

Chapter Two. Standards for SEL Practice

Our goal in developing standards for SEL practice was to integrate descriptions of the multiple elements of SEL practice in plain language to help professionals talk to each other, and to youth, about the “how to” of SEL work. The focus was on description of the action and experiences that staff and youth see and understand to be happening in highly effective OST settings. Although the exemplary offerings differed amongst each other in the curricula they used, the way they went about initiating and scaffolding SEL skill learning had important similarities that are described by the standards we identified. In this section, we discuss theory, data, analyses, and results from the qualitative method used to produce the standards. The full presentation of the standards and supplemental content are provided in the guide *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social and Emotional Learning* (Smith, McGovern, et al., 2016).

It is important to note that our overall design concept was to use a small sample of intentionally selected offerings in order to identify practices that were common across the settings at a granular level. We were in search of best practices used in exemplary offerings and followed the general rule that prevalence of a practice across the eight exemplary offerings was an argument for its importance. We conducted the performance studies described in Chapter Four in part to validate our selection process, and these findings indeed suggest that the selected offerings were operating at an exceptionally high level across a suite of SEL performance measures. These were ideal offerings to study as exemplars of SEL practice.

Qualitative Method

The method used to produce the standards and supplemental content was conducted in four overlapping and iterative phases. In the first phase, we reviewed literature on SEL skill development and practice and produced a preliminary conceptual framework and set of “starter codes” for different elements of SEL practice. We also developed a theory that linked SEL skill learning to SEL practices so we could ask practitioners specifically about the learning cycles their SEL offerings provide. Second, we designed data collection instruments (based on the framework) and methods; and then collected the narrative and artifact data in several waves. In the third phase, we subjected the narrative data to an iterative qualitative method to evaluate and revise the primary codes and subcodes for specific SEL practices in within and across the six SEL domains. These codes eventually became the standards and curriculum features.¹ In the fourth phase, supplemental content was assembled to support interpretation of the standards: Multiple vignettes from the expert practitioners were selected from the narrative data to

deepen practical illustration of each standard, and case studies describing curriculum and resources in each of the exemplary offerings were developed to provide additional context.

In the remainder of this section, we focus on the details for the qualitative method used to produce the SEL standards and curriculum features presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Literature Review and Theory for SEL Skill Learning

An initial literature review was conducted and produced a preliminary set of codes for SEL practices in each of the six domains. In particular, we reviewed the extensive Larson et al. literature based on hundreds of interviews with youth and instructional staff. The twenty articles reviewed represent a unique body of work using qualitative methodology to explicate youth experience in developmentally focused OST settings, with reference to how settings initiate and scaffold youth experience and which SEL skills youth learn through their experiences. This preliminary coding framework for youth key experiences, staff practices, and curriculum features is provided in Appendix B. The initial Larson et al. evidence base is identified with an asterisk in the References section.

Through the literature review process, we extracted preliminary codes describing key youth experiences, staff behaviors, and curriculum features within and across the six domains. These preliminary codes were used as “starter codes” to examine the first round of data. In an exploratory fashion, we read through the narrative data from letters of intent, applications, and artifacts to examine how well the codes fit the data and whether there were strong themes in the data that were missing from the codes. Based on these assessments, we made a first round of revisions to the language of the codes. In this first phase, a preliminary set of 31 primary codes and 72 subcodes was produced across the six domains. Several curriculum features were also identified through the literature review and exploratory coding.

Underlying theoretical work. We also reviewed theories that link context (SEL practice) to individual experiences of skill learning. We needed to ask questions of the study participants that would yield narrative data containing information relevant to description of SEL practices at the right level of granularity. Specifically, we needed our expert practitioners to respond to questions at a sufficient level of detail so that the lowest-level indicators of the standards could be illustrated with multiple vignettes of offering-specific variations on the same practice.

We started with the assumption that youth learn skills in each SEL domain much like other skills, through a cycle of experiential learning such as that represented in Figure 2. As youth encounter challenges embedded in the offering curricula, they go through a cycle of identification, planning, action, and evaluation that results in resolution, adaptation, or redirection in relation to the original challenge. As the approach to a novel challenge becomes routine through repetitive practice, mastery occurs, and the

skill becomes integrated as one part of a response to new, more complex challenges.ⁱⁱ Here we use the term *challenge* broadly to mean some form of cognitive or emotional dissonance, such as “Things don’t add up,” or “I can’t learn this,” or “I’m too stimulated to focus.”

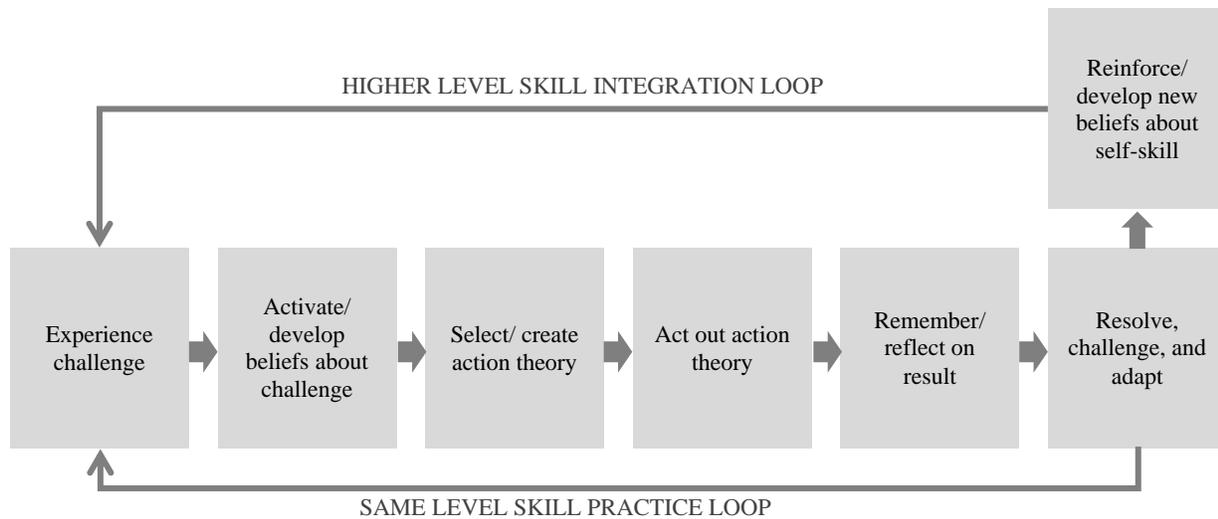


Figure 2. Learning Cycle

The implications of thinking about SEL learning in this way are, first, that the offering curricula are designed to intentionally produce the experience of a step in the learning cycle, and, second, that staff were professionally prepared to respond with supports during moments of challenge, to help move the youth forward. Because those moments were either a natural part of the activity or intentionally designed, we reasoned that these aspects of SEL practice were likely the “promising practices” that could be identified and replicated.

We worked with SEL Challenge participants, through interviews and in a workshop activity, to map the eight offering curricula in great detail. We repeatedly asked the expert practitioners about moments where the curriculum intentionally (or at least predictably) produced moments of challenge (e.g., requiring skills not yet learned, frustration with the process, interpersonal conflict, waning motivation), reflection, or demonstration of mastery. We wanted to know what was happening during those moments, what the youth were experiencing, and what the staff was doing in response to support those experiences. Because all youth experience challenge (first step of the learning cycle) differently, we asked staff about the types of practices they were prepared to deliver in advance, as the offering experience unfolded through time: Which kinds of practices – including the practice of restraint – did staff use in the moment when challenges emerge? How did staff get to know the youth and what their challenges are likely to be? Can staff anticipate youth’s responses to challenges that may occur at different moments in the curriculum? What are the structures for check-ins that helped staff know when

youth are experiencing challenge? What does youth exposure to trauma mean for their experience of the curriculum and for staff response? When and how is a given practice applied?

Finally, we also reasoned that skill learning cycles vary in length for different SEL domains (this was clear from the Larson et al. evidence base). For example, in the emotion management domain, learning cycles might occur very rapidly (e.g., secondary appraisal of emotion may occur in seconds), whereas learning responsibility might occur over the entire nine-month arc of an offering. Our research design assumed that learning cycles for social and emotional skills occur on timescales relevant to the offering curriculum and staff practices that the curriculum was designed to deliver. That is, we are concerned with *moments* during the offering curriculum or a youth's struggles wherein a staff might provide a real-time response to youth behavior, or *sessions* or *sequences of sessions* during which, for example, specific parts of the curriculum are implemented and specific types of youth experiences occur (e.g., completed the trust building part of the curriculum). Extending further, the entire offering curriculum cycle may be the descriptive period over which skills grow (e.g., nine months), and in some cases over multiple years (e.g., adolescence) in the case of returning students who in some programs took on staff roles in subsequent years.

Data Collection and Coder Reliability

Several types of narrative and artifact data were collected. Appendix B provides questions from all data collection instruments: letter of intent, application, interviews, and focus groups. The letter of intent and written applications were submitted via online survey software. Next, two two-hour phone interviews were conducted with each organization leader and the lead instructional staff for the exemplary offering. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Each participating site also received a two-day visit that included an additional two-hour interview with the organization leader, an additional two-hour interview with lead instructional staff for the target offering, a one-hour interview with an expert youth who had participated in the program during a previous cycle, and a one-hour focus group with up to eight current youth participants. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Other data sources included copies of curriculum materials, evaluation reports, and detailed notes collected at each of three learning community meetings.

For the primary qualitative analyses employed to develop the SEL standards, a master narrative data file was created from the written applications and phone interviews by loading all responses into a data file using spreadsheet software. Each cell contained a text segment representing one response, or a portion of a response, and yielded a spreadsheet containing 2,261 text segments, averaging 452 characters per segment.

For the coding process, coders used a consensus method to improve reliability of coding data in the master narrative data file. Codes were defined and applied by multiple raters to ten segments of data at a time, percent perfect agreement was calculated, and a consensus discussion was held to examine differences. At three reliability checks conducted during the third phase, average percent perfect agreement was 78% at the primary code level and 68% at the subcode level before the consensus discussion.

Analytic Approach

In this section, we describe the qualitative analyses conducted using the *master narrative data file*. Our primary goal in these analyses was to identify standards for SEL practice in six SEL domains by using the master narrative data file to evaluate, revise, and refine codes at a relatively fine level of granularity.

Analysis methods of grounded theory and other qualitative approaches were employed. We used both thematic and content analysis techniques; that is, we used both theory and frequency of occurrence in the data as criteria for initially identifying practices that were important. We then used the following criteria for final inclusion of a staff behavior, a program structure, or a youth key experience as a standard or a practice indicator: (a) appears across the exemplary SEL offerings, (b) was described as having content and substantive validity by the expert practitioners, and (c) was supported by an evidence base¹ in the literature. By content and substantive validity, we mean that the practice was rated by the expert practitioners as being both important to their work (content validity) and frequently occurring (substantive validity) in their curriculum design.

The following two steps describe the iterative sequence of analyses in the third phase of the qualitative study:

1. *Coding all data into primary codes for the standards.* Using the preliminary framework of 31 primary codes and 72 subcodes, two raters independently coded text segments using codes from all six domains and came to consensus on definitions for the primary codes. All text segments in the master data file were then assigned to primary codes and were allowed to be assigned to multiple primary codes. All text segments were also identified by data source (e.g., interview, application, etc.) and question so that the data file could be queried by question and offering.

Subsequent iterative analyses then examined and revised these codes through a process of constant comparisons. We asked: Were all of the primary codes used frequently in all eight programs?

¹ It is worth pointing out that the invaluable Larson et al. evidence base for this work was almost exclusively qualitative, and it was useful in our formative work for precisely this reason.

Were text segments for each offering more frequently coded to the SEL domains targeted in that offering? Did emergent codes have support in the literature base? As a result of this process, several new codes were developed, and operational definitions for the evolving codes were revised. Results for the application of the primary codes in this step are presented in Appendix Table B-5.

2. *Coding data into subcodes for the practice indicators.* The next step in the qualitative analyses was focused on revising and applying subcodes (practice indicators) to represent more specific staff behaviors, program structures, and youth key experiences within their respective primary code (standard) and SEL domain. Our goals for this step in the analyses were to evaluate and improve the fit of the subcodes to the narrative data file while at the same time discovering new subcodes and making revisions. We asked: Could most of the text segments in each domain be assigned to a subcode? Were each of the subcodes supported by multiple text segments? Was the number of subcodes manageable in the sense that there were not too many (i.e., not a different set of subcodes for each offering)? Were the subcodes sufficiently granular to describe objective staff and youth behavior?

To code the text segments using the subcodes, we first used the master narrative data file to create within-domain data-sorts, including only text segments within a single domain. We then coded the text segments within each domain by any applicable subcode. The goal at this stage was to eliminate redundancies across skill domains and to identify codes without sufficient evidence from a broad cross-section of offerings. Results for the application of the subcodes in this step are presented in Appendix Table B-6.

In this final step, we also spent a lot of time clarifying language as the operational definitions of the primary codes and subcodes were finalized. Ultimately, all operational definitions for the codes and subcodes were reviewed by the entire SEL Challenge learning community, revised further, and presented as the final set of SEL standards and practices indicators.

Curriculum Features

Through the two steps of iterative analyses described above, 681 segments were coded into one or more primary codes (and subcodes) that were either (a) not a staff practice that occurred in the point-of-service setting of the offering or (b) were present in all of the domains. We referred to these cross-domain or organization-level features as curriculum features—aspects of the offering that describe the structure, sequence, and purpose of the target offering across multiple domains—or management practices that supported staff to implement the SEL practices named in the standards for all domains.

Vignettes and Case Narratives

Following the qualitative analyses and finalization of the language for the practice indicators within each standard, multiple text segments were selected as exemplary vignettes. These vignettes were selected to represent different disciplinary, clinical, or other professional languages used by the expert practitioners. We hoped that seeing the same practice described in different ways would support translation of the standards for application in many different kinds of contexts that make up the OST field.

To further support interpretation of the standards, practice indicators, and vignettes, case narratives for each offering were developed to add contextual depth regarding implementation of the SEL practices named in the standards. The case narratives are featured in Part Three of the SEL Field Guide, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social and Emotional Learning* (Smith, McGovern, et al., 2016), and include a description of the history of each organization and offering, the background of staff and youth, and a detailed map of the curriculum sequence. Each case narrative was developed over several rounds of review and revision with the expert practitioners.

Results for Standards, Curriculum Features, OST-SEL Setting Intervention Design

Table 4 presents 34 primary standards and 60 practice indicators in six SEL domains. Each of the standards in Table 4 consists of a definition sentence and multiple practice indicators describing facets of the standard. It is possible to summarize across the practice indicators for some key characteristics of exemplary SEL settings. For example, 38% of the standards are responsive practices (modeling, scaffolding, coaching, facilitating) delivered by staff and explained further below; 22% of the practice indicators involve youth talking or communicating with others; 9% imply one-on-one communication between staff and youth; and 9% describe methods of staff shifting from leadership to support.

However, the expert practitioners also told us that most or all of the standards and practice indicators were both important and prevalent in their offerings. On a scale of one to five, where one was not important and five was very important, 60% of the practice indicators scored above four. In response to the question, “How likely are these practices and youth experiences to occur in your program?” all but four of the practice indicators were likely in 40% or more of the offering sessions. This feedback was a positive preliminary source of validation evidence for the standards.

Through implementation of the qualitative method described in this chapter, and from literature review to final analyses of data, it was clear that some important and prevalent staff practices were not appropriately coded into one of the six domains in the SEL standards. Some were management practices (e.g., youth recruitment policies), some were present in most of the domains (e.g., youth experience increasing agency), and some were articulated as the “non-negotiables” that were prerequisites for any effective implementation of any of the SEL standards (e.g., safe space). An additional 18 practice

indicators were developed to describe four SEL curriculum features and are presented in Table 5. These features resemble the list of promising practices outlined in a 2002 National Research Council publication that has widely influenced the OST field (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

An OST Intervention Design for Vulnerable Adolescents

Although it is possible to either review all of the practice indicators individually or summarize discrete characteristics across all 78, there is also a more integrated story about an SEL intervention design that was present in all of the exemplary offerings. The SEL offerings were structured to build a wide variety of skill sets, including community service, elder care, community organizing, conflict resolution, theatre, boat building, anti-racism training, relationship wisdom, community arts, poetry, the local policy making process, and others. Each employed a project sequence with challenging content linked to unique skill sets—skills to build a boat are very different from those necessary to deliver a high-quality theatrical performance. However, a common intervention design for building SEL skills with vulnerable adolescents was also present across the offerings. In this intervention design, youth learned SEL skills while doing the challenging work projects, which we refer to as the *project curriculum*. It was through the demands of the project curriculum that opportunities arose for youth to practice SEL skills and for staff to implement an *SEL curriculum*. In contrast to the very different skill sets developed through the very different project curricula, the set of SEL skills required to build boats or mount a theatrical production are the same skill set.

The SEL curriculum is described in Table 5 (see SEL Field Guide, p. 18-31) and consists of several elements, including safe space, responsive practices, and a planned sequence of one-on-one or small group check-ins that occur during the offering cycle. The SEL curriculum also includes *responsive practices* that are delivered in the moment as youth experience the project curriculum, in particular during moments of challenge, and are defined as:

- **Facilitating:** Staff helps to foster or sustain youth-led group dynamics and successful collaboration.
- **Scaffolding:** Staff set up or adapts skill-building opportunities to suit youth’s current skill level, interests, or connections, keeping the work challenging but possible.
- **Modeling:** Staff demonstrates or exhibits practices, characteristics, or skills they intend for the youth to emulate or develop.
- **Coaching:** Staff monitor, focus, and support youth’s learning experience by providing perspective, feedback, or encouragement that is respectful of youth’s autonomy (Smith, McGovern, et al., 2016, pp. 27-28).

One of these four responsive practices appear in 40% of staff behavior practice indicators in Table 4 and occur across all six domains. The SEL curriculum also included a calendar of planned meetings and check-ins, often one-on-one with adult staff, where socially- and emotionally-relevant content from inside or outside the program was allowed to surface and be discussed.

The two-tiered curricula—project curriculum and SEL curriculum—were also designed with an awareness of youth development and skill progression necessary for specific types of SEL skill learning to emerge. SEL practices were often delivered in a specific sequence, beginning with the empathy domain and progressing through teamwork to initiative and responsibility, whereas emotion management and problem solving were a consistent focus throughout. Further, most of the offerings followed a cycle-in, cycle-out model. This model first allowed youth to think about their place in various social structures (e.g., social class, race, neighborhood, etc.), then moved inward toward personal stories and histories, and finally cycled back out near the end of the project to take a place in their local communities through services, presentations, or political action (see the Smith, McGovern et al., 2016, SEL Field Guide, pp. 21-22).

Finally, in the SEL curricula, the practices described in the SEL standards were applied in a way that was broad and integrated. As reflected in Appendix Table B-5, SEL practices from all six domains were implemented in nearly all offerings and, as reflected in Table B-6, almost all of the practice indicators were present in multiple offerings.

This set of intervention elements—intensive participation in challenging project curricula; SEL curricula, including responsive practices and structured check-ins; the cycle-in, cycle-out sequence focused on deeper engagement with youth; and a broad and integrated approach to implementation of the practices in the six domains—constitutes a project-based learning with intensive co-regulation intervention design for OST offerings. This intervention design is focused on building SEL skills with vulnerable youth and is certainly not new.ⁱⁱⁱ

The term *co-regulation* refers to adult behavior designed to help children and youth successfully self-regulate; for example, to stay focused, keep moving, process emotion, and get the task at hand completed (Murray et al., 2015). Briefly, co-regulation draws on much prior research on the optimal range of self-regulation where moderate levels of stress (e.g., achievable expectations, deadlines, skill hierarchies) heighten performance, whereas negative effects on performance occur when stress levels get too high or too low. Typically-developing children and youth need less co-regulation from parents and adults as they move through the early life course. Youth with atypical patterns of development due to exposure to trauma or chronic stress may need higher levels of co-regulation from adults. Co-regulation is what happens when staff uses responsive practices to keep the stress and strain of a challenging project curriculum in the optimal range. The elements of the SEL curriculum, in particular the responsive

practices, are strategies for co-regulation of attention, motivation, emotion, and behavior—that is, adult supports for youth self-regulation leading to the experience of agency.

Finally, it is worth noting that the project curricula presented *challenge* in at least two ways. For some projects, the end goals of the work were more fully defined (e.g., a 14-foot boat, a play about your personal experiences), whereas for others the goals were more abstract (e.g., community service project, community arts project). Either way, high-level problem solving and repetitive practice were required in order to be successful with the project curriculum and thus created opportunities for implementation of the SEL curriculum during moments of stress or strain. Perhaps more importantly, these curricula all sought to create circumstances where youth (a) were producing novel solutions to some of the problems that emerged and (b) could be supported (e.g., given time, not judged) to take the work in new directions. In this sense, the concept of co-regulation should be extended to include the adult role in supporting youth choices about both goals and/or processes necessary to meet them.^{iv}

Table 4. Standards for SEL Practice

Emotion Management

Key Youth Experiences

Range of emotions. Youth experience a range of positive and challenging emotions in a safe context.

(EM1) Youth engage in program work and activities in which emotions occur, are expressed, and are recognized as an important and often valuable component of human experience.

(EM2) Emotions are experienced within a shared program culture (e.g., rules, norms) structured to make emotional expression and reflection safe and supported.

Emotion awareness and skill. Youth practice and develop healthy and functional emotion skills.

Youth practice (EM3) being aware of, identifying, and naming emotions, (EM4) reasoning about causes and effects of emotion, (EM5) using strategies for healthy coping with strong emotions and for harnessing emotions to advance the program work.

Staff Practices

Structure. Staff creates and adjusts the structure of daily activities to accommodate youth's processing of emotion.

(EM6) Staff creates time, space, or rituals within program activities for youth to process and learn from emotion. (EM7) Staff adapts program activities to respond to youth's emotional readiness and needs.

Modeling. Staff model healthy strategies for dealing with emotion within the context of caring, mutually-respectful relationships with youth.

(EM8) Staff model healthy strategies for dealing with emotions such as:

- a) active listening, remaining calm during intense episodes, and using problem-solving methods;
- b) communicating effectively and honestly about emotions (including their own);
- c) respectfully acknowledging and validating emotions in others.

Coaching. Staff provides coaching to youth about handling and learning from their ongoing emotional experiences.

(EM9) Staff provide coaching that is respectful of youth's emotional autonomy, including:

- a) using deep understanding of youth and their emotional styles to monitor, appraise, and respond in the moment to youth's ongoing emotions;

- b) fostering emotional awareness and reflection; helping youth frame the situation and emotion;
- c) encouraging problem solving in response to challenging emotions and the situations creating them; suggesting strategies for dealing with them.

Empathy

Key Youth Experiences

Inequality and identity. Youth explore social structure and power in relation to themselves and others.

(E1) Youth explore effects of stereotypes, discrimination, and social structures (e.g., based on race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, ability, etc.).

(E2) Youth own and articulate their identities, including in relation to these social structures.

Diverse perspectives. Youth share their stories and listen to the stories of others.

(E3) Youth develop and share personal stories, and (E4) provide attentive, empathic listening to the experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives of others.

Acceptance. Youth practice relating to others with acceptance and understanding.

(E5) Youth practice identifying, understanding, and managing judgments and (E6) experience empathy and demonstrate caring when others reveal or share emotional experiences.

Staff Practices

Structure. Staff provide programs with appropriate structure for sharing experience and promoting equity.

Staff cultivate a safe and caring space, including:

(E7) Employing appropriate structure for sharing different cultural backgrounds, personal beliefs, and stories (particularly those that are emotionally charged) without judgment.

(E8) Actively promoting inclusion and equity and demonstrating support for the principles that all are different, equal, and important.

(E9) Cultivating a program culture in which people actively care for each other.

(E10) Providing programs with ritual structures for multiple sessions that allow youth to first check in, then open up, and end with reflection.

Modeling. Staff model empathy skills with youth.

(E11) Staff model empathy skills, including:

- a) intentionally recognizing the influence of their own identities and how these may affect interpersonal interactions;
- b) active listening;
- c) serving as an ally for youth who are isolated by differences in culture, family background, privilege, or power;
- d) modeling boundary-setting, including sharing or withholding personal experiences as appropriate and as needed.

Teamwork

Key Youth Experiences

Trust and cohesion. Youth develop group cohesion and trust.

Youth participate in work teams that (T1) develop cohesion and trusting relationships and (T2) a sense of group identity and purpose.

Collaboration. Youth participate in successful collaboration.

(T3) Youth work together toward shared goals.

(T4) Youth practice effective communications skills (e.g., turn-taking, active listening, respectful disagreement).

(T5) Each group member's contribution is valued and affirmed.

Team challenge. Youth manage challenges to creating and maintaining effective working relationships.

(T6) Youth practice managing the challenges of group work, such as miscommunication, obstructive behavior, and conflict over goals and methods.

Staff Practices

Structure. Staff provides programs with norms and structure.

(T7) Staff helps youth cultivate norms and rituals for effective group work.

Modeling. Staff model teamwork skills with youth.

(T8) Staff model sensitive and high-level interpersonal functioning in staff-youth and staff-staff interactions.

Facilitating. Staff facilitates or intervenes as needed to foster or sustain youth-led group dynamics and successful collaboration.

(T9) Staff facilitates or intervenes as needed to foster or sustain youth-led group dynamics. This includes:

- a) cultivating mutual accountability (e.g., by communicating the importance of all youth's successful contributions to the group's work) (See also Responsibility);
- b) intervening only as needed, allowing youth to lead group processes;
- c) helping to manage individuals' personalities when warranted (e.g., through one-on-one conversations before, during, or after a group activity);
- d) diffusing unconstructive conflict, regrouping, reorganizing, getting group back on track and functioning well.

Responsibility

Key Youth Experiences

Roles. Youth take on roles and obligations within program activities.

(R1) Youth choose or accept roles and their obligations; in some cases they initiate the roles.

Demands. Youth encounter difficult demands.

(R2) As youth get into the roles, they encounter demands, requirements, and obligations; they understand that their actions in response to these demands will impact self, peers, or others.

Accomplishment. Youth draw on resources to fulfill challenging roles and internalize accomplishment.

(R3) Youth draw on resources to successfully fulfill roles and obligations. Resources include drawing on inner strength, commitment, or newfound resolve; a sense of obligation to their peers and the program goals; and/or leaders' support and encouragement.

(R4) Youth succeed in their roles and internalize the experience of having fulfilled valued roles.

Staff Practices

Structure. Staff provide structured but open-ended roles for youth.

(R5) The program design and the staff help create a variety of roles for youth that:

- a) have clear expectations and requirements; and
- b) have sufficient flexibility to allow youth initiative and ownership and accommodate youth's growing skills.

(R6) Staff helps fit individual youth to roles appropriate to their interests and capacities.

Modeling. Staff model and fulfill their own roles.

(R7) Staff model and fulfill their own roles in the program, defining and discussing them with youth.

Coaching. Staff promotes high expectations, respect youth's ownership of their roles, and provides help only as needed.

(R8) Staff articulate, encourage, and enforce high accountability for youth living up to roles and obligations.

(R9) Staff vigorously supports youth's ownership, empowerment, and latitude for decision-making within their roles, providing assistance only as necessary.

Initiative

Key Youth Experiences

Set goals. Youth set ambitious but realistic goals.

(I1) Youth have experiences setting challenging but achievable short- and long-term goals.

Motivation. Youth develop and sustain motivation by doing work that matters to them.

(I2) Youth develop motivation as they:

- a) form connections with collaborators;
 - b) build skills and confidence; and
 - c) see the value in the work for their futures (adult roles and career), their communities, and the world.
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Perseverance. Youth have experiences persevering through the ups and downs of difficult work.

(I3) Youth have repeated experiences of persevering through strenuous tasks and challenging work.

(I4) Youth experience the satisfaction of accomplishment and social acknowledgment of their efforts and achievements.

Staff Practices

Scaffolding. Staff provides ongoing assistance to help youth develop motivation within the work.

(I5) Staff help youth develop motivation by having youth select or shape the program goals and project(s) according to what matters to them.

(I6) Staff support youth's discovery of personal motivation in the program work by kindling youth's experience of belonging, competence, and connection of the program work to personal goals or societal purpose.

Coaching. Staff encourages youth to persist through challenging work, making sure that the effort behind youth's achievements is recognized.

(I7) Staff gives youth opportunities to persevere through challenges, setbacks, tiredness/tedium/boredom and also provide encouragement as needed to keep youth's attention focused and their effort engaged in keeping the program work moving forward.

(I8) Staff help youth see the progress and successes that come from their effort and perseverance.

Problem Solving

Key Youth Experiences

Projects. Youth engage in projects that involve organizing actions over time.

(PS1) Youth build project-specific knowledge and skills (e.g., carpentry, leadership, public speaking).

(PS2) Youth conduct projects that require organizing multiple, cumulative steps of work (e.g., creating a work of art, planning an event or a service project).

Planning-action cycles. Youth learn through cycles of strategic planning, execution, responding to emergent problems, trial and error, and reflection on outcomes.

(PS3) Youth engage in planning, including:

- a) brainstorming and generative planning;
- b) thinking strategically about the purposes, methods, content, and outcomes of the project;
- c) anticipatory thinking, if-then thinking (e.g., about how the work and various constraints interact), and contingency planning.

(PS4) Youth have multiple opportunities to practice implementing the same skills to achieve greater success (e.g., by trying and trying again).

(PS5) Youth grapple with adjusting short- and long-term goals and strategies to emerging challenges and changing circumstances in their work.

Outcomes verify skills. Youth reflect on how outcomes of their work provide information that helps build and verify youth skills.

(PS6) Youth reflect on the outcomes of their efforts at all stages of the work to identify mistakes and successes, note progress, and identify current challenges.

(PS7) Youth's sense of self-efficacy, accomplishment, or confidence grows as outcomes demonstrate their developing skills, and they critically evaluate how their actions influenced outcomes. (See also Initiative)

Staff Practices

Structure. Staff provides sufficient structure to youth-driven projects.

(PS8) Staff provides training experiences for youth to help them learn project-related skills.

(PS9) Staff places a high priority on youth having latitude to make choices and learn from experimenting within their projects.

(PS10) Staff set high expectations and structure projects that are achievable (e.g., by setting goals, setting timelines and deadlines, setting boundaries).

Modeling. Staff creates opportunities for youth to observe models of successful work.

(PS 11) Staff model skills youth need to learn for their projects (e.g., carpentry or speaking skills, skills for planning and problem solving) and expose youth to models of successful work that set high expectations (e.g., youth learn about projects from prior years, novices work with veteran youth or expert staff).

Scaffolding. Staff provides assistance, as needed, to help youth learn and solve problems on their own.

Staff scaffold youth progress on projects by balancing:

(PS12) stepping in to provide assistance and input as needed to help youth solve problems and learn (e.g., helping youth develop strategies when stuck or unsuccessful).

(PS13) stepping back to support youth's increasing independence in their work as their skill grows and to allow youth space to struggle with challenges.

Reflection. Staff offers youth opportunities for reflection on project outcomes.

(PS14) Staff ensures that youth have opportunities to reflect on the processes that led to the outcomes of their work and to evaluate the impact and meaning of completed projects for both the youth and other stakeholders.

Table 5. Standards for Curriculum Features

Curriculum Features

Project Content Sequence

- 1) Staff shapes the offering work with youth input, often requiring youth ownership.
- 2) Staff shapes the offering work with complex goals and/or a complex sequence of operations.
- 3) Staff shapes the offering work with repetitive skill practice in diverse contexts.

SEL Content Sequence

- 1) The offerings follow a progression through the SEL domains.
- 2) Offerings are structured for youth to engage their community.
- 3) Youth master social and emotional skills and experience increasing agency.

Safe Space

- 1) Staff cultivates ground rules for group processes (e.g. listening, turn-taking, decision-making) and sharing of emotions.
- 2) Staff cultivates a culture around the principles that all are different, equal, and important in which people actively care for, appreciate, and include each other.
- 3) Staff cultivates a culture where learning from mistakes and failures is highly valued.
- 4) Staff organizes consistent routines, activities, roles, or procedures to provide a structured and predictable experience.

Responsive Practices

- 1) Staff observes and interacts in order to know youth deeply.
- 2) Staff provides structure for check-ins to actively listen to and receive feedback from individual youth.
- 3) Staff coach, model, scaffold, and facilitate in real time as challenges occur.

Supports for Staff

- 1) The organization recruits youth who will benefit from the offering.
- 2) There is more than one staff member in every program session with the ability to implement responsive practices.
- 3) Staff works together before each program session to plan and collaborate on the session activities and regularly debrief following each session to discuss youth progress, staff response, and adjustments for future sessions.
- 4) Staff is supported to grow professionally and rejuvenate energy for the work.
- 5) Staff is supported by their organization to reflect on and improve their practices through a continuous improvement process.

End Notes

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- ⁱ The Curriculum Features include five features and eighteen practice indicators. These features could have been referred to as “standards.” We decided to distinguish the curriculum features because they were an exploratory result of our more intensive efforts to define promising practices in the six domains. We spent more time and methodological rigor on the development of the standards in the six SEL domains.
- ⁱⁱ This learning cycle is widely attributed to John Dewey (Dewey, 1938) and/or Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1977), and an experimental literature supports educational interventions based on this model (Miettinen, 2000). This model also parallels the skill-building theory whereby individuals practice skills in relation to challenges and, upon mastery, are both more likely to successfully apply those skills in other settings and to engage with challenges of greater complexity (Fischer, 1980).
- ⁱⁱⁱ This design has a history in adolescent group-work, camps, and community service interventions for high risk, high potential youth (Oden, Kelly, Ma, & Weikart, 1992) and has been usefully referred to as a “broad developmentally focused intervention” (Allen & Philliber, 2001) to emphasize the point that the interventions work across the wide variation in the SEL histories of adolescents.
- This intervention design could easily be gleaned from the “blue book” synthesis of positive youth development research and the curriculum features named in the SEL Guide look a lot like the features of positive youth development programs named in this synthesis (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).
- ^{iv} An emphasis on process and/or content choices as an element of positive youth development and program quality is old news to the OST field. The way in which problem solving complexity – and the necessity for making consequential decisions that require adult support (i.e., co-regulation for complex choice) – was built into the project curriculum is well described in the “capabilities-complexity” model in Oosterhof et al. (2008).