# A Dynamic Framework for Understanding the Complex Work of Quality Out-of-School-Time Programs

by Kim Sabo Flores Ph.D.

*Executive Summary*

# Acknowledgements

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# The Robert Bowne Foundation

The Robert Bowne Foundation supports quality out-of-school time programs that support the literacy development—engagement in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in order to better understand oneself, others, and the world—of children and youth in New York City especially for those living in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. We do this through direct service grants as well as grants for programmatic and managerial technical assistance, evaluation, advocacy, research and publications.

# Kim Sabo Flores Ph.D.

Dr. Kim Sabo Flores is a seasoned evaluation consultant and leader in the emerging field of youth participatory evaluation. Drawing upon her training in developmental and environmental psychology, Dr. Flores introduces hundreds of adults and young people, their programs and their communities to the empowering impact of creative and sustained participation, reflection and evaluation. In addition, she has worked with numerous foundations to help build their evaluation capacities, supporting them to measure their "community" impacts and progress toward achieving their missions. Her unique approach highlights the performatory nature of participatory evaluation and the contribution of performance to human learning and development. As founder and principal of Kim Sabo Consulting, Dr. Flores generates collaborative projects that educate not only program staff but also their funders about ways that participatory evaluation can help to build organizational capacity.

In 2002, the Robert Bowne Foundation set out on what became a five-year journey to answer the following research question: What are the keys to developing quality out-of-school-time programs?

## Research Methods

In order to explore these questions of quality, the foundation created a community of learners. The members of the learning community conducted literature reviews, participated in the research design to identify best practices, and helped analyze and reflect upon the data.

The Learning Community pinpointed current and past Robert Bowne Foundation grantees that exemplified these best practices. Using an independent rating scale, each community member ranked sixty programs on each of the quality practices that had been established. The community identified twenty programs that we considered high quality.

However, after deeper consideration the members of the learning community realized that while several of these programs had quality practices, they did not have strong organizational infrastructures. This realization led the committee to undertake another study, exploring the question: "What is the relationship between high quality programming and high quality organizations?"

In Phase I of the study, a broad range of organizational effectiveness measures were reviewed by the community members and a new instrument was developed to meet the specific needs of the population. Next, the twenty current and former grantees that had previously been identified as having "quality programs and practices" were rated on a scale from one to five (with five being the highest rating) on these key programmatic and organizational effectiveness indicators.

In September 2002, the nine organizations identified as "effective" were invited to participate in an extensive in-depth study that focused on their organizational capacities in the identified core areas.

During this first phase, an intriguing question came up. The data showed that all of the programs were doing quality work in most of the organizational capacity areas being researched. Indeed, they exhibited most of the traits defined as "quality" both by the literature and by RBF stakeholders. The members of the community were led to make statements like "Yes, they have a strong mission statement"; "Yes, they hire qualified staff"; "Yes, they have staff meetings." But it was clear that key philosophies and approaches to human development were the glue that held these "promising practices" together. For example, the key leaders in the program tended to have very similar philosophies of human and youth development and were equally committed to the development of the staff and the youth as they were the organization.

The learning community felt strongly that further exploration was needed in order to answer the question: what is the relationship between these philosophies and promising organizational practices? Thus, we launched Phase II of our study.

### Phase II Methods

Phase II of the research included a more thorough examination of professional development and organizational learning practices. The members of the learning community felt it was important to look outside the standard paradigms used to understand out-of-school-time programs and to explore new models and paradigms of success. The methodological instruments for Phase II were designed using Peter Senge's five disciplines of a learning organization as articulated in his books (e.g., The Fifth Discipline, 1990). These five disciplines include: (1) systems thinking, (2) personal mastery, (3) mental models, (4) building

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shared vision, and (5) team learning. Both RBF staff and stakeholders considered these five disciplines to be an important framework for understanding ongoing organizational learning.

## Key Findings

This five-year study yielded six very important findings, outlined briefly below:

**Finding 1 – Learning organizations and social cultural learning theory:** Organizations that were delivering high quality literacy programming and were identified as having strong components of organizational effectiveness were also "learning organizations." In other words, they had practices that mirrored all five of Senge's learning organization disciplines. However, not one of the key leadership team members had ever heard the words "learning organization," nor did they know of Peter Senge. Instead, leaders in the organizations were using their knowledge of youth development and social cultural learning theory not only to develop programs for the young people, but as principals for the growth and development of their organizations and staff members.

Because these organizations were not directly using learning organization theory in their work, the constructs, while related and relevant, did not map directly onto the observed practices. Within the case study contexts there were six unique strategies that were employed: A systemic understanding of development that focused simultaneously on the growth of the organizations, programs, staff, and youth; shared thinking, critical discourse and reflection; ongoing team building; staff members being related to and given the responsibility of acting in advance of their own development; and a safe environment in which risks were being taken (Figure 1).

**Finding 2 – Creative programs that are continuously created and evaluated:** One ongoing challenge of out-of-school-time programs has been program stagnation. In many instances, programs offer the same activities from year to year and students become bored with the offerings. However, within these case study programs, activities were created based on the ongoing development of staff members' interests, capacities, and skill levels, and on feedback provided by children and families through evaluation efforts.

### Figure 1: Qualities of Developmental Out-of-school-time Programs

*Systems thinking* – The activity of thinking and operating systematically to comprehend and address the whole organization as a dynamic process or creative ensemble rather than in terms of its individual parts.

*Shared thinking, critical discourse and reflection* – Ongoing practices in which staff experience themselves as "performers" and "creators of life scenes."

*Building the team* – Continuously building the team or "growing the group." Staff members engage in the joint activity of creating the team in order to learn, to grow, to give help, to get help and to create culture.

*Relating to staff in advance of their own development* – Relating to all staff members in advance of their own development, as learners, as development experts, as individuals who can do anything they desire.

*Creating safe environments in which risks can be taken* – Safe environments created by the group activity in which all members feel comfortable to take risk, to do more than they thought they could, to perform in new roles.

Because these organizations had strong integrated evaluation and monitoring practices, many decisions were based on real data. Thus, programs were able to continuously meet the needs of the families and communities they worked with. In this way, all participants were recipients of innovative, highly creative and passionate programming.

**Finding 3 – High levels of staff satisfaction:** Since staff members felt part of creating the programs, and because they themselves were supported to learn and grow, they reported high levels of personal fulfillment. Because of their ongoing reflections and evaluations, staff members were able to see and under-

stand their impacts on the children and communities in which they worked. They understood their work as valuable and meaningful contributions, which they found fulfilling. This finding seems particularly important given that many out-of-school-time staff are underpaid. Even though many staff members work in the field because they believe their work is meaningful, all too often they do not have the opportunity to see the impacts of their unique contributions.

**Finding 4 - Low staff turnover.** In out-of-school-time programs one of the greatest challenges has been staff turnover. Often, programs cannot retain staff due to low wages and the fact that staff members are often very young and are in highly transitional stages of their lives. However, staff members in these case study programs stayed in their jobs for an average of five years.

**Finding 5 – Highly trained and creative staff:** A major challenge of out-of-school-time programs has been their ability to hire competent and educated staff members. In these five case study programs, staff members were exceedingly well trained and competent. They were engaged in ongoing professional development opportunities that challenged them to grow while building on their unique talents and assets. In addition, many staff members were supported by the organization fiscally, practically and emotionally to obtain their BAs and masters degrees while working in the programs.

**Finding 6 – Sustainable organizations:** While many factors support the sustainability of an organization, it should be noted that all of the case study sites had a long history within New York City. This point is particularly salient because at the time of this study, many community-based organizations in New York City were closing due to lack of funding or an inability to make the changes necessary to stay open during massive changes in funding streams. The case study programs were able to remain nimble in their efforts, gathering information, developing staff, creating new programs and evaluating their successes.

## Conclusion

The value of this work lies not so much in what staff members create (i.e., vision statements, mission statements, curricula, activities, safe environments, etc.), but in the processes by which they create. In other words, it is not only the existence of a vision and/or mission statement, but the co-creation and participatory methods of actualizing these statements with staff through ongoing activities that make these programs high quality. It is not only the knowledge that is produced during staff meetings, but the activity of producing knowledge. It is not only the social roles that are being played, but the environment that needs to be produced in order that staff members feel safe to take risks and perform "a head taller." It is not only the quality of the curricula and activities that are produced, but the process of developing the curricula and activities. It is not only the number and type of available professional development activities, but the ways in which staff members are supported to grow and learn and are related to as learners. It is not only the existence of a safe environment, but the process of creating a safe environment.

While we have learned much about these unique developmental environments, there are still many questions to be answered. For example: How can organizations be supported to build these types of environments? Can all organizations create this type of environment, or is a particular type of leadership needed? Is the size of the organization a factor in the development of these types of learning practices? Are youth outcomes different or more intense in these types of environment? If we are to more fully understand the value of these environments, these questions need to be addressed.