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UNCOVERING AND RESPONDING TO THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
NEEDS OF AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM LEADERS ACROSS RURAL NEBRASKA

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Doctor of Education

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Under the Supervision of Professor Guy Trainin

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Uncovering and Responding to the Professional Development Needs of
Afterschool Program Leaders Across Rural Nebraska

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University of Nebraska, 2018

Advisor: Guy Trainin

An effective state-level professional development system designed for Nebraska 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program leaders should consider both the unique characteristics of the program leaders themselves, as well as the rural communities where the afterschool programs are implemented. Some of these differentiating characteristics include background of the program leader and their years of experience, the size of the community, availability of staff and frequency of staff turnover, availability of potential community partners, and the quality of the relationship with the school administration and teachers where the afterschool program is implemented. Ultimately, the state-level system must be responsive to the needs of all rural program leaders, allowing for personally meaningful, ongoing, and relevant learning experiences.

As the person responsible to design and implement this state-level professional development system of support, it was important to gather relevant information from those who would be impacted by the potential improvements to the existing system. Two sources of data were collected and analyzed utilizing a narrative inquiry approach in order to answer the primary research question addressed in this study: What are the professional development needs of rural afterschool educators and how can they be addressed in a statewide system of support? The data sources included information from

four rural project directors who participated in a series of interviews, as well as an analysis of my own journal entries describing my ongoing work as the Coordinator of Professional Development for the Nebraska 21st CCLC program. As a result of this study, a plan was articulated that will address issues uncovered through analysis of data collected. The plan will be implemented over time with ongoing input and feedback from rural program leaders and as part of the existing 21st CCLC continuous improvement process.

Dedication

Thank you to all who supported me throughout my learning journey. I have been so lucky to have my family by my side: Kalie, Will, my dad, sisters, brother, and all the rest! I love you and appreciate how you kept me going when I needed you most. My committee members and instructors, past and present, provided guidance and encouragement, helping me make the right decisions that resulted in completion of my dissertation. Every book I read, every writing assignment, and every course had an impact on the quality of my research and dissertation. I also want to thank my friends and want to let you know I might have some free time now so please forgive me for ignoring you for the past few years and give me a call! Most of all I'd like to give special thanks to the rural afterschool program leaders who participated in this study, sharing their experiences and insights, providing me with a window into their world as leaders and learners, and giving me renewed excitement for my work with the Nebraska 21st CCLC afterschool program.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Because of the challenging responsibilities of informal educators leading and working in Nebraska afterschool programs, ongoing professional development is critical. My primary job responsibility is to address this need through a structure that supports ongoing learning opportunities and support for new and experienced staff who work in 21st CCLC programs across the state. The 21st CCLC program (<https://www.education.ne.gov/21stcclc>) is a federally-funded grant program authorized by Congress in 1994 and is currently administered through the Nebraska Department of Education. The first grants were given in 1998 to “support the creation of community learning centers that focus on improving academic outcomes and providing enrichment opportunities during non-school hours, particularly for students who attend high poverty and low-performing schools” (Starr & Gannett, 2018, p. 93). Grant funds are used to bring a wide variety of activities and services to kindergarten through grade twelve students that enhance and allow application of what is learned during the traditional school day. Programs are implemented after school, on days when school is not in session, and during the summer, and are commonly referred to as *afterschool programs*. In Nebraska, all 21st CCLC programs are implemented in public school buildings.

The three overarching goals of the Nebraska 21st CCLC program are to: 1) improve overall student success and learning performance in one or more academic areas through academic support and enrichment activities; 2) increase student social benefits and positive behavioral changes; and 3) increase active and meaningful family and community engagement in supporting students’ education (Nebraska 21st CCLC Learning Centers, 2018). Program offerings are aligned to the Nebraska Department of Education’s

statewide accountability system, *Accountability for a Quality Education System Today and Tomorrow* (Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.), and work towards accomplishing goals of the Nebraska State Board of Education as identified in the board's strategic plan. In addition, the Nebraska State Board of Education approved a *Position Statement for Expanded Learning Opportunities*, adopted October 6, 2017, which outlines what research has identified as the elements of a quality afterschool program and serves as a guide for program excellence (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017).

The typical afterschool or summer program schedule includes time for physical activity, a healthy snack and/or meal, homework help and other academic support, and time each day for engaging in enrichment clubs and activities. Examples of enrichment activities include clubs focused on art, college and career readiness, STEM, and outdoor education. Programs are expected to meaningfully engage families in the child's education. Program leaders are also required to identify and build sustainable relationships with statewide, regional, and local community partners in order to provide unique learning opportunities for students based on both the afterschool program's and organization's mission and goals.

More than a decade of research evidence supports the value of 21st CCLC funds in offering positive learning experiences for children and youth. According to Harris (2010), the research base on 21st CCLC is "vast and varied, ranging from in-depth descriptive studies of program implementation to rigorous outcome studies examining the benefits of program participation" (p. 2). Research suggests that three elements of afterschool programs, including those with 21st CCLC funding, are connected to positive outcomes:

1) access to and sustained participation in programs; 2) quality programming, as demonstrated by such factors as appropriate supervision and structure, well-prepared staff, and intentional programming; and 3) partnerships with families, other community organizations, and schools (Harris, 2010, p.2).

All Nebraska 21st CCLC programs are required to participate in a continuous improvement evaluation process. During a scheduled meeting of program leaders each fall, the program's leadership team reviews the previous year's data to determine a program strength and an annual improvement goal. This improvement goal, and the articulated action plans that specify how that goal will be accomplished, currently serve as a data source for determining state-level evaluation and professional development needs.

My role with Nebraska's 21st CCLC program is to coordinate professional development for staff which intentionally leads to program improvement. The primary challenges I face include the variety of responsibilities a program leader faces and the struggle to design a statewide system of support that allows for personally meaningful, ongoing, and relevant professional development experiences that lead to the implementation of high quality afterschool programs. This leads to the central problem addressed through this study: How does one create a statewide system of support that is ongoing, based on varied individual situations and local program improvement goals, and addresses the many needs of program leaders with diverse backgrounds and experiences?

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Relevant to this research study is literature that describes the characteristics of a quality afterschool program since all professional development should result in

afterschool educators leading and working in high quality programs that positively impact student learning. It is also important to consider the characteristics of effective professional development including the needs of afterschool educators in particular. The theoretical framework of this study is focused on the learning theory of constructivism because professional development opportunities must address the learning needs of individuals who work in rural programs across Nebraska. Also relevant to this research study is information related to rural communities, including their characteristics and the people who reside there. Finally, the review of the literature will provide a snapshot of the program leaders and staff who work with students attending 21st CCLC afterschool programs across Nebraska.

Afterschool Program Quality

Little, Wimer & Weiss (2007) examined a “decade of research and evaluation studies, as well as large-scale, rigorously conducted syntheses looking across many research and evaluation studies, confirms that children and youth who participate in after school programs can reap a host of positive benefits in a number of interrelated outcome areas—academic, social emotional, prevention, and health and wellness” (2007). The characteristics of a quality afterschool program was defined by the Nebraska State Board of Education in a position statement adopted on October 6, 2017 (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017). This position statement, based on research conducted by the Afterschool Alliance (2012), identifies the elements of a quality program as:

- Administration with sound management and well-developed systems: In order for a program to be considered high quality, a well-developed system of administration and sound program management is critical to its implementation.

- College/career awareness and readiness: Every student, upon completion of secondary education, shall be prepared for postsecondary educational opportunities and to pursue his or her career goals.
- Diverse, prepared staff including certified teachers: High quality afterschool programs recruit and retain quality staff and volunteers who are focused on creating a positive and engaging learning environment. Staff members are diverse in their backgrounds and are representative of the youth population that is served in the program.
- Community-school partnerships and resource sharing: High quality afterschool programs intentionally build and support collaborative relationships with schools, local community members, leaders, businesses, and organizations that can form important partnerships in program planning and funding.
- Engaged learning: High quality afterschool program design and activities utilize active, meaningful, and engaging learning methods that promote critical thinking and expand student horizons.
- Family engagement: High quality afterschool programs have an inviting environment for families, promote positive communication with families, and support parental involvement in the educational experiences of youth. Regular opportunities for families to be involved are incorporated into the programming.
- Intentional programming aligned with school day program: High quality afterschool programs include developmentally-appropriate academic support and enrichment activities that complement the school curriculum, intentionally link goals and curriculum with 21st century skills, and maintain high expectations for all youth.

- Ongoing assessment and improvement: High quality afterschool programs utilize data from multiple sources to assess their strengths and weaknesses in order to continuously improve program design, outcomes, and impact.
- Participation, access and support during transitions: High quality afterschool programs promote consistent and active participation. Programs embrace and value diversity, and have a conscious commitment to helping all youth thrive by providing inclusive, accessible, responsive, and engaging services. The programs understand, value, and respect the myriad of backgrounds and experiences of youth and their families.
- Safety, health, and wellness: High quality afterschool programs provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment for all participants. The physical space and the atmosphere of the program promotes a healthy environment. Aspects of health and nutrition are incorporated into daily programming. The environment encourages both group and individual participation in the program. Programming is supportive, yet has clear boundaries.

In order to implement high quality programs that reflect these indicators of quality, as defined by the Nebraska State Board of Education (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017), staff preparation through ongoing professional development is essential.

Therefore, the goal of the improved professional development system identified as a result of this study will consider these quality indicators in a comprehensive system of support for program leaders and staff. In addition to these indicators that identify the characteristics of a quality program, another resource that describes the characteristics of prepared program leaders and staff, the Nebraska School-Age and Youth Development Core Competencies (2015), will also be utilized. This resource, based on research and

created by Nebraska afterschool leaders, will be used for determining necessary qualifications when hiring afterschool educators, planning professional development for both new and experienced afterschool educators, and regular staff evaluation.

Characteristics of Effective Professional Development

This research project will focus on the creation of an improved statewide professional development system that builds on, and enhances, the existing system of support. These improvements will consider the needs expressed by rural program leaders. However, they must also reflect the characteristics of effective professional development as defined by research. Much of what constitutes the typical approaches to formal professional development for educators are in opposition to what research indicates promotes effective learning. The typical workshops tend to occur once, deal with decontextualized information, and often do not meet the expressed needs of adult participants. By contrast, research evidence indicates the most successful professional development activities are those that are extended over time and encourage the development of learning communities. These activities have been accomplished by creating opportunities for shared, locally-implemented learning experiences, analysis of program data, and focus on shared decision-making (Corcoran, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Gusky, 2002).

Because 21st CCLC program leaders are essentially responsible for improved student learning, research on effective professional development for classroom teachers is also considered relevant to this study. Research supports that effective professional development for teachers looks more like a collective study of the teaching and learning process than a series of presentations (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 266). Teacher learning

is no longer seen as a process of periodic staff development wherein experienced teachers are congregated to receive the latest information about the most effective teaching processes and techniques (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). In contrast, one of the most promising approaches to professional growth in education is job-embedded learning, learning that occurs as educators and administrators engage in their daily work activities. “Job-embedded learning is learning by doing, reflecting on the experience, and then generating and sharing new insights and learning with oneself and others” (Wood & McQuarrie, Jr., 1999, p. 10). Professional development that is more likely to promote lasting positive changes in knowledge and practice is ongoing and long term (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

Professional development no longer refers to the typical one-time workshop or even a short-term series of workshops. There have been many research studies that focus on what impacts adult learning and the conditions needed to affect sustained change. Research shows that professional development should be built into the regular work schedule, with consistent opportunities to learn about new research-based afterschool practices as well as opportunities to implement and reflect upon new ideas (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

Wilson and Berne (1999), in their research on contemporary professional development, conclude that “despite the lack of substantial empirical evidence about what teachers learn (or do not learn) in traditional professional development activities, many educators have embraced the calls for a wholesale rejection of the traditional, replacing the old with new images of meaningful professional development” (pp. 174-175). They describe the characteristics of effective professional development for teachers,

identifying several themes that ran across the vast, published research on teacher acquisition of professional knowledge:

- all projects involved communities of learners that were redefining teaching practice. Many started as funded professional development or research and most continued to exist long after funding was over;
- the idea that teacher learning ought not be bound and *delivered* but rather *activated*. It was when studies were focused on helping teachers understand their own knowledge that changes occurred;
- what the projects appear to be doing when they ask teachers to become scientists or mathematics learners or book club participants is to engage them as learners in the area that their students will learn but at a level that is suitable to their own learning, and privileging teachers' interactions with one another (pp. 194-195).

One of the most common examples of job-embedded learning is participation in a learning team, study group, or professional learning communities (PLCs) (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Vance, Salvattera, Michelsen, & Newouse, 2016). Learning Forward (<https://learningforward.org/>), previously the National Staff Development Council, described a learning team as probably the most frequently discussed approach to job-embedded learning. In this approach, groups of teachers and/or administrators come together to learn more about a particular topic, such as a curricular or instructional program. “The groups review and discuss the literature, visit model programs, and meet to discuss the potential of the practices or program for their school or classrooms” (Wood & McQuarrie, 1999, pp. 10-11). The goal of the learning team is for the participants to increase their knowledge in a particular area, improving current practices and student

learning. Although creating local learning teams or PLCs will be difficult to incorporate into a statewide professional development system, considering this addition could be beneficial. Vance, Salvaterra, Michelsen, & Newhouse (2016) describe PLCs as a “practice-focused alternative that has a track record of improving the way staff work with youth” (p. 21). They write that PLCs are relatively new to informal education, and they are growing in popularity. The organization Public Profit LLC (2018) has created PLC guides for afterschool educators that are available free and online.

According to Joyce and Showers (2002), researchers in the area of professional development identified practices, attitudes, and skills which seemed to help teachers develop an aptitude for learning. These include:

- persistence, even when a task is uncomfortable or difficult;
- acknowledgement of the transfer problem (that transfer of learning is a separate learning task from the acquisition of knowledge or skills);
- the challenge of teaching new behaviors to students;
- understanding the importance of the underlying theory;
- proactive and productive use of peers; and
- flexibility.

Considering these characteristics of effective professional development will inform analysis of the existing professional development structure of the 21st CCLC program and possible improvements to the system.

Professional Development for Afterschool Educators

Professional development is vital to the success of afterschool programs (Bouffard & Little, 2004; Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Bradshaw, 2015; Bradshaw, 2018; Frerichs,

Fenton & Wingert, 2018; Starr & Garnett, 2018). According to Starr & Gannett (2018), “the field does not have one consistent definition of professional development” (p. 88). Nancy Peter (2009) provides a broad definition saying it is a “spectrum of activities, resources, and supports that help practitioners work more effectively with or on behalf of children and youth” (p. 36). Starr & Gannett (2018) explain Peter’s (2009) definition as including “a variety of professional development formats, such as workshops, conferences, technical assistance, peer mentoring, coaching, professional memberships, apprenticeships, certifications and credentials, college coursework and degrees, peer networking, and professional learning communities” (p. 88).

The primary goal of professional development is to engage learners in activities and experiences that result in increased or improved knowledge and skills. When considering professional development that targets afterschool educators, programs target many outcomes including “increased staff knowledge about child and adolescent development, use of effective strategies for activity programming, and implementation of methods for promoting positive relationships with youth” (Bouffard & Little, 2004, p.1). Bouffard and Little (2004) conclude that a secondary goal of professional development initiatives is to “improve the quality and sustainability of the out-of-school time workforce, by increasing providers’ marketable skills and by garnering public support for the youth development field” (p. 1).

Afterschool educators, sometimes referred to as youth workers, are individuals who work in afterschool programs during times when school is not in session. Many of these educators are part-time employees, have a variety of backgrounds and experiences, often enter the workforce without any formal education and training, and gain skills and

knowledge on the job (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). Since these jobs are often a stepping stone on the path to another career, there is frequent turnover in staff who work in afterschool programs.

Bowie & Bronte-Tinkey (2006) explain the value of professional development for afterschool educators as follows:

- professional development improves program quality;
- professional development may increase retention of afterschool educators;
- a comprehensive professional development program is vital to enhancing and sustaining a cadre of qualified afterschool educators;
- professional development benefits the individual and ultimately the students served in the program;
- professional development benefits the program; and
- professional development benefits the field.

There is no question that staffing is a key component of quality in afterschool programs (Bouffard & Little, 2004; Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). However, the lack of national or statewide professional development systems is identified as a detriment to the field (Bouffard & Little, 2004). National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) and the AED (formerly the Academy for Educational Development) Center for Youth Development and Policy Research (2003) conclude that “it will take political will and a commitment of substantial public resources on the local, state and national levels to support and sustain a skilled and stable out-of-school workforce. The effort to build that will and secure those resources is an essential component of any effort to move the field forward” (p.3). A committee of experts gathered through the joint efforts of the NIOST

and the AED Center for Youth Development and Policy Research (2003) explain that there should be “a clear set of standards for the skills needed by out-of-school time workers at different levels of responsibility, a well-articulated map for career advancement, and benchmarks for increasing compensation as skills and responsibilities increase, critical elements of attracting and retaining the workers who can deliver quality programs for children and youth” (p. 3). The conclusion of the committee’s work was as follows:

Leadership is the key to halting the revolving door of turnover, guaranteeing staff a living wage and making working with children and youth during non-school hours an attractive career option. Despite isolated gains across the country, the workforce crisis will not resolve itself. Leaders from national, state, and local agencies, both public and private, must make building a skilled and stable workforce a priority before measurable gains will be made. (p. 4)

There are several types of professional development to consider including local or district support, a formal statewide professional development system, or a plan that uses a combination of types. Lom & Sullenger (2011) categorized the many available professional development experiences offered into four categories listed below (with examples from Bowie & Bronte-Tinkey (2006) that identify formal and informal professional development opportunities for youth workers that fit into these categories):

- formal, mandated professional development (e.g., district seminars, pre-service training and orientation for new staff, in-service training, local and national credentialing systems and programs);

- formal, self-directed professional development (e.g., higher education training, continuing education courses and degree programs, local and national conferences, training seminars provided by external organizations);
- informal, mandated professional development (e.g., in-school department meetings or team meetings, mentoring programs); and
- informal, self-directed professional development (e.g., conversations, staff collaborations, information from newsletters, online discussion boards, lunches for staff members to share ideas and expertise).

It will be important to consider these four types of professional development when considering the current system of support for Nebraska afterschool educators, and when proposing specific changes based on this research study.

L. Daniele Bradshaw (2015) applied the TEARS framework (Leggett & Persichitte, 1998) to afterschool as a structure for addressing implementation obstacles of lack of time, expertise, access, resources, and support. When addressing the issue of lack of time, Bradshaw suggests looking at the broad array of options for bringing professional development to educators such as workshops, coaching, learning communities and distance training. Solutions for addressing a lack of expertise included giving staff opportunities to provide input on needed training, peer coaching, and skill development that is contextualized, developmental, and periodic. Access included forming partnerships with schools, community organizations, and postsecondary institutions who can provide enhanced access to professional development for afterschool programs. Resources included state afterschool websites to help locate external professional development resources. Finally, support included “helping staff members to accept professional

development initiatives and to view them positively” (p. 51), as well as providing incentives to promote participation. Bradshaw (2018) explains that “orientations and trainings can have different formats, yet interaction is still essential” (p. 10).

The Click2SciencePD (University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension and the NOYCE Foundation, n.d.) model of professional development is designed to build the capacity of informal educators through a cycle of learning experiences “using multiple instructional strategies to meet the multiple learning needs of adult learners” (Frerichs, Fenton & Wingert, 2018, p. 117). According to Frerichs, Fenton & Wingert, this model is the “first of its kind to be theoretically grounded and intentionally designed for OST professionals” (p. 120). They write that this approach is “grounded in social learning theory while allowing for professionals to learn with video, interactive discussion, and scenarios of real-life practice” (p. 120). The key features of the model include: self-directed web lessons that allow learners to work online at their own pace and at a time convenient to them; in-person training opportunities that allow learners to engage in social, experiential activities together; practice that allows participants to incorporate new ideas into their instructional practice; meetings that are short and allow participants to review key ideas from the training experience and reflect on how they have applied them in practice; coaching that helps individuals develop new skills; and finally evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the program. According to Frerichs, Fenton & Wingert “educators can replicate this program to meet their organizational professional development goals” (p. 120).

Theoretical Framework

Because an effective professional development is ongoing, based on individual needs, allows for active engagement, and recognizes that learners must construct their own knowledge, this study is based on the learning theory of *constructivism*, the learning theory centered on the belief that people of all ages construct knowledge as they gain information and engage in experiences. “Constructivism is an epistemology, a learning or meaning-making theory that offers an explanation of the nature of knowledge and how human beings learn” (Ultanir, 2012, p. 195).

Constructivists believe that learning is an ongoing and active process. Individuals do not learn something because they have been told, but rather come to understand new concepts through interactions with people, experiences, their cultural background, and through articulating beliefs while speaking and writing. Constructivists believe that new understandings are built on existing knowledge and through personal experience. “For the constructivist one of the most valuable things a student can learn is the idea of possibility” (Peterson, 2012, p. 886). Key researchers who have contributed to this learning theory include Jean Piaget, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and Jerome Bruner.

Jean Piaget and John Dewey are the early contributors to the constructivist theory of learning. Dewey believed individuals are co-constructors of knowledge. They learn from genuine experiences and solving real problems. In his book, *Education and Democracy* (1916), he described thinking as the method of an educative experience. The essentials of method are therefore identical with the essentials of reflection. They are first that the pupil have a genuine situation of experience—that there be a continuous activity in which he is interested for its own sake; second, that a genuine problem develop within this

situation as a stimulus to thought; third, that he possess the information and make the observations needed to deal with it; fourth, that suggested solutions occur to him which he shall be responsible for developing in an orderly way; fifth, that he have opportunity and occasion to test his ideas by application, to make their meaning clear, and to discover for himself their validity (p. 163).

Dewey (2010) believed “rather than learning being an act of memorizing ready-made answers to possible questions to be put by another”, true “reflective attention always involves judging, reasoning, deliberation”, the learner has a question of his/her own and is actively engaged in seeking and selecting relevant material with which to answer it, considering the kind of solution the problem calls for. “The problem is one’s own; hence also the impetus, the stimulus to attention, is one’s own; hence also the training secured is one’s own” (p. 55). A professional development system built on the constructivist philosophy will consider the learners’ questions, needs, experiences, and will allow an individual to engage in learning experiences that are active and relevant.

Jean Piaget’s main focus is on the individual and how the individual constructs knowledge. In Piaget’s view, knowledge is not to be “construed as preexisting in reality, but only came about by virtue of the individual’s formulations in response to specific observations and experiences” (Peterson, 2012, p. 883). Piaget (2006) defines intelligence “as a form of equilibration, or forms of equilibration, toward which all cognitive functions lead” (p. 99). He defines intelligence in terms of a coordination of operations. Piaget shows this as the result of the development of personal experience of the child who “remains at one with the environment” (Pass, 2004, XI). Education, while considered an important factor in this development, at the same time cannot change its

development. “It is predestined, given in the first place by the inner rules of psychological development” (Pass, 2004, XI).

Piaget believed the development of a person’s intelligence occurs through four main periods: 1) sensorimotor stage (ages zero to two); 2) pre-operational stage (two to seven years old); 3) concrete operational stage (seven to eleven years old); 4) formal operational stage (eleven years old to adulthood). According to Piaget (2006), the child is destined to go through these four main periods of development of intelligence, with the possibility of integration with previous and subsequent stages. He wrote that the child progresses from one stage to the other “by the construction of new operational structures, and these structures constitute the fundamental instrument of the intelligence of the adult” (p. 106).

The work of another contributor to a constructivist theory of learning, Lev Vygotsky (1978), is relevant to this study because I am attempting to identify the zone of proximal development for each program leader through interviews. Vygotsky described the zone of proximal development as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 33). In other words, he believed learning activities should challenge learners beyond the level where they can learn independently and fairly easily, but not be so difficult that they are unable to accomplish the task with some support from an expert. When considering this philosophy in relation to adult learners, this study will attempt to identify the place where program leaders are now in their understandings, and then determine the information and support needed in order to grow to the next level of

knowledge. The term scaffolding was not used by Vygotsky, even though Vygotsky conceptualized the idea. According to Pass (2004), the term was first used by Jerome Bruner to describe a student “being brought from the bottom of his stage of development to the top by a caring ‘social other’ through the use of communication” (p. XVI). Interest in development, commitment to how humans actively seek out possibilities and not simply rely on the actual, and the belief that the humanities contribute to how we create meaning, all contributed to Jerry’s journey into education (Haste & Gardner, 2017).

Every program leader, like every learner, is unique. Some are starting new programs; some are hired to lead already existing programs. Some have strong administrative support in their school buildings; some work primarily on their own. Some have external evaluation support; others have the sole responsibility for completing evaluation requirements and analyzing data. Every program leader possesses varied knowledge and background experiences. Therefore, an ongoing challenge for this study will be to improve the existing professional development system considering the varied needs of every rural program leader—a system that will allow them to learn from meaningful and relevant experiences alongside other program leaders and their staff. Through this study, project directors will be empowered to take the lead in identifying the important content and structures that will support learning.

Defining Rural

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Rural America At A Glance (2017), “rural America encompasses 72 percent of the Nation’s land area, houses 46 million residents, and plays an essential role in the overall economy (p. 1). Surprisingly, even though according to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly twenty percent of the country’s

population reside in what is considered to be a *rural* community, and approximately 50% of school districts in the U.S. are classified as small, rural districts (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017), there is not one agreed upon definition of what makes a community rural (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Hawley, Koziel, & Bovaird, 2017; Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016). The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural simply as “what is not urban”—that is, after defining individual urban areas, rural is “what is left” or “all territory, persons, and housing units not defined as urban” (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, pp. 1-2). This definition might lead one to conclude that all rural communities are the same and can be characterized together as *what is left*. However, some studies do differentiate between the many rural communities across the country by describing their more unique characteristics. Unfortunately, these indicators can sometimes paint a negative image of rural communities. Research studies, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture report, *Rural America at a glance* (2017), describe rural communities’ shrinking numbers, the “brain drain,” population loss, lagging wages and employment opportunities, and limited access to technology. Rural communities are often defined by the problems they face, including what they are not—urban.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NDES), 2006, defines rural using three urban-centric definitions:

Rural fringe: Five miles or less to an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster (an area that has a central core and is adjacent to a densely settled territory containing between 2,500 and 49,000 people);

Rural distant: More than five but 25 miles or less from an urbanized area, or more than

2.5 but ten miles or less from an urban cluster (an area that has a central core and adjacent densely settled territory containing between 2,500 and 49,000 people);

Rural remote: More than 25 miles from an urbanized area, and also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

According to Cicchinelli and Beesley (2017), these are the definitions typically used by education researchers “to demonstrate that their study is about rural education and related issues,” but they add there is considerable debate about whether these definitions capture the most important characteristics of rural communities and their education systems (p.

2). They write:

Characteristics of communities such as population density, availability of services and goods, the condition of basic infrastructure, access to transportation networks, the type of work residents do, the ways in which residents spend leisure time, and the nature of the tax base may more aptly define what is rural. When it comes to education, factors such as internet connectivity, access to technology, the condition of the facilities, the composition of the student population, the stability of the local population may be more closely tied to the quality and effectiveness of rural education systems than overall geographic or population characteristics reflective of place. (p. 2)

Greenough and Nelson (2015) also wrote about the importance of recognizing the variety of schools located in rural communities. They explained it is important to understand that research in rural education is complicated not only by issues of defining rural, but also the variation in schools classified as rural. These differences can be seen in such characteristics as remoteness, average school and district size, student poverty rates,

enrollment of racial and ethnic minorities, and growth or decline in district enrollments (p. 322). In their research, they used the definition provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2006) to describe the varieties of rural schools in terms of remoteness and school size, student demographics, and enrollment growth or decline.

Susan J. Bracken (2008) conducted a study focused on defining rural communities through the eyes of adults who live there, those participating in informal and nonformal adult education in rural communities. For the purposes of her study, she defined this as “just about any endeavor adults undertake to learn and work together outside formal classroom, workplace, or postsecondary educational settings” (p. 83). In her interviews of 57 members of the rural communities who were part of her study, some common themes arose regarding how the participants defined “rural,” “rural character,” and “rural way of life,” as well as their opinions about what strengths and challenges they perceived in their activities” (p. 84). Half of these individuals were from communities in Northeast United States, the other half from communities in the Southeast part of the country. Bracken explained in their definitions they identified a “tie to nature, green space, and population density in rural areas” (p. 84). They also said “there are also transitioning or struggling economic and tax bases, changing population demographics, serious community health issues, and difficulty accessing health services” (pp. 84-85). The participants in this study also talked about their perceptions of “rural culture or rural character, that is their way of life” (p. 85). They “perceived issues as complex, multidimensional, or simply as part of a balanced system” as they talked about the fact that most rural residents value privacy, property rights, and the concept of independence and consequently expect less formal regulation or intervention in their personal and work lives (p. 85). She wrote, “rural

identity and independence were not characterized just as toughness, self-sufficiency, or creative problem solving due to isolating conditions; they were also described relationally as a right, a preference, a way of being” (p. 85). Bracken also identified another reoccurring theme in the responses of the study participants, writing:

Another reoccurring theme was discussion of the notion of partnership or shared or pooled resources. By necessity, many rural communities do not have the population base for stand-alone services, businesses, resources, community organizations, or programs. Participants stressed that rural families and communities help each other in a time of need and that it is vital to pool and share resources: talents, labor, material resources, emotional and cultural support, and companionship. (p. 86)

Nugent et al. (2017), in a chapter focused on the perspectives and recommendations of rural education researchers, practitioners, and policy makers gathered at the National Conference on Rural Education Research held April 2013, wrote there is “the need to more carefully identify contextual variables that could influence educational experiences in rural” (p. 19). The participants who attended this conference acknowledged that there are contextual factors that define rural schools/communities outside of those typically reported (i.e., free and reduced lunch, etc.) that can help with understanding rural communities and the differences among them. These factors—such as cultural diversity, distance traveled to school, increase in commuter residents, access to technology, and economic affluence and stability—may have a unique impact on the educational experience of students attending rural schools (p. 19). Some conference participants stated “it is important to consider the commonalities that exist among rural communities

and between urban and rural communities” (p. 19). Also mentioned was the understanding that “although professional development opportunities for rural teachers were seen as pivotal to rural student success, many barriers to participation in such training were cited, including cost, distance to be traveled, or technology required to attend virtually” (p. 20).

Hawley, Koziol, and Bovaird (2017) offer detailed descriptions of the “most common definitions available to education policy makers and researchers.” They suggest that “different rural definitions are often treated as exchangeable, but depending on the study context, certain rural definitions may be more relevant than others” (p. 32). For the purposes of this study, the actual definition of rural is not as important as identifying what the research says are the characteristics that make these communities unique and could therefore impact participation in learning opportunities for rural afterschool program leaders and staff.

Nebraska 21st CCLC Staff

Results of the first Nebraska 21st CCLC Afterschool Workforce Survey (Johnson, 2018) paint a picture of both program leaders and staff working in Nebraska 21st CCLC programs during the 2017-18 school year. Respondents included 557 staff members, 79 site supervisors and 39 project directors. Sixty-five percent (441) are 30 years or younger, 41% (279) have taken some college courses but do not have a degree, 40% (272) have worked in the afterschool program for less than one year, and another 41% (279) have worked in the program for one to three years. When asked for the reasons they work with the afterschool program, 81% Eighty-one percent (550) responded that they work in the afterschool program because they enjoy the work; 60% (408) work there because of the

students with whom they work. Fifty-nine percent (398) anticipate working in the program for another zero to two years and the majority indicate the reason they will leave is because of graduation.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Statement of the Problem

The central problem I face when approaching my work is how to replicate the elements of a quality professional development program at a statewide level that addresses the individual needs of informal education leaders in rural Nebraska communities. I work with program leaders directing rural afterschool programs who face a variety of challenges recently summarized during a newly formed advisory group meeting, the 21st CCLC Nebraska Rural Advisory Committee. The group was formed because rural Nebraska program leaders face different challenges than urban program leaders, located in Omaha and Lincoln, and their voices were needed when considering decisions made at the state-wide level. One topic discussed during this call was professional development. Among the many issues identified by this group of ten rural program leaders were:

- limited funds to participate in professional development;
- frequent staff turnover;
- rural settings led to isolation from other program leaders;
- limited time for professional development because many program leaders and staff members hold other jobs; and
- difficulty finding common times to participate in professional development activities.

In addition to these issues identified by the Rural Advisory Committee, based on conversations and observations, I would add three other issues not discussed during the Rural Advisory Committee meeting but influencing the need for this research study. One is that program leaders have varied backgrounds and are not necessarily educators when they begin leading the 21st CCLC programs, even though they are ultimately responsible for improved student learning. A second critical issue is the number of duties program leaders are responsible for including hiring and retaining staff, forming meaningful relationships with school leadership, teachers, family members, and community members, data collection and analysis, program planning, federal and state reporting, and more. A third issue program leaders face is varied degrees of support from building principals whose role is vital in a successful program.

Current Professional Development Structure

Prior to this study there were many professional development structures in place through the Nebraska 21st CCLC program that could support new and existing program leaders. These include:

- continuous improvement process meetings with support for data analysis and identification of an annual program improvement goal;
- on-site visits by members of the state-level leadership team;
- monthly calls using technology for all program leaders and a separate monthly call for new program leaders (in their first year);
- annual full-day afterschool conferences in both La Vista and Kearney, Nebraska on alternating years;
- regional workshops on a variety of topics including STEM;

- My21stCCLC secure Moodle site for program leaders to access information and resources;
- Click2SciencePD (University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension and the NOYCE Foundation, n.d.) professional development website created by experts at University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension;
- You for Youth (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) professional development website created and updated by federal 21st CCLC program experts; and
- a variety of print resources provided to all new programs.

Uncovering what was helpful through this existing system of support, and determining program leaders' opinions regarding what else is needed, was important information to gather during one-on-one interviews with selected program leaders through this research.

Primary Research Question

What are the professional development needs of rural afterschool educators, and how can they be addressed in a state-wide system of support?

Data Sources

Nebraska 21st CCLC program leaders who lead rural afterschool and summer programs across the state were invited to participate in this study. These individuals were invited to participate with the goal of representing small and mid-sized programs, who are new and experienced, and represent the span of elementary through middle school programs.

Four individuals participated in this study:

Raevik—elementary program leader in very small community with limited resources

Doug—a newer program leader who leads a middle school and junior high program in a large rural community

Joelle—leads an elementary program in a small, diverse, Nebraska community

Olivia—experienced elementary and middle-school program leader in a mid-sized rural community.

Research participants, communities, and programs

Name	Name of Community	Size of Community	Location of Community	Level of students	Years of experience in this position
Raevik Johanson	Anthony	Just over 1,000	Nebraska panhandle	elementary	<5 years
Doug Humphrey	Norton	Just under 25,000	Northeast Nebraska	middle	<5 years
Olivia Johnson	Clifton	Less than 6,000	Nebraska panhandle	Elementary and middle	> 15 years
Joelle Meyer	Lewis	Under 2,500	Northeast Nebraska	middle	<5 years

Every participant in this study was interviewed three times over the course of a semester using a semi-structured interview approach. Interviews were recorded and analyzed to uncover themes including issues and recommendations. Themes were uncovered using a narrative inquiry lens.

Participation in this study was voluntary. If people chose to participate, it was expected they would participate in three individual interviews over the course of several months. Those invited to participate in the study represented very small and mid-sized rural programs. Large urban programs were not included in this study as their

professional development and technical assistance needs are unique to that setting, and adequate funds and support structures are typically in place.

Questions for the first interview included the following three identified as important, but not normally asked when planning professional development for educators (Lom & Sullenger, 2011, p. 58):

- What do you consider important for program leaders know and to learn?
- How would you like to engage in the learning process?
- What are you already doing in this regard?

The following questions were asked as follow-up from initial Rural Advisory Committee meeting:

- What are the issues that keep you from participating in professional development opportunities?
- What do you consider important for your staff to know and to learn?
- What are the issues you face when planning staff professional development?

The complete list of questions asked over the course of the three interviews are identified in Appendix C. As an additional source of data, I kept a journal throughout the research study recording my ongoing work supporting 21st CCLC rural program leaders and reflections relevant to this research.

Data Analysis

A narrative inquiry approach was utilized throughout this study as the research methodology. Narrative inquiry was selected because it is “situated in relationships and in community, and it attends to notions of expertise and knowing in relational and participatory ways” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 13). Since the data collected and analyzed for

this study was informed by stories of personal experience, mine as well as others, this approach was most useful. Clandinin (2013) wrote that thinking with stories is primarily thinking relationally. She explained most narrative inquiries begin with telling stories, “that is, with a researcher engaged in conversations with participants who tell stories of their experiences” (p. 34). Justification for using this approach, according to Clandinin, can be explained personally (why this study matters to us as individuals), practically (what difference this research might make to practice), and theoretically (what difference this research might make to theoretical understandings). I address these three notions in relation to my own experiences below:

Personally (or why this study matters to me as an individual):

My job is challenging. I am responsible to ensure new project directors have the information and experiences they need to learn a very complicated job. I am also responsible to challenge experienced program leaders to become informed leaders in their schools and communities. I anticipated this study would help me uncover the real issues facing both of these groups and I would attempt to use the information to improve the existing professional development structure in the state.

Practically (or what difference this study will make to practice):

This study was practical for me because it was directly related to my job. If I am better able to support program leaders, their programs will become more effective, and the result will be increased student learning and success in school. Many students served in 21st CCLC programs are at-risk academically. Engaging and interesting learning experiences tied to what is learned during the school day, families who are better

connected to school, and working together with community partners will likely make a positive impact on student success.

Theoretical (or what difference this study will make to theoretical understandings):

The results of this study identified the key components of a statewide professional development system that reflects the beliefs about teaching and learning that are constructivist in nature. It revealed how a statewide system can address individual need, promote active engagement in the content, build on experience, and reflect the voices of those it is intended to support.

Significance of the Study

This study was designed to address an authentic need. There was currently a professional development structure in place for Nebraska 21st CCLC afterschool program leaders. However, rural program leaders have expressed the need for additional support. Therefore, what was learned from this study will inform changes to the existing professional development system to address their identified needs. Ultimately, an improved professional development plan could lead to better support and sustainability of program leaders, which would result in improved program quality. As a result of this study, Nebraska could serve as a model for other states in their pursuit of program excellence through quality professional development.

Afterschool program quality has the possibility to significantly impact student success in school. However, there is little research that informs the development of a statewide system of support that addresses the identified needs of afterschool program leaders as they strive to implement a high-quality program. We know these are complex jobs and afterschool program leaders face vast responsibilities. They are responsible to support

students in their academic achievement, find meaningful ways to engage families, and connect with community members in their leadership role. In Nebraska, because 21st CCLC afterschool programs are all implemented in school buildings, program leaders must also form and maintain meaningful working relationships with school principals and teachers in their pursuit of common goals. The results of this study could add to the existing research, bringing a new perspective to the issues faced by rural afterschool program leaders related to their own professional growth, as well as the staff they oversee.

CHAPTER 4: RAEVIK

We have some very, very bright and intelligent kids and they just sometimes feel like they're caught in a bubble and that they'll never have the chance to go to school other than maybe [the local college]. And it's like, nope guys and gals, you've got lots and lots of chances to get away. If you choose to come back to your community, maybe you do it through an entrepreneurship. Maybe you do it because you've gone to the University and you get into marketing so you can come back to the ranch and you can make it work and function highly and be very competitive and make a good living off of where you grew up and with the family that you want to be around. So it's just helping those kids realize that there are opportunities out there. It's just a matter of, don't limit, let's not limit ourselves. (personal interview, March 10, 2018)

Raevik Johanson is a project director leading an afterschool and summer program in a very small rural community with just over 1,000 residents. I appreciated her willingness to participate in this study because of the important perspective she contributes—a

program leader employing only one regular staff person and located in a community so small there are very few potential local community partners. Ultimately, improvements in the state-level professional development plan will need to benefit a program leader leading a very small program with only one staff person such as Raevik's, as well as a larger rural community with a staff of 30 or more. If the state-level professional development system provides her with needed information and support, it will likely benefit many other rural program leaders.

I first met Raevik when she was hired as a new project director three years ago in a town so far from the office building where I work it is a full day's drive to visit her or her program. This limited our in-person conversations; however, technology allowed us to talk regularly throughout her first year since she was an active participant in the new project director online monthly meetings. Her commitment was apparent, asking questions and seeking advice on a variety of topics. She attended in-person regional trainings and the annual afterschool conference which allowed me to get to know her personally. She was invited to serve as a member of the 21st CCLC Rural Advisory Committee because of her unique situation and obvious commitment to the students who attend her program, as well as those in other rural communities across the state.

Raevik and the Community of Anthony

The rural community of Anthony is uniquely situated in the corner of the state near beautiful parks, historic sites, farms, ranches, and unique geography that attracts game hunters and bikers during the summer months. People who love the outdoors make it a destination because of the scenic beauty that surrounds it. The population of this community is just over 1,000 according to the 2010 census, reflecting a decrease in the

population from 2015 to 2016 of 8.2% (American Community Survey, 2018). Raevik explained that many families live on farms and ranches outside of town, some as far away as 18 to 20 miles from the school where the afterschool program is located. Because the school district does not run any school busses, most families drive their children to and from school each day. Although some families own townhouses in the town where the school is located to avoid the daily commute, most drive their children to and from school each day. This long daily commute and lack of school busses makes it difficult for Raevik to reach her goal of having her students attend the program 30 days or more, the number of days needed in order for them to count as regular attenders. During the 2016-17 school year, there were 98 students who attended the elementary school, grades K-6 (Nebraska Department of Education, 2018). Raevik reported the afterschool program typically serves 25-30 students on a daily basis afterschool.

When asked what she sees as the advantages of leading a program in a very small rural community, she listed several. First, she explained that she is able to get to know the students very well. "I ask the kids a lot about their interests and so that helps me to kind of plan some of the programming." She also feels it is easier to have one-on-one conversations with classroom teachers to determine and address students' individual academic needs. She explained that, in a small community, another benefit is the strong relationships she is able to build with families. She gave the example that if a field trip is scheduled and she needs additional adults to oversee a large number of students, "all I have to do is ask those parents, and if one can't, then I go to another one and inevitably there's a parent that will find the time." She told this story of a father, laughing, explaining he told her if she ever needs additional adults to assist in the program "you

give me a call. I'll drop calving or whatever I'm doing and I'll come in and help you..., and he would! I don't know if you can get that anywhere but a rural area." She also noted it is easier to build partnerships with people in the business community who are willing to provide food for events, supplies for activities, and rewards for students who earn points for responsibility, respect, effort, and safety. She said they had an actual auctioneer from the community who came in and led an event when donated prizes were auctioned off using the points students had earned in the program. She said, "those connections to people in the community...are a saving grace for us. They really, really are."

Raevik's strong education background. Raevik brings many relevant experiences to her role as the project director in this small school in a rural NE community, especially her educational background. She said she had over 30 years of classroom teaching experience in upper elementary grades and multiple grade levels in country schools where her single classroom included students from kindergarten through grade eight. This experience is unique for any educator, and especially valuable for her since the afterschool program she leads typically has two adults planning for, and overseeing, students across multiple grade-levels simultaneously, similar to the structure of a country school.

Raevik graduated from a Nebraska university with a double major—elementary education and physical education. Because of this background, she is very interested in the impact of physical activity and nutrition on students and how this influences learning. She enjoys working in the afterschool program, as opposed to the school day, saying "I really feel like sometimes all we do is just teach to the test," while in the afterschool program she can take the skills she wants to teach, but "go out of the box with them." She

feels she can keep the students' interest in learning while engaging in activities they normally cannot do within their school day because of the focus on "the reading, the writing, the math, and getting good test scores."

Because of her education background, Raevik is also able to integrate literature into "the math, the science, the art, even helping the kids with social skills," which she says has really helped her students academically. She sees the benefit of bringing STEM, especially science experiences, to students. She helps them see the differences and similarities between the scientific method and the engineering process as they engage in activities, "digging deeper," and giving them the "hands-on they love." She teaches students that in science and engineering, "failure is feedback." She feels afterschool is a good environment to reinforce this concept since they do not get a grade for their work, and have the time they need to "go back, redesign, retest, try it again."

Raevik's passion for her students. When I asked Raevik about the influences and experiences which have shaped her as a program leader, she said she has a love of learning and a "big heart for those kids who struggle or kind of the underdogs." She explained that she was not a "really a good reader, wasn't, you know, extremely good at math," but she had a college professor who took her, "a good old country girl...saw the potential, he saw my compassion for kids, and he turned me into what I think is a pretty, pretty, marvelous teacher." She mentioned another college professor who instilled a love of health and physical education in her which has also carried over into activities planned for students on a regular basis. These professors will "tell you that I bend over backwards to help the underdog kid, that that's definitely one of my biggest influences."

Raevik's passion for her students and their futures was also evident as she talked about the kinds of experiences she intentionally brings students who are living and attending school in this very small, rural community. Considering her students' futures, Raevik spoke more about her commitment to bringing entrepreneurship experiences and awareness to her students. She attended a recent training, driving across the state with her local 4-H Extension staff member, to learn more about the career-related opportunities she might be able to bring back to her students. She sees this as a way to teach them not only about starting their own business as a future career opportunity, but also teach important interpersonal skills. She said interpersonal skills can be challenging for some of her students, but she knows it is important for them to develop these skills saying they must know how to "talk to people, shake someone's hand, tell them good morning or afternoon, and thank them for coming to look at the items they are selling."

She is also committed to scheduling field trips to local areas of interest, including nearby museums and parks to ensure students are exposed to places of interest outside of their own small community. She explained that, although there are popular tourist spots less than five miles from town, many students are unable to visit them with their families, "and believe it or not, there's a lot of our kids that never do get out to the [Anthony State Park] area and it's in their backyard basically."

Relationships with community partners. Community partners are essential to a small, rural afterschool program. Raevik has been fortunate to grow relationships with several community partners who lead clubs focused on a variety of topics of interest to students, as well as providing professional development opportunities for her and her staff. Community partners, such as experts from her local 4-H Extension office, bring

curriculum directly to students focused on STEM, health and fitness, and social emotional growth, to name a few. But building relationships with potential community partners is challenging and time consuming, especially for a new program leader and a person new to the community. “I was kind of thrown in being very, very new that first year,” because at the time, the program was in year five of their five-year grant cycle, and she was expected to write a continuation grant so the program could continue once the initial grant period ended. Since it is required that grantees form a partnership with at least one community partner as part of the application process, she began by contacting possible partners such as the town library, their Chamber of Commerce, and local 4-H Extension curriculum experts. She took the students who attended the program to the local library, the newspaper office, the local grocery store, and area museums, getting to know people in the community and building relationships with them. These efforts resulted in a number of community partners supporting the program in various ways, including identifying and recruiting many individuals who now volunteer in the program and work directly with students. These volunteers are essential to the program because of her limited program budget which only allows her to hire one part-time staff person who is able to regularly work with students in the program.

Using community partners and volunteers is a benefit to the program because of the expertise and enthusiasm they can bring to students, but depending on volunteers to take the lead on planning and leading clubs can also bring challenges. For example, this year, they lost their local librarian because of medical issues, a person who planned and led students in literacy activities. The new person hired was unable to take the lead on planning activities for the students, so the responsibility “falls on my shoulders.” Raevik,

however, said she uses the library visits to plan activities for students that integrate science and literature. She was enthusiastic about this opportunity saying, “My kids, when you say science or STEM, they’re there because they just don’t get that kind of stuff in the regular classroom, and they want science!”

Raevik has formed strong partnerships with several educators from the regional 4-H Extension office, who provide training and also work in the program directly with students. She explained she does not get a lot of support from classroom teachers or her building principal, but the county 4-H Extension educators are willing to “really sit down and brainstorm with me, we get creative, they bring in lessons” and fill gaps where she feels the students have identified needs. One 4-H Extension partner provided training and support over a six-week period, bringing positive youth development experiences to students, one of the goals of the 21st CCLC program. Raevik described this program, called 8 to Great (Mueller, 2018), as a “confidence building curriculum.” The activities help students take a negative feeling, analyze it, and turn it into a positive feeling. It changes students’ thought patterns and then impacts actions that lead to a desired result. The 4-H Extension expert also pulled in related literature, math, science, and art into the activities making it cross-curricular experience. The program helped the students grow academically, socially, and “it’s helped some of those kids with behaviors really understand, well, why do I react the way I do?” Raevik also sees the benefit of participation in this program when students face state testing time. The students learn how to handle frustration in testing situations. Raevik says, “We have a lot of kids that get into kind of that panic mode.” She teaches the students when they have a problem with a question, they can say to themselves, it’s only one question out of the many I have

to do, and if I can't figure it out right now, I shouldn't spend a lot of time on it and "worry and stew and get all frustrated." Rather, I can skip it, move on, and then come back to it later. Another 4-H Extension expert brought the CATCH program (CATCH Global Foundation, n.d.) to the students, a program focused on teaching the benefits of fitness and good nutrition.

Raevik's Professional Development

There are many challenges Raevik faces when it comes to her own professional development. When asked if she is able to join on-line learning opportunities, such as webinars, she explained this is often difficult. Raevik has an additional, part-time job during the day and commutes from a nearby town to work, limiting participation in both in-person or on-line professional development sessions. In spite of this, she has participated in several webinars led by Click2SciencePD (University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension and the NOYCE Foundation, n.d.), You for Youth (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), and Better Kid Care (PennState Extension, n.d.). She mentioned several were particularly helpful, including one led by Click2SciencePD (University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension and the NOYCE Foundation, n.d.) which helped her create and implement educational goals for students, and another on recruiting students to her program. Because of her limited time, she participated in specifically selected webinars to address a current program need saying, "They were very good, the ones that I went through. But those really were kind of targeted, you know, for where I was at" as a program leader. Realizing their value, she did say joining more webinars is "something I'm trying to pursue."

Raevik also mentioned several useful in-person trainings she has attended, led by local 4-H Extension educators from her own, as well as neighboring counties, which were very useful and “extremely well presented.” One she valued in particular was a session focused on creating a positive learning environment for students after school. She was also able to occasionally attend in-person trainings held at the nearby college or ESU.

But challenges also exist that keep her from participating in local professional development opportunities. For example, inclement weather can sometimes force her to cancel planned professional development sessions because of dangerous driving conditions on isolated rural highways. She was able to adjust her schedule to attend a recent training on positive youth development at the nearby college, but a bad snow storm forced them to cancel the session. She has also tried to attend trainings offered by the school where the program is located, but teacher workshops are usually held at the same time her program is available for students during non-school days, a time when teacher professional development is often scheduled. Another challenge Raevik faces is the lack of substitute teachers available to oversee the program so that she and her staff person can attend face-to-face professional development sessions such as the statewide afterschool conference.

Raevik described herself as a kinesthetic learner. “I love to move. I love to put things in my hand, whether it was a ball, it was throwing a football, whatever. And our kids sit, sit, sit anymore.” She explained that students spend many hours sitting on computers at home and at school and we just have kids that don’t move a lot. She gets them up, going from one table to another table, to get whatever items are needed to complete a STEM activity, or a science experiment, or some kind of hands-on activity saying, “They have it

in their hands. They're moving." She also explained she learns best through active, hands-on learning opportunities. She is committed to providing these same types of learning activities for her students. Raevik sees the afterschool program as the place to explore science, engineering, and "the deeper thought, critical thinking skills that you can get the kids to really dive into." She knew she did not want to stand in front of students and lecture during the afterschool program, rather she "threw out ideas at them and I really let them dig into it." She said:

I want to get my hands on it and in that- then you can encourage the kids to use their observation skills and that predicting. If it doesn't work, it's OK. Our kids are so scared of failing, in the summer time and even during the school year. I encouraged them, I said, you know while in this program, you're not getting a grade. This is the time for you to have those expanded learning opportunities. And I said in science, failure is feedback. I said, it's the same thing in STEM. I said, it's the same thing in some of our math projects. If it doesn't work the first time, its feedback, it is not a failure. (personal interview, March 10, 2018)

Raevik explained her own experiences in school related to science were very limited. When she started her job, she kept hearing about STEM and so attended a training sponsored by the 21st CCLC office focused on STEM and "that just sparked me!" She said after that training she spent hours and hours researching STEM activities she could bring to the students, and "the kids, they love it." She said that space and access to technology limit her, but "we try to pull in whatever we can with the resources that we have. But the kids love the science. They really do." She said:

Our kids do extremely well in science and when we had our mid-year meeting, one of the compliments from our elementary principal was the fact that we offer a lot of science and STEM activities and the kids do extremely well on their science portion of their achievement test. (personal correspondence, March 18, 2018)

Raevik's Staff

Staffing is a challenge for Raevik, whose budget allows her to hire only one part-time staff person to work in the program on a regular basis. Over the past three years, she has employed three regular staff because of turnover each year, an ongoing issue for this small rural program. These part-time employees come to the program with a variety of backgrounds, interests, and expertise. One was the mother of a special needs child with expertise in differentiating curriculum. Another had a background in AmeriCorps (<https://www.nationalservice.gov>) with expertise in STEM. This school year, the staff person is an education major at a nearby college who plans to teach elementary students once she graduates. Raevik describes her current staff person as a “natural” educator, who attended school in a K-12 rural community. Raevik sees this as advantageous to the program saying, “We’re in a rural area and she came from a rural school.” She has a background in rodeo, ranch, and farming “so she’s really a natural for what we’re doing.”

When the number of students demands additional adult support, the school sometimes provides a paraprofessional (para) to assist with snack and playground time. She explained that she is lucky to have this scheduled para time because the school is on a very tight budget so they “don’t want to pay anybody after four o’clock.” She explained:

We had kids that were trying to finish up tests or they were trying to finish classwork and then they come in late for snack, so we could leave one person in

for snack and still have two people out on the playground to make sure that we had a good coverage of watching the kids. (personal interview, April 7, 2018)

Other programs sometimes utilize high school students as club leaders, especially those in the National Honor Society, but in a small rural program the students are frequently involved in the majority of extracurricular activities offered such as sports and the annual one-act play. Raevik says they do help out “when they can.” She was trying to work with the school counselor to identify students who might be interested in assisting in the program, and was hopeful the new Future Farmers of America (FFA) club being implemented in the high school would result in high school leaders who are interested in leading a club in the afterschool program. Raevik was happy to explain that she has some sixth-grade students who currently attend the program who have already made a commitment to return next year as seventh graders to assist in the program. I told them, “if you want the program to get better and better, then you come back and you add to the program that’s given you a lot.”

Staff Professional Development

Time for planning professional development for her staff is a challenge because of the many hats she wears as a program leader. She explained:

It’s probably more of my downfall...by the time I do all the database, the lesson plans, and the paperwork and keep up on attendance, by that time it’s surveys and then it’s doing APR reports and that. When you’re the sole person basically responsible for all, I’ll admit professional development was probably the last on my list. (personal correspondence, April 28, 2018)

However, Raevik realizes the importance of ongoing professional development and finds ways to incorporate it in both her and her staff's schedules. Raevik explained what she feels is important for her staff to know becomes the focus of scheduled professional development. There were several key areas of importance mentioned, including 21st CCLC grant policies and procedures, the school's policies and procedures, behavior management for afterschool environments, STEM, child development, Marzano (2003) teaching strategies, and differentiating educational activities.

Raevik explained it is important for staff and volunteers to understand the 21st CCLC grant policies and procedures, shared in "small chunks as we go along." She wants her staff to become familiar with the school's policies and procedures so even though they are working in the 21st CCLC program, they understand they are part of the school. These trainings include health and safety topics such as the use of EpiPens and defibrillators, blood-borne pathogens, sexual harassment training, and suicide prevention. Another key focus of ongoing professional development is in the area of behavior management. She said the need is ongoing because of turnover as students "leave the system and we get new kids who come into the system." Students come from a variety of backgrounds and some have unique special needs which makes the need for this training continuous. Another area mentioned was training on STEM, engineering design, and the scientific method so her staff know the unique features of each. Raevik also expressed the importance of staff understanding child development for children who attend the program ages five (kindergarten) through twelve (grade six). When planning and implementing activities, Raevik teaches her staff the Marzano (2003) teaching strategies because they are used in her school district, saying, "we try to implement some of the teaching

strategies in the program so there is that school and afterschool program relationship, and we keep it as consistent as we possibly can.” These strategies are taught during teacher professional development days Raevik attends at the beginning of the school year, with Raevik then communicating them to her staff. Raevik also talked about differentiating instruction in an afterschool setting which provides support to students in grades kindergarten through grade six, learning together in the same learning environment.

Scheduling professional development for her staff is a challenge. One solution to the lack of time for professional development during program hours is to find time outside the program. But finding time for participating in professional development, even outside of program hours, is a challenge since Raevik’s current staff person is a college student. Raevik and her staff member both live out-of-town in a nearby community and they commute to work together two to three times per week. They use the “sit-drive time” for sharing information, for planning, for discussing relevant topics and individual student needs. Raevik calls this “road tripping,” a creative solution to a common problem that allows one to two hours per week of focused conversations. Raevik explained they often use this time to discuss students’ academic needs, especially when a new student comes into the program. They discuss their observations, what they are seeing as far as deficiencies in students’ reading or math abilities, and talk about the kinds of activities which could be incorporated into the program to bridge the gap between where they are and where they need to be academically.

One example of the impact of these professional conversations is the assignment of SMART goals (DuFour et al., 2010) to focus academic support on individual students’ unique needs. For example, they currently have a kindergarten student who attends the

program who needs additional academic support due to both parents “struggling to just be able to keep a job down so there’s not a lot of support at home.” They provide additional assistance in the area of reading and math, including word-picture puzzles, sight words, activities that teach numbers and letter sounds. “She’s coming along rather nicely I feel, in my book, with the little bits of time that we get with her, we’re seeing progress.”

Something else Raevik is helping her staff person understand is creating lesson plans which incorporate scaffolded lessons because of the wide range of ages, grade-levels and abilities of the students who attend the program. Raevik feels by scaffolding learning opportunities, they can “meet as many of the kids’ abilities as we possibly can.”

Since Raevik’s current staff person is an education major at the nearby college, they discuss what she is learning in her college courses, and Raevik gives her the opportunity to bring what she is learning back to the program and the students. This has resulted in both meaningful learning opportunities for students and the chance to apply what her staff member is learning in class to her work with students in the afterschool program. For example, her staff person’s mathematics methods class recently planned and implemented a family math night for the students and their families. Raevik also allowed her staff member to plan and deliver lessons that incorporated what she was learning in a children’s literature class. Lessons she created and implemented focused on poetry, fables, and author studies. “She’s going to have a lot of good experiences going if she stays teaching in the afterschool program.”

Raevik expressed the importance of her staff knowing the benefits of being connected to school-day teachers in order to support students in meeting their academic goals.

However, one of her biggest challenges is to connect her staff with school-day educators

in the building, not only because of conflicting schedules, but the lack of commitment to connect on the part of the school-day teachers. “I’ve asked and asked and asked—I don’t have teachers that will share what they’ve discussed in the teachers’ meetings.” An example of this problem was the lack of information and training regarding the implementation of a new math series in the elementary school. She said:

I was promised that I was going to get two teachers to train me, and that’s never happened, so I feel like we’ve kind of dropped the ball on the kids because I’m not being able to incorporate as much math as I would like. (personal interview, April 7, 2018)

To overcome this challenge, Raevik has incorporated more math into the science curriculum she implements with students after school. She has also embedded math into career exploration activities. An example she gave was a unit on careers in landscaping where students used math skills to determine area and perimeter. She noted that NDE’s AQuESTT tenets (Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.) include college and career development so she plans to take the students to a nearby community on a field trip to visit a greenhouse and a landscaping company to learn more about this potential career option.

Raevik’s Recommendations Regarding Professional Development

Raevik expressed that there are many other project directors in her part of the state who face the very real challenge of isolation because of the distance they have to travel to get together. She mentioned many communities by name where there is primarily one program leader and a very small number of staff. Therefore, she suggested the state 21st CCLC program arrange regional sharing sessions where these program leaders come

together to share club ideas, lesson plans, and resources that are available in their part of the state. She explained that it is difficult to bring new ideas into the program because of the lack of available staff who would bring various passions and areas of expertise to program planning. She knows every program leader has resources they “really go to” and could ask, “have you ever really thought about this?” She thought this would help her because she has taken her students to many local businesses and “about every museum around” but she still wants to schedule field trips that would expose students to new ideas and possible careers. She said she sometimes feels drained when facing her limited resources, and hearing ideas from others in communities facing similar challenges could inspire her when program planning.

In the past, the state 21st CCLC office has arranged regional professional development days, bringing multiple content experts to lead trainings, and Raevik recommended these continue. Raevik mentioned one of these professional development days in particular where several sessions were offered throughout the day, led by experts from a public power district sharing curriculum and staff from Click2SciencePD (University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension and the NOYCE Foundation, n.d.) who helped attendees become familiar with their website and resources. Raevik appreciated this experience because “this was my first contact with some of these people and some of these resources.” She explained:

It was a fast and quick way for me to be able to learn some different things to incorporate into the program, of which I did, because it was something that was like, oh OK, I experienced myself, then I could take it back to the kids and felt as if I was much better prepared for it. So even though you had to come clear to the

other end of the state, that was extremely beneficial for me as a program director.

(personal interview, April 28, 2018)

Raevik explained having workshops scheduled in their region allows more people who work in very small programs to attend. Regional gatherings help programs avoid the extra days of travel needed to cross the state, as well as the cost of meals and overnight accommodations. The time and money saved allows more staff to attend, increasing opportunities for hands-on learning for staff, and ultimately the students who attend their programs.

There are many webinars offered by both local and national experts each month, so many that busy program leaders have difficulty sorting through the offerings to determine which would best meet their professional development needs. Raevik suggested it would be helpful to program leaders to have a location on our 21st CCLC website where upcoming webinars could be listed by topic, possibly using the Nebraska State Board Position Statement for Expanded Learning Opportunities (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017) as an organizing structure. This would benefit program leaders from very small programs who have so many responsibilities it is difficult to make professional development a priority. She said:

Bigger schools have somebody that does the database, somebody else is doing the bookkeeping, somebody else is doing the lesson planning, somebody else is maybe working on some professional development. Well, that all falls on my shoulders and I just don't have that much time in my day to get that all done.

(personal interview, April 28, 2018)

Raevik said workshops presented by 4-H Extension experts in her county, as well as the neighboring counties, are very helpful because they not only provide trainings for staff, but help program leaders connect with 4-H experts who are available to work with students who attend their programs. Having someone who is prepared to plan and lead a club is valuable to Raevik, since this provides her program with another adult who she can depend on to work with groups of students on a regular basis. She appreciates the 21st CCLC office coordinating efforts to connect program staff with the statewide network of 4-H experts, as well as other potential state-wide community partners, who can share their expertise with afterschool staff and students who attend their programs.

Raevik expressed that online options for professional development are useful to her as a rural program leader because staff turnover is an ongoing issue. Raevik appreciates the continuous availability of webinars, but also suggested that if in-person trainings were recorded, viewing the recordings would be beneficial to her when there are conflicting schedules that keep her and her staff from participating in face-to-face training events. She explained she can view the recordings herself and later share the content with her staff, or could ask her staff to watch the webinar or recording and then set aside time for a discussion focused on the content presented. She said this would allow them to address the limited time they have and also pair content to match particular areas of need, whether the need is curriculum and planning, addressing behavior issues of individual students or other timely topics.

Raevik mentioned that professional development offered in conjunction with the annual project director meeting each fall is useful and appreciated. She mentioned the session last year focused on self-care was particularly relevant. She said that this session

really hit a lot of people and there were many important conversations that resulted saying:

I didn't realize how much time I pour into the program, and I reflected on it heavily on my way home. If I'm not a well-oiled machine and functioning well, my assistant isn't going to function well, my kids aren't going to function well.

(personal correspondence, April 28, 2018)

Sessions like this help project directors "keep going." She said the session was a highlight for her and many other project directors, helping them realize taking care of themselves will result in a higher quality program "so bonus for you guys."

Raevik expressed that the statewide afterschool conference is "probably at the top of my list" saying, "there's just so many good ideas and you bring in such good people to share at conference and I go back and I use everything that I possibly can." The disadvantage she faces is she is the only person from her program who is able to attend due to limited staff and lack of available subs. She explained most other project directors are able to bring at least one staff person with them to the conference, some many more. This allows them to attend different sessions and share what they have learned with each other, multiplying what they are able to bring back to the program. She said, "We don't have enough staff that we can split up and go to a lot of them and then come back and have a big meeting, and then you've got this plethora of wonderful ideas." However, she takes advantage of information shared at the conference, "on the run," to various sessions throughout the day, bringing many ideas back to her staff and the program.

Reflections on Conversations with Raevik

One important thing I learned from Raevik is that program leaders and staff without an education background require more support than I have been providing. My usual advice is for them to communicate regularly with school-day teachers in order to align the program activities to support students' academic growth. I now have a better understanding of the complexity of meeting this program requirement after hearing Raevik describe the struggles she faces, but more importantly the various ways she overcomes challenges to support her young students so they are prepared for both the present and what the future holds for them.

Although most 21st CCLC program leaders have college degrees, of the four participants in this study, Raevik is the only one who has an education degree and classroom teaching experience. Because she taught for many years, several of them in multi-grade country schools, she had a strong sense of how to provide students with academic support after school. There were several examples of this: writing SMART (DuFour et al., 2010) goals for students which provided an intentional focus for individualized learning activities, using Marzano (2003) teaching strategies which are research-based and align to strategies used during the school day, scaffolding lessons to meet students' specific needs, and her ability to integrate multiple content areas into the lesson plans she creates. Her education background was particularly useful in her situation since she lacks the support of school-day staff when program planning.

I found myself thinking about Raevik's ability to take her own experiences as a learner in school and turn them into a passion for what she can bring to her students in her afterschool program. I was struck by her obvious commitment to preparing the

children and youth in her community for their futures, whether it is attending college or a possible career opportunity. She explained there was one college professor who really impacted her future when he saw the potential in her and turned her “into a pretty marvelous teacher.” I had the sense throughout our three interviews of her commitment to making a difference for the students in her community in the same way—to be sure they see the possibilities and can confidently approach their futures. One example of how she prepared students was teaching them about entrepreneurship as a possible career path, teaching them the skills they will need, as well as taking them to area businesses to interact with those who have chosen to start and run their own businesses. This might be more important in a very small rural community where there are few businesses compared to a large rural or urban community. She said her students sometimes feel they are “caught in a bubble” with few chances to “get away,” but she is committed to helping them see there are many opportunities available to them, for learning, earning and living.

When Raevik mentioned the fact there are no grades given for students’ work in the afterschool program, I realized this was something I had not thought much about. She expressed, and I agree, this makes the afterschool program a perfect environment to explore, to fail, to struggle, to persist when approaching a difficult problem. I also appreciated her awareness of what she can do in the afterschool environment that will prepare students to deal with the stress they might feel when taking required state tests.

Throughout my three interviews with Raevik, I reflected on the unique challenges Raevik faces as a rural program leader. It is hard to imagine leading a program with only one staff person to assist with lesson planning and work directly with students—especially knowing after one year of training and experience this person will likely move

on to another job opportunity. This heightens the issue of staff turnover many program leaders face because, with only one staff person, when one leaves there are no remaining staff with training and experience left to work in the program. On top of this, since she has little support for program implementation and improvement from her building principal or classroom teachers in the school where the program is situated, there is limited information shared and a lack of shared space and needed resources. In spite of these major barriers to running a quality program, she maintains a positivity and passion for the program and commitment to the students who attend. I also heard a commitment to instill the same positivity in her students. When she described the *8 to Great* program (Mueller, 2018) as a “confidence building curriculum,” which teaches students to “take a negative feeling, analyze it, and turn it into an action that leads to a desired result,” I thought about her own ability to turn a negative into action that leads to a desired result. Even though she is unable to hire more than one staff person, and the school-day staff do not support the program in the ways she needs, she has been able to build partnerships with families, people in her community, and others in her region of the state in order to bring adults in to work with students and provide both her staff person and the students with high-quality learning opportunities.

Considerations Based on Conversations with Raevik

- I should improve the support I provide program leaders who do not have an education background and have varying degrees of support from school-day staff. Raevik gave me many examples of the ways she supports students including posing complex problems for them to solve, helping them learn not only from their successes but, just as importantly, their failures, identifying very

specific learning goals for individual students, and offering opportunities to learn skills they need to succeed in the future.

- The professional development system must be useful for programs so small there are only one or two staff members, as well as larger rural programs that might have over 30 staff. I must also consider the number of college-age students working in 21st CCLC programs.
- The state leadership team will continue to offer the annual conference and incorporate some professional development into the annual project director meeting held the day before the conference.
- I will create a structure that will enable me to organize and share professional development content by topic including upcoming webinars, as well as recorded webinars that can be viewed and discussed with staff.
- I will continue to pursue regional face-to-face trainings led by community partners so program leaders and staff can come together to talk, share ideas, and problem solve together.
- I will explore the possibility of videotaping trainings whenever possible to help address staff turnover.

CHAPTER 5: DOUG

I am very young, still in school...but for my age

I've had a lot of opportunities presented to me that I've taken advantage of...

I'm a lifelong learner. (personal correspondence, January 28, 2018)

Doug Humphrey is a young professional, a leader, and a learner. Despite his youth, his maturity was evident throughout our three interviews; he provided thoughtful and well-

articulated responses to questions asked, presented a positive outlook on both the present and the future, and illustrated his commitment to ongoing learning and the many leadership experiences that have already informed his current work as a 21st CCLC program leader. Doug is the youngest project director in the state, still attending college to become a business teacher and ultimately a school leader. In spite of his youth, he hires and is responsible for preparing and leading a staff of 30 which he describes as multigenerational, most of whom are close to his age and also attending college. He is committed to serving in a leadership role in the community, having positive and productive relationships with both school administrators and community leaders. He believes being connected to the community is a role of the director saying, “If it’s not on the job description, it should be.” He is also a lifelong learner saying, “I try to find things that are mutually beneficial for me personally growing, and then the program in general.”

I knew Doug as a new program leader through my work as the state’s 21st CCLC professional development coordinator, monthly/online discussions for new program leaders, and in-person visits to his community and program. He was an active participant during these online and in-person discussions, asking questions and sharing information about his first-year experiences. I got to know him better when we both attended the annual 21st CCLC national conference in Pittsburgh the next summer, discussing what we learned from presenters and exploring the city as the conference scheduled allowed. We even found time to walk on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway to the Philadelphia Museum of Art to see the “Rocky Steps” featured in the movie by the same name. But it was through these interviews that I uncovered his passion and commitment to students, his staff, and to his community of Norton. Doug appeared eager to be part of this project and

was always prepared to engage in what we would both consider, using Doug's words, "thoughtful conversations."

Doug was selected as a participant in this study because of these unique personal and program characteristics: Norton is a larger rural community with a college in town and another within driving distance; his school administrators are very supportive of the program; and Doug is a newer project director, having the position for over two years.

Doug and the Community of Norton

Doug is the project director who leads the 21st CCLC afterschool program in the rural community of Norton. Norton is a larger rural community with a population just under 25,000 people. Doug describes Norton as a unique community for being considered rural saying, "In a lot of ways, I don't feel like I'm in a rural, small town in Nebraska." He said there have been tremendous efforts to give "that big city feel" to this growing community. He describes it as a "little hidden gem" miles from the interstate. According to Doug, Norton is a safe community and ranked in the top 10 safest cities in Nebraska in 2017. There is an excellent police force and safe alternatives for kids, especially the "under 21 after 9:00 PM."

The afterschool program in this community benefits from the generosity of many successful people in Norton who are willing to give back and support local initiatives. Doug gave an example of how supportive the local community is when describing a recent library expansion. The existing library was built in 1979 and was in need of significant updates. The city supported a bill which went up for a vote, passing on its first try, which allowed for nearly the doubling of the size of the library with significant funds targeting additional technology. Doug gave this example because it illustrates "how

supportive our community is, offering opportunities for everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status.” Beginning next August, the library will pilot several opportunities for youth adding a *Makerspace* including 3D printers, tinkering gadgets, and laser cutters. During this pilot year, the students who attend Doug’s afterschool program will be allowed to try out the various pieces of equipment and provide input as to what should be purchased by the library for use in the upcoming years.

The afterschool program Doug leads consists of two sites, one serving middle school students and one serving junior high students. This is a fairly unique structure for a school district in Nebraska, intentionally designed by the school and community to meet their specific needs. Even after a long school day, and many other options available to students of this age, they come to be around the primarily young staff who design and lead the clubs and engage in experiences not available to them during the school day. He is fortunate that his relationship with the schools’ administration at the building-level and with the district’s central administration is strong and he knows he has their support. He appreciates that they always speak highly of the program “even when I’m not around.” He goes to school administrators for advice if students display challenging behavior, for questions regarding logistics such as the use of the buildings, or just for general support. Doug knows he is welcome at trainings sponsored by the district saying, they are “looking out for me” when it comes to available learning opportunities for both himself and his staff, and provide him with “good and honest feedback.”

Finding staff who want to work part-time in an afterschool program can be a challenge. For this reason, the location of this program has a definite advantage over other small rural communities because there are two colleges nearby, one in his town and

another 35 miles away that offers a teacher education program. Doug explained that there is a good relationship between both of the colleges, the school district, and the afterschool program, including the support of an education professor who serves on his program's advisory board.

Doug appreciates the many learning opportunities available to students who attend his program and in this rural community many are within walking distance for staff and students. It is safe for students to walk to many area businesses, the town's food pantry, a nearby park, and a gaming business where the students can go and play games. In addition, there is a library nearby and the students are able to walk to the district's high school to access additional learning opportunities.

Doug as a leader. Doug described his past work experiences as opportunities to grow as a leader, explaining that every job he has held has provided him with leadership experience. They are typical jobs held by a young person growing up in a rural community, but he engaged in them in an atypical way. His job while de-tasseling corn when 15 years old was "straw boss," assigned to walk the rows with four other youth he oversaw. His job, when he was 16 years old, was training new staff in a call center. His next job at a local restaurant, while a junior and senior in high school, allowed him to progress from dishwasher to kitchen manager. As a college student, he joined what he described as a professional fraternity, Delta Sigma Pi, where he served as a pledge educator and held office positions such as Chancellor. In addition, once he started college, he got a job in the same afterschool program he now leads, beginning as a club facilitator, then a site manager and now the director. Having completed his second year in the position, and although he is likely the youngest program leader leading a Nebraska

21st CCLC afterschool program, he is considered among the top because of his positive attitude, confidence, and his ability to grow relationships with people in the school and community. Doug explained that as a project director in a smaller community:

I wear a lot of hats similarly to other rural directors, so I always joke with people that I'm my own bus driver, my own secretary, my own school nurse, because at the end of the school day, those resources aren't all available. (personal interview, January 28, 2018)

Doug explained his role is not only defined in the school building, but he has an important leadership role in the community as well. He explained it is crucial he is involved in the community and that he tries to find opportunities that are “mutually beneficial for me personally growing, and then the program in general.” Doug explained that he is currently involved in the Kiwanis Emerging Leaders, the Optimists, and a few councils in town including the Philanthropy Council. He said he wants to make sure that the community knows the afterschool program is a “player in the community.” He said he and his staff are intentionally finding ways to get the students more involved in the community as well. For example, the students know who their representatives are in the community, who their senator is, and how their local council operates. The mayor recently visited the afterschool program asking the students for their ideas on how to make Norton a great place to be and, when asked, every student's hand went up wanting to share an idea. One of the activities planned for the students at the end of the year was naming a recently added street near the school. Doug said the street has no name “so we thought, hey, what a cool way to get our kids involved in civic reform and getting this street named.” They are proposing the street be named to represent a person important to

the school or the community, or possibly a critical character trait. Some ideas the students had include calling it *Success Lane* because of its location near the school, or considering conducting research to learn about the first principal of the school and honor that person when choosing the name. He explained they would like the students to put a proposal together to take to a city council meeting and have the students present their proposal, including their reasoning behind it. He explained this is “something in the works that we want to get our kids engaged in because we want our kids to know their voices can be heard, even in middle school.”

Doug as a young professional. Although he is young and still in college, Doug is professionally connected to the school and community where he lives and works. This allows him to find opportunities that not only benefit himself personally, but his program, his staff and students. Doug said as a “young, young professional,” he appreciates the opportunities he has because of this community’s efforts to engage young professionals. He described a new initiative called *[Norton] Area Connected*, where events are planned that are intended to gather and engage the many young professionals in the community. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), close to eight percent of the population in Norton is between the ages of 15-19, another eight percent is between the ages of 20-24, and approximately seven percent are between the ages of 25-29. An example Doug gave of an upcoming event that targets these young residents is the *young adult prom* that will be held in Norton. Those attending will rent prom garments to wear, although Doug does not plan to attend as he would prefer to “hang out in the nearby coffee shops.” He believes that you do not typically see activities like this in communities “our size, and so that’s a prime example of why I don’t feel like I’m in a small Nebraska town.”

The local Kiwanis Emerging Leaders group is qualified as a Kiwanis International program. It is comprised of mostly young adult professionals who meet monthly and follow the three-two-one rule: three hours of service, two hours of social, and one hour of meetings each month. The target market is young professionals in the community. His participation in the Kiwanis Emerging Leaders organization resulted in the afterschool program receiving funds, as well as getting volunteers to come and work in the program. Doug explained that at an upcoming meeting, he will request members of the Kiwanis Emerging Leaders to sign up to volunteer during the program's homework time twice a week, providing additional adults who can assist students during this busy time of day.

Another example Doug gave regarding to his commitment to community leadership was his invitation to participate in the community's Philanthropy Council. This group is comprised of various nonprofits in the community. Doug is primarily engaged in the council's young philanthropy contest. His students put together projects for the contest allowing some to win up to \$1,000 to implement their philanthropy project. He described a recent philanthropy project the afterschool program participated in with the local Veteran's Home allowing the students to landscape the grounds. He also applied for a legacy book project with junior high students pairing up with ten veterans to write their memoirs. These stories will eventually be published by Marathon Press and the families will receive free copies of the books once published. In addition, the students will save copies of the recorded videos and provide a copy to each participating family. The Philanthropy Council actually awarded the afterschool program twice as much money as they applied for, allowing them to implement the project multiple times.

Doug has also made some helpful professional contacts in the nearby rural community where he attends business and education classes. This has allowed him to form many relationships with professors, including his advisor who he described as “a “great, great mentor” and someone he can go to for advice.

Doug’s Professional Development

When I asked Doug what he considers important to know and to learn regarding the implementation of a quality afterschool program, he said there are three things: “you’ve got to be prepared, you’ve got to be engaged, and you’ve got to be willing.”

Be prepared: Doug explained both he and his staff must always be “prepared professionally.” They must be prepared with clearly articulated learning objectives, needed materials, and necessary “logistical pieces” in place for the program to run smoothly. He explained the program is not just providing something for students to *do*, but rather, staff and students need to be clear about what students are going to *learn*. He explained all activities do not have to be aligned to a school day learning standard, but rather, for example, could be focused on “learning how to straight stitch.” Ultimately, because staff are prepared, students will benefit from increased learning opportunities “at the end of a long school day.”

Be engaged: Doug sees his engagement with both staff and students as important. He explained that “even as the director, when the students are first getting checked in or when the students are back, it’s time to get off the computer and go hang out with the kids.” The students aren’t “writing your check, but that’s ultimately who you work for.” He also knows he should set an example for the staff to “just be in there with the kids, talking to the kids, engaging with the kids, having those conversations.” He sees

engagement with the staff important as well, not just communicating, but connecting with them as very crucial.

Be willing: Doug explained that he cannot have a fixed mindset as a director, he must have a growth mindset (Dweck, 2015). You have got to be willing to put in the time, be willing to talk to those parents who are not always “super thrilled to talk to you,” and you have got to be willing to confront staff about the challenges that arise. Talking to staff when they are not meeting your expectations can be uncomfortable for Doug, since many are older than him or might have a little more experience working with youth in an afterschool program. Doug knows there are going to be times you “stumble and fail, and that’s totally fine. It’s just as good as success.”

When asked how he personally likes to learn, he said “*application* is my one-word answer” and it “takes many forms” including writing and time for reflection. He also enjoys discussions with others, listening to audible books, mentioning several books he has read recently that have impacted him as a director. He explained:

In regards to my personal study, a couple books I really like were Simon Sinek’s Start With Why. It’s a great, it’s more of a business side of leadership, but it’s a very, very good book and that has influenced me. I actually just finished reading Angela Duckworth’s book on *Grit*... love that book. It really makes me think about how we’re serving our students and our staff and that’s influenced me. Another book, Brene’ Brown Braving the Wilderness just came out you know a few months ago. That’s another really good book and it’s just kind of about vulnerability and being part of that open, honest discussion. That’s really influenced me as a director. But kind of, I would say the most influencing thing to

me is any open and honest discussion I had with staff, administrators, and other directors as well. (personal interview, January 28, 2018)

As an example of his commitment to intentional learning, Doug explained that he has ten personal and professional goals that literally were posted right in front of him as we spoke. He explained:

Actually, right here I have my list...I've got ten items on there for 2018 that I want to do, so I write them out, and I've got little boxes by them. Some of them are continuous so I won't ever be able to check the box off, but some are things to think about. But yes, I'm very intentional about it and how I do my goal setting and I do write it down and try to hold myself accountable to that. (personal interview, January 28, 2018)

Doug described some learning opportunities that were meaningful to him personally, and one in particular when he meets with other area program staff and leaders in a nearby community. These regional gatherings include area program leaders and site coordinators from area programs including both 21st CCLC programs and others from nearby communities. He said he appreciates the various perspectives because it is helpful to hear how they model their programs and strategies to sustain their programs. Program sustainability is an ongoing topic of discussion at these meetings since grant dollars only cover part of the cost of a program and are not available indefinitely. He appreciates the "open and honest discussion and conversation with others" on a variety of topics. He described the structure of the regional meetings as fairly informal with the participants choosing the discussion topics. He enjoys these in-person meetings since they allow him to connect with others who do similar work and provide time to discuss issues with

others, “whether it’s affirming what you’re already doing or just getting completely new ideas that you’ve never thought of.” Since his location in a rural community is usually miles from another town, getting together in person always involves driving time on Nebraska highways. Some might see this as a roadblock to participating in a professional development event, but not Doug who appreciates the quiet time for reflection which driving provides. He explained, “I really enjoy the car ride home because I really think about some of the things we discussed... I really value those meetings. I don’t mind the drive at all.”

Doug summarized himself as a learner saying he regularly connects with staff, attends regional meetings, sets personal and professional goals, considers ways to improve the overall quality of the program, and improve the camaraderie and friendliness of the staff. He is “constantly reflecting and trying, and again being prepared, being engaged in, and being willing.” “I continue to study outside of work. Enrichment is something I’m passionate about so it comes really easily to me to continue to learn ways to improve and think.”

When I asked what the issues were that kept him from participating in professional development, he said time was the biggest barrier:

Right now, in my life especially, working full time in a career that’s not a 40-hour week, it’s much more than that if you’re going to be successful at it. And then also being a part-time student. I’m someone who takes my academics seriously so time is a huge constraint. And then in addition to there being a lack of time, I also need to balance between family and work and friends, and so time, I would say, is the main obstacle for me. (personal interview, January 28, 2018)

Doug expressed that because he lives and works in a rural community, he must frequently seek out learning opportunities in other locations with travel time further hindering participation. Many scheduled professional development activities involve travel to the state's two larger urban areas, impacting already limited time which "compounds because as a rural director, you are already wearing a lot of hats, ...so your time is limited already."

Doug's Staff

I frequently hear about the struggles program leaders face in their ongoing search of qualified staff who are willing to work only a few hours per week in an afterschool program. However, because Doug's program is located in a larger rural community in close proximity to two colleges, he is fortunate to be able to adequately staff his program. He described his more than 30 staff as "multigenerational," but approximately three-fourths of them are college students. The remaining fourth are a mix of high school students and staff who are older. When hiring new staff, the number one thing Doug looks for are individuals who have an understanding of the needs of middle school and junior high age youth. One question Doug always asks during an interview is "what are some issues that middle schoolers and junior high students are dealing with today?" If they have an "understanding of that, and a passion and compassion for that", this is what he is looking for saying that he can train them on everything else.

The majority of Doug's part-time staff attend college in addition to working in the program. One college is in the same community, and the other, which offers a teacher education program, is within driving distance of Norton. Because of his close proximity to the colleges, he is able to recruit needed staff by sharing flyers, word of mouth through

existing staff, and his relationship with the college professors who help spread the word. According to Doug, this is a “great blessing because I have a lot of aspiring educators working in our program.”

The college students who work in the program are able to share their interests and talents with the youth who attend the program, benefitting both. For example, he explained he has a couple of soccer players from the local college who will come in and lead a soccer program this spring. They have been able to connect with students who really love soccer, which is a very popular sport in his community, and will lead a soccer program during the fourth quarter at the junior high. This program draws lots of students because soccer is not played as part of the school’s sports program so it is really filling a need, and “it will be really cool because it’ll be run by some college soccer players.”

Doug is also able to recruit high school students to work in the program who are doing well in school and want to have a positive impact on the community. These high school students are typically volunteers who are available to work in the program during the summer months. According to Doug, the middle school and junior high students who attend the program are really drawn to the high school students, who select the areas where they want to assist based on their interests and talents. For example, Doug worked with the school counselor to start a Career Academy in his program with high school students providing a “kick-start” on learning about different careers and career clusters. Another opportunity which is offered by high school students is through the Future Farmers of America (FFA) program. Students walk over to the near-by high school to see their aquaponics system, cattle, calves and chickens, “so that’s been a really cool partnership,” one that can only happen in a small rural community.

Some of the staff working in the program are older than Doug, including certified teachers and some paras who also work with students during the school day. He also hires retired individuals from the community who are interested in working with students.

Doug explained some of his best staff are the “older generation.” He explained:

They are totally comfortable with various scenarios, and they are some of my most hard-working staff... I can almost always expect them to have a lesson plan ready to go, and they're organized, and I am able to get them all the supplies they need because they let me know ahead of time, and if they're ever gonna be gone, it's always two months in advance compared to, with some of my college staff, it's two days in advance. They're just a lot more organized. (personal interview, February 11, 2018)

The most popular program led by retired individuals is the *Sew Cool Club*. This club was formed as a result of a new partnership with a local sewing and vacuum business. Doug put a flyer on the business' counter that said, “If you really like sewing and you'd like to work with middle schoolers, call me.” The result was that he now has three or four ladies who come and teach students how to use sewing machines.

He explained one challenge with hiring older staff is some expect the afterschool program to look like a school day classroom, rather than the hands on, interactive environment of afterschool, where it is “gonna get loud, and it's gonna get messy, and that's all part of the fun.” He knows that sometimes they want it to be “quiet and tidy, but it's different afterschool. We're gonna make some messes, we're gonna make some memories.”

When asked his advice to other program leaders hoping to grow their middle school programs, he said it is essential to hire the right people saying:

This is kind of cliché, but you've got to hire the right people because I really do feel like many of our students, I'm even comfortable saying a majority of our students, aren't coming to [the program] because of the programming available, they're coming because of the relationships they have with the adults afterschool. And that's apparent because when we come to the point where we're signing up for our new clubs, our students aren't asking our staff what clubs are we offering next quarter, they're asking, "What clubs are YOU running next quarter. I don't care what you're doing, but I want to be in your club." (personal interview, February 11, 2018)

Staff Professional Development

Preparing staff of every generation to work with students after school is a major responsibility of every 21st CCLC project director, but finding time for ongoing professional development is a major challenge in rural afterschool programs. Doug explained the staff schedules vary widely, some working with students once or twice a week, and some working only once every couple of weeks. He explained that being the only full-time person overseeing so many part-time staff, professional development is challenging but "crucial." He knows it is important the staff are "collaborating and striving to accomplish the same goal and mission to serve our youth," adding "It's definitely challenging." Ultimately, he wants staff to be able to work together, sharing ideas and practices. When they can communicate with one another, you can really start to see the quality of the program improve.

To address the challenge of scheduling time for professional development, Doug schedules regular team meetings at the conclusion of the daily program. He divides the staff into three groups, which helps address scheduling conflicts among staff who have various responsibilities outside the program. These meetings are required for the hourly staff but are voluntary for the contracted staff. He said:

I didn't want to make those opportunities mandatory because I would hope that everybody would just want to dive in and learn more and be a part of that development. But the reality is, if they don't have to be there, many times they're going to choose something else. Which is too bad. But I'm hoping that through these opportunities they're realizing that, hey, this is valuable information to me and will help me do better at my job and will impact the students in a positive way. (personal interview, February 11, 2018)

These small-group sessions are held each Friday, with staff scheduled so they attend one meeting each month. The meetings start off with an ice-breaker, then there is a discussion topic typically generated by staff. For example, during a recent meeting, questions were raised for staff discussion including: Why are you here?, Why are we working in an afterschool program?, Why do afterschool programs exist?, Why is your job so meaningful?. On another occasion, the conversation focused on behavior management strategies, with staff going through some scenarios and sharing some experiences. An upcoming meeting will focus on how to earn students' respect. Doug said he has learned, as the session facilitator, it is important not to lecture, so he is prepared to ask the right questions and listen.

In addition to regular team meetings, Doug also schedules longer quarterly professional development sessions. He described last quarter's session as a panel discussion with school administrators and teachers. The site coordinators facilitated the conversation and Doug listened, making note of the questions asked considering these as topics for future professional development sessions.

Doug said this year he is trying to do a better job of communicating his expectations to staff, saying you cannot have implied expectations, you must communicate what you want for your program. He said a big topic this year is developing relationships with students and being "caring adults after school." This has been an intentional focus and he has seen a shift this year as a result. An example he gave was that most of the students leave by 6:00 when the program ends, but there are usually students waiting to be picked up. Instead of the staff acting impatient because of having to stay later until parents arrive, the staff have positive interactions with the students who remain, playing music and dancing. "I've seen my staff take on that opportunity to be a little more one-on-one with the students and not make them feel like they're not wanted there because it's late."

He has been more intentional about connecting with staff, also, saying:

I'm a pretty serious person, and so that's something I've really tried to challenge myself with, is loosening it up a little bit and being a little more open in connecting with staff and just making sure that they feel comfortable coming to me with a problem or concern. So that's important and I've been a little more intentional with it, and I can see the benefits of that. (personal interview, February 11, 2018)

However, having staff who are very young results in challenges that must be addressed through professional development. One of these is the professionalism of staff. For example, even though Doug is not a firm believer in a dress code, staff need to look like “education professionals.” He is fine with the staff wearing a “nice pair of jeans,” or “an open-toed shoe as long as it’s a nicer sandal.” But occasionally staff come to work in sweatshirts or sweatpants, which should not be worn. Another challenge to be addressed when hiring college students is many seek a lot of direction, and problem-solving on their own can be a challenge. He explained that he can hardly go three seconds without a staff person calling, “Hey Mr. [Humphrey], Hey, [Doug], what do you think about...” He said he is fine with answering questions, but “about 70% of those questions I feel like they might have been able to handle on their own.” Another challenge related to professionalism that must be discussed is, in a small rural community, staff are frequently in the community sharing spaces with students and their families during off-hours. Although not at work, they must still act in a way that represents the program well. He explained:

We’re a small enough community that it’s impossible to go to Hy-Vee or Walmart without running into a parent or a student, and so I’m trying to make my staff really aware of that, that you’ve really got to present yourself all the time, everywhere you go, in a way that you want to be represented. (personal interview, February 11, 2018)

Doug also works with college students to improve their communication skills. He explained they sometimes lack the confidence needed when communicating with family

members or potential community partners who might want to come volunteer in the program. He said:

You're not asking something awful, you're giving them a cool opportunity to come hang out with the kids and the worst they can tell you is no. But I think there's a fear of being told no or that embarrassment, which is too bad because it's a good opportunity to grow. I don't force them to do it, but I very strongly encourage them until they do it, because it is good for them to make those calls and to be a part of that process and have that communication there. So yeah, there's that communication is kind of weak with some of the college staff which is, can be challenging. (personal interview, February 11, 2018)

When working with young staff, organization can also be an issue. Doug feels when staff are unorganized and are not ready with a well-thought-out lesson plan, “our students pick up on it pretty quickly.” He is working with the staff to be more organized and accountable. But what lacks in organization is usually made up by their flexibility and adaptability. They can “kind of go with the flow” based on what the students are needing at the moment.

An additional challenge Doug faces that is somewhat unique to him as a young project director, is he is very close in age to many of his staff. He explained there is “that little bit of awkwardness I suppose, redirecting or talking to staff, or confronting staff, being so close in age.” Maintaining that line between boss and friend in the workplace setting can be a challenge being so close in age, or younger, than many of the staff.

Understanding behavior management in an educational environment is often identified as a professional development need for staff working in an afterschool program. Even for

older staff with some educational experience, there can be a lack of understanding that afterschool is not a traditional classroom setting and you cannot manage it in the same way, “so we can never get enough training in managing a non-traditional classroom.” He said he is working hard to find opportunities for his staff to develop in that area before working with students. He is using the expertise of 4-H Extension experts to provide some training in his town or a community close by. He explained:

We could have training every day, and we would still say we could use more training, just because there is an infinite amount of scenarios. Every year students bring in unique behaviors, good and bad, and so managing those effectively and compassionately is difficult....I think if there was a way we could train on behavior management like we could train to run a utility line, we'd want to sign up for that training.... That would be awesome, but it doesn't work that way because we're dealing with humans here. (personal interview, February 11, 2018)

I asked about his staff's ability to write lesson plans, and he explained some are “really passionate about the clubs that they do and are totally independent, do all the lesson planning on their own, for themselves...and they're awesome.” On the other hand, some are totally reliant on already created curriculum. Doug approached the varied needs of staff by developing what he calls the *Club Creation Committee*. The members of this committee work together to develop clubs for the upcoming quarter and have lesson plans ready to go which provide detailed plans that reflect more than just a “sparkly idea.” “I absolutely love the Club Creation Committee...It's really become essential to running our quality program.” The committee is voluntary but staff members get paid for their time. The committee meets once or twice a week after the majority of students leave

for the day and only a few remain until their ride home arrives. This addresses the problem of having to schedule time outside program hours, which is always challenging due to the many responsibilities staff have outside of regular program times. The club is led by the site managers, giving them ownership in the plans and making sure the plans address the needs and interests of the students.

Doug's Recommendations Regarding Professional Development

Based on his experiences as a rural program leader, Doug had several recommendations for elements of the current professional development system that should be retained, as well as suggestions for strengthening support from the state through the NDE. He commented throughout the interview that he appreciates the chance to meet and talk with others face-to-face, although connecting using technology also serves its purpose knowing it is not always possible to meet in person. He appreciates chances to physically be together, “sit around the table and talk and discuss ideas, share ideas. It just allows for a lot more intimate conversations” than a conference call would allow, but it is “definitely a challenge in rural communities.”

Doug feels the one-day annual project director meeting is particularly useful saying, “It’s just a great opportunity to tie up some loose ends and get some updates on what is new for the upcoming year.” He liked that there were also some professional development sessions integrated into last year’s meeting, mentioning the You for Youth (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) experts who came to the state to provide sessions on project-based learning and also the local experts who presented on the topic of Compassion Fatigue. Doug mentioned that afterschool program directors need tools for managing the anxiety and stress that often accompanies the job. “But I think my favorite

thing that we do at these workshops is when we just kind of split up and we get to pick at each other's brains a bit," sharing programming ideas, unique materials that are available, and tips for writing grants. "It's nice having those opportunities to communicate with the other directors." He also mentioned the annual GetConnected Nebraska Statewide Conference (<https://www.education.ne.gov/21stcc/c/nebraska-afterschool-conference/>) as another chance to experience the same kinds of interactions and opportunities to gain useful information.

Doug also appreciates the opportunity to attend quarterly meetings in a nearby community. These meetings give him the chance to meet with others face-to-face and have ongoing conversations with others who lead afterschool programs. He commented that other participants ask questions that "make us reflect on what we do." He also stated that being able to share ideas is really beneficial because there is so much to learn. Doug mentioned the long drive that rural program leaders experience requires planning and many hours on the road, "so anytime we can get ourselves more central, or do things regionally the better." Representatives of organizations who have unique expertise are sometimes able to lead regional trainings which he also finds useful. Attending half-day or full-day trainings, and being able to have conversations with these experts, can result in unique learning opportunities for students. One example he gave was the Nebraska Game and Parks experts leading summer workshops where participants learn more about their curriculum and resources. These types of trainings allow program staff to strengthen relationships, resulting in unique learning opportunities for students who attend afterschool and summer programs.

Doug feels it is important as a program leader to attend a national conference every other year to get a sense of what's happening in other states, including new ideas and issues other programs face. Last year, Doug attended a national conference, and he thought this experience was valuable because it allowed him to rethink some of his program operations at one of his sites. He said he found it interesting and reaffirming to hear about the issues program leaders face across the country including turnover of staff.

Doug also shared ideas for additions that would enhance and supplement existing support. One was creating a mentoring program for new program leaders. Doug was fortunate that he was able to work as a site manager before getting his current job as the project director. He was "literally just six feet to the left" of the previous director so the transition was really smooth. From when he started to the time the previous director "cut the leash, it wasn't too spooky for me." Because of this experience, he cannot imagine "jumping in and starting a program from the ground up." Doug feels very privileged in this regard and explained he benefited from having this mentor "by his side" as a new project director. This experience "really made me think that new directors, especially in the rural communities, if they could be assigned a mentor—wow, how much of a big difference that would make." Doug suggested that asking program directors to visit one or two other programs during the school year could result in a meaningful support system and mentoring relationships among staff. He expressed that these visits to other programs could benefit not only new program leaders, but experienced directors as well. "Even for the veteran project directors who've done it for ten years, I think it'd be beneficial for them to get to sit down and meet with another, regardless of how long they've been in the program, just because you'll...gain some new insights and get some new ideas." He

believes if being a mentor is voluntary, there would be “plenty of directors” who would be willing to mentor new project directors. Being a mentor for someone in the same region would be helpful because you would be able to meet in person some of the time. If your mentee was in another part of the state, you would have to meet using technology which would not be as effective as in-person visits. “For me anyway, I would like to get together at least once a quarter to kind of go through things, look at sign up forms, see where attendance is at, and just go through issues, concerns, successes, and those types of things.” He added that he knows there are some project directors who are concerned about adding anything to their plate, but he feels that it would not be just another task, but rather something that would pay off. “I think it’s definitely something that would be nice to see more directors have on their goals.”

Doug feels it would be helpful to have some workshops for program leaders focused on leadership, saying:

It would be nice to go through some workshops on managing our staff empathetically and compassionately. I think that would be meaningful. The discussions we have are great, but it would be awesome to have, you know, just some direct training...on how to do that from a professional standpoint. (personal interview, January 28, 2018)

He explained he has had to develop these skills, but if there was any training on how to be more effective, that would be beneficial. He explained that in a teacher education program you learn some leadership skills but he could benefit from more, including hiring the right people as well as providing the learning opportunities they need once they

are hired saying, “they want to grow, so knowing how to assist them, that would be helpful.”

Doug feels that having the state develop a virtual training available for new staff would be beneficial. He does offer a full-day orientation for new staff at the beginning of the school year, but having online resources for training would help with the ongoing staff turnover. He feels it would be good to have virtual trainings, and then incorporate face-to-face discussion in response to the content, asking questions such as:

Why did you think that, Why did you choose to respond this way to this scenario, and have that conversation, and kind of go over what it might look like afterschool, or what our expectations are for them would be neat. Obviously, a big idea and would take a lot of time to implement, but I think it'd be really useful to a lot of our rural communities. (personal interview, January 28, 2018)

Doug referenced some readily available and high-quality online resources such as Better Kid Care (PennState Extension, n.d.) and Click2SciencePD (University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension and the NOYCE Foundation, n.d.). He feels that having two to three hours of content would be a reasonable amount of time for most rural project directors. The online component would also help address staff turnover saying that “I think a lot of our rural communities will say that you probably get at least one new staff member every couple months.”

He also described a “big idea” he has to have NDE host a “boot camp,” a weekend retreat in the summer before school starts for staff who will work directly with students to gather programming ideas, organizational tips, suggestions for materials, information on how to scaffold the program, how to spark student interest before starting an activity,

how to handle bullying, and how to foster problem solving and critical thinking. He likes staff to see what the students can do without adult help and not jump to assist them at the first sign of an obstacle. He gave the example of having students use pop can fishing lines last summer and he noticed the facilitator tying all the knots on the hooks explaining, “The kids couldn’t figure it out, and so I just did it.” He suggested the facilitator let the students struggle with this a little bit, “help each other out so they gain experience in solving a problem.” Another topic that would be helpful is how to reinforce what students are learning during the school day including researching skills. He suggested that the Rural Advisory Committee get involved in the training and decide on the topics. He also suggested having community partners come in and lead some of the training to show staff what they can offer in their programs. He thought staff should get paid for their time. Those who are able to attend could bring the content back to others, serving as mentors for new staff, and providing them with leadership experience. Another idea was to offer this as a one-day training at the same time the project directors meet since many staff accompany the project directors in order to attend the afterschool conference the following day. Besides program staff, Doug thought it would be important to have sessions specifically for the site coordinators that addressed topics such as professionalism, communicating with parents, motivating staff, supporting staff, building camaraderie among staff, leadership skills, and building program quality. Doug expressed that these are topics he would be interested in as the project director, also. “I want to make sure I’m equipped with all the tools to be successful and make sure I’m being an effective leader, too. I talk about our staff meeting expectations, but what are my expectations for myself? Do I have those identified, as well?”

Doug thought it would be useful to have the Rural Advisory Committee work together, virtually or in person, to create a training handbook for program leaders to use when training staff. This resource could articulate policies and procedures that would result in more consistency across programs regarding organization and student behavior. Examples he gave were managing students as you move from one location to another and rules about phone use. He felt a resource like this would empower staff to articulate and enforce a rule and give them more tools. He is going to work on creating a resource like this over the summer for his program; working with other program leaders to create it could improve the quality and usefulness. He suggested that members of the Rural Advisory Committee would perhaps be interested in working on this project together.

Doug ended our final interview saying:

I'm very blessed to have this opportunity.... I really do believe in the afterschool program.... I think it can be part of a solution to a lot of problems going on in our world. There are always things to learn, better ways, and ways to be more and more effective..., continually learning how to do that. (personal communication, March 11, 2018)

Reflections on Conversations with Doug

Doug is proud of the community where he lives and sees opportunities all around him. As I listened to him talk about his community, I was able to see this rural Nebraska town through his lens of positivity and possibility. He used words such as “growing,” “philanthropic,” “supportive,” and “a little hidden gem.” As I reflected on the more than three hours of one-on-one conversations with Doug, I also began to realize the advantages of living and working in a larger rural community for a learner and a leader.

Doug's ability to build positive and useful relationships with school leaders, businesses, and organizations in his community has resulted in, not only his own ability to grow as a leader, but instill leadership skills in his staff and students as well. Doug is at the center of these opportunities, however, and they would not exist without his vision, insight, and commitment to the program and students.

My interviews with Doug further confirmed the relationship between a quality program and the support of school administrators where the program is located. When he said school administrators say good things about the program "even when I'm not around," I had a true sense of what he experienced as the leader of an afterschool program connected to a school with supportive administration. This apparent support is not present in every afterschool program, even though principal participation is required. A question remains, how do you change this mindset?

I heard Doug's commitment to students throughout our interviews. When he said he tells the staff the students are ultimately who they are working for, I saw this as an important perspective for any educator, formal or informal, to bring to the job. As an educator with this mindset, one sees that decisions at every level (his, his staff, and his community partners) will be made to reflect the best interests of the students. When he said he tells his staff that, although the students are not writing their paychecks, that is who you are ultimately are working for, I heard a commitment to students I rarely hear in the field of education.

Although Doug expressed there is some awkwardness being so close in age to his staff, I saw it as a sign of his maturity that he is able to effectively supervise staff who are his age and also in college. When he stated that "it's just not as common for college

students to consistently and continuously act in a professional manner,” and that “communication is kind of weak with some of the college staff,” he seemed able to differentiate himself from his peers and make observations and decisions as their supervisor. On the other hand, he also supervises staff much older than himself saying, “I think some of my best staff have been the *older generation*.” This could be equally challenging in my opinion.

Most importantly, during the time between the three interviews with Doug, I began to shift my thinking from the assumption that living and working in a rural community presented challenges to overcome, to one which more closely resembled Doug’s. Rather, I now appreciate the many possibilities that exist for program leaders overseeing 21st CCLC afterschool and summer programs across rural Nebraska.

Considerations Based on Conversations with Doug

- I am considering renaming the monthly new project director calls to the 21st CCLC Leadership series after Doug’s many comments regarding the need for growing leadership skill in staff and students. Topics to include might be supervising staff and growing program leaders’ skills and confidence in communicating with families and community partners.
- I am considering the implementation of a new staff mentoring program after hearing Doug mention people who influenced and supported him while he was a new program leader, and those continuing to mentor him today. He recommended this be optional and include visits to nearby programs. He also suggested experienced program leaders would benefit from participation in a mentoring program, as well.

- I am considering a two-tiered approach to professional development, one strand for program leaders and another for their staff, with a design that considers audience as well as purpose.
- I am also rethinking the current professional development system built on optional participation, based on Doug's comment that "the reality is, if they don't have to be there, many times they're going to choose something else." Perhaps we should require a certain number of hours of professional development annually for both program leaders and staff. It might also be good to expect participation across several areas described in the State Board Position Statement for Expanded Learning Opportunities (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017), which would result in a wider variety of learning opportunities.
- I like the idea of enlisting other members of the Rural Advisory Committee to assist Doug in developing a training handbook that program leaders could use to prepare staff, which could result in standardizing some processes and procedures across 21st CCLC programs.

CHAPTER 6: JOELLE

I didn't want to ask for any money. I just honestly, all I would like is just time and a person. That's really what I would like, you know, from any of the community partners. All I would like, I just need their time. (personal communication, May 30, 2018)

I first met Joelle Meyer when I went to the small town of Lewis to provide advice and support as she stepped into her new position as project director of the afterschool program. Over the past three years, there had been three program directors overseeing the program, as well as three different principals leading the elementary school. Turnover in program leadership presents a challenge, but when it is coupled with a new building principal, the transition can be even more difficult. Joelle had recently moved to a larger rural community, located a short drive from the town where she was hired to lead the already existing afterschool program. She was a recent college graduate without education experience, so the learning curve would be steep. Her warm, vibrant smile reflected her enthusiasm for the program and the many young students who attended.

Joelle said she never anticipated working for a school system or as an afterschool coordinator. When hired as the program's project director, she brought eleven years of experience working in a daycare setting to the position, working with children from seven months to school-age, saying "I did a little bit of everything." Working in a daycare setting helped her learn to work and communicate effectively with parents, which has been an important component of her work as an afterschool project director. She also did some grant writing while working in the daycare, not anticipating it would benefit her present career. Now she sees those past experiences as relevant to her current position.

Joelle holds a degree in psychology from a Nebraska college, taking many classes in human services. "I went to school for psychology, so that's helped me a lot because I focused on young kids when I did my senior research." Joelle feels that one college class she took on assertiveness training was particularly helpful. In the beginning, because of the ongoing turnover in program leadership, she felt it was hard to get the staff to

recognize that she was the program director, and that they needed to follow the program rules, saying, “There were certain procedures that we had to follow.” She said the course in assertiveness training was especially valuable “because I’ve had to just really pull and tug to get resources and funds, and kind of fight for the program....If I didn’t have those skills, the program wouldn’t be where it is right now.”

In addition to her role as the elementary afterschool project director, Joelle is also a paraprofessional at the community’s middle school. She said this additional half-time position gives her a different perspective; one she feels is very beneficial. She is growing important relationships because of her work in this building, including a partnership with the building’s sixth-grade teachers. She explained that one of the middle school teachers told her the sixth-grade students spend the majority of the first couple of weeks of school just learning how to open and close the lock on their locker and the rules of using a hall pass. Joelle was invited to bring her elementary students over to the middle school to introduce them to the environment and expectations, easing their transition to sixth grade. She explained:

The middle school is not that big, but coming from the elementary to a whole new building is kind of overwhelming for the fifth graders. I’ve been partnering with them to see what kind of information we need to be teaching them or giving them a heads-up on, reminding them that this is going to happen in sixth grade.

(personal communication, February 25, 2018)

As Joelle completes her second year as the school’s project director, she said, “It has been a learning experience.” Joelle explained if she comes back next year, she will be the longest-serving director of this program which has been implemented for the past eleven

years. She knows this has helped improve her communication with staff, community partners, teachers, and parents. The students have noticed her commitment to the program, too. She said towards the end of her first year in the program, the students said, “You’re going to leave, right?” She explained she was not leaving, and they seemed glad there would not be yet another new project director leading the afterschool program.

Joelle and the Community of Lewis

The small rural Nebraska community where Joelle’s afterschool program is located is the diverse town of Lewis with a population of just under 2,500 people (American Community Survey, 2018). There are approximately 500 students who attend the community’s school district, including students in prekindergarten through grade 12. This elementary afterschool program serves students in grades kindergarten through grade five, with the majority of students attending the afterschool program regularly. She knows she is filling a need in the community because she has “a bunch of kids that come every day.”

Joelle explained that because the majority of the community is of Hispanic descent and speak English as a second language, communication with families can sometimes be difficult. She explained that she sometimes uses her staff who speak Spanish to communicate with families when there are issues to discuss or information to share. She seemed frustrated that she was not able to communicate with many of the parents directly, saying:

I have one of my staff translate, and then I have to talk to her and she has to tell them, so I have to deal with that on a daily basis—communicating three ways. I want to communicate my point and make sure they’re understanding me, and

sometimes I don't know 100% for sure if my staff is communicating the same things I'm trying to tell them. (personal communication, February 25, 2018)

She explained that since many parents do not speak English, it is difficult for them to communicate the importance of the afterschool program, to “shine a better light on it.” The value of the program “needs to be voiced by not just me—it has to be the parents, too.”

Community and school partners. Knowing that forming relationships with local business and industry is essential to implementing a quality program, Joelle made many attempts to collaborate with a major employer in the community, the House of Poultry plant. Joelle described this as “her biggest challenge.” She said the company is willing to provide support to the high school, but the reputation of the afterschool program was that it was more of a babysitting resource “and not so much of an educational outlet for the kids.” However, one month after my first interview with Joelle, she identified some success in this area. She built on an existing partnership with the local Boy Scouts to jointly conduct a canned food drive, distributing over six hundred cans of food in the community. The Boy Scout leader was on the radio announcing their joint project “which was nice because we got a little bit of publicity for the afterschool program. I was excited!” Joelle was especially happy about this project since she had been trying to communicate with the House of Poultry plant managers because “they are kind of big here,” one of the biggest employers in Lewis. They had an ongoing relationship with the town's high school, but growing a partnership with the elementary afterschool program through their donations to the community food drive was a break-through. She felt this was a “foot in the door” for both the afterschool program and the Boy Scouts.

Just this school year, Joelle also formed a new partnership with the high school's athletic director. She explained that many of the students in this community do not go out for sports, and she wanted to raise their interest in athletics. She proposed an idea to the school's athletic director to set up small sports camps for the elementary students. The athletic director talked to all of the coaches who ended up volunteering their time, setting up small sports camps for the elementary students attending the afterschool program. She described the partnership as wonderful and told the athletic director they will have to do this every year. She was especially thrilled with this partnership because all of the coaches led the camps on their own time. Some of the high school athletes also came over and helped with the camps. She said, "I was very grateful."

Joelle would like to partner with more businesses and community organizations in the community, but it is difficult to form relationships with them since she lives in a neighboring town. "I'm not in and out of the grocery store, or the bakery, or the gas station. I do all that stuff in [the town where I live], so it's not like I see them a lot, the people that run the businesses." In spite of this, slowly over time, she has been able to grow more partnerships each year. The town's bank provides prizes if students read a certain number of books. Another partner, 4-H Extension, has an office in a nearby community and staff lead activities with students on a regular basis. For example, a staff person worked with high school students on a project and brought the high school students over to the afterschool program to work with a group of third graders, eventually completing some projects together. She has another strong, ongoing partnership with the town's nursing home. "They've actually been very appreciative of us coming in and

visiting with the residents.” She has also formed a partnership with the local library where students walk over in grade-level groups to participate in their reading program.

She explained that “there is a negative vibe, sadly, with the elementary teachers towards the afterschool program.” She explained:

I feel like they don’t respect the fact that I am the coordinator of the afterschool program, and we have rules and regulations, and we have to follow them. So when something doesn’t go their way, it’s just been a constant struggle having to communicate with the teachers—in fact, more of an inconvenience when I have to talk to them, which is sad because we have to align things to the school day and it’s been so hard. (personal communication, February 27, 2018)

She said that although some of the teachers act a “bit superior,” she is hopeful the situation will improve as time goes by because teachers will realize the afterschool staff are not communicating just because they want to say hi, but rather they are communicating because they want the afterschool program to be aligned to the school day. She hopes they begin to understand “we’re not just doing this just for the heck of it. We’re trying to align our lesson plans and everything else with the school day. I think slowly but surely we will get there...we’ll get there...we’ll get there.” Joelle is hopeful for improved communication between the teachers and her staff in the upcoming school year because there are three new teachers hired, male teachers, which she referred to as “bright young faces,” adding “some new fresh ideas are good.” Moving forward, she will continue to work to have regular communication with the teachers to keep them informed about the program and get updates regarding student needs “so that we can bridge that communication gap.”

Joelle's Professional Development

As far as her own learning style, Joelle explained that she appreciates participating in both in-person learning opportunities offered through the school and the local ESU, as well as online learning opportunities, not only because of the content, but for their convenience. She mentioned one opportunity in particular that was offered both online and through their local ESU, paraprofessional training videos, approximately one hour in length and offered monthly. She explained these online learning sessions benefit her both as an afterschool educator, and in her second job as a paraprofessional working in the middle school during the day. She attends Certified Staff Inservice days (CSI) with her staff, considering the content helpful. These inservices sometimes focus on research-based Marzano (2003) teaching strategies, which she described as somewhat complicated, but the training helps her and her staff “learn what’s going on, the kind of methods they are learning to use” during the school day. In addition to training she is encouraged to attend by the elementary building principal, she also feels very supported by the middle school principal, the building where Joelle works as a paraprofessional. This principal regularly sends her to inservice trainings that benefit her as a middle school para, and Joelle often sees the information as useful and relevant to her work leading an afterschool program.

When asked what she feels is important to know regarding the implementation of a quality afterschool program, she mentioned that besides assertiveness training, time management is key. She does not have a co-director or site coordinator, so all program responsibilities fall on her shoulders. Tied to this idea, she also mentioned self-care as essential, saying, “You don’t want to get drained out,” believing it is important to leave

work at work. She also mentioned trainings to improve her communication skills are beneficial in her role as an afterschool project director.

When asked about barriers to participating in professional development she mentioned both fiscal limitations, as well as time limitations. If she were able to, she would like to take a class per semester, but financially this would be a challenge. She said she would also like to take some time off to visit other afterschool programs to see how they are managed, but she feels she cannot be away from the program in case problems arise. She explained:

I've tried to leave, but right now staff need my help and need to just be pushed and need more confidence in their position. I feel like there's always been a problem that arises, and I feel like I can never go to anything that's related to professional development at all. (personal communication, Mar 30, 2018)

In addition, if workshops are held during the day, she perceives the trainings would need to be relevant to her daytime position or "it would be questioned, definitely." So rather than being gone during the school day, she relies primarily on free videos or calls that utilize technology, "or things that can be recorded that I could do later on my own time." She enjoys listening to the recordings in the hour she has between her daytime position and the start of the afterschool program because she can listen while doing other tasks to prepare for the arrival of the students.

Joelle feels, in addition to participating in more formal professional development activities, it is also beneficial to have time to talk to other 21st CCLC project directors during face-to-face meetings because they likely face the same challenges she faces. One of these challenges, the elementary teachers' lack of respect and engagement with the

afterschool program, is particularly difficult. Having time to talk with other program leaders about strategies they use to build relationships with school day teachers could help her overcome her feelings of isolation and help her identify ways to improve the situation. It would help knowing she is not the only one facing a difficult challenge saying:

I know that probably other people go through the same things that I do at their afterschool program, and I think it would be helpful to have somebody else say, “Oh my, yes, my teachers, they don’t want to help me or the afterschool program. I think that would be helpful and we could help each other learn how to deal with that, or how we can learn to how to bridge that gap between the afterschool program and the teachers. (personal communication, February 25, 2018)

Joelle’s Staff

Finding staff for the afterschool program has been an ongoing challenge for Joelle from her first days in the position. She is only able to offer very part-time hours, only two hours a day, and most people in the community want full-time jobs that pay well. “It has definitely been a learning experience because when I first got here we did not have enough staff, so I had to learn to just deal with what staff we had.” She explained:

Everybody wants more than two hours a day. I mean a lot of the community, a lot of the parents, like the mothers especially, they either want a full-time job that pays well or honestly they won’t work at all. I can see the reasons why because they are paying a babysitter for only two hours of work, so by the time they get their paycheck, it’s not that much, so it makes it kind of hard to find staff.

(personal communication, February 25, 2018)

Although finding part-time staff to work in the program is an ongoing challenge, she now has five paid staff which she sees as adequate. Her staff include a mom who has children attending the school and afterschool program and a classroom teacher from the elementary school who provides students with daily homework assistance. Her staff also include three college students who are all education majors at a nearby college. She thinks this is “wonderful” for both the education majors and the students who attend the program. The college students who work in the program are gaining experience writing and implementing lesson plans and have valuable time engaging with students across the elementary grade levels. Two of the three college students who are now employed in the program volunteered in the afterschool program when they were in high school. One of them was influenced to pursue a career in education because of her experience volunteering in the program and is also intending to come back to Lewis to teach once she graduates. Joelle explained:

This is the second staff member that I had—one staff member the first year that I started who said “I want to come back to [Lewis] and teach” which is, that's just awesome. That's something I like to hear, having your staff come back to their own community and teach. (personal communication, May 30, 2018)

Another member of Joelle's staff was recently hired as a paraprofessional for the district, gaining additional work hours during the school day. She said she recently had a conversation with the building principal where they discussed this idea, saying:

I said really the afterschool program is an excellent way to train paras, to introduce them to the school system because in a short amount of time, it was only two hours a day, but it still introduces you to the teachers and a bunch of the

kids, and you learn what this whole system is all about. (personal communication February 25, 2018)

Staff Professional Development

When asked what she considers important for her staff to know and to learn, she began by reflecting back on her first year in the program when she initially hired and trained staff. She said she made a mistake by overloading them with information. But now, when she interviews potential staff, she wants them to be sure this is something they really want to do. She has them come and observe the program for an entire afternoon so they can see what happens in the afterschool program, and she gives them a tour of the spaces they are “allowed” to use. She goes over all of the paperwork they are required to do as an “afterschool para.” She also lets them know that “every day is a learning experience,” and she is always there to help, as is the building principal. She informs them there is an annual afterschool conference they are required to attend “to gain more knowledge and experience and ideas for the afterschool program.” She also lets them know they are required to attend all the school and faculty inservices, and there will be regular staff meetings with some professional development built into them.

Joelle and her staff are invited to attend CSI professional development days with the school day teachers. Through attendance at these sessions, her staff have been exposed to Marzano (2003) teaching strategies, the school-wide behavior intervention program, and all staff are trained in Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). She feels even though the teachers “talk above them” and they don’t feel included in small grade-level group discussions, “it’s extra training for us to learn what’s going on, the kinds of methods they are learning to use to teach the kids during the school day—different ways to teach the

kids.” Staff attendance at trainings “pushes them to leave their little box, their little area, and to speak up” for themselves. She explained to her staff that she won’t always be there to communicate on their behalf with the teachers, so they have to do this on their own. She tells them, “If you want us to be heard, you have to speak up.”

Joelle schedules regular staff meetings (at least once monthly) after the afterschool program because this is the time all staff are available. She plans for twenty minutes because it is the end of the day, but the meetings usually last much longer, up to 45 minutes, because of the questions raised and the discussions that result. She begins with an agenda, a written document which outlines what they will go over during the meeting. The sessions includes some professional development and support for writing lesson plans. Last year was the first year Joelle expected staff to create their own lesson plans, and she explained it is her goal this school year to provide additional support in this area. She created a template with sections indicating the various time periods in 30- or 60-minute increments for staff to record what they will be doing with the students. In the beginning, she had them create plans for an entire month, but this was too overwhelming, so now plans are created for the week. She explained this is all a learning experience, even for her, and she is trying to make the planning process a little easier and more enjoyable for them. In her own experience, she knows that if some direction is given and people know what is expected of them, the work “won’t be so tedious.” Once plans are created, they are posted on a “parent board” that displays the general daily schedule, including homework times. She has each staff person’s name displayed with the lesson plans on her office door so the students, parents, and others in the cafeteria can see them and “everybody knows what’s going on or if there is something special scheduled.” In

addition, she sets out copies of the program calendar so parents can take a copy. She communicates the importance of having written plans, not only for her, but for communication with the parents, teachers, and the school administration so everyone knows what is being taught in the program. She has the staff work together to write the plans, sharing ideas to implement with students.

Another communication strategy Joelle tried for the first time this year is the creation of an afterschool para resource door on the inside of her office door for communicating information with the staff. On this door, she displays the afterschool program calendar, posts the schedules for partners who come and work with students, and posts helpful websites for the staff. She also puts up little folders or mailboxes where she communicates important information (often procedural), and the staff must sign that they have read the announcements. She said next year she will spend time pointing out what is on the door and discussing the information with the staff, including the resources shared. She also plans to use their school emails more rather than relying on group texts. It has been her experience that sometimes information shared, especially websites, can be overwhelming. She will be looking for ways to better support the staff as they take the information and actually use it to write lesson plans and implement them in the program.

When asked what is working well for her staff in the area of professional development, she explained she feels going over information in person during staff meetings is most effective because she gets a better sense of their understanding. She is able to listen to their questions and provide information and resources that are relevant to aid their understanding. If they are reading the information she provides on their own, she is not sure if they have had a reaction to it or have questions she should address.

However, she thinks both methods of communication have their places. Realizing “everybody is a little bit different” in how they learn, she provides information both in person and in print. She said she “knows for sure” they will continue to attend the school’s inservices which she says have helped “tremendously.” She hopes the more sessions they attend, the more exposure the teachers have to the afterschool staff, the more likely teachers will see the afterschool staff as an important resource. “I want the school day staff to know this is something serious that we’re thinking about, it’s not just a daycare.” Joelle explained that all staff will continue to attend the annual afterschool conferences. In addition, she will continue to incorporate professional development into her staff meetings. She will create print resources as a way to share important information and make sure staff are aware of all the teacher resources, including books and materials, which are available to them in her office. “I would like to do more but it’s all a process.”

As far as the challenges she faces when providing professional development for her staff, time is a major factor. Having her monthly staff meetings after the program ends is not ideal because everyone has already had a day full of responsibilities, and they are often tired and have difficulty focusing their attention on the tasks at hand. Unfortunately most staff are not available before the program starts so this is her only option.

Communication can be challenging because many times questions are asked while students are there and need the staff’s attention. She tells staff she is always available before the program starts to discuss their questions, and said if they have a question or concern, they often text her. An important challenge she mentioned is knowledge of teaching saying, “None of them are teachers, so it’s just that can be a struggle getting them to understand the importance of what they are doing.”

This past school year, for the first time, Joelle did afterschool staff evaluations. As part of the evaluation, she had the staff write down what they bring to the program. She said some just wrote a few little sentences to which she replied, “Oh you guys do so much more than that.” She explained, “I don’t know if they realize how much I appreciate their help because...I couldn’t do it by myself, obviously...I feel like if they know how much they’re appreciated and people give them feedback and encouragement, they work better honestly. I think their work environment is better.” She explained:

It's intentional what they're doing and that takes practice, trying to teach somebody something, making it intentional, you know, that's hard to actually think about and do. There's a lot of people, teachers, they'll just go through the motions, but making it intentional...takes a lot of emotional and mental power.

(personal communication, May 30, 2018)

Joelle’s Recommendations Regarding Professional Development

When asked about her current professional development system of support, as well as her recommendations regarding improving the statewide system, she expressed the following:

Local professional development. Joelle and her staff will continue to participate in the ongoing professional development provided by the school district, as she finds it useful and “easily accessed.” She will continue to incorporate professional development activities on topics of interest during her regularly scheduled staff meetings. She will continue to provide her staff with information available online such as resources offered through the You for Youth (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) and Click2SciencePD (University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension and the NOYCE Foundation, n.d.) websites.

During the upcoming school year, she will make time to explore the many books and print resources purchased or provided by the 21st CCLC office, which are available to her and her staff, and are currently stored on her office bookshelves.

Regional professional development. Joelle will pursue trainings for her staff led by regional 4-H Extension, ESU experts, as well as community partners.

Statewide professional development. Joelle and her staff will continue to attend the annual statewide afterschool conference, saying this one-day event provides them with “a whole bunch of resources” to take back to the program. To improve the afterschool conference, she suggested having presenters spend some time at the end of each session helping attendees consider how they would incorporate the information presented into lesson plans for their particular grade levels and create a plan for sharing the information with other staff who could not attend the session. She suggested we make sure conference session titles and descriptions better match the content presented to help people make good decisions about which sessions to attend and that we offer a conference session specifically for new project directors that would allow them to discuss their issues, ask questions, get ideas for resources, share example schedules, etc. She also suggested a regional follow-up to the afterschool conference, either in-person or using technology, with program leaders and staff answering questions and providing support as staff use the information learned at the conference. She would see the value of having another similar conference in the summer when staff are either not working or have more flexible schedules than they have during the school year. She explained that because one gets so many new ideas at the conference, it would be helpful to have this learning opportunity more than one time per year.

Joelle suggested some improvements in the support we provide using technology. She requested a question-and-answer location be created on the secure 21st CCLC website where project directors can ask each other questions and provide answers to the questions posted. Joelle would like professional development resources to be organized by topic on the 21st CCLC public website or the secure site for program leaders and listed separately for each potential audience (program leaders and program staff). She suggested perhaps representatives from both You for Youth (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) and Click2SciencePD (University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension and the NOYCE Foundation, n.d.) could create a resource that would assist program leaders in navigating all of their available resources so they could better incorporate the information into ongoing professional development planning. She also requested that resources be posted that would assist her staff in creating quality lesson plans. Joelle sees the 21st CCLC monthly update as valuable to program leaders and hopes we will create a similar resource with information that could be shared with staff.

Joelle thought it would be beneficial to create a new project director mentoring system where new directors could visit other programs and have ongoing discussions throughout the year. These visits could also be done using technology to save on travel costs. She suggested it would be best to make participation optional, not required. Joelle found visits to new programs useful when she began working as a project director, but she suggested these visits could be improved if program directors included their staff members so they

could observe others interacting with students and see the various activities being offered.

Reflections on Conversations with Joelle

Joelle described her first three years as this small rural program's 21st CCLC project director as "a learning experience." Her background is not in education which likely contributed to her steep learning curve from the time she first took her position to the present. When she began her position with the school district, she had not anticipated working in this field. This caused me to wonder if this is true for many of the other afterschool program leaders overseeing 21st CCLC programs. Since there is not currently a postsecondary major that prepares staff to enter this field, other than one in education, this may be true of many 21st CCLC program leaders. Joelle had recently moved to a nearby rural community from a larger urban center and did not know people in the town where the school was located. This made it difficult to build needed relationships with school day staff and form partnerships with local business and industry. She is, however, beginning to overcome these challenges. She is hopeful and optimistic, and if she comes back next fall, she will be the longest serving project director since the program was first funded eleven years ago.

Her hard work is resulting in program success. Even in the time span of a few months, between her first and third interview as a participant in this project, she revealed an increased optimism and successful early steps in growing partnerships with the community and the school district where she works to the benefit of the afterschool program. In our first interview, she said that most community partners came from outside town, from nearby communities, to work with students in the program. By the third

interview she spoke more optimistically regarding growing these important relationships in the town where the program and school are situated. Now in her third year as a 21st CCLC project director, Joelle is acquiring more community partners and staff and relationships are improving with school administration, partnerships essential to a quality afterschool program.

At the end of this school year, Joelle also has an increased optimism regarding growing positive partnerships with school-day teachers because three newly hired (“young”) teachers will be coming to teach in the elementary school next fall. She explained most teachers in the building currently do not treat Joelle and her staff respectfully, talk down to them, and criticize rather than help. With new teachers starting next fall, she is optimistic that there will be more positive and helpful interactions which could result in better program alignment with the school day and improved overall program quality. She noted, “You would think as teachers they would be more helpful,” offering support rather than criticism. This prompted me to reflect back on my support of the afterschool program in the building where I was teaching early in my own career. Unfortunately, I do not recall any interactions with the afterschool staff and Joelle’s comments made me wonder if I acted the same way towards them. As Joelle explained, “we’re not doing this just for the heck of it. We’re trying to align our lesson plans and everything else with the school day.” Collaborative working relationships with teachers will improve learning opportunities for students—everyone’s ultimate goal.

On the other hand, Joelle has a very positive relationship with the principal of the middle school building where she is a para during the school day, as well as with many of the middle school and high school teachers. For example, she has formed meaningful

working relationships with the sixth-grade teachers in the middle school who are interested in helping elementary students successfully transition from the elementary school to their middle school building. The high school teachers also worked with Joelle, volunteering to lead sports clubs for the students last spring.

Joelle was very focused on discussing the professional development needs of her staff over her own needs throughout our interviews. She provides a nurturing, supportive, and encouraging learning environment for them. I was surprised at the amount of responsibility she gives her staff, for example, giving them the responsibility of creating their own lesson plans. She does provide them with support in the form of print resources and handouts. However, they need to make sense of the information provided and identify ways to use it when planning for students. Because three of her staff members are future educators, they are likely better able to make this transfer from a given resource to a meaningful plan, but others could benefit from more structured support. She asked for assistance in preparing staff to do their jobs effectively multiple times and in multiple ways across the three interviews.

Joelle mentioned assertiveness training as helpful to both her and her staff. This made sense since program leaders and staff must sometimes engage in difficult conversations with family members and with teachers who are less supportive of the program. I have always felt that 21st CCLC program leaders have difficult jobs and having the confidence and expertise it takes to address difficult situations might be a key factor in their success.

Something else Joelle said caused me to reflect on discussions held during project director gatherings. It was her perception that other program leaders do not experience some of the same challenges she does, that “they have everything under control.” She

said she thinks it would be “helpful to have somebody else say, ‘Oh my word yes, my teachers, they don’t want to help me or the afterschool program.’” This is a misconception; others have expressed difficulty in this area, also. There should be more time for conversations during project director meetings so that directors can discuss the challenges they face and gain strategies for addressing them.

It is exciting that two of Joelle’s current staff are future educators who used to work in her afterschool program as high school volunteers. One of them wants to come back to their community to teach once they graduate from college. This is the second future educator who was influenced to select education as their future career since Joelle began in the program. This is certainly a very positive result of her efforts and of having high school volunteers spend time with students who attend the program. Joelle said, “That’s just something I like to hear, having your staff come back to their own community and teach.”

For the first time last spring, Joelle did afterschool staff evaluations for all of her staff. I found it interesting that she had them write about what they bring to the program, and then they discussed what they wrote. She said they did not write very much, but still this reflective exercise likely caused all of them to consider the vast responsibilities and the wisdom and expertise they have. In response to the small amount of writing produced, she responded by telling them, “Oh you guys do so much more than that. I don’t know if they realize how much I appreciate their help because it’s, I couldn’t do it by myself, obviously.” She also commented that reflecting on what they do helps them be more intentional about planning and implementing the program, “and it takes a lot of emotional and mental power to do that.”

At the conclusion of the interviews, Joelle expressed her appreciation for being part of this project, saying, “this is making me aware of what I need to change, and making me aware of what I have been doing, which is good, because sometimes I have to kind of advocate for what I do, so thank you.”

Considerations Based on Joelle’s Recommendations

- 1) If it is not possible to offer the statewide afterschool conference more than one time per year, provide follow-up with presenters to encourage them to offer additional regional trainings for program leaders and staff throughout the school year and summer.
- 2) More than one time, Joelle asked for support to help her staff learn to create meaningful lesson plans. She expects staff to write weekly plans for the students in their grade-level groups, but they do not necessarily have the skills needed to do this. She created a template to assist them and expects staff to account for every 30-minute block of the program. This was the first year she expected staff to take on this responsibility and assistance is needed. Perhaps programs could pay a stipend to classroom teachers in their buildings to lead sessions on lesson planning and aligning club activities to school day learning objectives.
- 3) I will consider organizing an optional mentoring system for new directors that includes visits to other programs and additional follow-up conversations. Our discussion about the possible use of technology to minimize costs was interesting. Having the mentor walk around their program showing various activities and clubs in progress using a laptop or iPad, along with explanations and a chance to answer questions, seems like a possible option.

- 4) I will build a secure resource repository with examples from other Nebraska programs that include: forms being used, lesson plans, handbooks, and other useful templates that could be adapted by other program leaders.
- 5) Although resources are shared regularly in the 21st CCLC news update, Joelle has many print resources in her office, and is familiar with some websites that have relevant information for providing professional development, Joelle asked for help processing all of the available information and making sense of all that is there so she can share it more effectively with her staff. I falsely assumed that if they have print resources, they would feel fairly comfortable using them in their program planning. I will no longer make this assumption.
- 6) Program leaders need venues for raising questions and issues and supporting each other in solving problems.
- 7) Not only is afterschool curriculum needed, but it is essential that training accompany the curriculum so staff feel confident in using it with students.
- 8) Two tiers of professional development support may be needed—one for program leaders and one for staff. This is something to consider.
- 9) Based on Joelle's recommendations, I need to consider the following in this year's afterschool conference planning:
 - a. make sure there is at least one session specifically focused on lesson planning;
 - b. make sure session titles and descriptions are specific about session content to help conference attendees make good choices regarding the sessions they select to attend;

- c. have a session specifically for first-time directors that provides them with time to talk, ask questions, and gain information useful when starting a program;
- d. ask presenters to take the last ten minutes of their sessions to discuss how to incorporate the information shared into a lesson plan for students, when applicable;
- e. give participants a template for taking notes that would provide them with specific information needed for implementing what they have learned in the program (e.g., who to contact with questions, how to incorporate student voice and choice into the activities);
- f. conduct an online meeting with presenters prior to the conference to help them prepare their sessions, including presentation tips and relevant activities that would engage participants.

CHAPTER 7: OLIVIA

The strength of the program is the strength of your people and you're bringing out the best in them, and so it's always different. It's going to look different which is refreshing for me, it's refreshing for my site coordinators, for the students. It's always evolving and changing, working with these young people, working with the college staff and seeing [the students] grow and mature. (personal interview, February 7, 2018)

When I began my position as Coordinator of Professional Development for Nebraska's 21st CCLC program, the state's program director at the time was building a partnership with NASA to bring a NASA Summer of Innovation (National Aeronautics

and Space Administration, 2011) grant to the state. In the early months after receiving the grant, we had to move quickly to organize and provide regional STEM-focused professional development across the state, a program we called Nebraska BLAST!. It was a leap of faith in the early months of the grant to find project directors and staff who were interested in attending workshops offered by partners focused on the selected content including aviation and aeronautics, astronomy, rocketry, and robotics. Even the term STEM was new to education at that time. But Olivia Johnson and her school partners, including classroom teachers, were some of the first to sign up. I traveled to her corner of the state to help with workshop logistics on more than one occasion, and was welcomed with hospitality and an enthusiastic reaction to the training provided. I have always appreciated her willingness to recruit teachers and staff, find space for professional development workshops, and complete the endless amount of paperwork required by the grant. Olivia referenced these workshops on several occasions throughout our interviews, describing it as “four years and four summers that we had excellent, excellent professional development... We never could have done the things we have done in science if it hadn’t been for participation in that NASA grant and the Nebraska BLAST! program.” Since that time, I have had many more visits to her community and, because of her years of experience, I value her opinion as we plan and carry out various statewide initiatives. For this reason, I was pleased when she agreed to participate in this research study, making time to contribute her knowledge and expertise to improve the program’s professional development system of support.

Olivia and the Community of Clifton

Olivia is an experienced 21st CCLC project director who lives and works in the small rural, largely agricultural-based community of Clifton. She described her town as unique because it serves as a regional hub with a community college, the offices of the Nebraska Forest Service, several nearby state parks, shopping, and a regional airport. She explained that many travel the highways from neighboring states through their community for work and pleasure from within a one-hundred-mile radius for “art, plays, music” because of the college. The school district in this rural community of Clifton includes a primary building, intermediate building, middle school and high school serving less than 1,000 students preK-12.

Olivia holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Family Consumer Science with a minor in Economics. Prior to becoming the program leader for her district’s afterschool program, she had ten years of experience working as a youth leader for 4-H Extension in two adjoining states, Nebraska and South Dakota. Once hired to lead the afterschool program, she continued to work half-time for 4-H Extension and half-time as the project director as an employee of the school district saying, “I basically was recruited by the superintendent at that time to apply for the director of this 21st CCLC grant program.” The district’s superintendent wrote the original grant application with the superintendent of another nearby Nebraska rural district who also saw the need for an afterschool program. Once the grant was awarded, Olivia worked with the newly-hired project director of the other district to design the program with input from many community partners and school administrators. At that time, 21st CCLC grants were awarded to grantees directly from the federal government, unlike today’s grants which are awarded

through the NDE through an annual grant competition. Approximately 1.5 million dollars were awarded over a three-year period to be shared across the two districts, eventually providing afterschool programming to students in grades K-12, grades five through twelve in her district, and grades kindergarten through four in the partnering district.

Unlike the grants now awarded through the NDE where there are clear guidelines and requirements, as well as support from the state-level management team to implement a quality program, there was no guidance from the federal government at that time regarding project design. She explained the program outcomes were left to each grantee to define, making it very challenging to collect and report data and meet unarticulated program expectations. She explained:

I'm kind of surprised we survived that, actually, so I think what the NDE [Nebraska Department of Education] does, all the things that they provide us, the tools to gather the data, the survey information, all that ahead of time, is just wonderful compared to where we started with the federal grant. (personal interview, February 7, 2018)

Since that time, Olivia's program has grown and now stands on its own, serving students in grades kindergarten through middle school in one district. Clifton Primary program serves students in kindergarten through grade two, Clifton Intermediate serves students in grades three and four, and the middle school program serves students in grades five through eight. Although she is hired to work less than full-time hours, she oversees the three programs, in three different school buildings, hiring and preparing approximately 75 paid staff and volunteers.

When I asked Olivia about the influences and experiences that shaped her as a project director, she noted her training in the areas of youth development and informal education, “learning by doing” through the 4-H Extension program saying, “that probably shaped me the most, all the training I had working with youth and adults and volunteers through those programs.” She explained further an important reason for going the direction she did was the frustration she felt when she realized the youth and families who participated in 4-H Extension programs typically had “every advantage,” leaving many others without the means to be engaged in the programs offered. She was “trying to serve all these wonderful kids that already have all these wonderful opportunities.” When asked to run the afterschool program in her community, she saw the chance to help students and families who do not have the same opportunities. Her own young children participated in Boy Scouts, attended church, attended and participated in sporting events, participated in recreation programs, “pretty much anything they want to do, they get to try it.” Her driving force was then, and is now, to bring these same opportunities to students who would not otherwise be able to participate in an afterschool program in a public school. She works hard to treat all children who attend the program the same. “I think my big push is I want all children...to have the same opportunities that my children have.” She expressed it is a strength of hers to find ways to help the entire family, identifying their needs and challenges, and helping them find solutions. “That’s something I pride myself on, being able to recognize those challenges that these children are going through and help to bring needed resources to them.”

School and community connections. Initially, when the school district received the federal 21st CCLC grant, the program was perceived as “this other program” and not part

of the school; however, this perception no longer exists. The program has the support of the administration from the “superintendent down,” including the building principals who help write and administer the grants. Olivia brings a unique perspective to conversations with the school leadership—the “informal educator perspective,”—allowing her to advocate for the students and their families, considering what is in the best interest of children and youth. Another benefit of working in a district with supporting school administration is that Olivia and her staff are aware of, and are invited to participate in, “any and all of the school’s professional development offerings,” ensuring program alignment to the school day.

When asked about the advantages, from her perspective, of living and working in a small, rural community, she explained that you know everybody and everyone knows you. She said she lived in the community for nearly ten years before taking her position as a program leader and has worked in this job for 16 years. “I apparently knew a lot of people by then. A lot of people knew me. That’s a huge advantage.” She explained you know how things work. You know the inner workings of a small community saying, “You know who pulls the strings, the kingmakers. The kingmakers are the people that make things happen.” She said she is familiar with every organization and the leaders of every organization.

Another advantage of living in her rural community is the local community college which offers a teacher education program. “I mean it’s been a huge, huge advantage for us. We wouldn’t be as successful as we are without them.” She explained that the college provides her with a “really good workforce.” She adds, “Your program is never stagnant

because it's forever changing and that is probably a good thing. That is actually pretty good. That's an advantage. It is evolving.”

Because of Olivia's background and experience as a 4-H Extension staff member, she has close relationships with the staff in her area who frequently volunteer in the program, leading clubs for students on a variety of topics. In fact, some of the people who attended the 4-H youth program when she was an assistant now have children who attend her afterschool program. She explained 4-H Extension staff who work in her county are now very specialized in areas such as health and wellness, community development and entrepreneurship, and the curriculum provided is research-based and high quality. They are a valuable asset to her program, needing little training and bringing a variety of engaging clubs to students at all levels. In addition to training offered by her local 4-H Extension experts, Olivia sends staff to specialized training when offered in other parts of the state during the summer. For example, her site coordinators have traveled long distances to participate in Nebraska BLAST! workshops (<https://www.education.ne.gov/21stcc/c/b/blast/#1525361555850-88e9aed5-1ad8>), including Biomedical Engineering and Wearable Technology, also led by experts from 4-H Extension. Because of these specialized workshops, staff are now leading clubs for students focused on these unique curricular areas designed for implementation in an afterschool or summer program.

Although Olivia does not promote the program through the local news organizations, she has many partners who do so, saying, “I know obviously they are pretty happy about [their relationship with the afterschool program] because they're writing about it, and it's fulfilling their goals.”

Olivia's Professional Development

Olivia described herself as a hands-on learner saying, "I have to be, I've always been, I have to learn by doing. I know that's the 4-H model, but I have to experience something to learn it." She gave a recent example of her desire to improve her ability to use technology. She hired some of her college students to guide her in setting up a twitter account, saying, "That was a little frightening for me to do on my own." She set it up herself but learned best by having someone sit next to her, saying, "Yeah, click on that, yeah, that's what you do, yeah, this is how you do that...I've done lots and lots of face-to-face trainings, which is the best way for me to learn."

She participates in sessions hosted by the 21st CCLC staff using Zoom technology. She finds it helpful to have someone walk her through the available curriculum, such as the recently developed *So You Want to Be A...* curriculum (Jones, 2017), describing the training as "really handy and wonderful." She especially likes hearing about the successes others have and the challenges they face since it helps when planning their own implementation. Olivia finds the annual GetConnected Statewide Afterschool Conference "very valuable" for both her and her staff. Although the long drive across the state to attend is unpopular with many staff, she values the time in the car for processing, planning, and sharing what is learned by each member of the team so that it can be taken back to the program.

Olivia is also gaining experience in working with policymakers in the state legislature to communicate the importance of afterschool programs to their community. She says she is not very good at "touting her own horn," and conversations with senators are "really out of her comfort level." Nevertheless, realizing the importance of being an advocate for

the afterschool program and the need for funding, she makes regular visits to the state capital with her school's superintendent to engage in this advocacy work. "I've learned a lot from her. She's so good at that and very supportive and knowledgeable."

Olivia's Staff

Finding individuals interested in working from 3:00 PM to 6:00 PM each day is an issue, so she feels grateful to be in a community with a college, saying, "nobody wants that job except college students. There's no one that would really love that gig." She explained:

I don't know how other programs do it to be honest. I just don't know how they find people to work, or people that work all day long, because I've had people like that, that work all day long in the school district who are certified teachers and then work after school. (personal correspondence, February 27, 2018)

But she is able to find staff who stick with her for years and also want to work in the summer programs. She said she tries to pay them well, especially in the summer. She is also able to employ some teachers in the summer who are looking for extra income.

The vast majority of Olivia's 30 paid staff are college students. All but two are not, both serving as program site coordinators. One of the two is a paraprofessional during the school day and works half-time in the program. The other is a substitute teacher during the school day and has two children who attend the middle school. The college students range in age from 18 to 26, from "brand-new shiny freshmen this year" to others who have attended college for up to six years and are on track to graduate this spring. Many of the college students are able to work in the program for several years, which Olivia sees as advantageous to the program. Many of the college students are education majors, and

working in the program “gives them the opportunity to practice their skills, put into practice some of the things they’re learning in the classroom, and practice it on students and parents...Some are shiny and wonderful, others aren’t as shiny and wonderful, but they learn a lot, and I think they get a lot of good experiences.”

College students who are education majors bring a desire to work with children, a “love and that passion” to their work in the program. They are “not just there for the paycheck,” but rather, they are there because they want to “learn the skills and hone their skills and honestly see if this really is what I want to do, am I any good at this.” She feels working in the afterschool program provides them with experiences that help them decide if they want to be a teacher of elementary students, or middle school students, and determine if this career path is the right one for them. She said:

They think they want to be teachers. They’re excited. They like children and they seem to think they want to be an educator, and so that’s a positive, and they want to learn and be the best they can be, so that’s an added incentive and added advantage. (personal interview, February 27, 2018)

Staff professional development

Although attending professional development offered by the school district, ESU, college, and statewide workshops led by a variety of content experts benefits Olivia personally, she often prefers to find time for her staff to attend training because ultimately they will be the ones overseeing the program and/or implementing the curriculum with students. Her approximately 75 paid staff and volunteers have different strengths and interests, so utilizing their talents in the program always benefits the students. Once one person is trained, they train other staff, and then “they pick it up and

they'll run with it." She explained this is especially true with technology training. The staff have recently implemented computer coding clubs and, in the middle school, an *Escape Room*, bringing engaging problem-solving opportunities to students.

When training new staff, Olivia feels what's most important is knowing what a quality afterschool program, "a really good program," looks like. She wants them to learn about the elements of a quality program, because "they need to be able to see the big picture." But this can be overwhelming, so she starts small and builds on previous learnings. She reflected back on her experience when first designing the program, saying, "We wanted to quit more than one time or another because it's so overwhelming." Now NDE provides many resources and needed information she described as a "one-stop shop."

In addition to the characteristics of a high-quality program, Olivia explained the staff must also know the policies and procedures of the site where they work as well as the school where the program is located. This is important because of the need for consistency between school day and afterschool (e.g., "this is how you act in the building, this is how you act on the playground"). They must be able to work effectively with school administrators or they will not be able to perform. They need to have "strong shoulders," a good standing in the community, stand up for why having this program is the right thing to do, and how you are going to help all of our students, "not yours, not mine, our students, our families and our community." She said you need to be flexible and be able to work with a lot of different kinds of people, and realize you're not going to achieve everything right away. "Start with the little successes and work up from there."

Olivia described a variety of strategies for meeting the professional development needs of her staff. Her site coordinators, or site-level leaders, are included in much of the

school's professional development offered to teachers during in-service days and "early release Fridays." She explained that she and her site coordinators appreciate being included in the trainings that Clifton Public Schools offers that would "be an advantage to us and would help us understand either what's going on during the school day or would help us be better professionally." Examples of trainings she considers important for both herself and the staff and offered by the school district include *Safe School Training*, which includes Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation; First Aid; Blood-borne Pathogens; Slips, Trips and Falls; and Playground Supervision. "They are all very good and valuable." Site coordinators and staff also participate in the school's behavior management trainings and technology trainings offered by the school district.

Although her site coordinators are able to attend many of the trainings held by the school district, scheduling professional development for program staff is very challenging due to conflicting schedules and responsibilities outside the program. The college students who work in the program cannot usually attend professional development sessions because they are attending classes during the day, and many part-time staff hold other jobs, including one of her site coordinators who is a paraprofessional in the district during the school day. Because of these scheduling conflicts, they must sometimes cancel a day of the program so staff can attend professional development activities.

Olivia explained she, along with the site coordinators, schedule a comprehensive training for their staff before school starts, and then ongoing staff professional development is provided through weekly staff meetings. She said very little is scheduled as a "whole group" but rather offered at the site-level because of the difficulty of finding common times in staff schedules and the varied needs across grade levels. "What makes

sense for grades K-1-2 doesn't do us any good at the middle school." She uses online trainings when available because they are "very handy and can be done anytime." This includes the school's safety training that is offered online and is required by the school district. These trainings are typically 30 minutes in length, leaving an additional 15 to 30 minutes for discussion and questions in response to the content. "It's really handy because that can be done any time." She explained that staff might come in and do all five or six safety trainings in one day when they don't have school, or they might do one every week at their staff meetings until they have completed the series, which might take up to a month or two. There is a log-in through the afterschool site "so they usually just throw it up on the smart board or throw it up on the projector and do it as a group." Participation results in a certificate of completion.

Distance is a major barrier to participation in professional development, her own as well as her staff's. Olivia's town of Clifton is "about as far away as you can get" from the urban areas of the state where many professional development activities take place due to the available facilities and the availability of curriculum experts to lead trainings. Olivia feels the burden of traveling long distances for scheduled events usually falls on communities in her part of the state, saying "It's never a two-way street;" however, the travel time does give her staff time to process what they have learned during professional development sessions. She explained they sometimes have an additional seven to eight hours in the car, time that can be used to talk about the sessions they attended, processing what they learned, and planning what they will implement in the program. "It is exhausting, but that's what you do when you live in a rural area like we do."

Olivia also said that money is probably the biggest challenge they face when it comes to participating in professional development because there is no money in their budget for this. The school district pays for her, the site coordinators, and some staff to attend the state conference. She appreciates that they are allowed to participate in the school's professional development offerings at no cost.

In spite of the challenges regarding participation in ongoing professional development that requires travel, Olivia knows it is critical to be part of these trainings and the conversations and relationships that result. Olivia relayed a key point from a recent conversation with her collaborator from Clifton State College who explained that if she and the other education staff from her college do not travel to the other end of the state to attend meetings on a regular basis, their voices are not heard, their presence is not known and they are "forgotten about."

We really make that conscious effort to get down there and get in front of those people that they need to be in front of and go to these meetings, and whatever, even though it is terribly exhausting, because otherwise, these people out here just get forgotten about. (personal conversation, February 27, 2018)

Olivia believes she is very fortunate to have a good staff, but they are "constantly, constantly, constantly turning over because they are college students." They might work in the program for four years, and if so, "that's phenomenal. If they've been there that long, they're running a program and they are full-time college students, too." When asked how she addresses constant staff turnover, she said she runs the same training over and over again. She also works to identify staff strengths quickly so that she can use their individual strengths. She said:

If their strength is working with students and classroom management, you let them run with that. And then you work with somebody else with the lesson planning and doing the lesson plans and that sort of thing. And some of those other management things that you have to deal with, that they've not run a staff meeting or dealt with people and hours, and you know supervising volunteers and that sort of thing, then you let someone else manage that for them and let them spend their time with the students and manage the classroom. (personal correspondence, February 7, 2018)

She explained that she hires “so many young people, young adults with high energy, interest, desire” but you typically have them for a short time, perhaps one semester, or up to four years. She explained their time in the program goes quickly saying, “just as they get really, really good, they graduate, they go.” Interestingly, she said not only are they preparing students kindergarten through grade 8 to be the best they can be, at the same time they are preparing these college students who work in the program to be “the best they can be as educators or whatever profession they choose.”

When asked what works best for her when it comes to providing professional development for staff, she explained different options work depending on the goals of the session and content needing to be delivered. When it comes to the “very straight-up stuff” that needs to be done, online options work well. For example, the school’s safety training can easily be completed online. One example given was knowing how to run the electronic defibrillator if needed. “You can just quickly do it, and you have...that knowledge,” so she thinks online options are good for certain trainings such as this. Other trainings that are about “doing” or “inspiring” and learning to use curriculum should be

experienced in person if possible. Conferences are helpful, according to Olivia, when you want a face-to-face experience with a presenter who walks you through lessons. She also addressed the challenges of time and lack of available funds by having site coordinators provide some ongoing training for their staff. Site coordinators are able to attend all-school staff meetings, leadership team meetings, grade-level meetings and then bring the content back to their staff during professional development sessions. They regularly use *Google Docs* and *Google Sheets* to share needed information including notes from trainings, videos, or any resources shared with them during a training.

Not only does Olivia provide professional development and support for staff to work with students in the afterschool program, the training and experiences she provides also builds leaders. Staff that Olivia hired in the past have moved into leadership positions both in the public school system and in the area of informal education. One, the second person Olivia ever hired, assisted in the creation and implementation of a nationally recognized web-based STEM resource, Click2SciencePD (University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension and the NOYCE Foundation, n.d.), now used by afterschool educators across the country. Another began as a staff person in the program, moved on to teach in the school district, and is now the principal of the district's primary school. One individual is the district's Informational Technology Director, another was Wyoming Teacher of the Year. Olivia says their experiences in the afterschool program "helped form them and get them to where they are because it helped them hone their skills." She described herself as a "pretty proud mama."

Olivia's Recommendations Regarding Professional Development

Olivia provided many useful recommendations, organized according to the following categories: locally offered professional development; regional and statewide support; and strategies to address staff turnover.

Locally offered professional development. Taking part in professional development sessions close to home allows more staff to attend trainings, addressing staff preparedness as well as staff turnover. Olivia explained it is important that the frontline staff and site directors have access to ongoing professional development at their level and to content that meets their individual needs. She is fortunate that she and her staff are included in many of the school building and district professional development events offered, ESU trainings, as well as some offered by the community college located in her town. The convenience of these trainings is appreciated due to limited money and time because of having to travel to events offered in other locations.

Olivia encourages other program leaders and staff members to attend ongoing training offered by their school districts on the behavior plan followed during the school day. Each school building is in a different level of training, so afterschool staff is involved in all trainings offered. She finds the trainings very useful because the strategies for behavior management after school are consistent with those implemented during the school day. She explained the middle school staff are the furthest along in their training saying, "The middle school staff just does exactly what they do during the school day. They probably use the system better than some of the classroom teachers."

Olivia encouraged other programs to explore the high-quality professional development offered locally through their regional ESU. ESU staff are part of a statewide network delivering professional development locally across the state. Olivia explained:

I think the ESUs do a great job and set up some really good things.... Of course, we have a rep right here in town and she's phenomenal with us. We know her very well and work very closely with her. So I think the ESU is an important tool.... (personal interview, March 27, 2018)

She also encourages program leaders to take advantage of high-quality workshops offered at their local community college.

Regional and statewide support. Olivia feels the statewide professional development activity with the most impact on her staff is the annual statewide afterschool conference offered in two Nebraska communities (alternating the conference in the large urban population area every other year, and a more central location on the off years). Olivia explained this event offers a "huge advantage that I'd like to continue." She primarily includes her site coordinators in this training as well as what she describes as her "upper level" staff members. Olivia said it has been helpful that it is offered in different parts of the state each year because this helps with travel, expense, and time. She would like for the NDE to continue to hold a statewide conference annually.

Olivia talked about the ongoing need for support and training for meeting program expectations in the area of reporting such as completing an *Access database* of students who attend the program and the many other required online forms. She feels the state-level evaluation team does a good job of providing ongoing support through meetings using technology where one can view the forms as they are explained. These meetings

are also recorded for those unable to join live and for those who need a later review. She feels everyone has been “really good about helping us through a technical challenge” when it comes to program reporting requirements “because there has been a lot of change and the use of technology for reporting can be scary for some people.”

Olivia described professional development provided regionally by community partners with a statewide outreach as particularly helpful. One example she mentioned was the Nebraska BLAST! program. This initiative began as a four-year program funded with a NASA Summer of Innovation grant (National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2011), which allowed the state 21st CCLC office to partner with statewide organizations who offered quality STEM training and provided materials, such as solar and night sky telescopes and robotics kits now permanently housed in afterschool programs across the state, ensuring program sustainability. These trainings continue due to the time and generosity of many experts passionate about STEM, knowing afterschool and summer are perfect times to expose students to their various curriculums.

In addition, she mentioned several partners in particular who offer excellent trainings throughout the year, including 4-H Extension, Nebraska Natural Resources Districts, Nebraska Game and Parks, and the Nebraska Forest Service. “It’s not always convenient to get there, but we’ve been to a number of them that have been very helpful, and our staff has used [what they’ve learned] throughout our afterschool program.” Olivia also noted that many workshops offered by these same community partners could also be shared with a broader audience through the use of technology. A combination of in-person when possible, along with connecting others to the session using technology, would eliminate many of the expenses associated with travel including mileage, hotel

fees, and time away from school. She noted, “If it is something we could jump in via technology... I mean, why not?”

Olivia also recommended that technology could be used to support the use of curriculum designed for afterschool programs. An example she gave was a recent online meeting using technology when the creator of a curriculum designed to provide students with experiences focused on college and career readiness. The *So You Want To Be A...* (Jones, 2017) curriculum materials were mailed to program leaders prior to the meeting for easy access and reference, and the curriculum creator walked those who joined the meeting through its features and answered questions about implementation. She commented this was easily done using technology and “it’s quick, and it’s efficient.” She explained:

You get the information you need, you’re done, can ask some questions, you’ve got some face-to-face, a little bit there with cameras or with voice at least, and it helps to hear what other people are doing rather than looking at a piece of curriculum and trying to implement how would you do that. (personal interview, March 27, 2018)

Strategies to address staff turnover. Olivia had several suggestions which could help to address the problem of frequent staff turnover. She mentioned that offering workshops more than one time in her part of the state is helpful; however, she is willing to send staff to other locations if the topic is of interest. These “refresher workshops” could provide new staff with training, or experienced staff with reminders and support for implementation. She offered the example of a refresher workshop on the topic of astronomy with an expert coming back to their region of the state to teach or remind staff

how to assemble and use available telescopes for *Star Parties* including “how you run the telescopes, turn it on, set it up, a step-by-step review.”

Another recommendation she shared was for more support to select from the many online options that are available, saying “there’s so much good online training; it’s just overwhelming.” Olivia suggested someone with expertise sort through all the “wonderful resources” out there and organize them by area of focus and level and “lay out a plan” that could be used for planning professional development. Olivia suggested that the State Board Position Statement for Expanded Learning Opportunities (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017) could serve as a potential framework for organizing all that is available. She said:

I mean there's wonderful resources, but I need it pared down to say, okay first-year staff need to do this one. They get six of these done this year and the second-year staff -maybe they need more training in this or that. I have to navigate through that all, figure it out. There's a lot there. I haven't done that very well. I haven't done that, and I'm not, I don't feel like I'm capable of doing that. I might need a mentor. I need someone to...it's just a little overwhelming for me.

(personal correspondence, March 27, 2018)

Olivia suggested this framework could be used to create what she described as personalized learning plans for her staff. She would identify staff strengths and their weaknesses or what they need to improve upon; with this plan in place, she could assign two or four videos that new or experienced staff would watch over the course of a quarter or a semester. They could schedule time for a 30-minute professional development session during work time before the program begins, after the program, or when the

program is slow. This would prevent having to find time for all staff to participate at the same time, which would aid program leaders in their planning. Olivia explained that having a resource available that would help them plan an individualized approach to assigning professional development would be a time-saver, saying, “I think it’s time, you don’t have time to just sift through all that.”

Reflections on Conversations with Olivia

Olivia’s 16 years of experience allowed her to share many insights regarding her own professional development needs as well as those of her site-coordinators and staff. She is one of the longest-serving Nebraska 21st CCLC project directors, has lived in her community for many years, and has been a long-standing employee of the school district. Her years of experience connect her with the community, the school staff, the staff of the local college, as well as families and students. These connections and resulting relationships benefit the program in multiple ways.

Olivia is fortunate to work in a school district where the afterschool program is highly valued because it addresses both student and family needs. Not every project director has strong support from the district or school building administrators, and Olivia has both. The principals help administer the grant, participate in site-level management team meetings, and always include the afterschool staff in scheduled staff meetings and professional development trainings. When there is a lack of administrative support, challenges such as a lack of communication with teachers, lack of needed space, lack of alignment to the school day, and a general sense of having to approach and solve problems on their own results. I have said many times to principals in school buildings with new afterschool programs that a supportive principal is key to a quality program.

Olivia's supportive administrators are an excellent example of the benefits of having involved school leaders.

Olivia's background in youth development has also been a benefit to the program. In Nebraska, 4-H Extension staff have been strong partners in most 21st CCLC programs across the state. Not only do they provide professional development trainings, they often personally lead clubs for students who attend the programs, serving as additional (though temporary) staff. Because Olivia had many years of experience working as a 4-H Extension educator in Nebraska and in a neighboring state, she understands their commitment to bringing learning opportunities to students outside the regular school day. This background also fueled her passion for recognizing the needs not only of the students, but also their families considering "what else is going on in this child's life." She said she prides herself on being able to direct families to needed resources or to school personnel who can direct them towards needed assistance. She knows that if children and youth do not have their basic needs met, it is difficult for them to learn. Therefore, she is committed to offering nutrition education, including how to make their own food, clothing care, and other basic human needs. In addition, her background allows her to have a positive working relationship with the 4-H Extension staff in her own region, and also across the state, resulting in engaging learning opportunities for the students who attend her program.

Olivia has an obvious passion for the students served in the program, the staff, and the families. She started working in the program because she "wanted all children to have the same opportunities that my own children have," realizing, while in her previous position as a 4-H Extension educator, that many children are not able to participate in the clubs

that are offered because of the costs to families. The afterschool program can provide similar opportunities at little or no cost, providing engaging and unique learning experiences to children outside of the school day.

Olivia's programs are a training ground for future teachers. Although there are many postsecondary institutions across the state, not every rural community has access to a university or college. Where one exists, however, it is easier to find college students to work part-time in afterschool programs. Many of these staff are education majors; others are majoring in other career fields, but all tend to bring an eagerness to learn and youthful energy to the program. Twenty-eight out of the 30 paid staff who work in Olivia's program are college students. I was surprised at the number of college students who work in our programs, and now have a better understanding of the difficulty of recruiting and hiring staff when afterschool programs are located in a smaller community without a postsecondary institution nearby. I better understand the benefits of having a college in her rural community, not only for access to potential staff members, but for the real-life teaching experiences it provides future teachers. These education majors are able to experience lesson planning and implementation under the supervision of college professors and as part of their coursework, have ongoing opportunities to work with students across many grade levels, and the "chance to put into practice some of the things they're learning in the classroom." She also appreciates the new ideas and energy they bring to the program. Her words echoed my thoughts when she said, "I don't know how people find staff if there isn't a college in their town...It's a huge advantage for us in our small community...it's been a huge, huge advantage for us."

Olivia described herself as a “pretty proud mama” when reflecting on the successful individuals she hired who worked in her program over the years and now serve in leadership positions. Did these individuals already possess the knowledge and skills needed to succeed? Or was Olivia especially insightful regarding the personality, talents, and training needed to become exceptional leaders? As I listened to her I found myself wondering if it was the learning opportunities she provided that helped prepare them and motivate them to succeed.

I was surprised that Olivia’s position was not full-time. She oversees three different programs in three buildings. She is responsible for hiring and supervising 30 paid staff and another 45 volunteers, manages a budget, finds and uses community partners, and has formed meaningful working relationships with school administrators and teachers. She also collects, reports, and helps analyze ongoing data as part of the continuous improvement process. And most relevant to this study, she is responsible for ensuring all staff and volunteers are prepared by finding or providing ongoing learning opportunities needed to lead a successful program. Any of these elements can be challenging, and she is able to effectively manage them all on less than a full-time position.

The distance some program staff must travel to attend professional development sessions is often a barrier to participation. Olivia’s program is one of a few with the most miles to travel to attend offerings in urban communities on the other side of the state. With travel comes time and expense, both major barriers to participation. She also expressed that it is very tiring to make these long trips. However, she realizes the importance of training and the value of participating in meetings face-to-face, so she attends and encourages her staff to attend, saying, “That’s what you do when you live in a

rural area.” She said she does not feel that others appreciate how difficult the travel can be, “don’t understand it at all.” She commented that she has conversations with others, such as a college professor and her district’s superintendent, who make the long trip regularly because if they do not, they are not part of important conversations and limit their ability to impact decisions made—that people in her part of the state are “forgotten about.”

Considerations Based on Conversations with Olivia

- Olivia said it is important for staff to learn the characteristics of a high-quality afterschool program, as well as the policies and procedures of the school where the program is located so there is consistency across the school day and afterschool for students. This is good advice as I plan the new project director monthly online meetings offered throughout the first year of employment. I can use this structure to organize topics discussed and resources shared.
- I am more aware of the importance of program leaders and staff members participating in locally provided professional development trainings offered by the school district on topics such as safety, behavior management, and effective teaching strategies.
- I should organize the many webinars and other available resources by topic, by grade level and experience level, organized in segments that can be easily accessed by program leaders during scheduled professional development times.
- At the state-level, I can pay more attention to what is offered at the various ESU’s and communicate with program leaders regarding offerings that would be relevant to afterschool educators.

- I will continue to support and organize 4-H Extension regional trainings including those focused on STEM (e.g., Nebraska BLAST!), being sure to plan workshops early to ensure staff is available to participate and repeat offerings to address ongoing staff turnover.
- When curriculum becomes available, offer online trainings so staff can receive assistance in planning and advice regarding implementation from the person who created the curriculum.
- I will consider the expense of participating in professional development away from home (transportation, meals, overnight stay, and cost of workshop) and remember the amount of money they have is usually limited and out of their hands. Offering online training options is important and whenever possible I will be sure participants have curriculum and materials ahead of the trainings.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Throughout the months of this study, I noticed my perspective regarding rural Nebraska and leadership in rural Nebraska afterschool programs shifting in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Prior to this study, I respected the work of 21st CCLC project directors, appreciated the differences in leading a rural versus urban or suburban program, and since all but two of Nebraska 21st CCLC project directors are leading programs in rural communities, I attempted to consider their perspectives as decisions were made regarding a statewide professional development system of support. I grew up and presently live in an urban community. I brought this background and my personal experiences with me as I began this study. Although I have worked with educators from rural schools for many years, it was my goal, through this study and our in-depth

conversations, to better understand their professional development needs and the challenges they face (Cicchinelli & Beeskley, 2017; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Hawley, Koziel & Bovaird, 2017). What I learned from all four participants in this study has reshaped my perspective and enhanced my understanding of the strengths Nebraska 21st CCLC project directors bring to their programs as well as the challenges rural program leaders face.

My Previous Understandings

The passion of 21st CCLC project directors towards their work, their communities, their students, their families, and their staff has always been evident to me. Going into this study, I recognized their commitment, listened to their advice, and valued their recommendations as relevant and important. Realizing they were the experts in what they need (Bruner, 1960; Dewey, 1916; Dewey 2010; Piaget, 2006), the 21st CCLC Rural Advisory Committee was formed, a small representative group who advise the state-level management team on relevant topics, including the professional development needs of rural program leaders. I provided structures which allowed regional networking opportunities, including in-person workshops. I observed their ability to support each other as they addressed their specific needs, especially the new project directors who are hired each year. Above all else, I appreciated their positive approach to facing challenges and solving problems.

Over the years I have grown to recognize the critical role partners play in the design and implementation of a quality afterschool or summer program (Afterschool Alliance, 2012; Anthony & Morra, 2016; Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2007). I have learned that an effective partnership is mutually beneficial—the relationship will enhance the work of

both entities and assist each of them in meeting their individual and collective goals. Partners essential to an afterschool program include local businesses and community-based organizations, as well as school building administrators and teachers. These partners provide financial support as well as personnel to lead clubs and conduct staff training. Building these partnerships is primarily the role of the 21st CCLC project director, but staff are also critical to building positive and useful relationships.

Prior to this study, I recognized that 21st CCLC project directors leading programs in rural communities face unique challenges. These challenges include limited resources, such as time and money, both of which impact a program director's ability to participate in ongoing professional development activities. I suspected some rural program leaders face feelings of isolation since they are many miles from a nearby community and other afterschool program leaders. I knew they had many responsibilities including data collection and analysis, reporting, hiring and preparing staff, recruiting students, and ensuring that engaging and meaningful learning opportunities were available to students every day. I also knew that many project directors were not full-time employees and worked other jobs just to make ends meet. I recognize now that my perspective was based on the belief there were urban programs and programs that were not urban. My underlying belief was that if a program was not in an urban community there would be problems to be solved, and working at the state-level, I would be in a position to help them address their issues (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Hawley, Koziel, & Bovaird, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006; Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016; United States Census Bureau, 2016; United States Department of Agriculture, 2017).

What I Learned

There were some surprises I encountered throughout the months of this study. I organized these findings into four categories: the diversity of rural communities; the diversity of rural program leaders and staff; the importance of collaborative relationships for program success, and the gradual shift in my perspective regarding working and living in a rural Nebraska community.

Diversity of place. Throughout the course of this research study, it became very clear that just using the term *rural* to characterize Nebraska communities did not adequately describe them. Rural communities cannot be categorized simply as *not urban* as defined by the United States Census Bureau (2016). Before engaging in this research study, I tended to think of rural communities having more in common than not. But over the span of this research, I began to see what made each community unique. These differences influence the challenges and strengths of program leadership and implementation, and recognizing these differences has changed my perspective on the system of support needed across the state for rural program leaders and their staff.

Rural Nebraska communities vary widely in size; some rural communities are extremely small, some comparatively large. For example, of the four communities that were the focus of this study, populations ranged from approximately 1,000 to 25,000. I realized in a larger rural community such as Doug's, the number and variety of community organizations and businesses available to partner with the program impacted the structure and the learning opportunities available to students. I also realized that although staff turnover was an issue in every program, finding staff when that turnover

occurred in a larger rural town made it easier to address, as opposed to finding staff when a program is implemented in a smaller community.

Another factor which greatly impacted program quality was whether or not the community had a college in the town or nearby. I had not realized how many college students work in Nebraska 21st CCLC programs when the program is in a community with a college. It also became apparent to me that having a teacher education program in the college is especially beneficial to both the program overall, as well as the college students themselves. Olivia described herself as a “pretty proud mama” when she talked about her program as a training ground for future school teachers and administrators. Joelle displayed the same pride when explaining how the experiences of high school students who worked in her program impacted their decisions to go into the field of education and desire to eventually come back to their rural community to teach. Raevik and Doug also relayed similar stories of the benefits to both the program and college education students working in an afterschool program.

Diversity of people. It was not just the diversity of the communities that became apparent but also the diversity of the program leaders who participated in this study, differences that illuminated the professional development support that might be beneficial. The ages of the program leaders covered a wide-span of years. This matters because it affects their level of experience, as well as other background experiences they bring to the position. One program leader, Olivia, brought over 15 years of experience leading afterschool programs in Clifton. She was well-connected in the community, enabling her to effectively use local business and community agencies in supporting the program. She had excellent working relationships with school-day teachers and

administrators and much experience finding, hiring, and training staff. Raevik had over 30 years of experience as a classroom teacher, most of them in multi-age classrooms. These experiences help program leaders successfully address the many challenges they face in their leadership positions.

Another difference is the focus of their education. Most program leaders have a four-year college degree, but their majors varied. After listening to Raevik across the three interviews, I became aware of the benefits of having an education degree and multiple years of teaching experience when leading an afterschool program. When she discussed differentiating lessons, scaffolding, and the very specific strategies she used to support young learners, I realized that others, without an education degree, might be at a disadvantage considering the need to support students' academic success. She was the only study participant who expressed an appreciation for being able to provide students with experiences where they can try and either fail or succeed without consequence and also for the benefits of not having to administer tests and give grades in an afterschool environment. Although most 21st CCLC project directors do not have a degree in education, they have degrees in relevant fields. Olivia's degree in family consumer science was beneficial because, in addition to providing academic support, 21st CCLC programs are required to find ways to meaningfully engage families in the afterschool program. Although still in college, Doug is bringing his relationships with professors and what is learned in classes to his position. Joelle's degree in psychology benefited her in growing positive and productive working relationships in her leadership role.

Something else I had not considered is the level of confidence needed to do this job effectively. Program leaders are expected to build relationships with community

members, school administrators and teachers, college professors, family members, and others. They must find, hire and train staff, and deal with staff-related issues when they arise. They must cajole community members into forging partnerships. Working with people requires confidence, good communication, and interpersonal skills; without it many of these tasks could seem overwhelming. Joelle discussed this need, recognizing the importance of participating in an assertiveness training course to build her confidence. Similar to the other three research participants, she was then able to use skills learned to support her staff in growing their confidence levels and begin to create positive and productive working relationships with school staff, community partners, and families.

The ages of program staff, their backgrounds, and reasons for working in afterschool programs (Johnson, 2018) impact the professional development structures and resources needed by program leaders. It was interesting to consider Doug's comments regarding staff needing support to grow as professionals, especially because so many of his staff are in college and are very young. He talked about their need for reassurance, as well as their need to socialize. Some staff are certified teachers and need little support to plan and implement activities with students. Many who work in rural afterschool programs are paraeducators during the school day. Although they are not teachers, they know the students and teachers, are able to observe teachers throughout the school day, and usually have some experience implementing the school's behavior management plan. Some staff are parents of students who attend the school; some are community members looking for part-time work. This wide range of backgrounds, abilities, and staff turnover make a well-thought-out professional development plan essential.

Diversity of people and place

Participant Name	Raevik Johanson	Doug Humphrey	Olivia Johnson	Joelle Meyer
Name of Community	Anthony	Norton	Clifton	Lewis
Size of Community	Just over 1,000	Just under 25,000	Less than 6,000	Under 2,500
Years of Experience in this position	<5 years	<5 years	> 15 years	<5 years
# of paid staff	<1	Approximately 30	Approximately 30	5 or less
College in same town	No	Yes	Yes	No
Relationship with school administrators and teachers	Limited	Positive/ productive	Positive/ productive	Emerging
Area of college degree	Elementary Education and Physical Education	Currently working on degree in Education	Family Consumer Science with a minor in Economics	Psychology

Importance of collaborative relationships for program success. Interviews conducted as part of this study illustrated the critical importance of strong relationships with school leaders and teachers, community partners, and local postsecondary instructors and college students for success. Strong relationships with school leaders and teachers ensure an alignment of afterschool activities to school day learning objectives, access to needed space and materials, support in finding and preparing staff through professional development, and increase the opportunities for student learning across all academic areas. Relationships with colleges located in or near rural communities allow

access to program staff and also provide college students with practical teaching and learning experiences. Relationships with community partners who are able to provide professional development for program staff, access to materials for implementing clubs, and access to relevant and unique curriculum increase the variety of enriching activities that can be offered to students after school. Through interviews with Olivia and Doug, I learned that when program leaders have positive working relationships with all of these entities the benefits are multiplied and program success is likely.

Rural as an advantage. As I entered this study, I imagined the challenges facing a rural program leader would overshadow the benefits of living and working in a rural community. I assumed because these program leaders worked in rural communities, they faced ongoing obstacles that must be overcome and needed my help to do their jobs well. I believed urban communities had the resources needed to independently succeed, and the others, because they were not urban, needed additional help and support. However, throughout the period of this study, I now see rural communities and the people who live there in a different light. Through my reflections as part of this research, I am now aware of my shifting beliefs about living and working in a rural community. Of course there were challenges identified, as well as conversations focused on the issues they faced, but these issues and challenges were never seen by those interviewed as roadblocks to having quality programs. Rather, I heard the pride in their voices, the strength with which they approached their work, and the view that the students who attended their afterschool and summer programs deserved nothing less than high-quality learning experiences. They saw their efforts to ensure this as their primary job responsibility, and any obstacles in

their way were simply a situation to be overcome, not roadblocks which only outsiders could help remove.

Next Steps

As a result of knowledge gained throughout this research study, I have identified professional development opportunities that will be embedded into the state-level system of support for rural afterschool program leaders. The recommended improvements reflect a constructivist theory of learning (Bruner, 1960; Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 2010; Pass, 2004; Peterson, 2012; Piaget, 2006; Twomey-Fosnot, 2005; Ultanir, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood & McQuarrie, 1999) incorporating the idea that support can be provided at the state-level but decisions should be made locally regarding individual and site-level implementation. Also considered were the elements of the Click2SciencePD model of professional development (University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension and the NOYCE Foundation, n.d.; Frerichs, Fenton & Wingert, 2018) which utilizes “multiple instructional strategies to meet the multiple learning needs of adult learners” (p. 117). The recommendations in the research from Wood and McQuarrie, Jr. (1999), which described that learning should be job-embedded (learning by doing), allow time to reflect on the experience, and provides opportunities for sharing new insights with others, were also reflected in this plan.

Recommended Improvements to Professional Development System

Category	Characteristics	Application that is self-directed and job-embedded	Incorporates opportunities for reflection
Ongoing access to information, both in-person and using technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Access to local expertise (through school, ESU, local college, local and regional experts) -Considers varied schedules/availability/ongoing staff turnover -Information that is relevant including development of leadership skills -Online information is organized by topic for easy access -Includes live or recorded webinars, articles, research briefs -Access to available afterschool curriculum, both in-person trainings and available online -Conference follow-up throughout the school year with support from presenters and community partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time to practice new skills -Support for implementing what is learned -Follow-up discussions with other program leaders and program staff regarding successes, issues, questions -Ongoing support from workshop leaders for implementation (online or in-person) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities to identify personal learning goals -Writing to document what is learned including application, observations, questions, next steps -Opportunities to lead discussions regarding what is learned -Keep a journal regarding what is learned, questions, next steps
Need for opportunities for in-person networking and to learn with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Networking during annual statewide afterschool conference -Networking during annual Project Director Day -Attendance at local and regional meetings and workshops -Implementation of Personal Learning Teams at the local level -Create templates for 15 and 30 minute professional development sessions that include time to discuss, plan for implementation, and follow-up support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Attendees organize and share information gained at workshops or meetings -Utilize resources to implement Personal Learning Teams afterschool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Prepare presentations and lead staff trainings -Lead discussions with other staff regarding self-selected topics -Keep a journal regarding what is learned, questions, next steps
Need for ongoing support from others holding similar positions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Optional mentoring for new/existing project directors (in-person or e-visits using technology) -Use of 21st CCLC secure website for project director Q&A -Ongoing participation in staff meetings -Use of secure website to share forms created and utilized in programs -Monthly meetings with other project directors using technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Conduct observations of other program leaders and staff -Discuss issues, questions, successes during regularly scheduled staff meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Write regarding questions, successes, struggles. Share and discuss writing with others during regular in-person or online meetings. -Lead discussions with other staff regarding self-selected topics

Considering the insights gained as a result of this research study, throughout the upcoming school year and into the future, the following will be accomplished:

Ongoing access to information, both in-person and using technology.

- I will develop a secure, online course for program leaders, organized around the State Board Position Statement for Expanded Learning Opportunities (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017). On this site, I will post curriculum, websites, recordings of webinars, and sample forms from other Nebraska 21st CCLC programs. I will also post lesson plan templates which can be used by project directors as they support staff in program planning.
- I will create an Afterschool Program Leadership Series. Content will include topics directly tied to program leadership including hiring, supervising and evaluating staff, and developing relationships with educators in the school, families, and the community.
- I will find ways to better support 21st CCLC program leaders as they grow meaningful working relationships with school day teachers in their buildings. This could result not only in improved communication between staff and teachers, but also in utilizing teachers to provide needed training for staff. Topics could focus on the school's behavior management strategies, support for lesson planning, and specific strategies for supporting individual students' academic needs.
- I will continue to build relationships with experts from 4-H Extension and other statewide organizations who are able to provide resources, lead clubs for students, and lead regional trainings for program staff.

- I will continue to organize the annual statewide afterschool conference and plan additional regional in-person or online follow-up sessions with presenters who can provide ongoing support for implementation.
- I will continue to locate afterschool curriculum and, when accessed, schedule webinars with the creators of the curriculum to explain its features and answer questions.

Opportunities for in-person networking and to learn with others.

- I will make efforts to get better connected to the regional ESU network in Nebraska, communicating with them about the identified needs of afterschool educators. I will attempt to build a relationship with one contact representing each ESU to make sure program leaders are aware of upcoming trainings that are relevant, requested, and near their communities.
- I will develop generic templates for both 15-minute and 30-minute professional development sessions that utilize both print and online resources, time for discussion and reflection, and a plan for follow-up experiences.
- I will create resources for project directors to help them build and utilize a professional learning community (DuFour et al., 2010; Public Profit, 2018) model for the ongoing professional development of the staff who work in their afterschool programs.
- Because I better understand all the benefits of growing partnerships with postsecondary institutions across rural Nebraska, the new leadership course will include resources and strategies to support program leaders in building useful relationships with college instructors and students attending classes.

Need for ongoing support from other project directors.

- I will develop an optional mentoring system to connect new project directors with experienced directors that includes both in-person discussions and in-person program visits. This system could incorporate the use of technology for conducting virtual visits in order to reduce travel time, expense, and include as many staff as possible.
- I will ask project directors to work with others in their region to identify common professional development needs. Once these needs are identified, I will assist regional leaders in identifying people and resources who will be able to bring them the information and support requested.
- I will create an online location for posting example forms, handbooks, lesson plans, and available curriculum.

Prior to implementation, these potential improvements to the state professional development plan will be shared with the 21st CCLC Rural Advisory Committee. Their feedback and recommendations will be considered as the plan is communicated and implemented over the next months and years.

Implications for Future Research

Existing research was limited regarding the professional development needs of rural afterschool project directors that could be used to inform this study. Therefore, additional research studies that uncover the specific needs of afterschool educators in other states comparable in location, size, diversity, and availability of federal and state funding could provide additional insights into potential improvements to Nebraska's professional development system of support. In addition, studies focused on gathering insights of staff

members who work in rural afterschool programs, rather than program leaders, could provide useful information from yet another perspective. It would also be informative to gather data from leaders of urban afterschool programs to determine the similarities and differences in their identified professional development needs compared to those identified by rural afterschool project directors through this research study.

Limitations of Study

The perspectives and experiences of four participants are represented in the evidence provided in this study. Although the participants were intentionally selected as a representative sample of all rural Nebraska project directors, it is not possible to determine if their responses represented the experiences of all rural afterschool project directors. Participation in this study was optional; however, it should be noted that the researcher conducting this study had prior relationships with study participants which could have impacted the responses provided throughout the study.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email/Letter

Dear [Name]:

I am conducting a research study in order to determine the professional development needs of rural Nebraska afterschool program leaders and their staff. Participation in this study will involve three interviews over the next three months. Each interview will take one hour or less. Technology will be utilized to conduct the interviews. Interviews will be recorded for later analysis. If you are interested in participating in this study, further instructions will follow in an email/letter. There are no risks involved in participating in this study. If you have questions at any time, please let me know. You may reach me via email or phone:

Kim Larson, kimlarson1500@hotmail.com, 402-440-2579.

Thank you for considering this opportunity.

Kim

Appendix B: Informed Consent Letter

Title of Research Project:

Uncovering and Responding to the Professional Development Needs of Afterschool
Program Leaders Across Rural Nebraska

Principal Investigator:

Kimberly K. Larson

1500 Sioux Street

Lincoln, Nebraska 68502

402-440-2579

kimlarson1500@hotmail.com

Purpose of Research

This study will investigate the professional development needs of rural afterschool educators, and how they can be addressed in a state-wide system of support. You must be 19 years of age or older, and a 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool program leader in the state of Nebraska, in order to participate in this research.

Procedures:

Participation in this study will require approximately three hours of your time. You will be asked to participate in three interviews over a three-month period of time.

Participation will take place outside of the regular work day, using non-work related

communication methods.

Risks and/or Discomforts:

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

Benefits:

The benefits of this study will be your ability to inform and influence improvements in the 21st CCLC statewide professional development system of support for rural program leaders and staff.

Confidentiality:

Your responses to survey questions will be kept anonymous and confidential. The recordings of interviews will be stored on a secure computer in a locked file cabinet. In any report, pseudonyms will be used to prevent identification of people, school names, and community names utilized in this study.

Compensation:

There is no monetary compensation for your participation in this study.

Opportunity to Ask Questions:

You may ask questions concerning this research any time by contacting the principal investigator, Kim Larson, at kimlarson1500@hotmail.com.

Freedom to Withdraw:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature of Participant:

Date:

Name and Phone number of investigators:

Principal Investigator:

Kim Larson, kimlarson1500@hotmail.com, 402-440-2579

Secondary Investigator:

Guy Trainin, gtrainin2@unl.edu, 402-472-3391

Appendix C: Interview Questions for 21st CCLC Rural Project Director

Participants

Interviews will be semi-structured to allow for generative conversations, avoiding imposition and allowing participants to share how they perceive their own professional development needs, the needs of their staff, and the issues they face when selecting, scheduling, and providing ongoing learning opportunities. Through questioning, I will gather information related to three themes:

Theme 1: Rural program leaders' personal professional development: Their own background, their perceived professional development needs, and issues they face in achieving their goals.

Theme 2: Rural program staff professional development: Staff background, staff professional development needs, and issues faced in helping staff achieve identified learning goals.

Theme 3: Statewide professional development system for rural program leaders and staff: Analysis of the current professional development system, as well as recommended improvements that could be made.

Through a semi-structured interview process, I will attempt to uncover the successes, needs, and issues facing 21st CCLC project directors related to their own, as well as staff, professional development. I will also ask what is useful regarding structures already in place at the state-level, and their ideas for what can be done to improve the existing system. I will use echoing and probing questions to delve into clarifications related to the three identified themes. A spiral questioning technique will facilitate the process of returning to questions at follow-up interviews to ascertain changing perspectives.

Interview 1: Personal professional development needs: Participant's own background, professional development needs, and issues they face in achieving them.

- Tell me about yourself, your education, and experiences related to this position.
- How long have you been a 21st CCLC project director? How many staff do you oversee?
- What kinds of influences/experiences have shaped you as a program leader?
- What do you consider important to know and to learn regarding the implementation of a quality afterschool programs?
- How do you personally like to engage in the learning process?
- What are you currently doing related to your own personal professional growth?
- What are the issues that keep you from participating in professional development opportunities?

Interview 2: Staff professional development needs: Participant's staff's background, professional development needs, and issues faced in helping staff achieve their learning goals.

- Describe your staff (e.g., background and experience).
- What do you consider important for your staff to know and to learn?
- How do you address the professional development needs of your staff (e.g., resources you utilize, time frame for delivering, individual or group experiences)?
- What is working?
- What are the challenges you face?

Interview 3: Statewide professional development system: Analysis of the current professional development system, and recommendations for improvements that could be made.

- What are the elements of the current state-wide professional development system currently in place that you utilize and want to see continued?
- Based on the issues you have identified and face, what improvements could be made to better support the professional development needs of both you and your staff?