

# **The QuEST Model**

## **Out-of-School Time Contexts and Individual-level Change**

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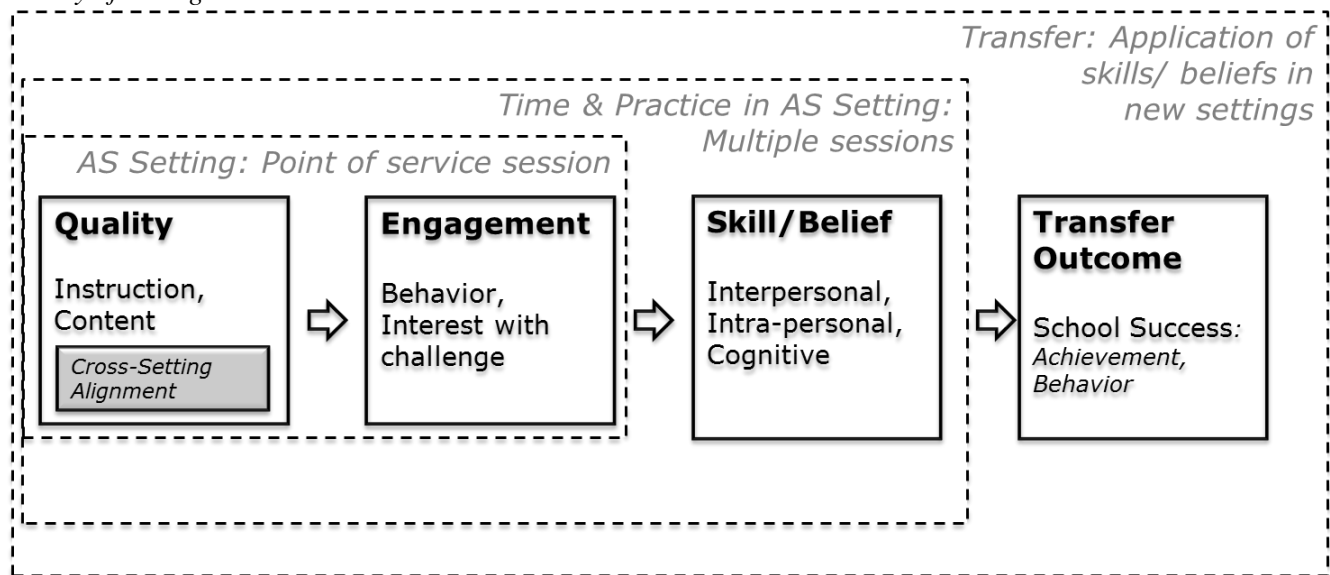
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This brief describes a model for a generic theory of change that highlights the relationship between the qualities of youth experience in out-of-school time (OST) programs. This model bears the acronym QuEST from the sequence: quality (Qu), engagement (E), skills (S), and transfer (T), as depicted in Figure 1 below. The QuEST theory of change requires program providers to think very specifically about which skills they are trying to grow and how likely the qualities of program experience they provide will grow those skills.

The primary chain of effects described in the QuEST model suggests that the quality of instruction and content<sup>1</sup>, delivered at the point of service where instructors and youth meet, will produce heightened levels of youth engagement with content during afterschool offerings. A sequence of high quality, high engagement sessions over time leads to development of specific skills. Finally, with sufficient intensity of exposure to high quality environments, specific skills and beliefs will transfer to other settings, including school day classrooms. When two contexts are highly aligned, they become mutually reinforcing of the skills (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). This chain of effects is described in greater detail below.

**Figure 1:**  
*Theory of Change*



*Afterschool Setting: Point of service session.* According to Figure 1, high quality instruction and content produces youth engagement during a given session. The point-of-service setting is the place where staff, youth, and resources come together as activities (Smith & Akiva, 2008; Smith, Peck, Denault, Blazeovski, & Akiva, 2010) and is a youth-in-context transactive system (cf. "microsystem" in Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). That

<sup>1</sup> Quality is defined in two parts: 1) instruction/ pedagogy that provides positive youth development experiences (e.g., those described in the Youth Program Quality Assessment) and 2) content that is at the right interest and challenge level for youth, including material that is relevant to other settings (e.g., school, family, peer groups).

is, youth bring their experiences, background, motivation, attitudes, etc., to the point of service, and the setting provides features that include instructional practices and content. During each afterschool session, the context provides quality instruction and content and produces youth engagement (Akiva, Cortina, Eccles, & Smith, 2013; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Engagement (the behavioral equivalent of motivation) is a strong predictor of skill development (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

*Time and Practice in Afterschool Setting: Multiple sessions.* The simultaneous presence of high quality instruction and high youth engagement across multiple sessions produces mastery experiences. We also know that guided practice, in which teachers provide immediate feedback and assistance to learners who are applying new skills, can lead to higher levels of performance (Fischer, 2007). Youth engagement over multiple sessions is likely to include regular experience of positive affect, concentration on tasks requiring moderately-difficult effort, and receipt of scaffolding – especially adults’ modeling of the learning task (Fischer & Bidell, 2006) which can be, for example, socioemotional (e.g., using your words), academic (e.g., reducing fractions), or expressive (e.g., design a service project). The definition of skill employed in this paper is broad, including domains of knowledge acquisition, retrieval and use; intrapersonal regulation and beliefs (within a person); and interpersonal behaviors (between persons). Within this domain of skills, most afterschool outcomes can be located, including both more proximal outcomes which are the direct objectives of afterschool experiences (i.e., improved communication skills) as well as outcomes which are demonstrated in other settings such as classrooms. In our model, youth engagement and skill building over multiple sessions mediates the effects of OST setting participation on positive developmental outcomes.

*Transfer: Application of Skills/Beliefs in New Setting.* Finally, the third box raises the issue of skills transfer, or the likelihood that the skills are mastered well enough to be applied in other contexts. According to educational researcher Kurt Fischer, context can include the environment or setting where the skill is being carried out; the range of emotional and biological states that occur within a person; and the relationship to other people and the levels of support, challenge, or stress that they provide (Fischer & Bidell, 2006). Skill development is highly context-dependent so outcomes and measures should be highly aligned with features and processes in the afterschool context/experience (Love, Meckstroth, & Sprachman, 1997; Rosenshine, 2010; Shager et al., 2013). Most skills are designed to perform specific functions in particular contexts. For example, a student who learns to use the scientific process in biology class might not realize that the same pattern of thinking can be used to deconstruct one author’s argument for the onset of the Civil War in history class. Likewise, talented baseball players may not be able to transfer their throwing skills to the football field. However, context-specific mastery experiences support longer-term skill development and skill transfer to external settings. Whether an afterschool program’s theory of change follows a pathway of direct or indirect effects, greater alignment between schools and afterschool programs increases the likelihood for skill growth and demonstration across contexts.

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