: front-line staff. Since the skill and longevity of a program's workforce are central markers of its quality, professional development that can build skills and encourage staff retention is critical (Metz, Burkhauser, & Bowie, 2009). As the Harvard Family Research Project (2004) notes, "*Staff development can affect youth outcomes*" (p. 4, emphasis original).

A Focus on Methods and Efficacy

Much of the research on professional development mentions that content is important but then moves to other topics without explanation. Rather, the research tends to focus either on cataloging types of professional development—that is, the methods by which the undiscussed content is delivered—or on evaluating the efficacy of training, as determined by student outcomes. The mode of training gets the attention, while content is, intentionally or not, a secondary concern. The work of the Harvard Family Research Project demonstrates this tendency. Its 2004 article lists eight types of professional development and discusses evaluation methods, but it mentions content just three times, and then in little detail.

Researchers who do include content in the constellation of factors influencing OST quality may still neglect to pursue the topic fully. For example, Huang and Cho (2010) conducted two studies, the first of which parsed best practices from 53 high-quality OST programs, while the second, the extension study, examined professional development in four programs in more depth. Although "exemplary practices in organization, structure, and especially in content delivery" (Huang & Cho, 2010, p. 10) were part of the first study, the article emphasizes the second study's findings on staff retention rather than focusing on content.

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Research on Content-Specific Professional Development

In the words of Gil Noam (2004), content encompasses "the essential features of afterschool programming: goals, curricula, and activities" (p. 8). Much of the research on content-specific programming and professional development has been conducted on initiatives related to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), whose skills dovetail nicely with those taught by chess. This relationship holds true for professional development as well.

In one major survey, Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) tested the effect of various professional development practices on the learning, knowledge, and practices of a large sample of math and science teachers. The researchers identified six criteria for effective professional development. In keeping with other studies, the criteria are wide ranging; however, the first criterion is "focus on content knowledge." The authors found no correlation between student achievement and professional development on general pedagogy. Rather, the professional development that positively affected student outcomes emphasized "specific content and how students learn that content" (Garet et al., 2001, pp. 924–925). The researchers found that the type of professional development—the *how*—mattered much less than the *what*: "the core features (i.e., content, active learning, and coherence)" (Garet et al., 2001, p. 936). They conclude that their findings "give renewed emphasis to the profound importance of subject-matter focus in designing high-quality professional development" (Garet et al., 2001, p. 936).

Structuring Content-Specific Professional Development

The online *Guide to Professional Development for Out-of-School Science Activity Leaders* created by the National Partnerships for After School Science (N-PASS, 2009) is a research-backed treasure trove of content-specific professional development practices. The guide aims to help OST staff lead high-quality science activities even if they have little background in science. It coalesces best practices into a set of recommendations for training staff

in science content—the *what* of STEM learning—so that they can implement ready-made curricula and activities (N-PASS, 2009).

N-PASS has three recommendations for teaching content: explicit modeling of science activities, discussing science content and processes, and reflection on pedagogical practices (N-PASS, 2009). N-PASS notes that explicit modeling "is much more convincing and effective than merely telling participants what to do" (p. 16) because the hands-on experience allows staff to see how an activity can work for their students (N-PASS, 2009). Practicing the activity enables the future leader to grapple with the content personally, rather than in the abstract. Under the guidance of a skilled instructor, such practice gives staff direct feedback on the structure and presentation of an activity.

Guided modeling leads to the second NPASS recommendation: discussion. Conversations with a knowledgeable instructor can give participants who may feel less confident in their science background a better sense of what is expected (N-PASS, 2009). Participants thus learn content knowledge through both direct experience and specific feedback.

N-PASS's final recommendation, reflection, builds from the first two, as it advises professional developers to introduce pedagogical practices within the context of science activities, in order to demonstrate how they are applied (N-PASS, 2009). Only once the practitioners understand the content and the lesson does the instructor reveal the pedagogical underpinnings. This final level of understanding emphasizes why activities are presented in certain ways—the rationale for specific instructional practices—in order to encourage youth development (N-PASS, 2009).

Reflection often requires time and intentional practice. N-PASS (2009) therefore recommends that "there needs to be adequate time given for reflection" (p. 16) in the course of professional development programs. Reflection on the techniques being learned should be guided by the instructor. After they have put their new skills to use in their work with youth, participants should have the opportunity to discuss common implementation issues. "This type of reflective exercise is essential to help participants adopt these pedagogical strategies into their own practice" (N-PASS, 2009, p. 16).

N-PASS's research-based recommendations on teaching STEM content provides a useful framework for the examination of ASAP's chess club leader trainings.

Professional Development in ASAP's Chess Initiative

ASAP is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization founded in 2002 to increase the number of afterschool enrichment activities available to the city's youth and to create and maintain a free public database of all OST programming citywide. ASAP's own programming focuses on four main initiatives: chess, debate, Scrabble, and drama. These enrichment clubs meet at least once a week for at least an hour, for at least a semester. Many clubs operate more frequently and for much longer. They are fueled by volunteers recruited by ASAP and by staff of existing OST organizations.

Volunteers are recruited by ASAP's small administrative staff, who also perform required background checks. Volunteers receive training in at least two separate sessions: The first covers general youth-work skills, and the second teaches skills specific to the club type, such as chess. We then place volunteers in existing afterschool programs that match their schedule and logistical requirements.

ASAP recruits other club leaders from the staff of existing afterschool programs in schools, libraries, recreation centers, and other sites. Our pitch? If the site can identify staff interested in leading an ASAP club, we will train those individuals in activity instruction, provide supplies and instructional materials, and follow up with ongoing support, including free events such as tournaments and family fun days. Since these individuals already have clearance to work with youth and have been trained by their employers in general youth-work skills, they jump right into the program-specific training. This approach has yielded many strong partnerships that have remained active over many years.

The Philadelphia Youth Chess Challenge is ASAP's largest initiative, with 230 clubs serving more than 3,000 youth throughout the city. Our two-person chess staff organizes 18 tournaments and events each year, as well as a 15-week chess league for public and charter school teams, a five-session academy for female players, and a mentorship program that partners high school chess players with younger clubs. To serve the adults who lead those 230 clubs, ASAP holds about 30 training sessions each year. Most are facilitated by ASAP's lead chess instructor, Stephen Shutt, a longtime classroom teacher and chess coach who has led several national championship chess teams.

Characteristics of Chess Club Leaders

ASAP's professional development is shaped by the needs of our chess club leaders. Those leaders, in turn, are

shaped by the nature of employment in the OST field—namely, that "there is no standard route to becoming a provider" (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004, p. 2). Leaders are an eclectic group from many walks of life—teachers, librarians, recreation center staff, concerned citizens, OST program staff, and student volunteers.

Similarly, the 230 chess clubs meet at many different venues: public, charter, parochial, and private schools; libraries; recreation centers; churches; and community centers. In spring 2011, ASAP conducted a large-scale survey of its chess club leaders. The results, shown in Tables 1 and 2, demonstrate the variety among club leaders and host sites.

These adults share a dedication to the city's youth, but their familiarity with teaching, classroom management—and, most importantly, the game of chess—varies. Determining what club leaders need is no small task. Their varied experiences and roles mean that there is no one thing that they all need in equal amounts. Any given training session might be attended by an expert chess player who has never before worked with youth and a 10-year teacher who can command a classroom but barely knows how the pieces move.

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Table 1. Chess Club Leaders

LEADER TYPE	PERCENTAGES
School teacher or staff	51%
Afterschool program staff	25%
Volunteer	15%
Recreation center staff	9%

Table 2. Chess Club Host Sites

SITE TYPE	PERCENTAGES
School	60%
Community center	26.5%
Recreation center	9%
Library	2.5%
Church	2%

What, then, stitches together ASAP's diverse club leaders? The game of chess. ASAP's focus on content appeals to leaders who themselves love chess or who believe strongly in the game's value for the students with whom they work. People become chess club leaders because they value the game—the *what*—and teaching it to youth. One of the consequences of that focus and the enthusiasm it engenders is the longevity of ASAP chess clubs. The annual return rate for chess clubs has hovered around 75 percent; the other 25 percent may dissolve or enter hiatus for a time. The average chess club has been in existence for five years. Some clubs keep the same leader throughout their lifespan; others have multiple leaders over time. To keep those numbers at such a high level, ASAP has made it a priority to identify replacements when club leaders are unable to continue. Our 2011 survey indicated that 68 percent of club leaders had 0–3 years of experience in that role; the rest had 4–10 years. Club leaders' affinity for chess is at the heart of ASAP's content-specific professional development.

Workshop-Based Professional Development

Given ASAP's limited funding, its volunteer-based model, and the diversity among club leaders, we rely on workshops to deliver most of our professional development. This choice is not without limitations. Workshops have been criticized for offering insufficient "time, activities, and content . . . for increasing teachers' knowledge and fostering meaningful changes in their classroom practice" (Garet et al., 2001, p. 920). These limitations are particularly evident in single-session workshops that lack follow through. Indeed, ASAP has worked hard to build a workshop-based model that addressed those pitfalls.

Early in its existence, ASAP used one-off workshop sessions. Over time, the organization began to expand and revise its pre-service and in-service trainings based on research-backed best practices. All ASAP-recruited volunteers are required to attend a general volunteer orientation, during which they learn about ASAP, volunteering with OST programs, working with youth, and the legal obligations of youth workers. The volunteers are joined by OST site staff for a second pre-service training that focuses on the type of club they will lead. In the Youth Chess Challenge, this session is called the New Chess Club Leader Training. At its conclusion, new club

leaders are given their chess supplies. Attendees are invited to a series of two optional follow-up trainings that teach additional chess content. Open question-and-answer sessions and other advanced topics are also offered.

Workshops were chosen as the main avenue for ASAP's professional development for several reasons. First, workshops are the most cost-effective way for a small-budget outfit to provide high-quality professional development to a group of educators. Second, an in-person workshop creates an opportunity for club leaders and ASAP staff to meet face to face, building a sense of community and belonging. The diversity among ASAP club leaders and host sites makes this connection to ASAP especially important.

However, relying on workshops has forced us to face the challenges listed by Garet and colleagues (2001). For starters, those myriad club leaders have a wide variety of scheduling needs. Although we hold training sessions both in the morning and in the evening, there are always conflicts. In addition, we limit each session to two hours. If it's any shorter, it's not worth bringing attendees together. If it's any longer, participants begin to fade, causing the training to lose its efficacy.

Sustaining turnout is also a challenge. While the required general orientation and New Chess Club Leader Training sessions are consistently well attended, some club leaders require incentives to attend the follow-up trainings. Trainer Shutt says of the optional sessions, "There is a cost factor, which is that you're tired; you've spent all day at school. How much do I really need to go? I know I'll enjoy it, but I've got papers to grade" (personal communication, April 12, 2011). The numbers bear this out: Over the course of two school years, 2009–10 and 2010–11, 70 percent of the club leaders trained by ASAP attended only required trainings.

To lower this high percentage, ASAP has enacted several strategies. First, additional instructional materials are distributed only at follow-up sessions to provide a concrete incentive for attending. We also altered the schedule of follow-up sessions to create a training *series*, at the successful conclusion of which club leaders who attend all sessions receive certificates. Such a series provides time and practice for reflection, as recommended by N-PASS (2009). Club leaders implement training recommendations in their program and then to return

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to the group to share their experience and learn from one another. When club leaders decline to attend additional trainings, our ability to guide their reflection and continued learning is limited to phone, e-mail, and site visits. These leaders lose the opportunity to learn from the experiences of the other members of their cohort.

Despite the pitfalls of limited-duration professional development, a workshop series is the best method we have available to deliver content-specific professional development.

Teaching the What

Our 2011 survey of chess club leaders gave us powerful confirmation that club leaders preferred content-specific professional development that focused on the *what* of chess, rather than on classroom management, youth development, or other general topics. Near the beginning of each training, the instructor tells the attendees that a club that consists merely of a group of youth playing chess will quickly stagnate. To keep a club vibrant and attractive to youth, the club leader must offer new chess skills and engaging activities. Indeed, the survey showed that club leaders wanted just those things, for their students and for themselves. In a question that asked leaders to choose six professional development topics from a list of 18, the only options selected by more than 35 percent of respondents were the opening, the middle game, the endgame, tactics, and checkmate patterns. Only 19 percent selected classroom management. The message from club leaders reinforced the insight of Garet and colleagues (2001): The content of a program drives youth engagement; other issues, such as classroom management, are positively affected by compelling content. OST staff members can do more with their background knowledge in youth development when they pair it with content-specific expertise.

Creating Cohorts

Because of their interactive nature, ASAP trainings are limited to a maximum of 12 participants. As recommended by N-PASS (2009), we customize each training to the needs of the specific group in attendance. As Shutt puts it, workshops "won't be the same from one week to the next because the group is different. So much of what I do is based off the feedback from the group" (personal

communication, April 4, 2011). Before and at the beginning of each training, we seek to understand each participant's situation: where the club will be located, what age group it will work with, what chess skills the students may possess, and what chess skills the club leader possesses. This information is used to shape the content of the training, from the subjects chosen to specific asides for one club leader or another.

The challenge of this individualization is the work that it takes to form and maintain. During 10 years of professional development, we have discovered that, once a cohort is created, effort should be made to keep it together at subsequent follow-up trainings. Since each training is customized to the group, the content delivered varies slightly from training to training. It takes effort to track what has been covered with each cohort—effort that goes to waste if the cohort cannot be sustained over time. This continuity is the reason we provide incentives to club leaders for attending follow-up trainings.

Modeling Strategies and Discussing Content

N-PASS recommends that workshops provide explicit modeling of content-specific activities and discussion of the content in those activities. We have found that such interactive and exploratory modeling is indeed an effective way of teaching both content and content-specific teaching techniques. The new-leader training centers on chessboards and relies on demonstration. There is no lecture without an accompanying example at the chessboard. The instructor works through each chess piece, demonstrating techniques for teaching the piece's movement and abilities. After all six pieces have been covered, the instructor moves into an examination of checkmate, the ultimate goal of a chess game. The instructor then puts all the pieces on the board to commence an introduction to the opening of a chess game.

Throughout, the training is highly interactive. ASAP's executive director says of the chess instructor, "Steve is great at drawing club leaders out, even if they're guarded about their own ability" (personal communication, December 30, 2010). The training converts the variety of chess skill levels among club leaders from a challenge into an asset. When demonstrating a skill, the instructor will pass the board around and have attendees try the activity, putting participants into the role of their students. As Shutt puts it, "I suppose some of the things that work the best are when you have some adults that are good models for teaching, and you've got some others that are skilled enough on their own to see what you're doing with the others" (personal communication, April 12, 2011). This technique takes advantage of the range of skill levels usually represented at each training, giving participants the chance to experience the lesson themselves while also allowing them to see the teaching methodology in action on others.

Adding Materials to Accompany Workshops

ASAP has found that giving training participants outlines of the workshop agenda and copies of the exercises greatly enhances content retention. One volunteer club leader expressed the concern this tactic addresses: "The interactive nature of the trainings is good, but Steve goes very fast. . . . I wanted to pay attention to what he was doing, but I also wanted to outline it so I could go home and practice what he showed" (personal communication, April 9, 2011). A training outline, lesson plans, activity suggestions, and chess exercises relevant to the new-leader training are included in the manual each club leader receives. This written material can remind club leaders of lessons learned during the training. They need not feel they have to write everything down, so they can focus on the training content in the moment. The instructor integrates the manual directly into trainings, referring to lesson plans and exercises during sessions and connecting the in-person lesson to written content that participants can review and use later. Distributing such a manual is consistent with best practices identified by Huang and Cho (2010).

Reflecting on Pedagogy

N-PASS (2009) emphasizes that professional development participants need to be able to reflect on content-specific pedagogical practices both while the instructor is presenting them in training and on an ongoing basis as participants apply their newly learned skills to their work with youth. We have found that, although it is easy to integrate explicit instruction in and discussion of pedagogy into training sessions, it is more difficult in the OST sphere to sustain participant reflection over time.

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During trainings, we take great care to explain the pedagogical rationale behind specific activities and our recommended lesson plan. ASAP strives to encourage chess players to use divergent thinking to understand and improve their game. To that end, trainings teach inductive reasoning exercises that coax players to tease out rules and strategies. For example, it is common to teach the movement and power of a chess piece by explaining and demonstrating the movement and by assigning that piece a static point value. We discourage such an approach; rather, we introduce a piece by having a student move it without any knowledge of the rules that govern it. We teach the club leader to simultaneously move the same piece of the opposing color and, through a series of turns and questions, lead the student to understand the piece's movement and abilities. When teaching the strength of a piece, the leader demonstrates how a piece's power often depends on its position on the board. The student is left with a range, rather than a static number, to represent the power of any given piece.

During training, the instructor introduces each exercise, teaching technique, or subject matter in the context of student learning, providing a rationale for the method being presented. Participants have the opportunity to ask questions about the method, to consider how it can be implemented, and to pose "what ifs" that explore potential problems with the activities. Techniques like these cement the content in a youth development framework and give participants time to organize what they've learned so they can successfully lead the activities and teach the material themselves.

Promoting ongoing reflection is more challenging. At the optional follow-up trainings, participants are encouraged to share their implementation experiences with the group, and the instructor uses their successes and failures to shape the lesson. Additionally, ASAP's open question-and-answer sessions have provided a valuable forum for club leaders to bring their reflections to ASAP staff and fellow leaders. Rather than being instructor-led, these sessions are discussion-based, with club leaders sharing suggestions and learning from their peers. We also encourage club leaders to share their successes and failures through personal communication with the chess staff—whether over the phone, through e-mail, or in person. At chess events, we seek to connect club leaders with one another directly.

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We can only encourage such reflection, however. Some club leaders will always choose not to share their thoughts with ASAP staff or other club leaders. We continue to seek new methods through which club leaders can actively reflect on their chess club strategies, especially those they find to be practical, efficient, and worthwhile.

Implications for the OST Field

In their review of professional development practices, Huang and Cho (2010) conclude that "a qualified, motivated staff with a low turnover rate" is critical to creating quality afterschool programming (p. 10). As OST programs consider content-specific programming, the sustainability and quality of their workforce should play a prominent role in their thinking, as should student outcomes.

The range of curricula available in OST is a strength of the field and an opportunity for individual programs. Some activities can occur daily, others weekly; some might last for six weeks while others continue all year. Such flexibility opens the door for content-specific programming. ASAP chess clubs, for example, are active an average of 1.5 hours per week. By limiting the frequency and length of specific offerings, OST programs can keep the focus fixed on content.

Once a content-specific activity has been created, both staff and students must be allowed to opt in to the activity. Almost all of ASAP's chess club leaders, whether they are volunteers or, especially, teachers or OST staff members, have chosen to take on the responsibility of leading a chess club. Leaders who appreciate the game for themselves or who see the effect it can have on their students make more willing facilitators than people who are randomly assigned the responsibility. By, as Huang and Cho (2010) say, "aligning staff skills with tasks" (p. 11), OST programs increase staff morale and lower turnover.

When staff lead content-specific programming of their choosing, they should be given responsibility for and some degree of autonomy over that activity. Huang and Cho (2010) found that "staff autonomy to create and implement personal goals" (p. 14) was a consistent feature of high-quality OST programs. Such autonomy challenges and engages staff, increasing satisfaction and retention while, ultimately, improving student outcomes. For all the professional development that ASAP offers chess club leaders, we enforce very few rules or restric-

tions about the structure or governance of chess clubs. With as much support as they want, leaders build their clubs according to their needs and those of their students and their programs. We believe that this autonomy is a key factor in the longevity of chess clubs.

For those researching the OST field, ASAP's model and the feedback of its club leaders, when placed alongside available research on content, should point to intriguing avenues for future exploration. The picture may currently be incomplete, but the relationships among content, professional development, OST program quality, and student outcomes warrant further research.

In our 2011 survey, 88 percent of ASAP chess club leaders rated the increase in their chess knowledge and ability to teach chess skills as either 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5. These individuals learned the content and transmitted it to their students, who—through chess— engaged with an enriching activity after school; learned valuable critical thinking skills; and applied these skills to academic achievement, state and national chess competitions, and their college applications and aspirations. OST programs are not the same as school classrooms; they can engage with content using methods unique to their own settings. In the words of Gil Noam, "The ways to learn practiced in afterschool programs should feel distinct to children. Afterschool learning should be experience-rich" (2004, p. 16). Content-specific professional development can make it so. When staff members are equipped to create content-specific activities and are given autonomy to implement them, OST programs create an "experience-rich" environment that pushes youth to achieve and that engenders enthusiasm and longevity among staff.

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