

Research in Adult Learning Theory Supports CalSAC Training Methodology¹

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Introduction.

Increasingly, research has shown that no matter what type of afterschool program children attend, it should be staffed by caring adults who are trained to address their social, emotional, physical and academic needs. A positive relationship with adults is one of the most important variables affecting a child's likelihood of success in school and in life (Scales, 1991). Afterschool programs that attract and retain a consistent staff of joyful, confident people interacting with children in predictable, thoughtful, and professional ways create countless opportunities for learning and growing. Research confirms that highly qualified, well-trained staff are an essential component of a high quality after school program (Pechman & Fiester, 2002). In order to sustain that confidence and joy day after day, school-age staff must have a well stocked toolbox of skills, strategies, and surprises.

The good news is that growing public support in California is producing a steady increase in new public and private school-age and afterschool programs. The not-so-good news is that there is a serious shortage of staff with the important skills necessary to run them. It has been predicted that in the next five years, there will be a statewide shortage of 20,000 staff in the afterschool field (CalSAC workforce paper, 2004).

A key role played by the California School Age Consortium is that of teaching school age professionals how to design and deliver training programs for staff who work directly with children. The staff of school age programs are increasingly the adults with whom school age children spend their time after school, and programs will squander critical opportunities for positive relationships if their staff members are uncomfortable talking about sensitive topics, unclear about their role in children's lives, or simply unprepared to engage in direct communication with school-age children. It is also critical that staff members have the ability to create meaningful and fun learning opportunities that connect with the school day.

The California School Age Consortium has been sponsoring workshops, conferences, and training materials for afterschool staff since 1982. In recent years, a professional growth system using a training of the trainers model has emerged that is well suited to tackle this statewide training need. Due to the geometric progression of instructors training school age professionals who in turn train direct care staff, significant numbers of people can receive the same knowledge and practice the same activities or skills in a relatively short period of time.

¹ Applying Adult Learning Theory to Improve Programs for Kids - A White Paper published by the California School Age Consortium, August, 2005.

A prototype of this training model prepared school age professionals to use *Kids' Time: A School-Age Care Program Guide* (California State Department of Education, 1994). Initially, one training event was offered in the northern part of the state and one in the south. Feedback collected from the trainees was used to modify the training, and a series of refresher workshops was developed to address areas of concern or confusion. In 1996, the first Training of the Trainers version of this curriculum was offered, recruiting professionals from the staff of high quality school age programs, faculty of community colleges, and administration of stage agencies. Participants who completed the training were endorsed, and they proceeded to offer workshops and other training events to direct care staff over the next two years.

CalSAC Trainer Institutes

In 2003, the Kids' Time Training of the Trainers Project was revised and expanded, and is now being offered to 120 school age professionals each year at CalSAC Trainer Institutes. All graduates of the program are required to conduct fifteen hours of training as a condition of their training, and stipends are paid to endorsed graduates to conduct local-level training beyond the fifteen hours. Technical assistance is available for graduates who train others. Additional features of this training ensure that mentoring and support are available to all instructors and trainers in order to ensure their success and effectiveness.

The CalSAC Trainer Network consists of over 200 school age professionals who offer approximately 1000 training events on specific topics and skills in a year, training an estimated 10,000 line staff, supervisors and administrators. CalSAC Trainer Institutes refresh and expand this trainer network, providing considerable added value to the school-age and afterschool programs serving California's families.

CalSAC Training Philosophy

Because the California School Age Consortium professional development training has been so successful, it is important to understand the pedagogical foundation and training methods that are used and taught.

At the foundation of CalSAC's Trainer project is the principle that adults, like children, learn best when engaged with their peers through an interactive teaching approach. CalSAC uses and teaches a training method that:

- values the experience adults bring with them;
- introduces and reinforces knowledge, skills, and abilities;
- encourages participants to identify the relevance of the learning to their work;
- offers an opportunity for participants to practice new techniques and skills.

Excerpt from Trainer Institute application

Integral to CalSAC training designs are four fundamental principles of adult learning: (1) Adults tend to be self directing; (2) Adults have a rich reservoir of experience that can serve as a resource for learning; (3) Since adults' readiness to learn is frequently affected by their need to know or do something, they tend to have a task- or problem-centered orientation; and (4) Adults are generally motivated to learn due to internal factors rather than external forces. (Knowles, 1980)

Beginning within minutes of their time together, new trainers are introduced to the ideas of such leaders in the field of adult education as Malcolm Knowles, Eduard Lindeman, and Stephen Brookfield.

Small groups of aspiring adults who desire to keep their minds fresh and vigorous; who begin to learn by confronting pertinent situations; who dig down into the reservoirs of their secondary facts; who are led in the discussion by teachers who are also seekers after wisdom and not oracles: this constitutes the setting for adult education, the modern quest for life's meaning.

Eduard Lindeman, *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926).

Throughout the CalSAC Institutes, trainers model a philosophy and a methodology that represents the approach and quality all CalSAC trainers are expected to use when facilitating professional development events for field staff. The learning environment that is produced at the Institutes, mediated as it is by clarification and explanation, can then be easily replicated by CalSAC trainers.

As an example, key adult learning concepts introduced early in the first session are modeled by instructors throughout the four-day training:

Adults come to training events with a wealth of previous experience and knowledge.

Recognizing and encouraging participants to share their knowledge and skills to the group is motivating and builds an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Adults learn best when allowed to direct their own learning.

Adults are, for the most part, voluntary learners. They attend training events with a goal, or expectation of how the training will enhance their skills or knowledge. Successful facilitators will address these expectations.

Adults learn best through a hands-on approach that actively involves them in the learning process.

Be sure to include opportunities for hand-on experiences or opportunities to practice or apply the learning,

Adults gain greater depth of learning by reflecting on the learning experiences of their peers.

By sharing their application of new learning with other adults, participants are able to reflect on how the learning may be affected by the context of real environments and how it may apply to their specific needs.

(excerpts are from
*California School-Age Consortium: Trainer's Manual for
Kids' Time: A School Age Care Program Guide, 2003.*)

Throughout the Institute, instructors lead participants through the same exercises and activities they will be teaching to staff, introducing new concepts in the context described above, and reflecting upon each experience in small or large group sessions, allowing time to integrate the new ideas into the framework of the environment from which the participants have come.

Adult learners value credibility and authenticity in their instructors, (Brookfield, 2004) and for that reason all core trainers must demonstrate significant experience in the field of school age programming. In addition to the people who are present throughout the institute to ensure modeling of adult learning techniques, guest facilitators share their expertise in particular content areas such as Special Needs and Inclusion, Cultural Diversity and Awareness, Behavior Guidance, Integrating Academics, and Program Leadership.

A word here about the learning environment of the Training Institutes. Adults have more to lose emotionally than younger students in a classroom situation (Zemke, 1984). A history of bad experiences in traditional education may cloud participants' feelings of safety, rendering them unable to benefit from information that is presented in a didactic format. CalSAC Institute trainers learned this early, and now consciously create an informal, enjoyable setting for the participants. In order to foster the best kind of learning, the setting must be both physically and psychologically comfortable (Zemke, 1984). Adult learners have little patience with long lectures, uncomfortable furniture, or the absence of opportunities to practice what they are learning. Consequently, Training Institutes typically are held at retreat centers rather than in classrooms, and use outdoor settings, living room arrangements, and alcoves for small group discussions and activities after each short concept presentation. The Institutes are actually quite engaging, and participants describe them as "fun" and "relaxing" – exactly the adjectives that Institute trainers hope will also be used to describe field training experiences created by participants after completing the Institute.

Training Events.

The ultimate goal of the CalSAC Trainer Institutes is to prepare future trainers to plan and lead local training events for line staff in their region of the state. Recognizing that adults, like children, learn best when engaged with their peers in an interactive process, Institute instructors introduce a prescribed sequence for preparing for training events and trainees begin immediately to engage in the process of planning future trainings.

1. ***Identify audience strengths and needs***

Agencies requesting staff training complete a detailed application, which includes a description of the agency's general staff development goals and ongoing professional development regarding school age care; the participants' experience, their strengths and expectations of the training. This allows the trainer to include material and activities that accurately address the needs of the participants, and draw on their strengths in the formation of groups, topics, etc..

2. ***Identify specific competencies to be developed during the training event***

Research on quality afterschool programs has identified a variety of competencies needed by staff members in order to be effective in their work. These have been articulated in several published standards such as: NAA's Quality Standards, The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets, The California Afterschool Partnership's Exemplary Practices. The process for preparing for a training event includes identifying the specific competencies that will be addressed in that session. CalSAC trainers work with requesting agencies to determine which competency areas are a priority for staff development based on a needs assessment which incorporates many of the overlapping competencies from the standards mentioned above.

Knowles' (1980) also urges instructors to explain *why* specific things are being taught so that participants can choose to engage in the learning activity as presented or modify it to their own needs. Key to the CalSAC training methodology is the trainer's ability to develop useful, detailed, guiding goal statements, and activities to support these goals while addressing the four steps for effective adult learning.

3. ***Develop learning goals that address the selected competencies***

Each module in the Training Institute is focused by learning goals that are discussed with the participants at the beginning of each session and revisited at the end. This allows adults to direct their own learning, something they will be able to model when they develop workshops for staff. Knowledge needs to be presented in an authentic context (Sticht, 1975; 1976), and one of the outcomes of these discussions is a list of ways in which each learning goal will contribute to the participants' effectiveness as trainers and school age professionals.

4. ***Design activities to support the identified learning goals***

Because instruction should take into account the wide range of different backgrounds of learners (Knowles, 1980), each activity allows for different levels and types of experience and draws connections from existing knowledge to new concepts or skills. Other important principles that are considered in designing activities include multiple learning styles (Gardner, 1984; 1993) and applying learning goals to practical contexts (Sticht, 1988).

While all learners exhibit multiple intelligences, MI-inspired teaching tends to increase the authenticity of learning experiences and increase student control and initiative (Kallenbach & Viens, 2003). Adult learning requires social interaction and collaboration (Lave & Wenger, 1990), and the activities are designed to promote such experiences through the use of such dynamic delivery modes as Socratic questioning, modeling, role play, group facilitation, and direct presentation. Integration of new knowledge and skill requires transition time and a focused effort on application (Zemke, 1984). Trainers are skilled in pacing activities to allow adequate time for integration of information and transition to the next topic.

5. *Evaluate the training session, reflecting on acquisition of learning goals, usefulness of knowledge in the workplace, and confidence in trainees' ability to present material to others.*

Critical reflection is a relatively new concept in the field of adult learning. It is described by Brookfield as "learning in which adults come to reflect on their self-images, change their self-concepts, question their previously internalized norms (behavioral and moral), and reinterpret their current and past behaviors from a new perspective..." (1986, p. 213-214). It is not enough that adult education programs just satisfy the learning needs of individuals and organizations. In order to continually improve and remain current, valid assessment of learning requires context specific measurement (Sticht, 1975, 1988). CalSAC conducts follow-up interviews with a sampling of agencies that have received training to determine if new competencies (articulated during the training session as training goals/learning goals) have been demonstrated. In addition, individual participant evaluations provide valuable feedback and direction for the future.

Summary and Conclusions

Traditional views on adult learning as well as current research support CalSAC training methodology. The experience of many years spent developing training modules for school age staff and administrators, with careful attention to participant feedback, has led to the use of highly effective adult learning techniques. CalSAC's training methodology (based on adult learning principles and applied to deliver competency-based training events) is consistent with what both research and experience have shown to be an effective approach to building and retaining competencies in School Age Care/Afterschool staff. Because CalSAC Trainer Institutes are based on a model of facilitating adult learning, rather than a more traditional stagnant curriculum, its Trainer Network is well poised to take advantage of the variety of expertise in the field and to remain current on research and promising practices.

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