Afterschool Matters

*National
Institute on
Out-of-School
Time*

**AT THE WELLESLEY
CENTERS FOR WOMEN**

table of **contents**

WELCOME

We are excited to present this special issue of *Afterschool Matters* highlighting work of the William Penn Foundation and its partners to support children and families in Philadelphia through literacy-rich programming and environments.

Literacy-rich environments is one of six strategies in the William Penn Foundation's Strong Start, Strong Readers program area. Four papers in this issue reflect current partner initiatives to build literacy-rich environments. Rachel Todaro and colleagues explore how Playful Learning Landscapes promote the kinds of adult–child interactions that build literacy skills. Karen Knutson and Kevin Crowley describe how museums and community-based organizations can partner to support family literacy. Two articles, one by Lori Severino and colleagues and one by a team here at NIOST, focus on how coaching can help OST professionals support children's literacy.

Keeping with the theme, the other articles and our Voices from the Field essay focus on other aspects of literacy development in OST programs in Massachusetts and New York City.

We are grateful to the William Penn Foundation for its generous support of this issue of *Afterschool Matters*.

GEORGIA HALL, PhD
Director & Senior Research Scientist, NIOST
Managing Editor, *Afterschool Matters*

Strong Start, Strong Readers

An Interview with the William Penn Foundation

Georgia Hall, managing editor of *Afterschool Matters* and director of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, interviewed two members of the William Penn Foundation's Great Learning grant program: Elliot Weinbaum, program director, and Amanda Charles, senior program associate. The William Penn Foundation generously funded publication of this issue of *Afterschool Matters*.

Georgia: The William Penn Foundation believes that all children deserve to have access to high-quality education and to experience academic success. How did Strong Start, Strong Readers become a priority direction?

Elliot: Children and youth have been a priority

of the William Penn Foundation since its founding in 1945. In 2015, we went through a strategy review to make sure we were using the foundation's resources effectively. There were really three steps.

First, we looked back at our grants over the previous ten years. Where had we seen our grants get traction to produce outcomes for children and youth?

Second, we looked at the ecosystem here in Philadelphia. The foundation has always been committed to Philadelphia. So how can we address a real need? Where is there momentum for the foundation to build on?

Third, we looked at the research on the transitional points in children's development where additional investments could make a difference.

So with that combination of past grant-making, the current landscape, and current research, we saw that work supporting young children was our niche and opportunity. We saw a need to invest early in children's lives and set the foundation for their success. That's how we landed on supporting kindergarten readiness and third-grade read-

ing. From there, we identified six strategies under Strong Start, Strong Readers. One of those was to build literacy-rich out-of-school time (OST) environments.

Georgia: How can literacy-rich OST environments support in-school academic and literacy learning?

Amanda: Children spend 80 percent of their time outside of school, not only at home but at parks, libraries, bus stops, corner stores, and so on. These spaces offer key opportunities for learning. Our strategies focus on transforming spaces and building momentum to support language and literacy development wherever families spend time. These spaces can support vocabulary growth, social-emotional skill development, and general knowledge—all things children need to enter school ready to learn and achieve success.

By offering content-rich programming in community settings, we give children a knowledge base to draw on in the classroom and support learning in school.

Elliot: Sometimes we talk about *constrained* and *unconstrained* skills. A *constrained* skill like learning the alphabet, learning phonics—those are things that schools are uniquely suited for. All kids have to master them, and they can master them in a certain amount of time with certain approaches.

Unconstrained skills are those that are always growing, like vocabulary and comprehension. This type of skill-building goes on our whole lives. OST programs build unconstrained skills that complement and support the constrained skills. In addition, much of the Literacy-Rich Environments portfolio is about growing motivation and enthusiasm, as well as increasing opportunities, for reading and language development in order to build a literacy foundation upon which schools can build.

Georgia: What are the goals of the foundation's initiatives in community-based organizations, libraries, museums, clinics, and community centers to promote children's language and literacy skills?

Amanda: Short-term outcomes include more adult-child conversations, expansion of vocabulary, and an increase in motivation and confidence related to learning in general. We hope that our initiatives can serve as models to other community organizations, decision-makers, and policymakers to replicate around the country. Our support of research and evaluation of these initiatives helps make that possible.

Thinking about longer-term goals, we hope to see more community-based organizations in Philadelphia adopt a focus on early literacy and language development. We hope that these initiatives give organization leaders and program staff the skills and tools to create literacy-rich programming. We want to encourage more high-quality literacy-rich learning environments across the city.

Georgia: How do the foundation's literacy-rich environments projects support the professional development of adult staff in grantee organizations?

Amanda: We are working across Philadelphia to support OST professionals. We work with organizations looking to make an intentional shift in their work toward early literacy.

One approach is to offer coaching that blends literacy skill building with program quality building. Program leaders receive one-on-one in-person coaching with real-time feedback, along with guidance on data collection. The strategies that coaches foster improve program implementation and support continuous quality improvement. With that groundwork, the OST programs can engage in literacy skill-building strategies and practices.

Georgia: What were your favorite OST learning spaces growing up?

Amanda: My younger brothers and I spent a lot of time in Timber Town, a playground near where I grew up. This environment was made entirely of wood. It lent itself to a lot of dramatic play, like chasing dragons.

Elliot: I grew up here in Philadelphia and attended the children's concerts given by the Philadelphia Orchestra. The conductor would explain aspects of the orchestra and the instruments, and a local artist would draw alongside to illustrate the music as it was happening. These were educational and wonderfully fun experiences!

Supporting Afterschool Literacy

Professional Development, Funding, and More

Lena O. Townsend & Anne Lawrence

Think about something you love to do. Do you love to swim? Play piano or chess? Now think of something that you're indifferent to or can't do. That might also be swimming or playing piano or chess. Would you want to teach someone to swim or to play piano or chess if you had no interest in that activity or if you had repeatedly had negative experiences while trying to learn? No, you wouldn't.

In the same way, people who have negative experiences with reading and writing are not well equipped to teach literacy. Even many people who like to read and write experienced learning to read not as something engaging and fun but as a chore. At least since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school-based literacy instruction has increasingly emphasized skills-based preparation to pass standardized tests. Teachers have fewer and fewer opportunities to make learning engaging.

LENA O. TOWNSEND served as executive director of the Robert Bowne Foundation from 2001 to its closing in 2015. Previously she worked with community-based afterschool programs for the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College. She holds an MA in reading from Teachers College, Columbia University, and an MPA in nonprofit management and policy from New York University.

ANNE LAWRENCE has over 40 years of experience in adult and youth education as a teacher, staff developer, evaluator, and program manager. She devoted many of those years to grantmaking and support of OST programming. As program officer of the Robert Bowne Foundation, she created ways to develop the literacy capacity of grantees and the OST field.

THE ROBERT BOWNE FOUNDATION founded *Afterschool Matters* and continued to provide funding when the journal moved to its present home, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time.

Partner Perspectives articles are not peer reviewed.

Out-of-school-time (OST) programs, especially those that depend on government funding, are also expected to improve participants' academic abilities. However, OST staff members aren't trained to be—or paid as—educators. It is inappropriate to expect them to improve participants' academic test scores. Young people need other kinds of complementary and engaging experiences, besides academic preparation, to grow into healthy, well-rounded adults.

Quality OST programs engage young people in sports, the arts, media production, cooking, gardening, community service, and a host of other activities. Rather than imposing more school after school, OST programs can integrate literacy into their program activities—just as literacy is integrated into every aspect of everyday life. Program activities give participants opportunities to put literacy, math, and science skills to use in authentic contexts. As Robert Halpern said, "afterschool programs' philosophy, purpose, and approach to nurturing literacy has to be different—in some ways fundamentally different—from that found in most … schools" (Halpern, 2003, p. 2).

In order to guide young people through engaging activities as they integrate literacy into their programming, youth practitioners must themselves have experienced engaging reading and writing activities in authentic contexts. But for most, their educational experiences have been of the lockstep, skills-based kind. If OST staff haven't experienced reading and writing as engaging and pleasurable, they are no better equipped to engage young people in reading and writing than a person who dislikes swimming or chess can teach those skills.

Those youth practitioners, then, need professional development—sustained, engaging, group-based support that enables them to experience literacy as fun or at least as useful toward personally meaningful goals. Furthermore, if OST programs are to provide that professional development, then their funders need to support the work. Drawing on our experiences as educators, professional developers, and OST funders, we offer our suggestions about what constitutes effective literacy professional development and how programs

and funders can support staff to integrate literacy into OST programming.

Elements of Effective Literacy Professional Development

Good professional development enhances the ability of program staff to create engaging literacy experiences for their young charges. Just as importantly, it enhances their own literacy abilities and their enthusiasm for reading and writing. It therefore must give them first-hand experience with engaging in literacy.

Swimming teachers who can swim smooth laps, piano teachers who can play favorite études, and chess teachers who can decide on a series of moves that will win a game deeply understand the experience they want their students to have and are enthusiastic about it. OST staff who want to facilitate authentic, engaging literacy experiences need to have similar enthusiasm. Maybe they loved having bedtime stories read to them as children. Maybe they easily get engaged in a good book. Maybe they use their literacy skills to follow recipes, or they keep a garden log to track what made some tomatoes or lettuce plants grow better than others. If they have experiences like these, their professional development can build on their engagement. If not, they first must experience literacy as engaging in order to be able to engage young people.

The Robert Bowne Foundation (RBF) funded literacy development in New York City OST programs from the mid-1980s to 2015. Before either of us joined the foundation as staff, we were part of an RBF-sponsored professional development group that collaborated with youth workers to develop workshops and, ultimately, longer-term professional development for OST programs. (Hill et al., 1995). The principles we outline below come from the work of that group and were refined through years of RBF practice (Youth Today, n.d.).

Start Where Staff Are

To help OST staff develop their ability to lead literacy activities, professional developers must help them reflect on their own experiences with literacy, become

> If OST staff haven't experienced reading and writing as engaging and pleasurable, they are no better equipped to engage young people in reading and writing than a person who dislikes swimming or chess can teach those skills.

conscious of the strategies they use to read or produce text, and develop awareness of their learning style.

During introductory literacy workshops, we have had participants reflect on their reading and writing history, using a prompt like this one:

> Close your eyes and sift through your memories of learning to read and write. What comes to mind? Pick one memory. Where were you? Who were you with? What were you reading or writing? How did you feel? Write down some notes and share them with the person next to you.

In pairs, the workshop participants then discuss the characteristics of their positive and negative literacy experiences. This activity helps OST staff become conscious of how their experiences with reading and writing have contributed to who they are as learners.

Next, we would help OST staff become aware of their own literacy strategies so they can better understand how to enhance the literacy strategies of program participants. Even staff members who love to read and write aren't usually aware of the strategies they use. We know this firsthand: We are both voracious readers, but it took a long-term professional development experience to make us aware of our own reading and writing processes. Then we could use that awareness to understand learners' strategies and build on those strategies to help learners grow as readers and writers.

An activity that helps OST staff become aware of reading strategies is to present them with a simple il-

lustrated text written in an imaginary alphabet, with just a few words translated into English. Because they can't read this alphabet, participants must use strategies such as sight word vocabulary (the translated words), context (from the illustration), and language conventions (such as ? for a question) to read the story. They experience what emerging readers go through when they read. In the process, they become aware that they have many strategies, in addition to phonics, to make meaning of a text.

The final step in beginning where professional development participants are is to address their learning styles—the ways in which they approach new information. We have often used Marcia Conner's (2018) learning styles inventory, which helps participants discern whether they are primarily visual, auditory, or tactile/kinesthetic learners. OST staff who know about learning styles can better help young people become more aware of how they learn and plan activities that take into account the fact that different people learn differently.

Teach by Modeling

The best learning practices are "experiential, participatory, and inquiry-based" (Youth Today, n. d.). OST staff can learn effective literacy development practices by engaging in those practices themselves as they investigate their own questions about practice. For example, we have used these common reading and writing instructional strategies in professional development for OST staff:

- **Journals.** Staff participants can use journals to keep notes, try out different reading and writing activities, record ideas for further exploration, identify problems, reflect on their learning process, and document how they are using what they are learning in their program.
- **Writing groups.** Participants can write during workshop time or share previously produced work with their writing group. They can talk about the finished product and about the process of writing. They may finally publish their writing for the whole group as a booklet or blog.
- **Book clubs.** When participants read the same book and talk about it in a small group, they are both exploring literacy together and thinking together about what the book says about helping young people develop literacy skills.

Build a Learning Community

The most successful professional development takes place over time with a consistent group of people. Participants learn, go back to their programs to try out new activities, and then come back to reflect with their colleagues on how it went. All participants have "both something to teach and something to learn" (Youth Today, n.d.). With our professional development colleagues, we pulled out three principles for effective learning communities (Youth Today, n.d.). Facilitators should:

- **Engage OST staff** in "discussion, experimentation, reflection, and sharing among colleagues" (Youth Today, n. d.). For example, coaching circles (Brassard, 2018; McNamara, 2002) use peer learning strategies to help people take concrete actions to support their goals in their programs. A participant brings up a challenge with which they are struggling. Rather than posing solutions, group members ask insightful questions to help the person who brought the challenge discover solutions. The person tries out one or more solutions in their program and reports back at the next session.
- **Assess and modify the professional development to meet participant needs**. Facilitators should regularly get feedback from the learning community and, as necessary, change their approach or selection of activities.
- **Build participants' leadership skills** by "helping them recognize what they know, providing peer networking opportunities, and encouraging them to share their learning with their program colleagues" (Youth Today, n.d.).

Good professional development enhances the quality of support OST staff provide to their young charges and, as importantly, improves their own literacy abilities and engagement with reading and writing.

Program-Specific Technical Assistance

Professional development and technical assistance (TA) are complementary processes. Professional development increases the ability of individuals to create and build on engaging literacy experiences for themselves and for program participants. TA takes place at the organizational level to enable programs to give staff the support they need to create quality programming.

TA is designed to meet the needs of the individual organization. As a funder of OST programs in New York City, the RBF partnered with grantees to help them build their literacy development capacity (Hirota & Schwabacher, 2012). Part of that work was experiential, learner-centered TA focused on programmatic and management topics. We identified critical questions about practice, worked with OST staff to study what works and what doesn't, and shared lessons learned among practitioners (Lawrence, 2014).

Most often, grantees asked for help to enhance their literacy offerings. Anne worked with each organization's staff to identify the literacy activities that were already happening and investigate where more literacy development could fit in—whether the organization had a specific focus, such as community service, dance, or video production, or offered many kinds of programming. Where possible, she established long-term learning communities to support staff in integrating literacy with their program activities.

Often, in the process of providing this programmatic TA, we learned that the organization needed organizational TA. An organization can provide quality programming over the long haul only if it is managerially and organizationally strong. Again tailoring the TA to the organization, we provided support with such management needs as strategic planning, board development, and financial systems and planning.

> That is our first and most important piece of advice for funders: Trust your grantees.

How Funders Can Support Programs

OST staff are the experts when it comes to their participants, communities, and areas of specialty. As foundation staff, we created partnerships with OST programs to help them build capacity in literacy development. We may have had expertise in literacy, but program staff knew the needs of their participants and organizations better than we ever could. We trusted their expertise and collaborated with them to fulfill their mission and our own. That is our first and most important piece of advice for funders: Trust your grantees.

Our other advice comes from our experience as staff first of grantee organizations and then of a funder of OST literacy programming.

Provide Comprehensive Long-Term Support

Foundations typically follow one of two predominant funding strategies. The first is short-term support, in which a foundation:

- Funds a specific activity or kind of programming for one to three years
- Provides limited funding for the specific activity and little to no overhead or general operating support
- Expects grantees to identify sources of funding to replace this short-term support
- Requires program evaluation and expects results that require ongoing professional development without paying for either

The second, longer-term strategy is less common but more successful. A foundation using this strategy provides funding that:

- Lasts as long as it takes for the program to meet its goals, often 10 or even 20 years
- Covers the actual cost of the program, including the general operating support that any specific programming requires
- Spares grantees the burden of juggling multiple funders and their requirements
- Covers any required evaluation or professional development

Revenue for social programs comes from a limited number of places: government grants, donations, fees, and foundation or corporate grants. Government grants rarely cover the full costs of programming, much less the associated overhead. In addition, government payments are often delayed, which raises cash flow issues for organizations that are usually strapped for cash. Meanwhile, donations and fees for services are limited options for most OST organizations; it takes money to make money in those ways.

So foundation grants are a big part of many OST organizations' financial pies. When foundations commit to only one to three years of funding, the organizations have to engage in continual fundraising and are always in danger of having less funding than they need to run quality programs. Organizations can provide quality services only when they have sufficient support guaranteed over a substantial period of time. That support needs to include overhead costs. OST organizations can develop young people's literacy skills only if they can keep the lights on and pay the rent.

Ask Grantees for Their Budgets

Lena once had a project with 13 funders. Each funder required a budget describing how its grant would be spent. One funder provided its own budget for the project. Lena had to figure out how to fit project costs—for example, salaries, local travel, and supplies—into one cohesive budget that reflected the amounts each funder had approved. She often found that she had more money than she needed for one category—say, local travel—but not enough for another category—say, materials. One funder threatened to take back $300 that wasn't spent on the allotted category in the allotted time, even though the funding was needed in a different category.

A more sensible approach is to ask the grantee to provide its own detailed budget as part of the project proposal. If the budget seems unreasonable, ask the grantee why it is making the requests. Encourage grantees to budget realistically, including a reasonable amount for overhead. Learn what it really takes, in terms of money, time, and staff, to accomplish program goals.

Another sensible strategy is to have a budget modification process that is clear to grantees and not onerous. After all, it is not unusual for needs to change over the course of a multi-year project.

Support Evaluation and Professional Development

Funders often require evaluation and professional development but don't pay for the time and staff those activities take. Many OST staff members are paid by the hour, so the organization would have to come up with money for the extra hours. For that matter, salaried staff have to give up some other activity in order to participate in evaluation or professional development. In short, funders should not require what they are not willing to support.

In addition to funding, foundations can themselves provide professional development and TA to grantees. At the RBF, we provided long-term professional development and both programmatic and management TA. When the need was literacy development, we selected professional development providers to support programs. For some other needs, such as management capabilities, we funded third parties to provide focused TA. Just as children take years to acquire 21st century literacy skills, so OST organizations take years to build their capacity to provide high-quality literacy programming. To build that capacity, they need to provide their staff with sustained, interactive professional

development in a community of learners. Most also need to develop their administrative and financial systems to better support staff, participants, and families. If funders want the organizations they fund to succeed in building children's literacy capacity, they need to commit to their grantees for the long haul and provide comprehensive support for literacy development.

References

Brassard, C. (2018). *The point of coaching circles.* https://coachingcircles.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Article-The-Point-of-Coaching-Circles.pdf

Conner, M. (2018). What is your learning style? http://marciaconner.com/assess/learningstyle-2/

Fusco, D., Lawrence, A., Matloff-Nieves, S., & Ramos, E. (2013). The accordion effect: Is quality in afterschool getting the squeeze? *Journal of Youth Development, 8,* 4–14. https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2013.92

Halpern, R. (2003, Fall). *Supporting the literacy development of low-income children in afterschool programs: Challenges and exemplary practices.* Afterschool Matters Occasional Papers Series. https://www.niost.org/Occasional-Paper-Fall-2003/supporting-the-literacy-development-of-low-income-children-in-afterschool-programs-challenges-and-exemplary-practices

Hill, S. L., Townsend, L. O., Lawrence, A., Shevin, J. & Ingalls, S. (1995). *Supporting community learning: A staff development and resource guide for after-school and youth-education programs.* Institute for Literacy Studies, Lehman College, City University of New York. http://3bhuf2134ms42er36k19to8a.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/09/PDF6_Publication_1995_Supporting_Community_-Learning.pdf

Hirota, J., & Schwabacher, S. (2012). *The Robert Bowne Foundation: Clarity, consistency, passion of vision and action.* http://www.robertbownefoundation.org/documents/legacy_pub_short.pdf

Lawrence, A. (2014). Technical assistance and strong relationships: Key to quality capacity building. https://grantcraft.org/content/blog/technical-assistance-and-strong-relationships-key-to-quality-capacity-build/

McNamara, C. (2002). *Authenticity circles facilitator's guide: A step-by-step guide to facilitating peer coaching groups.* Authenticity Consulting.

Townsend, L. (2003). Transformative work in programs for children and youth. *Afterschool Matters, 2,* 3–12. https://www.niost.org/2003-Spring/transformative-work-in-programs-for-children-and-youth.html

Youth Today. (n. d.). The Robert Bowne Foundation: Professional development principles and practices. https://youthtoday.org/rbf-opening-quadrant-page/capacity-building-professional-development/robert-bowne-foundation-professional-development-principles-practices/

Playful Learning Landscapes

Promoting Literacy Through Youth Engagement and Culturally Relevant Design

Rachael Todaro, Brenna Hassinger-Das, Jennifer M. Zosh, Sarah R. Lytle,
Roberta M. Golinkoff, & Kathy Hirsh-Pasek

High-quality language interactions not only support children's language development but also promote better long-term academic outcomes (Hirsh-Pasek, Adamson et al., 2015; Huttenlocher et al., 2010; Pace et al., 2019; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Interactions in the form of frequent back-and-forth conversations between caregiver and child predict language growth in children (Adamson et al., 2014; Hirsh-Pasek, Adamson et al., 2015), regardless of whether families are from highly resourced or under-resourced environments (Masek et al., 2020).

Language learning is the single best predictor of later growth in language, literacy, mathematics, and social development (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Pace et al., 2019). However, many families do not have access to educationally enriched spaces that spur high-

RACHAEL TODARO, PhD, is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Psychology, Temple University.

BRENNA HASSINGER-DAS, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, Pace University-NYC.

JENNIFER M. ZOSH, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology, Pennsylvania State University-Brandywine.

SARAH R. LYTLE, PhD, is the executive director of Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network.

ROBERTA M. GOLINKOFF, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Delaware, Newark.

KATHY HIRSH-PASEK, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Psychology, Temple University, and a senior fellow of the Center for Universal Education, Brookings Institution.

quality language opportunities. This issue leads us to ask what educators and policymakers can do to expose children to high-quality interactions that promote literacy skills.

A great deal of literacy instruction takes place in school, where children in Western countries spend only about 20 percent of their waking time (Meltzoff et al., 2009). Up to 80 percent of children's time is available for special moments with family, friends, and neighbors, as well as for afterschool activities. Activities after school take varied forms—not only participating in organized afterschool programs but also playing in public parks and playgrounds, visiting libraries or recreation centers, and going to local museums or science centers. While these community educational assets enrich neighborhoods, they are not available or accessible to all children. Communities with high poverty rates and high percentages of minoritized racial and ethnic groups are significantly less likely than more affluent White neighborhoods to have play spaces (Mowen, 2010). Reduced opportunities for play make it difficult for children to tap into their communities' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and cultural expertise as familiar literacy resources (Dyson, 2006; Wohlwend, 2018).

> Reduced opportunities for play make it difficult for children to tap into their communities' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and cultural expertise as familiar literacy resources (Dyson, 2006; Wohlwend, 2018).

The Playful Learning Landscapes (PLL) initiative was founded on the premise that children from all communities should have access to beautiful, enriching, and culturally relevant play environments that help them thrive. Working with community members, we co-designed public spaces that promote the kinds of adult–child conversations that lead to literacy learning.

Playful Learning

Playful learning lies on a spectrum that encompasses free play, guided play, and games (Zosh et al., 2018). In *free play,* children set up and engage in their own play without a learning goal. *Guided play* maintains the exploratory nature of free play but fosters a particular learning goal through the design of the environment, gentle adult scaffolding, or both (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017; Weisberg et al., 2016; Zosh et al., 2018). Critically, the child still drives the learning. For example, a children's museum installation is curated to facilitate child discovery within the bounds of a well-designed and enriched space. Similarly, a teacher might create an exploratory learning activity in which children discover the solution to a problem or create a new device from old maker parts (Weisberg et al., 2016). Adults can support guided learning through caregiver–child conversations that support a variety of outcomes, such as language development, school readiness, and achievement (Hadani et al., 2021; Hirsh-Pasek & Hadani, 2020). Finally, *games* that integrate content can, like guided play, be used when adults are aiming for a particular learning goal (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017).

Playful learning encompasses all three types of play. However, the scientific literature suggests that guided play best improves child outcomes when adults have a particular goal in mind (Fisher et al., 2013; Weisberg et al., 2016). Increasing guided play opportunities increases caregiver–child interactions in which both partners use the types of language known to support learning outcomes (Hanner et al., 2019; Schlesinger et al., 2020) and literacy development (Cavanaugh et al., 2017; Farrell, 2019; Han et al., 2010; Tsao, 2008).

Playful Learning Landscapes

PLL began as a community-research partnership initiative in Philadelphia. Originating at Temple University Infant and Child Lab, it was driven by local community-based organizations and largely supported by the William Penn Foundation. As the initiative evolved, support for project implementation across the country shifted to the Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network (PLLAN), an initiative of the Ultimate Block Party, a national nonprofit organization. PLLAN is partnering with community-based and nonprofit organizations, city agencies, and marketing firms to expand PLL to such locations as Omaha, Nebraska; New York City; and Santa Ana, California.

The mission of PLL is to reinvent everyday spaces and experiences as fun, intentional, evidence-based learning opportunities that organically prompt interactions that support children's literacy development. PLL rests on three assumptions:

- Changes in public spaces can foster human behavior change.
- The latest findings from the science of learning can be baked into the design of spaces in ways that spark intergenerational family engagement, which, in turn, builds social capital.
- Change in public spaces resulting from co-design with communities can elevate neighborhood voices and showcase cultural relevance.

There is rich precedent for thinking that the design of public spaces can both enrich neighborhoods and support the common good. Physical tweaks to public spaces can fundamentally change how individuals behave. For instance, planting trees near commercial areas increases usage and prompts people to return to the area (Wolf, 2007), adding green spaces to an environment reduces aggressive behavior (Younan et al., 2016), and putting exercise equipment in public parks increases activity levels (Cohen et al., 2012).

Whether at bus stops, in parks, on sidewalks, or in supermarkets, all PLL projects adhere to criteria based on the research on how children learn through play. The best learning environments are:
- Active, not passive (Chi, 2009)
- Engaging, not distracting (Han et al., 2010; Zosh et al., 2018)
- Meaningful and connected to previous knowledge or experience (Hudson & Nelson, 1983)
- Socially interactive (Chi, 2009)
- Iterative, not static (Bonawitz et al., 2011; Weisberg, 2016; Zosh et al., 2018)
- Joyful (Hirsh-Pasek, Zosh et al., 2015; Zosh et al., 2018)

Such environments can help children learn in a variety of content areas, from learning new words (Han et al., 2010; Zosh et al., 2013) and remembering stories (Hudson & Nelson, 1983) to exploring causal relationships (Bonawitz et al., 2011). Learning environments with these characteristics support social and linguistic growth (Berk, 2006; Howes et al., 1992), cognitive flexibility (Isen, 2001; Isen et al., 1987), and integrative thinking (Kahn & Birch, 1968)—all of which are important to developing literacy skills, including reading and writing.

These principles suggest that community co-design

> The mission of PLL is to reinvent everyday spaces and experiences as fun, intentional, evidence-based learning opportunities that organically prompt interactions that support children's literacy development.

of public spaces to foster evidence-based playful learning opportunities might increase the quantity and quality of child–caregiver interactions to support literacy, mathematics, and spatial learning development (Bustamante et al., 2019; Hanner et al., 2019; Hassinger-Das, Zosh, et al., 2020; Hassinger-Das et al., 2021; Ridge et al., 2015). Just as families become more physically active when outdoor exercise equipment is introduced into city parks and walkways, we expected that they would become more mentally active when co-designed playful learning structures were introduced in public spaces.

Building with Communities

All playful learning designs can be crafted to create fertile ground for child–caregiver conversations that support children's literacy outcomes. However, community participation is central to PLL's mission to capture community members' goals and make spaces culturally relevant. Rather than simply installing prefabricated structures, PLL initiative leaders transform community spaces through intergenerational community co-design, using methods from community-based participatory research (Collins et al., 2018). When interventions integrate the science of learning *and* are culturally competent (Chen et al., 1998), they can spark meaningful, high-quality interactions. Four PLL projects illustrate these and related principles.

King Puzzle Bench

Using the co-design approach to engage community members of all ages, PLL projects have successfully supported both literacy and other foundational skills. For instance, community members in West Philadelphia co-designed a bench that displays a large three-dimensional puzzle of Martin Luther King, Jr. Observations documented that the puzzle prompted conversations about the civil rights leader, who gave a speech at that very spot; it also set the stage for caregivers and children to use spatial language such as *above, below,* or *align* (Hassinger-Das et al., 2020). Spatial language fosters the development of representational structures that not only support spatial-relational understanding but also facilitate mental processing (Lowenstein & Gentner, 2005).

Play Captains

Successful community co-design depends on engaging both adults and youth. Sutton and Kemp (2002) argue that bringing young people into design processes can heighten their social and environmental awareness while helping them gain a sense of control over their surroundings. Community-based organizations also benefit youth by providing them with safe places to develop independence, community identity, social competence, and social responsibility (Hung, 2004). In turn, creating processes that involve youth in producing social and physical environments can foster community development.

To promote opportunities for youth engagement, PLLAN and Temple University Infant and Child Laboratory researchers collaborated with Fab Youth Philly—a Philadelphia organization that provides teenagers with opportunities for employment and civic engagement—to infuse its existing Play Captains Initiative with training in playful learning and to assess the efficacy of the project (Schlesinger et al., 2020).

The Play Captains Initiative ran alongside the city's Play Streets program, in which community members agreed to close their street to traffic between 10:00 am and 4:00 pm to allow children to play freely. The teenage play captains were hired for five weeks during the summers of 2018 to 2021 to facilitate playful activities and games and to collect data in play street locations. The play captains kept "Bex decks"—small notebooks with playful learning tips and games—for easy reference. To promote literacy development, we pointed the play captains to tactics for transforming play street activities into literacy activities. For instance, jumping rope became a spelling contest under play captains' guidance. Jumpers spelled the name of an animal of their choice, one letter per jump, ending their turn when they had spelled the name correctly.

An evaluation of the Play Captains Initiative found that children who played alongside play captains demonstrated increased interaction and use of targeted learning-related language. In addition, play captains significantly increased both their self-confidence and their understanding of the links between play and learning (Schlesinger et al., 2020). The project succeeded due both to the foundation built by Fab Youth Philly as a well-respected and experienced community partner and to the engagement and enthusiasm of the play captains themselves. Projects like the Play Captains Initiative enable neighborhood youth to imagine themselves as more than token participants and to realize their roles as agents of community change.

Urban Thinkscape

The iterative and participatory designs of PLLs evolve in response to community feedback before, during, and even after construction. Although the iterative process may lengthen a project's timeline, this approach has significant value because iteration often leads to design improvements (Xu et al., 2015). Even seemingly small or subtle details can affect a design's cultural relevance (Arcia et al., 2016). In one study, when culturally relevant and familiar literacy-enriched objects and activities were placed in urban daycare centers, children were more likely to engage in reading and writing behaviors (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). Similarly, PLL's approach can yield a new generation of playful learning interventions that will resonate with their primary audiences and be disseminated broadly (Adam et al., 2019).

Project evaluations can help researchers and communities determine how community members are interacting with PLL installations and whether these spaces are engaging children and families in high-quality interactions to build language and essential skills. Typically, community-led evaluations are conducted using naturalistic observation, in which community researchers examine the use of the space before and after a PLL project is implemented (Bustamante et al., 2020; Hassinger-Das et al., 2020).

For example, alongside Temple University Infant and Child Lab researchers and in collaboration with local designers and architects, the president of a neighborhood association in West Philadelphia created a new kind of bus stop that turned a waiting space into a playful learning plaza known as Urban Thinkscape (Hassinger-Das, Palti et al., 2020). During the design process, the president convened the neighborhood association to choose learning goals to integrate into the designs. Urban Thinkscape's four designs—Puzzle

> Rather than simply installing prefabricated structures, PLL initiative leaders transform community spaces through intergenerational community co-design, using methods from community-based participatory research.

Wall, Jumping Feet, Stories, and Hidden Figures—are actively engaging, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, and joyful. Each targets specific language outcomes, such as spatial, literacy, and mathematics talk. For example, Stories allows children to be physically active as they climb across the installation from one narrative cue to another, creating a story as they go. This design thus targets the development of narrative skills, which improve children's literacy outcomes (Tabors et al., 2001).

As Urban Thinkscape was being designed and implemented, community members voiced their interest in being involved in the evaluation research. As a result, the project employed and trained neighborhood residents to collect data (Hassinger-Das, Palti et al., 2020). Results demonstrated that caregivers and children interacted more and held more conversations at Urban Thinkscape than they did before installation. When compared to a control site playground, Urban Thinkscape demonstrated a significant effect on adult–child interaction and language use—with large effect sizes suggesting sizable and meaningful differences (Hassinger-Das, Palti et al., 2020).

Library Projects

Support and engagement from local partners can have a strong effect on successful design and integration of PLLs (Hadani et al., 2021). In collaboration with the Free Library of Philadelphia, PLLAN collaborated with an architectural firm, a park playground organization, and a nonprofit devoted to children's play to create the next generation of libraries in North, West, and South Philadelphia (Hassinger-Das, Zosh et al., 2020). The project reimagined children's library spaces to enhance the quality and quantity of caregiver and child visits. During several community events, project staff captured ideas from library staff members about play materials in the library. They helped library patrons envisage how they would like to play and learn and then empowered them to express their visions. Then the project staff synthesized the community input to inform the libraries' redesign plans. One library installed a 10-foot climbing wall with letters that children could use to create words. In others, reading nooks feature large Tangram-style blocks, or a curtain-clad stage encourages children to engage in sociodramatic and narrative play. Observations showed that use of these play-and-learn spaces was associated with increases in caregiver–child conversations of the kinds known to foster literacy and STEM skills (Hassinger-Das, Zosh,

Figure 1. Creating a Playful Learning Environment in 11 Steps

et al., 2020). Working with local partners to reimagine libraries as a play space where people can interact and thrive can increase not only the frequency of library visits but also opportunities for rich, playful interactions that support language and literacy achievement.

11 Steps to a Playful Learning Landscape

PLL has evolved since its beginnings to become much more adept at centering the community during all stages of design, implementation, and evaluation, thanks in large part to the patience and input of communities that have participated in PLL projects.

Interest in enriching everyday spaces to enhance caregiver–child interactions is growing among researchers, educators, community leaders, organizations, families, and funders. Figure 1, captured from PLLAN's *Playbook* (2020), outlines our community-centered process. These 11 steps integrate our best practices and provide a roadmap for PLL projects, regardless of their magnitude or sponsorship. PLLAN's *Playbook* and information about the initiative, including sample projects, can be found at https://playful-learninglandscapes.fun.

Playful learning landscapes can enhance the 80 percent of children's waking time that is not spent in school. Public spaces, freed from past boundaries around their functions, can be the most critical out-of-school places a community has. They can be even more powerful when they include culturally relevant components and intergenerational engagement. If cities can embrace the difference between an ordinary bus stop and a PLL bus stop, they can enhance the quantity and quality of child–caregiver interactions. PLL is not merely an initiative. It is a movement to create accessible, culturally relevant learning opportunities for every child.

References

Adam, M., McMahon, S. A., Prober, C., & Bärnighausen, T. (2019). Human-centered design of video-based health education: An iterative, collaborative, community-based approach. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 21(1), e12128.

Adamson, L. B., Bakeman, R., Deckner, D. F., & Nelson, P. B. (2014). From interactions to conversations: The development of joint engagement during early childhood. *Child Development, 85*, 941–955.

Arcia, A., Suero-Tejeda, N., Bales, M. E., Merrill, J. A., Yoon, S., Woollen, J., & Bakken, S. (2016). Sometimes more is more: Iterative participatory design of infographics for engagement of community members with varying levels of health literacy. *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, 23(1), 174–183.

Berk, L. E. (2006). *Child development* (7th ed.). Allyn & Bacon

Bonawitz, E., Shafto, P., Gweon, H., Goodman, N. D., Spelke, E., & Schulz, L. (2011). The double-edged sword of pedagogy: Instruction limits spontaneous exploration and discovery. *Cognition*, *120*(3), 322–330. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2010.10.001

Bustamante, A. S., Hassinger-Das, B., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2019). Learning landscapes: Where the science of learning meets architectural design. *Child Development Perspectives, 13*(1), 34–40. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12309

Bustamante, A. S., Schlesinger, M., Begolli, K. N., Golinkoff, R. M., Shahidi, N., Zonji, S., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2020). More than just a game: Transforming social interaction and STEM play with Parkopolis. *Developmental Psychology, 56*(6). https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000923

Cavanaugh, D. M., Clemence, K. J., Teale, M. M., Rule, A. C., & Montgomery, S. E. (2017). Kindergarten scores, storytelling, executive function, and motivation improved through literacy-rich guided play. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 45(6), 831–843.

Chen, D., Chan, S., Brekken, L., Lynch, E. W., & Valverde, A. (1998). Project CRAFT: Culturally responsive and family focused training: A learning activities guide. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED426552

Chi, M. T. (2009). Active-constructive-interactive: A conceptual framework for differentiating learning activities. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 1(1), 73–105. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-8765.2008.01005.x

Cohen, D. A., Marsh, T., Williamson, S., Golinelli, D., & McKenzie, T. L. (2012). Impact and cost-effectiveness of family fitness zones: A natural experiment in urban public parks. *Health & Place*, *18*(1), 39–45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2011.09.008

Collins, S. E., Clifasefi, S. L., Stanton, J., The LEAP Advisory Board, Straits, K. J. E., Gil-Kashiwabara, E., Rodriguez Espinosa, P., Nicasio, A. V., Andrasik, M. P., Hawes, S. M., Miller, K. A., Nelson, L. A., Orfaly, V. E., Duran, B. M., & Wallerstein, N. (2018). Community-based participatory research (CBPR): Towards equitable involvement of community in psychology research. *American Psychologist*, 73(7), 884. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000167

Dickinson, D. K., & Porche, M. V. (2011). Relation between language experiences in preschool classrooms and children's kindergarten and fourth-grade language and reading abilities. *Child Development, 82*(3), 870–886. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01576.x

Dyson, A. H. (2006). Literacy in a child's world of voices, or, the fine print of murder and mayhem. *Research in the Teaching of English*, *41*(2), 147–152.

Farrell, K. (2019). *Using guided play to acquire literacy skills.* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Northwestern College.

Fisher, K., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Newcombe, N., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2013). Taking shape: Supporting preschoolers' acquisition of geometric knowledge through guided play. *Child Development, 84*, 1872–1878. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12091

Hadani, H. S., Winthrop, R., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2021). Playful learning landscapes: Convergence of education and city planning. In S. Ra, S. Jagannathan, & R. Maclean (Eds.), *Powering a learning society during an age of disruption* (pp. 151–164). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0983-1_11

Han, M., Moore, N., Vukelich, C., & Buell, M. (2010). Does play make a difference? How play intervention affects the vocabulary learning of at-risk preschoolers. *American Journal of Play, 3*, 82–105.

Hanner, E., Braham, E. J., Elliott, L., & Libertus, M. E. (2019). Promoting math talk in adult-child interactions through grocery store signs. *Mind, Brain, and Education, 13*, 110–118. https://doi.org/10.1111/mbe.12195

Hassinger-Das, B., Palti, I., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2020). Urban Thinkscape: Infusing public spaces with STEM conversation and interaction opportunities. *Journal of Cognitive Development, 21*, 125–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/15248372.2019.1673753

Hassinger-Das, B., Toub, T. S., Zosh, J. M., Michnick, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2017). More than just fun: A place for games in playful learning. *Journal for the Study of Education and Development/ Infancia y Aprendizaje, 40,* 191–281. https://doi.org/10.1080/02103702.2017.1292684

Hassinger-Das, B., Zosh, J. M., Bustamante, A. S., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2021). Translating cognitive science in the public square. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 25*(10), 816–818. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2021.07.001

Hassinger-Das, B., Zosh, J. M., Hansen, N., Talarowski, M., Zmich, K., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2020). Play-and-learn spaces: Leveraging library spaces to promote caregiver and child interaction. *Library and Information Science Research, 42*(1). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2020.101002

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Adamson, L. B., Bakeman, R., Owen, M. T., Golinkoff, R. M., Pace, A., Yust, P. K. S, & Suma, K. (2015). The contribution of early communication quality to low-income children's language success. *Psychological Science, 26*, 1071–1083. https://doi.org/ 10.1177/0956797615581493

Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Hadani, H. (2020). *A new path to education reform: Playful learning promotes 21st-century skills in schools and beyond.* The Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Big-Ideas_HirshPasek_PlayfulLearning.pdf

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Zosh, J. M., Golinkoff, R. M., Gray, J. H., Robb, M. B., & Kaufman, J. (2015). Putting education in "educational" apps: Lessons from the science of learning. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 16*(1), 3–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100615569721

Howes, C., & Matheson, C. C. (1992). Sequences in the development of competent play with peers: Social and social pretend play. *Developmental Psychology*, *28*(5), 961.

Hudson, J., & Nelson, K. (1983). Effects of script structure on children's story recall. *Developmental Psychology*, *19*(4), 625.

Hung, Y. (2004). East New York Farms: Youth participation in community development and urban agriculture. *Children, Youth and Environments*, *14*(1), 56–85.

Huttenlocher, J., Waterfall, H., Vasilyeva, M., Vevea, J., & Hedges, L. V. (2010). Sources of variability in children's language growth. *Cognitive Psychology*, *61*(4), 343–365. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogpsych.2010.08.002

Isen, A. M. (2001). An influence of positive affect on decision making in complex situations: Theoretical issues with practical implications. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *11*(2), 75–85.

Isen, A. M., Daubman, K. A., & Nowicki, G. P. (1987). Positive affect facilitates creative problem solving. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *52*(6), 1122.

Kahn, D., & Birch, H. G. (1968). Development of auditory-visual integration and reading achievement. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 27(2), 459–468

Lowenstein, J., & Gentner, D. (2005). Relational language and the development of relational mapping. *Cognitive Psychology*, *50*(4), 315–353. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogpsych.2004.09.004

Masek, L. R., Paterson, S. J., Golinkoff, R. M., Bakeman, R., Adamson, L. B., Owen, M. T., Pace, A., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2021). Beyond talk: Contributions of quantity and quality of communication to language success across socioeconomic strata. *Infancy*, *26*(1), 123–147. https://doi.org/10.1111/infa.12378

Meltzoff, A. N., Kuhl, P. K., Movellan, J., & Sejnowski, T. J. (2009). Foundations for a new science of learning. *Science, 325*, 284–288. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1175626

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice, 31*, 132–141.

Mowen, A. J. (2010). Parks, playgrounds and active living. Active Living Research/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Neuman, S. B., & Roskos, K. (1992). Literacy objects as cultural tools: Effects on children's literacy behaviors in play. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 203–225.

Pace, A., Alper, R., Burchinal, M. R., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2019). Measuring success: Within and cross-domain predictors of academic and social trajectories in elementary school. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 46,* 112–125. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.04.001

Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network. (2020). *Playful learning landscapes: The playbook*. https://playfullearninglandscapes.com/playbook/

Ridge, K. E., Weisberg, D. S., Ilgaz, H., Hirsh-Pasek, K. A., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2015). Supermarket speak: Increasing talk among low-socioeconomic status families. *Mind, Brain, and Education, 9,* 127–135. https://doi.org/10.1111/mbe.12081

Schlesinger, M. A., Sawyer, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Fabiano, R. (2020). Play captains on play streets: A community-university playful learning and teen leadership collaboration. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice, 3*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.33596/coll.54

Storch, S. A., & Whitehurst, G. J. (2002). Oral language and code-related precursors to reading: Evidence from a longitudinal structural model. *Developmental Psychology*, *38*(6), 934. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.38.6.934

Sutton, S. E., & Kemp, S. P. (2002). Children as partners in neighborhood placemaking: Lessons from intergenerational design charrettes. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *22*(1–2), 171–189.

Tabors, P. O., Snow, C. E., & Dickinson, D. K. (2001). Homes and schools together: Supporting language and literacy development. In D. K. Dickinson & P. O. Tabors (Eds.), *Beginning literacy with language* (pp. 313–334). Brookes Publishing.

Tsao, Y. L. (2008). Using guided play to enhance children's conversation, creativity and competence in literacy. *Education*, *128*(3), 515–520.

Weisberg, D. S., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., Kittredge, A. K., & Klahr, D. (2016). Guided play: Principles and practices. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 25*, 177–182. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721416645512

Wohlwend, K. E. (2018). Playing to our strengths: Finding innovation in children's and teachers' imaginative expertise. *Language Arts*, *95*(3), 162–170.

Wolf, K. L. (2007). City trees and property values. *Arborist News*, *16*(4), 34–36.

Xu, A., Rao, H., Dow, S. P., & Bailey, B. P. (2015, February). A classroom study of using crowd feedback in the iterative design process. In *Proceedings of the 18th ACM conference on computer supported cooperative work & social computing* (pp. 1637–1648).

Younan, D., Tuvblad, C., Li, L., Wu, J., Lurmann, F., Franklin, M., ... & Chen, J. C. (2016). Environmental determinants of aggression in adolescents: Role of urban neighborhood greenspace. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *55*(7), 591–601.

Zosh, J. M., Fisher, K., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2013). The ultimate block party: Bridging the science of learning and the importance of play. In M. Honey (Ed.), *Design, make, play* (pp. 113–136). Routledge.

Zosh, J. M., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Solis, S. L., & Whitebread, D. (2018). Accessing the inaccessible: Redefining play as a spectrum. *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*, 1124. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01124

Museums and Community-Based Organizations Partnering to Support Family Literacy

Karen Knutson & Kevin Crowley

Students who have low literacy skills in fourth grade are four times more likely to drop out of school than students who read at grade level; the risk may be higher for lower-income children (Hernandez, 2011). Some studies suggest that, compared to more affluent children, those from lower socioeconomic strata are exposed to fewer words and fewer books in their formative years, have fewer books at home, and are read to less often by caregivers (Golinkoff et al., 2018; Hoff, 2013). Adult and family involvement positively influences young children's social competence, cognitive development, communication skills, and attitudes toward learning (Rowe, 2012; Weiss et al., 2006). Parent involvement might be best conceptualized as a community issue addressed through co-constructed, collaborative partnerships involving families, schools, afterschool programs, community-based organizations (CBOs), and other key stakeholders in a community's social and educational infrastructure (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; Luke & McCreedy, 2012).

The William Penn Foundation launched Philadelphia's Informal Learning Initiative (ILI) to support the development of literacy-rich programming for families with children aged 3 to 9. The initiative was designed as a network of partnerships in which a cultural organization—usually a museum—paired

KAREN KNUTSON, PhD, and **KEVIN CROWLEY**, PhD, co-lead the University of Pittsburgh Center for Learning in Out of School Environments (UPCLOSE). Their work has focused on helping museums understand their unique role in supporting the development of lifelong interests.

with one or more CBOs to design literacy-rich informal learning experiences for caregivers and children. The initiative involved 11 cultural partners and 15 CBOs. Two partnerships dropped out after the first two years, and three new partnerships joined in the third year.

Programs exposed three- to nine-year-old children and their families to literacy practices in the context of original artwork, live animals, science experiments, natural settings, new foods, and cultural or historical sites. Programming was delivered at no cost to families, often in community settings such as recreation centers or school auditoriums. Offerings ranged from biweekly afterschool programs to weekend and evening family events, open houses in museums, and home visits. Convenient times and locations, as well as snack or meal options, supported family participation, as did book giveaways, take-home activity packs, and special museum visits.

Each museum–CBO partnership's project team decided how many families to serve. Some smaller programs maintained months- or years-long relationships with as few as eight families, while others served 100 or more families in one-time events. Several programs encountered the same families across multiple years of programming. Programs served diverse families in multilingual and multicultural settings. Two programs involved families with five or more different first languages; some were strongly bilingual in Spanish and English; others were conducted primarily in English.

Content reflected the intersection of community interests or needs with the disciplinary expertise of the cultural organizations. The cultural organizations included natural history and science museums, art and children's museums, gardens, zoos, aquaria, arts groups, and media producers. CBOs offered services in a wide variety of areas including education, workforce development, housing, health, and parenting.

ILI calls on cultural organizations to become part of collective efforts to improve family literacy. As informal learning institutions, cultural organizations design learning experiences as part of their mission. They offer resources ranging from one-time experiences in exhibition halls and event-based programming to ongoing programming and internships. Designed infor-

> Programs exposed three- to nine-year-old children and their families to literacy practices in the context of original artwork, live animals, science experiments, natural settings, new foods, and cultural or historical sites.

mal learning experiences are an essential part of educational ecosystems (National Research Council, 2009), enabling families to learn about science, art, nature, and culture with the support of educators and experts who help them develop their interests and deepen their knowledge. Whereas schools focus on proficiency and a standard curriculum, informal learning settings can help children and caregivers identify their individual interests. They can "activate" children toward building identities and competencies that can provide lifelong, life-wide learning pathways (Crowley et al., 2015; Hecht & Crowley, 2020).

Although cultural organizations may think of themselves as shared community resources and important parts of the educational ecosystem, families from many communities do not visit these institutions or use them as learning resources (Crowley et al., 2014; Dawson, 2014). Originally designed for civic enlightenment, cultural organizations such as museums have always had an exclusionary and political angle (Coffee, 2008; Gurian, 2006). They are designed to showcase the treasures of the state and public. Education per se is only one small part of their mission; curating and preserving the collection is their dominant mode. They have envisioned the problem of audience as being concerned with getting more people through the door to experience their resources (Coffee, 2008; Gurian, 2006).

More recently, museums have recognized the need to become more accessible and inclusive. Structural barriers such as transportation, location, and cost are not the only reasons families choose not to visit museums. Visitors from historically marginalized communities can feel unwelcome because they sense that museums do not acknowledge or represent their history, values, or lived experiences (Dawson, 2014). In response, many museums have tried to demonstrate their value and become more relevant by creating exhibitions that represent excluded communities or by inviting input from varied communities (McSweeney & Kavanagh, 2016; Sandell & Nightingale, 2012). But organizational practices have made it difficult for museums to reimagine themselves as connected to local communities. Attempts to modify institutional pro-

cesses not only have been difficult to sustain but also have been critiqued as "empowerment lite" and "doing for" rather than "doing with"—stances that further disempower communities and maintain existing power structures (Lynch, 2011).

Efforts like ILI are rethinking how cultural organizations consider public outreach. These initiatives work closely with communities and focus on the specific needs of particular audiences in order to tailor their resources and co-design educational experiences that are relevant, accessible, and useful to target audiences. Partnerships between cultural organizations and CBOs encourage the museums' informal learning professionals to move away from traditional one-way outreach models toward collaborative, community-centered design. ILI's long-term impact could include sustained changes in how museums see community in their work and how they conceptualize their roles in the educational ecosystem. The partnerships also encourage CBO staff to see their part in that same educational ecosystem and to envision themselves as agents with the social capital, knowledge, and power to co-design learning experiences that are accessible and welcoming to their communities.

Remixing Literacy and Informal Learning

ILI's operation as a networked learning community became a key driver for its success. Regular network convenings, responding to the evolving needs of network members, supported reflection on program design, literacy training, informal learning design support, and evaluation capacity building. CBO and museum staff members appreciated the opportunity to learn from the work of colleagues—a rare opportunity for professional development in the nonprofit education and community service sectors.

Network convenings frequently focused on the nature of early literacy, the best ways to support it, and the best ways to measure impact. These questions reflected a tension at the heart of the initiative. The official launch event, attended by many project staff members, made it clear that ILI was publicly aligned with a citywide reading proficiency campaign. But reading instruction is traditionally the turf of schools, and most

of the resources designed for literacy function best in school settings.

It took some time for network members to figure out how best to address literacy within their informal programming. In an early network convening, a technical assistance provider who works mostly in formal settings gave a presentation that outlined six interlocking "puzzle pieces" of early literacy: oral language, phonological awareness, letter knowledge, print awareness, vocabulary, and background knowledge. The framework offered clear, easily defined goals for programming. Network members discussed how their program activities could include vocabulary building, use conversation as a focal point, or build background knowledge.

However, through discussion and some program implementation trials, network members began to wonder if the puzzle pieces were well aligned with the network's expertise and potential impact. It would be difficult, for example, for informal educators to develop programming on phonological awareness or letter knowledge, as they worked with children on a short-term and sometimes ad hoc basis. Therefore, with support from the technical assistance provider, project teams refocused their literacy programming on two questions:

- How are books and specialized vocabulary used?
- How are caregivers invited to participate in reading with their children?

These two areas felt authentic to the nature of informal learning and could be woven into programming by all network partners.

Early in the network convenings, the use of books during program activities especially emerged as a shared focus. Reading books aloud to children helps with language development; early readers come from homes where they have been read to (DeBruin-Parecki, 2009). According to Reese and Cox (1999), effective read-alouds can be broadly construed as descriptive, or focused on describing the pictures; comprehension-oriented, or focused on story meaning; or performance-oriented, with an introductory overview and questions afterward.

In ILI Year 1, programs experimented with strategies for read-alouds and other ways of using books in program activities.

> Partnerships between cultural organizations and CBOs encourage the museums' informal learning professionals to move away from traditional one-way outreach models toward collaborative, community-centered design.

- Some programs used books as tools and information sources, asking families to look in books for specific evidence.
- Some used pictures in wordless books to encourage children to describe what they were seeing and to create a story from the pictures.
- Theatrical storytellers created excitement and engagement for the emerging narrative.
- Some programs gave each family a copy of the book that the educator was reading aloud so caregivers and children could follow along.
- Tip sheets suggested questions adults could ask children during the reading.
- Educators led "picture walks" through books to pique families' interest in reading the book together.
- All programs gave families books and related activity sheets to promote the development of a family library.

Reading aloud was just one of the literacy strategies network partners remixed and extended from formal education as they stretched to integrate literacy for young children into their programming. The program snapshot in the box Bugs at Dinner illustrates the many factors that combined to create effective informal literacy programming for families.

- Caregivers and children learn, read, eat, and talk together. The atmosphere is comfortable and fun.
- Organized activities for everyone are balanced with station-based activities where families can choose how to engage.
- Activities are designed for children of a broad range of ages. ILI targets three- to nine-year-olds, but families sometimes brought along younger or older siblings.
- Museum and CBO educators facilitate, encourage, question, and notice what children and caregivers are doing and saying.
- CBO staff, who participate as learners and facilitators, offer a familiar and welcoming presence.
- Text, talk, reading, and writing are infused throughout.
- The strong informal learning content—in this case driven by live bugs and science-inspired activities—reflect the collection and commitments of the cultural partner, in this case a natural history museum.

Bugs at Dinner

Children and caregivers are sitting at tables in an afterschool space in North Philadelphia, sharing a take-out dinner from the local South American restaurant. Most have been part of a series of programs at this site. As they eat, the six families each look through their copy of a nonfiction picture book about bugs. Three museum staff members and two CBO staffers circulate, welcoming families and asking questions about the book in English and Spanish.

To begin the program, an educator from the natural history museum invites all the adult and child "scientists" in the room on a treasure hunt. First she asks families to find a picture of a bug that makes a "sssss" noise. Children excitedly leaf through the book and then yell out the answer. Next, "Find a bug that hides"—and so on with other attributes of bugs. Caregivers help younger children manage the books. At one point, a boy holds his book up over his head, open to the picture he found, waiting to be recognized by the educator.

Then comes time to introduce a real bug—a large hissing cockroach. "Ewwww!" Educators coax family members to hold or touch the cockroach, pointing out its hard exoskeleton. This activity is a great leveler, as adults and children experience the same level of awe and disgust. They challenge one another to get closer and touch the bug. There are lots of laughs. Cell phones come out to document the moment with photos.

Next, families are invited to a table where a plastic aquarium box holds a large centipede. A CBO staff member provides some background about centipedes and the food they like. When the families are told that they will feed the centipede, caregivers and children alike can barely contain their excitement. More photos are taken as two crickets are dropped into the cage. The families wait, mesmerized. Children call out attacks and near misses as the crickets jump away from the creepy predator. It takes a while, but eventually the crickets are eaten.

Children move on to build-a-bug stations. They construct imaginary bugs and habitats out of craft materials, in an activity intended to showcase adaptations and encourage observation and classification of insects.

In this fun evening, literacy was supported not only by use of the book but also by encouraging families to record information about the bugs in "arthropod journals" in English or Spanish.

Source: program observation, March 20, 2019

Methods

Investigation of informal learning poses specific challenges (Diamond, 1999; Knutson & Crowley, 2005; Crowley et al., 2015). Many families visit museums to have a fun or social experience; learning may not be a primary goal at all (Falk et al., 1998; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002). The engaging, continuous, and exploratory nature of informal learning is at odds with tests and surveys, which are typically used to study learning in formal education (Zapata-Rivera, 2012). Introducing tests can undermine the goals of a supportive, positive learning environment that builds confidence and allows learners to try something new without feeling judged (Fu et al., 2019).

As the evaluation team for ILI, we structured our work to support the development of a networked community of practice, collecting data for improvement and exploring the best ways to measure impact across projects. We relied on "light touch" research methods (Borun, 1977; Knutson & Crowley, 2005; Yalowitz & Bronnenkant, 2009) so as not to disrupt the program culture and trust with families that partners were building over time. Understanding that rigid, test-focused approaches to evaluation can prioritize measurement over context, to the extent that the evaluation can disrupt the program and hinder the formative learning function of evaluation (Dahler-Larsen, 2009), we adopted a participatory approach. Learning from evaluation, a recognized strength of collaborative approaches, is a form of accountability in and of itself (Cousins et al., 2013).

We developed a structured observation protocol that would allow us to characterize the extent to which partners implemented key programming features and provided engaging learning environments. The observation protocol had a section on program implementation and one that tracked the participation of individual children through a single session. We also noted snippets of conversation; described interactions among children, caregivers, and educators; documented the content and sequence of each observed program; and noted the atmosphere and appearance of the space and activities. Soon after each observation, using our observation sheets and photographs, we wrote a reflective observation summary.

In addition, CBO staff and educators conducted interviews with children and caregivers in their programs. We decided to have educators conduct interviews because families already knew and trusted them. We collaborated with the educators to develop, pilot, and refine the interview questions. Interview questions for children focused on what they remembered, learned, and were interested in. Interview questions for caregivers probed their perception of their child's participation in the program, the caregiver's own participation, and whether and how any of the ideas or materials from the program found their way into subsequent activities at home. Child and caregiver interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in the language preferred by the participant. Interviews that were not in English were translated and transcribed by the educator who conducted the interview.

> Our field notes contain many examples of children crowding around a demonstration, eagerly participating in discussions, concentrating on individual projects, chasing down facilitators to show off their work, or asking questions of adults and other children.

Children's Engagement and Learning

We collected observational records for 117 children participating in ILI programming. We tracked two measures of children's participation: a code for child engagement with program activities (high = 2, medium = 1, low = 0) and a code for whether children successfully completed the day's activities (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Findings suggest high levels of engagement, with an average of 1.75; the completion rate was 85 percent. Program-specific engagement ratings ranged from 1.20 to 1.91, while completion rates ranged from 70 percent to 100 percent. Our field notes contain many examples of children crowding around a demonstration, eagerly participating in discussions, concentrating on individual projects, chasing down facilitators to show off their work, or asking questions of adults and other children. Educators noted that one of the best parts of ILI programs was the level of attention and engagement, which they had not expected because of the children's young ages. Children often became noisy and animated during programs, but educators did not identify behavior management as a major problem; they are used to the high energy and sometimes chaotic flow of informal learning. Over time, programs across the network evolved to better accommodate children of different ages, abilities, and attention spans.

We also tracked children's talk, with codes for whether they talked with educators, caregivers, or other children and for whether their talk included disciplinary content, questions, or target vocabulary. Observations showed that 93 percent of children engaged in rich learning conversations with informal educators. In many such conversations, children and educators used content-specific vocabulary and concepts to describe, question, label, connect, and explain. Other codes for talk showed that 50 percent of children talked about informal learning content, 46 percent asked questions, and 37 percent used vocabulary targeted by programming objectives. We observed 69 percent of children engaging in conversations with peers. Talk with caregivers was less common, at 63 percent, but this result can be explained by the fact that some programs were afterschool programs in which caregivers typically did not participate. In the programs designed for full family participation, we observed 88 percent of children talking with their caregivers during learning activities.

During program activities, children were exposed to new topics and themes. For example, they learned about the role mussels play in filtering water, tasted vegetables they had never eaten before, observed that seeds come in different kinds and sizes, and learned how artists create a collage. In interviews, children gave many examples of what they remembered from program books and activities. For example, one four-year-old recalled an animal featured in a program:

Interviewer: Do you remember when we did this? [Shows picture of armadillo]

Child: He eats worms.

Interviewer: Do you remember what he is?

Child : Arm-da-dillo!

Interviewer: Right! He eats worms, what else?

Child: He has a pointy nose. He can dig with his nails to find some food. He eats worms.

Caregiver interviews indicate that some of the children's learning connected to engagement and learning at home:

My child is always happy to come to [the program]. He loves it! He says he learns lots of things. We at home can see that he is learning a lot.

He loved hearing the inchworm story. He went home and measured everything. He used his feet to measure and counted 17 steps.

Another caregiver spoke of the confidence the program inspired in her child:

She lacked confidence in reading, so I wanted to find something for her alone so she could get the hang of it. Her brother is an obstacle and takes over. Now she can show her brother something he didn't know.

Caregivers' Engagement and Learning

ILI programming targeted families, with special attention to the role of caregivers in supporting their children's literacy development. This characteristic separates ILI informal programs from center- or school-based programs, which may recognize that parents can support learning but focus primarily on child outcomes. Most programs, except for the afterschool programming, were designed for families to attend together. All projects had family learning components and provided literacy resources families could use to extend the learning at home. Resources included free picture books, home learning activities, journals, and parent guides.

One of the clearest messages to emerge from the caregiver interviews was appreciation for how the programs modeled engaging ways for adults to read picture books with children. Fully 83 percent of caregivers said that they had learned a new strategy; for example:

I have learned how to read to her. I explain more to her about what we're reading. Sometimes one reads to the children, but one really doesn't know how to read to them.

By the second year of the project, a shared set of read-aloud practices had emerged. Programs focused on ways readers could reframe stories or ask questions to keep children interested and actively focused. Our interviews suggest that caregivers took up some of these practices; the most common strategy, asking questions while reading, was cited by 42 percent of caregivers. Another strategy, using the pictures in a book to tell the story, was mentioned by 38 percent of caregivers. In this strategy, adults encourage children to describe what they see happening in the pictures, perhaps making up their own story. Some caregivers found this technique useful when they didn't themselves know all the English words.

About one-third (33 percent) of caregivers talked about making the reading theatrical and engaging. For example, one said:

The tone that you read in, I'm getting better at the

tone that you say things, the emotion. The manner in which you read—the intensity, the tone of voice, how you ask questions with mystery or happiness.… Like yesterday with *Los Gatos Negros*… there was a door that made the sound AEEEEEE! Like, the drama it creates, the mystery, [continues to recall parts of the book with excitement and sound effects] so [the baby] even wanted to know what was going on!

All projects came to see read-alouds as useful not only for exposing children to literature but also for modeling strategies for adults. Some projects went further, adding caregiver-only segments in which staff talked to caregivers about reading strategies and how to connect reading to children's interests.

Caregivers who were themselves English learners were not always ready to read books in English. Programs that served such families often read books in both languages. The most common practice we observed was reading books in English but translating and paraphrasing a few elements on each page. We also observed projects using books in Spanish or books with pictures and no words, which could be narrated and discussed in any language.

Some caregivers were not comfortable reading in their first language. One project that served families experiencing homelessness had several struggling readers among its caregivers. The program developed a practice of having families sit around the room with multiple copies of a book and then inviting both caregivers and children to read aloud, while the other families followed along. We observed this practice in three separate program sessions. Our field notes suggest that the program was a supportive environment for emergent readers, adult and child alike. One caregiver said, "It's a more inviting place to read. It's not a chore in this setting. And [my child] sees other people reading." The CBO staff were key to creating this inviting place. The caregivers trusted them and thus were encouraged to take risks. Everyone, fluent or not, took a turn as reader. We recorded in our notes that, if a caregiver struggled to decode a word, other adults and sometimes children would call out the word; the adult would pick it up and move on. After one mother

> One of the clearest messages to emerge from the caregiver interviews was appreciation for how the programs modeled engaging ways for adults to read picture books with children.

slowly but successfully read two pages of a book without help from the group, she gave a big smile as her child leaned in to hug her and said, "Good job, Mom! I love you!"

Building Trust and Community Roots

How does an informal learning institution create a trusted relationship with a family? Many interventions designed to address economic and racial/ethnic disparities in learning outcomes take a deficit approach, targeting the development of knowledge and skills that families seemingly lack (Cabrera et al., 2012). This deficit approach disempowers families and ignores rich social and cultural competences.

In contrast, ILI network partners attempted to take a culturally responsive and strengths-based approach. Relatively few studies document exactly how best to implement strengths-based programming (Leyva et al., 2021). Network partners promoted a culturally responsive approach by validating families' languages, cultures, and historical perspectives and by asking for their input on subjects and books that would reflect their community and interests. By building positive social relationships with children and caregivers, partners worked to create safe and welcoming environments whose norms supported all participants.

One goal of ILI was to find meaningful ways to connect families with informal learning institutions. Indeed, 78 percent of caregivers we interviewed said that they'd never been to their CBO's partner cultural organization; some had never even heard of it. The rest of the caregivers said that they had been to the museum once before, usually when they were young. The projects made many families more aware of museums as resources. Several caregivers noted that their level of comfort with the cultural organization increased the more time they spent in the program:

> It was very fun! We participated in things we had never done before. It's right down the street from our house. We had never been to a museum.

> The truth is, we were never in any museum before going to [this one]. It's a very good place filled with beautiful paintings. Sometimes it has to do with a lack of time. Plus, I have five children and they are a bit restless, especially the baby. Then at

a museum, you cannot touch anything, and I have to continually tell the boy, "Don't touch this, don't touch that."… The other day my whole family went to the museum. Everyone loved making houses with cardboard.

Thus, museums began to find new audiences for their work, in partnership with the CBOs. Some programs catalyzed museum-oriented communities of families:

> [This program] is like family. It brings people together with common ground. Community nights give us an incentive, and we get to see and spend time with parents we don't see at the community center.

One caregiver said that the program gave her child an opportunity to do something new, though it was initially scary. The child developed positive relationships with the educators ("the ladies") and looked forward to returning to the program:

> She didn't want to do it at first, because she thought that I would be leaving her here. There were very fun things for us to do together. She kept asking, "When do we get to go to the activity?" And I tell her, "No, the activity isn't until tomorrow." "Okay, are we going to see the ladies?" "Yes, we are going to see the ladies."

Projects worked with highly diverse audiences; during one observation, we noted five languages being spoken. Multilingual and multicultural programming can be particularly difficult for museums whose educators and audiences both tend to be much less diverse than their communities. Bringing CBOs and museums together has been an innovative step toward bridging cultural differences. Projects with English learners have been careful to value and include the learners' first languages, as recommended in the literature (Auerbach, 1989; Reyes & Torres, 2007). Caregivers who were not fluent in English said in interviews that they appreciated programs' care in creating multilingual and multicultural settings where families felt comfortable learning together:

> I like that the teacher speaks Spanish. This way, [my son] is comfortable in class. For me, I know

> that he'll be understood and that he can participate in class. He is also learning English words. He now knows the names of the colors in English and in Spanish.

Researchers have noted the importance of building relationships and paying attention to the needs of parents (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2019; Bess & Doykos, 2014). They also emphasize developing parents' leadership skills (Warren et al., 2009). The norms, expectations, ways of knowing, cultural resources, and forms of expertise of underrepresented minority parents often have less currency and impact in schools than those typically associated with White, middle-class families (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). The ILI network worked to help families from underrepresented groups to feel invited and to take ownership of the programs.

> I love this program because it taught me a lot of things that I didn't know and had never done, especially to participate with my children.… I had never done a program like this. I liked it a lot. I felt very good.

> The truth is, you all are very nice, very helpful. You pay attention to each person, to each group, to each child. You give us suggestions … to the parents. The truth is, it feels very full. You give the best of yourselves. You provide complete activities for us to do. It is super good. I hope it continues.

> We don't take time to dedicate to the kids, share with the kids things that they did at school. This is a good little bit of time that I get to spend with them and let them know that what they do matters to us.

Some programs engaged directly with caregivers to great effect. One project had caregivers gather without their children to recommend books to one another. The caregivers broadened the discussion to include internet literacy resources and family play activities. Another project, working with Black families, built caregiver feedback sessions into their regular programming. Early in these sessions, caregivers said they wanted more

Network partners promoted a culturally responsive approach by validating families' languages, cultures, and historical perspectives and by asking for their input on subjects and books that would reflect their community and interests.

books featuring Black authors or Black characters so that their children could see themselves represented in the text. This input helped the program better reflect the needs of the community. We later interviewed the program staff about this process:

Staff 1: I know we all agree on this. Ownership is a key tool to get folks to invest and show up. And the team did an amazing job of coalescing caregivers to make some of those decisions....

Staff 2: … It's worked best so far to see the ownership of the families taking it over. They've pointed out good books. That was one of the best learning experiences I've had so far. They took us to a really good place.

Staff 3: Right, the value should be placed on where they're coming from. To be reflective [in our program design] is what I'm most proud of, and making the shifts. We want to get good rich literature where they can see themselves. We're putting it in their hands.

> One project had caregivers gather without their children to recommend books to one another. The caregivers broadened the discussion to include internet literacy resources and family play activities.

In a reflective evaluation interview, staff members from more than one project talked about how hard it was to get everyone on the same page about how to be culturally sensitive. They said it took time to work with partners to understand the specific needs of the families—but there were rewards. Staff members said they appreciated seeing the change in children's artwork when they used culturally representative books. They loved the feeling of connection with communities. They were excited to see adults enjoying the programs and feeling comfortable in the museum. They also spoke about broader effects, such as showing the value of family engagement to the staff of the school where the program was housed. One staff member said that the best part was seeing "community in action, love in action. And joy."

Recommendations for Museum– CBO Partnerships

Support for equitable educational outcomes in urban settings involves all aspects of life, including families, neighborhoods, and communities. Children spend most of their time outside of classrooms. What learn-ing opportunities do they have when they are not in school? Healthy educational ecosystems provide equitable access to learning resources and learning pathways (Akiva et al., 2020; Hecht & Crowley, 2020). In such ecosystems:

- Communities feel invited to participate in informal learning and empowered to co-construct learning experiences to reflect their values, needs, and strengths.
- Diverse opportunities and pathways allow children to pursue differentiated interests and identities.
- Learning opportunities are often informal, place-based, and distributed across the city.
- In their daily lives, children encounter all sorts of adults—educators, caregivers, role models—who know how to facilitate learning through collaboration, conversation, and facilitation.
- The city, seeing itself as a managed educational ecosystem, makes investments to improve the health of the system rather than restricting investment to a single niche, connection, or entity.

Our study examines how museums can connect to collective impact efforts in literacy and how informal learning programs can be reoriented to better respond to community needs. ILI programming was designed to capitalize on the strengths of cultural organizations. Children were exposed to new topics and themes in a range of content areas. They enjoyed the programs and showed high levels of engagement in, and completion of, program activities. They engaged in rich learning conversations with informal educators and caregivers—a critical component of informal learning experiences that support literacy development. Observations documented the use of content-specific vocabulary and concepts. Interviews with children and caregivers suggest that children remembered what they learned and sometimes extended that learning at home. Furthermore, caregivers learned strategies to support children's reading. They felt welcomed in and connected to the programs, and they formed relationships with educators and other families. These outcomes can empower caregivers to be brokers and advocates for their children's learning. Partners are planning to further strengthen caregiver engagement by

involving adults as learners, not just as facilitators of children's learning.

Four elements of the ILI approach have challenged museums and CBOs to move beyond their traditional roles to become central actors in Philadelphia's educational ecosystem. Other systems could use these suggestions to engage families in literacy development outside of school.

Center Community

ILI funded CBOs as a strategy to bring communities into the work of literacy development. Building on the trusting relationships they have established with their communities, CBOs recruited families for the programs and supported community engagement. Language, culture, and neighborhood were woven into programming. Museum educators connected with and learned about families who rarely, if ever, visited their institutions. They became aware of responsibilities beyond promoting learning outcomes; they came to think of their practice as addressing social and emotional learning, food insecurity, and adult learning. Partners aspired to work both in and with communities. CBOs pushed back against deficit perspectives and focused the network on strengths-based approaches. As of the third year of the five-year initiative, almost 1,500 families have participated in ILI programs.

Support Family Learning and Caregiver Engagement

Caregivers were central to ILI programming. Findings suggest that they often felt like full participants in the program; they not only learned strategies to support their children's learning but also acquired new knowledge and skills themselves. Informal learning is lifelong and free-choice. Giving caregivers meaningful roles and treating them as learners in their own right helped them stay interested and engaged enough to return for multiple sessions. Caregivers reported using strategies from the program at home, creating the possibility that program impacts could continue beyond the end of the project.

Develop and Support Informal Educators

Museum and CBO educators developed relationships with children and caregivers over time, learning about them and their communities. The educators developed new practices and routines for supporting early literacy. Compared to many out-of-school learning programs, ILI programs had a large proportion of adults in the room. Partners recognized that learning conversations with children and caretakers are an essential aspect of informal literacy learning. Personalized conversations helped families feel included and empowered.

> Four elements of the ILI approach have challenged museums and CBOs to move beyond their traditional roles to become central actors in Philadelphia's educational ecosystem.

Focus on Learning and Innovation

Recognizing that education is a systems problem, network partners did not begin by identifying proven strategies to implement in similar ways across the city. Instead, they bet on partnerships between museums and CBOs as a catalyst for exploration and change. We saw evidence that the partnership strategy was successful in that partners spent time learning, reflecting, and experimenting together. Staff members engaged in new kinds of work that spanned the museum–CBO boundary. By networking the partnerships together, ILI supported broad conversations and encouraged a culture of co-design and iterative improvement. This impact goes far beyond what individual children or caregivers learned from any given program. ILI's investment in connections within the ecosystem created a collaboration infrastructure that can be reused and extended through future investments.

Of course, meaningful changes in an ecosystem take time and patience. Most partnerships needed two years to begin to function smoothly, and the network is still in a formative phase. Continued investment in joint work and innovation is needed for this—or any—network to become a sustainable learning community.

References

Akiva, T., Delale-O'Connor, L., & Pittman K. (2020). The promise of building equitable ecosystems for learning. *Urban Education*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920926230

Alameda-Lawson, T., & Lawson, M. A. (2019). Ecologies of collective parent engagement in urban education. *Urban Education*, 54(8), 1085–1120. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916636654

Auerbach, E. R. (1989). Toward a social-contextual approach to family literacy. *Harvard Educational*

Review, 59, 165–181. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.59.2.h23731364l283156

Baquedano-López, P., Alexander, R. A., & Hernandez, S. J. (2013). Equity issues in parental and community involvement in schools: What teacher educators need to know. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 149–182. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12459718

Bess, K. D., & Doykos, B. (2014). Tied together: Building relational well-being and reducing social isolation through place-based parent education. *Journal of Community Psychology, 42*, 268–284. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21609

Borun, M. (1977). *Measuring the immeasurable: A pilot study of museum effectiveness*. Philadelphia: Franklin Institute.

Bouffard, S., & Weiss, H. (2008). Thinking big: A new framework for family involvement in policy, practice, and research. *The Evaluation Exchange*, *14*, 2–5.

Cabrera, N. J., Beeghly, M., & Eisenberg, N. (2012). Positive development of minority children: Introduction to the special issue. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(3), 207–209. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2012.00253.x

Coffee, K. (2008). Cultural inclusion, exclusion and the formative roles of museums. *Museum Management and Curatorship, 23*(3), 261–279. https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770802234078

Cousins, J. B., Whitmore, E., & Shulha, L. (2013). Arguments for a common set of principles for collaborative inquiry in evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, *34*(1), 7–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214012464037

Crowley, K., Barron, B. J., Knutson, K., & Martin, C. (2015). Interest and the development of pathways to science. In K. A. Renninger, M. Nieswandt, & S. Hidi (Eds.), *Interest in mathematics and science learning and related activity* (pp. 297–313). American Educational Research Association.

Crowley, K., Pierroux, P., & Knutson, K. (2014). Informal learning in museums. In K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Handbook of the learning sciences* (pp. 461–478). Cambridge University Press.

Dahler-Larsen, P. (2009). Learning-oriented educational evaluation in contemporary society. In K. E. Ryan & J. B. Cousins (Eds.), *Sage international handbook on educational evaluation* (pp. 307–322). Sage.

Dawson, E. (2014) "Not designed for us": How science museums and science centers socially exclude low-income, minority ethnic groups. *Science Education 98*(6), 981–1008. https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21133

DeBruin-Parecki, A. (2009). Establishing a family literacy program with a focus on interactive reading: The role of research and accountability. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 36*, 385–392.

Diamond, J. (1999). *Practical evaluation guide: Tools for museums and other informal educational settings.* Alta Mira Press.

Falk, J., Moussouri, T., & Coulson, D. (1998). The effect of visitors' "agendas" on museum learning. *Curator: The Museum Journal, 41*(2), 107–120. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.1998.tb00822.x

Fu, A. C., Kannan, A., & Shavelson, R. J. (2019). Direct and unobtrusive measures of informal STEM education outcomes. In A. C. Fu, A. Kannan, & R. J. Shavelson (Eds.), *Evaluation in informal science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education. New Directions for Evaluation, 161*, 35–57. https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.20348

Golinkoff, R., Hoff, E., Rowe, M., Tamis-LeMonda, C., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2018, May 21). *Talking with children matters: Defending the 30 million word gap.* Brookings Institute. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2018/05/21/defending-the-30-million-word-gap-disadvantaged-children-dont-hear-enough-child-directed-words/

Gurian, E. H. (2006). *Civilizing the museum: The collected writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian.* Routledge.

Hecht, M., & Crowley, K. (2020). Unpacking the learning ecosystems framework: Lessons from the adaptive management of biological ecosystems, *Journal of the Learning Sciences, 29*(2), 264–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2019.1693381

Hernandez, D. J. (2011). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation.* Annie E. Casey Foundation. https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf

Hoff, E. (2013). Interpreting the early language trajectories of children from low-SES and language minority homes: Implications for closing achievement gaps. *Developmental Psychology, 49*(1), 4–14. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027238

Knutson, K. & Crowley, K. (2005). Museum as learning laboratory: Developing and using a practical

theory of informal learning. *Hand to Hand. (Part 1 of 2) 18*(4). https://upclose.lrdc.pitt.edu/articles/2005%20Knutson%20&%20Crowley%20Hand%20to%20Hand.pdf

Leyva, D., Weiland, C., Shapiro, A., Yeomans-Maldonado, G., & Febles, A. (2021). *A strengths-based, culturally responsive family intervention improves Latino kindergarteners' vocabulary and approaches to learning.* https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai21-349.pdf

Luke, J. J., & McCreedy, D. (2012). Breaking down barriers: Museum as broker of home/school collaboration. *Visitor Studies, 15*(1), 98–113. https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2012.660847

Lynch, B. (2011). Custom-made reflective practice: Can museums realise their capabilities in helping others realise theirs? *Museum Management and Curatorship, 26*(5), 441–458. https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2011.621731

McSweeney, K., & Kavanagh, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Museum participation: New directions for audience collaboration.* MuseumsEtc.

National Research Council. (2009). *Learning science in informal environments: People, places, and pursuits.* National Academies Press.

Packer, J., & Ballantyne, R. (2002). Motivational factors and the visitor experience: A comparison of three sites. *Curator: The Museum Journal, 45*(3), 183–198. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2002.tb00055.x

Reese, E., & Cox, A. (1999). Quality of adult book reading affects children's emergent literacy. *Developmental Psychology, 35*(1), 20–28. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.35.1.20

Reyes, L. V., & Torres, M. N. (2007). Decolonizing family literacy in a culture circle: Reinventing the family literacy educator's role. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 7*(1), 73–94. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798407074837

Rowe, M. L. (2012). A longitudinal investigation of the role of quantity and quality of child-directed speech in vocabulary development. *Child Development, 83,* 1762–1774. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01805.x

Sandell, R., & Nightingale, E. (Eds.) (2012). *Museums, equality and social justice.* Routledge.

Warren, M. R., Hong, S., Rubin, C. L., & Sychitkokhong Uy, P. (2009). Beyond the bake sale: A community-based relational approach to parent engagement in schools. *Teachers College Record, 111*(9), pp. 2209–2254. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810911100901

Weiss, H. B., Caspe, M., & Lopez, M. E. (2006). *Family involvement makes a difference: Family involvement in early childhood education.* Harvard Family Research Project. https://archive.globalfrp.org/publications-resources/publications-series/family-involvement-makes-a-difference/family-involvement-in-early-childhood-education

Yalowitz, S., & Bronnenkant, K. (2009). Tracking and timing: Unlocking visitor behavior. *Visitor Studies, 12*(1), 47. https://doi.org/10.1080/10645570902769134

Zapata-Rivera, D. (2012). *Embedded assessment of informal and afterschool science learning.* https://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/dbassesite/documents/webpage/dbasse_072564.pdf

Coaching for Early Literacy Support

Training OST Staff to Meet the Needs of Diverse Learners

Lori Severino, Sinead Meehan, & Lauren Fegely

Many out-of-school time (OST) sites are incorporating literacy time in their programming to capitalize on the benefits associated with literacy instruction (Pelatti & Piasta, 2017). Afterschool is a perfect opportunity to foster a love of reading in children. Expanded learning in afterschool programs can make a difference in both short-term and long-term academic outcomes (Vandell, 2012).

However, OST staff may not know how to deliver evidence-based practices and meet the needs of diverse learners. In addition to understanding the behavioral and social needs of the children, OST staff should consider how to differentiate activities based on children's cognitive load. Cognitive load involves permanent information stored in long-term memory and temporary information stored in working memory. When working memory is overloaded, learning is hindered (Kalyuga, 2011). Intentional OST instructional design and programming can compensate for cognitive overload and maximize student learning (Kalyuga, 2011).

Coaching through professional development op-

LORI SEVERINO, EdD, is an assistant professor at Drexel University. Before joining the Drexel faculty, she was a public school special education teacher for 26 years. She presents nationally and internationally on teacher training, literacy, and dyslexia.

SINEAD MEEHAN is a doctoral student at Drexel and a research assistant in the McNichol Early Childhood Education Lab and the Informal Learning Linking Science and Technology Lab. Her interests include STEM education, teacher preparation, and professional development.

LAUREN FEGELY is a public school teacher. Her research interests include literacy and social justice issues.

portunities can positively impact education. In one study, when coaching was implemented as professional development in a school setting, it had large positive effects on instruction and smaller positive effects on student achievement (Kraft et al., 2018). A successful summer program achieved significant gains in reading achievement through both pre-program professional development focused on child development and construction of engaging instruction (Rasco et al., 2013).

Professional development for coaches enables them to improve their ability to create a productive learning environment, which they can then pass on to frontline educators. This article outlines the creation and content of a professional development program in early literacy that was delivered to coaches who work with OST staff. The training content focused on meeting the literacy needs of diverse learners, grades K to 3, in one city's OST programs. To design the training, we consulted with the coaches who would be trained to learn about their own needs and the needs of the program staff they would be supporting.

Background

Significance of Coaches

In schools, coaches have been used to improve nonacademic practices such as classroom management (Sprick et al., 2006). Coaching has been linked to improved teaching practices, student learning, teacher collaboration (Guinney, 2001; Neufeld & Roper, 2003), teacher attitudes, skill transfer, feelings of effectiveness, and student achievement (Cornett & Knight, 2009). One common coaching approach to foster teacher growth is a continuous cycle of observation, reflection, feedback, and action (Knight, 2011). Professional development opportunities that offer coaching can be used to teach new skills or content knowledge (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010). The difficulty with standalone professional development activities is that they often fail to produce systematic improvements at scale (Harris & Sass, 2011). Coaching can address this issue by helping to transform new knowledge into improved instruction (Kraft et al., 2018).

Research on professional development with coaching has concentrated on schoolteachers (Ostrand et al., 2020; van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2019) rather than on OST staff (Sheldon et al., 2010). In a study by Miller et al. (2006), OST staff received weekly coaching from professional literacy coaches in conducting read-alouds and facilitating independent reading. OST staff report-

ed feeling more comfortable leading literacy activities and saw improvement in their students' literacy skills compared to the beginning of the year. Sheldon et al. (2010) found that ongoing coaching and professional development led to improvement in OST program quality. Additionally, a 2019 study by Farrell, Collier-Meek, and Furman found that ongoing coaching was positively associated with implementation of positive behavioral intervention and supports at both the staff and program levels. Coaching is one of the most effective methods for improving OST staff quality, along with assessment, training, and data feedback (Phillips Smith et al., 2018).

Effectiveness of Online Professional Development for Coaches

In order to provide literacy coaching to educators, coaches must themselves participate in high-quality professional development. In professional development sessions, they can increase their content knowledge, evaluate current best practices, and refine their coaching skills.

Research has identified several components of high-quality online professional development:

- **Collective participation** creates a productive learning environment (Desimone & Pak, 2017) in which participants share responsibility for the activities in which they engage (Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2004).
- **Coherence** (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2004) aligns the professional development with the mission and needs of the institution and its constituents.
- **Active learning** through authentic tasks uses real-world scenarios to help participants make direct connections to their professional practice. Active learning correlated to educators' needs has been proven to increase the effectiveness of professional development (Garet et al., 2008; Loucks-Horsley et al., 2009).

According to Vrasidas and Zembylas (2004), online professional development is stronger when participants are involved in the development of the course, providing input on structure, goals, and assessment methods. Development should be a continuous process in which course designers evaluate and modify courses based on written and oral feedback from participants, analysis of multiple assessments, and evaluation of the course's online learning tools (Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2004).

This online professional development for literacy coaches, like many such courses, offered participants who completed the program a micro-credential. According to the National Education Association (n.d.), a micro-credential is "a short, competency-based recognition." Use of micro-credentials is grounded in research and aligned with best practices for adult learners in that it is flexible and personalized (Acree, 2016; National Education Association, n.d.). A post micro-credential completion survey found that "97% of respondents indicated that they wanted to pursue another micro-credential in the future" (Acree, 2016, p. 2).

> The difficulty with standalone professional development activities is that they often fail to produce systematic improvements at scale (Harris & Sass, 2011). Coaching can address this issue by helping to transform new knowledge into improved instruction (Kraft et al., 2018).

Literacy in OST Programming

OST programs typically provide not only a safe place for children while parents are working but also homework help and a space where children can socialize with peers. Some also focus on developing academic skills, including early literacy (Sheldon et al., 2010). Incorporating literacy instruction can not only improve academic achievement but also provide students with multiple varied literacy experiences, a critical requirement for early literacy development (Spielberger & Halpern, 2002). Children from low-income households and English language learners (ELLs) particularly need increased and varied opportunities to practice skills. Targeted reading and writing instruction in afterschool programs, though it cannot replace school learning, has been shown to close the literacy achievement gap in low-income neighborhoods. For example, a four-year study of an afterschool program that implemented structured literacy and reading training along with individual tutoring and choice-based book distribution with kindergarten to third grade children in public housing communities found growth in reading proficiency that was significantly higher than that of a similar group of children who did not participate (Douglass Bayless et al., 2018).

Additional literacy instruction during OST programs can be invaluable to students. Maxwell-Jolly (2011), for example, advocates for systematic literacy instruction to help ELL students. OST programs should engage in intentional planning—including interactive activities to practice language and reading skills—and provide consistent professional development opportunities for staff members (Maxwell-Jolly, 2011).

Although some evidence indicates that OST program staff generally have high levels of education (Gao et al., 2014), many OST sites are staffed by volunteers or part-time staff who have different levels of knowledge, expertise, and access to professional development (Bradshaw, 2015). Compounding this issue are staff shortages due to the COVID-19 pandemic (PASE, 2021). In order to support programs with a focus on early literacy, professional developers need to take into consideration the time and expertise of current and future OST staff as well as their access to opportunities (Bradshaw, 2015).

Training Literacy Coaches to Support OST Staff

Our project trained coaches to support OST program staff in providing differentiated early literacy instruction. The process of developing this train-the-trainer model involved identifying needs, deciding on topics, developing the training materials, and then implementing the training (Figure 1). The development team consisted of the three authors: Lori Severino is a university faculty member with expertise in literacy practices; Sinead Meehan is a doctoral student with Montessori experience; and Lauren Fegely was, at the time of this project, an undergraduate preservice teacher in secondary English.

Participants

We created a professional development program for eight literacy coaches and program liaisons from Philadelphia's Office of Children and Families (OCF). Literacy coaches support the implementation of "light-touch" literacy practices at multiple OST sites across the city. These light-touch practices include interactive read-alouds, independent reading, and literacy-rich environments. Program liaisons are assigned to specific OST sites, where they support many activities including light-touch literacy practices.
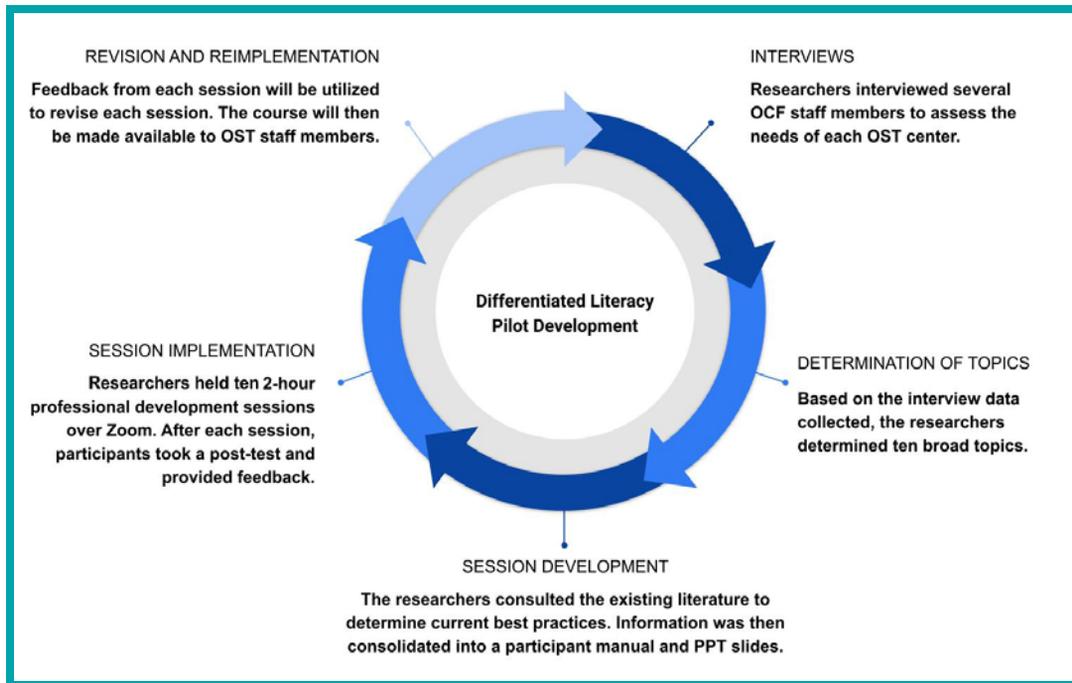
Figure 1. The Differentiated Literacy Pilot Development Process

Process

Our first step was to work with the literacy coordinator at OCF to identify the literacy coaches and program liaisons to participate in the pilot program. To help determine the topics to be covered in the training, we conducted a needs assessment, interviewing four of the eight literacy coaches and program liaisons regarding their perceptions of the OST centers' literacy strengths and areas for improvement. Philadelphia's OST system has identified literacy support to children in grades K to 3 as a focus of its strategic plan. Many OST programs have been working to construct literacy-rich environments that are conducive to read-alouds and independent reading, among other literacy practices.

Analysis of the interview data revealed several recurring themes. Respondents described a range of successful read-aloud instructional strategies, though use of these strategies was not consistent across sites. Half of the participants described instances when OST staff members brought theatrical flair to their read-alouds by putting on costumes, reading in different voices, and acting out scenes. Interviewees said that these strategies led to high student engagement. Another effective instructional strategy was the use of questioning and conversation. Half of the OCF interviewees provided examples of OST staff members asking children to make predictions based on a book's cover; using sticky notes to delineate opportunities to stop, question, and discuss the text; and using read-alouds as an opportunity to build vocabulary.

However, respondents also described challenges with read-alouds. Some OST staff members failed to intentionally prepare for read-alouds, thus missing opportunities for questioning, conversations, and extension activities. Classroom management of undesirable student behaviors was also recognized as a challenge.

Interviewees told us that, although most OST sites consistently incorporated read-alouds into their daily schedules, only a few designated time for independent reading. At those sites, interviewees saw staff members creating quiet and comfortable spaces where students could read independently. They also observed staff members walking around to assist children during independent reading time.

We used the information from the needs assessment to develop train-the-trainer sessions for the lit-

> Respondents described a range of successful read-aloud instructional strategies, though use of these strategies was not consistent across sites.

Session 6: Verbal Reasoning

Introduction to the Topic

Verbal reasoning refers to a child's ability to understand what they read and hear. Verbal reasoning involves making meaning based on the information given, going beyond that information to a better understanding and applying verbal skills to new learning. it most specifically refers to more complex thinking tasks, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation of text. it's interactive reading that results in a change in background knowledge, attitudes and beliefs.Verbal reasoning skills are developed and refined as children ask questions, make predictions, inferencing, making connections, retelling, sequencing, and identifying similarities and differences. In this session, we will focus specifically on the verbal reasoning skill of inference.

Objectives

1. Define verbal reasoning
2. Explain the term inference and describe the ways in which you can support students inference skills
3. Understand figurative language and how to address is with diverse learners

Glossary

idiom: an expression, word, or phrase that has a figurative meaning conventionally understood by native speakers
inference: a conclusion reached on the basis of evidence and reasoning
metaphor: a comparison that **does not** use like or as
simile: a comparison using like or as

Think about the ways that you learned to inference or the ways that you have taught inference skills in the classroom. What processes do you need to go through to make an inference?

Watch **"Rethinking Thinking: Inference and the Brain"**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJLqOclPqis

In this session we will talk about figurative language, specifically idioms, similes, and metaphors. How might figurative language be difficult for diverse learners? Be ready to share!

Read this **"Inference"** article from Reading Rockets
https://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/inference

Figure 2. Sample Manual Introduction Page

eracy coaches and program liaisons. We planned a total of 10 two-hour sessions whose topics were designed to address the varied literacy needs of OST program participants in grades K through 3.

Training Format

We had planned to deliver the training to OCF coaches in person but switched to live (synchronous) virtual sessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lori and Sinead, the university faculty member and the graduate student, led all 10 sessions, which were presented every other week for four months. We created a course manual (Figure 2) and mailed it to all eight training participants along with hands-on materials they could use to practice activities, such as dry-erase markers and white plastic plates to serve as dry-erase boards. At the beginning of each session, participants were provided a brief introduction to the topic, followed by a list of objectives for the session and a glossary of important terms. Sessions continued with a mix of instructor presentation, whole-group discussion, small-group discussions in breakout rooms, and hands-on practice followed by reflection.

Training Content

The session topics covered how to identify learners' needs, how to incorporate strategies that address those needs, and how to assist and encourage learners. Coaches would then implement these strategies with OST staff members, who would learn by example how to implement them with program participants.

Session 1: Differentiation

The first session provided an overview of what differentiation is and is not. We adapted Tomlinson's (2017) model of differentiating by content, process, or product. Content could be differentiated by texts that have a variety of genres or readability levels and by medium, such as print, audio, video, or presentation. Differentiating by process means using varied activities such as read-alouds, choral reading, readers theater, or repeated reads (that is, reading the same text again). Differentiating by product offers children choices in how to show their learning, for example, by writing, drawing, or performing.

Differentiation does not require providing something different for every child. Rather, educators offer different ways to access information in order to meet the needs of diverse learners. Differentiation does require advance planning, with the needs of the children at the forefront.

Session 2: Diversity

This session focused on two kinds of diversity: disabilities and cultural differences. Before the session, we asked trainees to think about the children they observe

at the OST centers: "Are there children who sit away from others? who are walking around when others are working? whose behaviors are challenging for adults?" Prework included reading *Categories of Disability Under IDEA* by the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (2012) and listening to the Cult of Pedagogy podcast "Culturally Responsive Teaching: 4 Misconceptions" (Gonzalez, 2017).

The first half of the session guided the OCF coaches through the 13 disability categories of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and suggested specific activities that can help learners who have the most common disabilities. We gave the coaches research articles, videos, and websites to share with OST centers. The second part of Session 2 addressed cultural diversity and culturally responsive teaching frameworks. Cultural diversity can have a large impact on academic achievement and motivation to learn; when students speak a language other than the one spoken at the center, culturally responsive education helps them acquire that language (Gay, 2000).

Session 3: Literacy Theories and Models

To prime the discussion about literacy theories, coaches were asked, "What do you think children should be able to do pertaining to reading in kindergarten and first grade?" We also asked them to be ready to share a memory about learning to read. This session focused on children's existing and developing literacy skills. Prework including watching the video *What Is Phonological Awareness?* (Understood, 2019) and reading the article "Rethinking Differentiation—Using Teachers' Time Most Effectively" (Marshall, 2016).

The literacy models we examined were Young's ladder of reading (2020), Ehri's reading stages of development (1995), the simple view of reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), and Scarborough's reading rope (2001). The reading rope, on which we relied in subsequent sessions, shows the many skills that make up the ability to read as strands that weave together into a rope that represents "skilled reading" (Scarborough, 2001). The goals were to enable OCF coaches to understand the typical reading development of children; to empower them to show OST staff how to identify the effect on reading of learning differences, behavior

issues, or trauma; and to teach them to coach OST staff to introduce read-alouds and other reading activities and supports. Again, OCF coaches received resources to share with OST sites.

Session 4: Word Identification, Phonemic Awareness, and Phonics

The required reading for this session was *The Importance of Phonics Instruction for All Students* (Reed, 2016). We also asked coaches to watch a video on *Syllable Types* (Severino, 2021) and to contemplate how OST staff could use identification of syllable types and syllable segmentation to develop children's literacy skills.

During the session, we focused on the word recognition strand of Scarborough's reading rope (2001), which consists of phonemic awareness, decoding, and sight recognition skills. To learn about phonemic awareness, the coaches completed activities on isolating, blending, and segmenting sounds as well as adding, deleting, and substituting sounds using Elkonin (1963) boxes. Elkonin boxes are presented in sets of four on worksheets, one for each of four potential sounds in a word. To practice phonemic awareness, children listen for each sound in a word and move a marker (such as a penny, poker chip, or M & M) into a box for each separate sound. For example, the word "cat" has three individual sounds. A child would slide one marker for the sound /k/ into the first empty box on the paper, another marker for the sound /a/ into the second box, and another marker into the third box for the sound /t/. The fourth box would remain empty. The idea is for the child to listen for individual sounds (phonemes) in a word and be able to identify each sound. Once children identify how many sounds are in a word, they can match letters to those sounds. This is a great predictor of later reading skill.

For decoding, we guided coaches through the six syllable types and syllable division rules, providing activities and resources for use with OST staff. For sight recognition, we introduced a model for teaching high-frequency words by helping learners identify the sounds in each word that follow regular patterns and what part of the word is the "tricky" part.

> "Are there children who sit away from others? who are walking around when others are working? whose behaviors are challenging for adults?"

Session 5: Language Comprehension

This session highlighted the comprehension skills of Scarborough's reading rope (2001). To prime coaches for this session, we asked them to reflect on the connections they make to their own prior knowledge while reading and then think about how to help students make such connections. Next, we asked them to watch the video *Teaching Text Structures for Non-Fiction Reading* (Cult of Pedagogy, 2014), reflect on how knowing text structures (or genres) aids comprehension, and consider how to teach text structures to children. The last assignment was to read the article "Building Background Knowledge" (Neuman et al., 2014).

During the session, we taught the coaches about developing background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge. We introduced the 95 Percent Group's *Comprehension Process Continuum* (2011), providing an example of modeling for each step of the continuum and offering differentiation activities. In virtual breakout rooms, the coaches discussed the importance of building background knowledge and participated in sample activities. Finally, we introduced the process of using graphic organizers to teach nonfiction text structures.

> In virtual breakout rooms, the coaches discussed the importance of building background knowledge and participated in sample activities.

Session 6: Syntax, Semantics, Morphology, and Code Switching

This session delved more deeply into the language comprehension section of Scarborough's reading rope (2001). As prework, coaches were asked to think about a common idiom that might confuse children whose first language is not English. The session also addressed code switching, which may be practiced not only by ELLs but also by native speakers of English who speak a particular dialect at home and in the community. The required reading for this session, "Julie Washington's Quest to Get Schools to Respect African-American English" (Brennan, 2018), addressed code switching to help coaches realize how much mental work Black and Brown children can go through to shift from their cultural language to "school" language.

During the session, coaches watched a video on morphology (Institute of Education Sciences, 2016) that explained the study of word parts and provided sample instructional activities. We also walked the coaches through activities to teach sentence elabora-

tion and the four sentence types: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. Finally, we asked coaches to think about how they could teach the morphology of a vocabulary word using Matt de la Peña's *Last Stop on Market Street* (2015). They explored how word parts can help children understand a word's meaning.

Session 7: Verbal Reasoning

This session covered verbal reasoning, inference, and figurative language. To prepare coaches for this session, we asked them to think about how they learned to make inferences and to consider how the inference process works. The video *Rethinking Thinking* (Ted-Ed, 2012) built on their understanding of the cognitive process required to make inferences. The required reading was an article on inference from Reading Rockets (n.d.). We also asked coaches to consider how figurative language might be difficult for some learners.

During the session, we guided a discussion about where children struggle with inferences and figurative language. Verbal reasoning involves making meaning that goes beyond the information given, so the ability to apply verbal reasoning skills to new learning enables students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. We showed coaches examples of inferences and figurative language in *The Color Monster* by Anna Llenas (2018) and then led a discussion about how to teach these skills. The session ended with a discussion of how learning disabilities affect students' ability to understand figurative language.

Session 8: Fluency

This session communicated how to support children to develop the three components of fluency: accuracy, expression, and speed. The manual instructed coaches to consider what makes a fluent reader and how inability to read fluently might affect a child's reading comprehension (Hasbrouck, 2020). It also prompted them to watch *The "Essentials" of Developing Reading Fluency* (Scholastic, 2014) and to read an article on fluency from Reading Rockets (2020).

We began the session by teaching the difference between *automaticity* and *fluency*. Once children learn to identify sounds in a word, they decode more quickly, thus developing automaticity. They do not have to

sound out each phoneme to read the word. Fluency is a cadence of reading quickly and easily. Fluent readers read aloud as they would tell a story: Their voice changes and they phrase words in a way the listener can understand. Coaches learned tools to improve children's fluency, including modeling strategies, readers theater, and audiobooks (Reading Rockets, 2020). They received a list of audiobook resources to take to the OST centers.

Session 9: Writing

This session covered the components of writing, types of sentences, and graphic organizers to assist children in writing. To prepare, coaches were asked to think about parts of speech and sentence structures and to consider how to teach these concepts. They watched a video on simple, compound, and complex sentence structures by EasyTeaching (2018). The reading for this session, *How to Teach Writing in the Early Primary Grades* (Jocelyn Seamer Education, n.d.), introduced the many components of writing, such as handwriting, phonetic awareness and encoding, spelling, syntax and the parts of speech, and text structure.

In the session, we provided instruction on parts of speech, types of sentences and clauses, prepositional phrases, and conjunctions. Writing activities the coaches could share with OST staff included "the hamburger model," a graphic representing the parts of a good paragraph. A paragraph needs an introduction (top bun), the details or meat of the topic (hamburger, lettuce, tomato), and the conclusion (bottom bun). The hamburger model helps children visually see the parts needed to develop their writing. Another activity involved using the mnemonic POW TREE to walk children through the writing process (Graham & Harris, 2000). POW stands for **P**ick my idea, **O**rganize my thoughts, **W**rite more. The TREE part of the mnemonic helps children organize a paragraph by writing a **T**opic sentence, giving three **R**easons that support the topic sentence, **E**xplaining how those reasons relate to the topic sentence, and adding an **E**nding sentence (Graham & Harris, 2000).

Session 10: Behaviors

The final session examined the difference between learning issues and behavior issues and presented types of consequences, prevention strategies, and problem-solving strategies. The thinking prompt asked coaches to consider what behaviors OST staff members struggle with most. Coaches watched the video *Engaging Children in After School Programs* (Parks and Recreation Ontario, 2019) and read an article about relationships in relation to behavior management (Kirylo, 2009).

Focusing on the common behavior issues OCF interviewees had observed in the OST centers, we led a discussion designed to help coaches understand the antecedents of undesirable behaviors. We presented information on children's developmental stages and on coping mechanisms used in a traditional behavior model. We gave them behavior guidelines, prevention strategies, and conflict resolution strategies to share with OST staff. One such strategy, ACT (Holstead, n.d.), prompts adults to **A**cknowledge the child's behavior and what motivated it, **C**ommunicate the rules or limits and the consequences for breaking them, and **T**arget choices by providing the child with acceptable alternative actions.

Next Steps

Training OCF coaches to train OST program staff in literacy strategies for diverse learners enables scaling of effective practices across multiple sites over many years, despite high staff turnover. This model thus builds capacity to sustain change for the long term. The 20 hours of training for OCF literacy coaches and program liaisons both introduced evidence-based literacy strategies and promoted collaboration so the trainees can support one another in their work as coaches in OST sites. Data analysis and a study of the effectiveness of this training will be completed at the end of the 2021–2022 school year.

We used real-world scenarios as much as possible in the training to provide authenticity (Desimone & Pak, 2017). When OCF trainees proposed additional strategies that they thought would be effective or that they had witnessed at OST sites, we took detailed notes. These notes and the feedback trainees provided will influence future training modules.

This training was the first step in this project. The next step is to support the OCF literacy coaches and program liaisons during their coaching at five pilot OST sites. The literacy expert who led the training ses-

> The final session examined the difference between learning issues and behavior issues and presented types of consequences, prevention strategies, and problem-solving strategies.

sions will observe literacy practices in these five sites alongside the literacy coaches. The trainer will coach the OCF literacy coaches and program liaisons as they themselves start to coach OST staff to implement light-touch literacy practices. After 10 weeks of implementation with the trainer's support, the literacy coaches and program liaisons will continue coaching and mentoring at the five pilot sites for four more months. After that pilot period, an independent evaluation of the light-touch literacy practices will begin.

The support we provide will help the literacy coaches and program liaisons implement light-touch literacy practices throughout OST programming. For example, if a literacy coach and trainer observe that the staff at an OST site are doing read-alouds but are not incorporating activities to support children's skill development, they might suggest activities that would help children focus on how many sounds they hear in a word. This phonemic awareness skill supports both reading and spelling. Let's say that the book is *The Field* by Baptiste Paul (2018), which features a soccer game that can begin only after children shoo animals out of the field. The literacy coach could show the OST staff member how to use soccer balls to help children with phonemic awareness. Each pair of children has a soccer ball, which they pass once for each sound in a word. For the word "shoo," the first child kicks the ball to the other while saying /sh/. Then their partner kicks it back, saying /oo/. Then together both children say "shoo." The training the literacy coaches and program liaisons received equips them to mentor the OST staff to incorporate activities like this.

OST staff can incorporate literacy-skill building activities into what they are already doing without needing deep knowledge of the research behind the strategies. However, we will make these evidence-based differentiated strategies available to OST staff online in modules consisting of three- to five-minute video clips and downloadable materials on the topics discussed in the training. The literacy coaches and program liaisons can use these materials to support their coaching and mentoring efforts. In addition, OST staff can access the resources if they want to know more about strategies their coach is suggesting.

References

95 Percent Group. (2011). *Comprehension process continuum, elementary version*. Education Consulting and Professional Development. http://store.95percentgroup.com/compcontinuum.aspx

Acree, L. (2016). Seven lessons learned from implementing micro-credentials. William and Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation. http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/principal-project-phase-2-seven-lessons-about-implementing-microcredentials-lauren-acree.pdf

Bradshaw, L. D. (2015). Planning considerations for afterschool professional development. *Afterschool Matters, 21,* 46–54.

Brennan, W. (2018, April). Julie Washington's quest to get schools to respect African-American English. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/04/the-code-switcher/554099/

Cornett, J., & Knight, J. (2009). Research on coaching. In J. Knight (Ed.), *Coaching: Approaches and perspectives* (pp. 192–216). Corwin Press.

Cult of Pedagogy. (2014, November 6). Teaching text structures for non-fiction reading [Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSGX34Zf82c&t=8s

De la Peña, M. (2015). *Last stop on Market Street*. Penguin.

Desimone, L., & Pak, K. (2017). Instructional coaching as high-quality professional development. *Theory into Practice*, *56*(1), 3–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2016.1241947

Douglass Bayless, S., Jenson, J. M., Richmond, M. K., Pampel, F. C., Cook, M., & Calhoun, M. (2018). Effects of an afterschool early literacy intervention on the reading skills of children in public housing communities. *Child Youth Care Forum, 47,* 537–561. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-018-9442-5

EasyTeaching. (2018, November 11). *Simple, compound, complex sentences* [Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smgyeUomfyA&t=35s

Ehri, L. C. (1995). Phases of development in learning to read words by sight. *Journal of Research in Reading*, *18*(2), 116–125. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9817.1995.tb00077.x

Elkonin, D. B. (1963). The psychology of mastering the elements of reading. In B. Simon & J. Simon (Eds.), *Educational psychology in the U.S.S.R.* (pp. 165–179). Stanford University Press.

Farrell, A. F., Collier-Meek, M. A., & Furman, M. J. (2019). Supporting out-of-school time staff in low resource communities: A professional development approach. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *63*(3–4), 378–390. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12330

Gao, J., Hallar, B., & Hartmann, T. A. (2014). *A snapshot of OST programs in Philadelphia: An evaluation of eleven 21st Century Community Learning Center grantees*. Research for Action.

Garet, M.S., Cronen, S., Eaton, M., Kurki, A., Ludwig, M., Jones, W., et al. (2008). *The impact of two professional development interventions on early reading instruction and achievement* (NCEE 2008-4030). National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, practice, & research*. Teachers College Press.

Gonzalez, J. (Host). (2017, September 10). Culturally responsive teaching: 4 misconceptions [Audio podcast episode]. In *Cult of Pedagogy*. https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/culturally-responsive-misconceptions/

Gough, P. B., & Tunmer, W. E. (1986). Decoding, reading and reading disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, 7, 6–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/074193258600700104

Graham, S., & Harris, K. R. (2000). The role of self-regulation and transcription skills in writing and writing development. *Educational Psychologist, 35*(1), 3–12.

Guinney, E. (2001). Coaching isn't just for athletes: The role of teacher leaders. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82, 740–743. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F003172170108201006

Harris, D. N., & Sass, T. R. (2011). Teacher training, teacher quality and student achievement. *Journal of Public Economics, 95*, 798–812. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2010.11.009

Hasbrouck, J. (2020). Understanding reading fluency. *Learning Difficulties of Australia Bulletin*, 52(1), 9–12.

Holstead, J. (n.d.). *Guiding children's behaviors in school-age programs*. [PowerPoint slides]. Human Development and Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. https://www.cde.state.co.us/21stcclc/behaviorguidance_presentation

Institute of Education Sciences. (2016, September 14). *Video 8: Morphology*. [Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMbuIYgRlBU

Jocelyn Seamer Education (2021, February 28). *How to teach writing in the early primary grades*. https://www.jocelynseamereducation.com/blog/51998-how-to-teach-writing-in-the-early

Kalyuga, S. (2011). Informing: A cognitive load perspective. *Informing Science: The International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline*, *14*, 33–45. https://doi.org/10.28945/1349

Kirylo, J. D. (2009). Issues in education: The power of relationship and behavior management. *Childhood Education*, *86*(1), 33–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2009.10523107

Knight, J. (2011). *Unmistakable impact: A partnership approach for dramatically improving instruction*. Corwin Press.

Kraft, M. A., Blazar, D., Hogan, D. (2018). The effect of teacher coaching on instruction and achievement: A meta-analysis of the causal evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, *88*(4), 547–588. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318759268

Kretlow, A. G., & Bartholomew, C. C. (2010). Using coaching to improve the fidelity of evidence-based practices: A review of studies. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *33*, 279–299. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406410371643

Llenas, Anna. (2018). *The color monster*. Little, Brown.

Loucks-Horsley, S., Stiles, K. E., Mundry, S., Love, N., & Hewson, P. W. (2009). *Designing professional development for teachers of science and mathematics*. Corwin Press.

Marshall, K. (2016). Rethinking differentiation—Using teachers' time most effectively. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *98*(1), 8–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721716666046

Maxwell-Jolly, J. (2011). English learners and out-of-school time programs: The potential of OST programs to foster EL success. *Afterschool Matters, 14*(1), 1–12.

Miller, B. M., Brigham, R., & Perea, F. (2006). *Afterschool literacy coaching initiative of Boston: Final evaluation report*. Boston Massachusetts 2020.

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities. (2012). *Categories of disability under IDEA*. https://www.parentcenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/repo_items/gr3.pdf

National Education Association. (n.d.). *Micro-credentials*. https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/professional-learning/micro-credentials

Neufeld, B., & Roper, D. (2003). *Coaching: A strategy for developing instructional capacity*. Annenberg Institute for School Reform and Annenberg Institute Program on Education.

Neuman, S. B., Kaefer, T., & Pinkham, A. (2014). Building background knowledge. *The Reading Teacher*, *68*(2), 145–148. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1314

Ostrand, K. V., Seylar, J., & Luke, C. (2020). *Prevalence of coaching and approaches to supporting coaching in education*. https://digitalpromise.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12265/91/Prevalence_of_Coaching_Report.pdf

Parks and Recreation Ontario. (2019, March 6). *Engaging children in after school programs*. [Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TyyiVIvNsI&t=3s

PASE: Partnership for After School Education. (2021). *The great resignation or a referendum on job quality? Exploring staffing shortages in afterschool*. https://pasesetter.org/news/2021/the-great-resignation-or-a-referendum-on-job-quality-exploring-staffing-shortages-in-afterschool

Paul, B. (2018). *The field*. NorthSouth Books.

Pelatti, C. Y., & Piasta, S. B. (2017). Improving literacy outcomes for at-risk kindergartners through an afterschool tutoring program: Results from a feasibility study. *Frontiers in Education*, *2*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2017.00027

Phillips Smith, E., Osgood, D. W., Oh, Y., & Caldwell, L. C. (2018). Promoting afterschool quality and positive youth development: Cluster randomized trial of the Pax Good Behavior Game. *Prevention Science, 19*(2), 159–173. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-017-0820-2

Rasco, C. H., Cheatham, J. B., Cheatham, S. H., & Phalen, E. M. (2013). Using afterschool and summer learning to improve literacy skills. In T. K. Peterson (Ed.), *Expanding minds and opportunities*: *Leveraging the power of afterschool and summer learning for student success*. Collaborative Communications Group.

Reading Rockets. (2020). *Fluency*. https://www.readingrockets.org/teaching/reading-basics/fluency

Reading Rockets. (n.d.). *Inference*. https://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/inference

Reed, D. K. (2016, September 6). *The importance of phonics instruction for all students*. Iowa Reading Research Center. https://iowareadingresearch.org/blog/the-importance-of-phonics-instruction-for-all-students

Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook for research in early literacy* (pp. 97–110). Guilford Press.

Scholastic. (2014, September 11). *The "essentials" of developing reading fluency*. [Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OM-mi_4usvE

Severino, L. (2021). *Syllable types*. [Video]. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wTWadF2a0qzFMKjXQhED_f84eW3XIPpb/view?usp=sharing

Sheldon, J., Arbreton, A., Hopkins, L., & Grossman, J. B. (2010). Investing in success: Key strategies for building quality in after-school programs. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*(3–4), 394–404. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9296-y

Spielberger, J., & Halpern, R. (2002). The role of after-school programs in children's literacy development. Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Sprick, R., Knight, J., Reinke, W., & McKale, T. (2006). *Coaching classroom management: Strategies and tools for administrators and coaches*. Pacific Northwest.

Ted-Ed. (2012, October 15). *Rethinking thinking-Trevor Maber*. [Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJLqOclPqis

Tomlinson, C. A. (2017). *How to differentiate instruction in academically diverse classrooms,* 3rd ed. ASCD.

Understood. (2019, December 20). *What is phonological awareness?* [Video]. https://youtu.be/K0G6teawxls

van Nieuwerburgh, C., Knight, J., & Campbell, J. (2019). Coaching in education. In S. English, J. M. Sabatine, & P. Brownell (Eds), *Professional coaching: Principles and practice* (pp. 411–426). Springer.

Vandell, D. L. (2012). *California afterschool outcome measures project: Field test of the online toolbox. Final report submitted to the California Department of Education*. https://cpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/faculty.sites.uci.edu/dist/0/236/files/2013/07/caomp_field_test_report_4.13.12.pdf

Vrasidas, C., & Zembylas, M. (2004). Online professional development: Lessons from the field. *Education+ Training*. https://doi.org/10.1108/00400910410555231

Young, N. (2020). [Untitled webpage]. https://www.nancyyoung.ca

Coaching to Improve OST Literacy Programming

Philadelphia Practitioner Perspectives

Maggie Gilbert, Julie Dennehy, Diane Gruber, & Georgia Hall

Research overwhelmingly reveals that the early elementary years are critical for developing foundational literacy skills, yet grade-level literacy proficiency remains out of reach for many children in the United States. By the end of third grade, most children are expected to transition from learning how to decode to using reading skills to understand content (Chall et al., 1990; Chall & Jacobs, 2003).

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2017), only 37 percent of American fourth-grade students in 2017 performed at or above the proficient level on standardized reading assessments. Achievement gaps based on race, ethnicity, income level, disabilities, and English language learner (ELL) status persist across grade levels. In the 2013 NAEP, across all grades, almost three times as many White students (47 percent) as Black students (16 percent) scored at or above the proficient level in reading (NAEP, 2013). In 2017, only 5 percent of ELLs scored at or above the proficient level in reading, compared to 39 percent of non-ELL students (NAEP, 2017).

Out-of-school time (OST) programs can play an important role in building children's literacy skills and helping to bridge achievement gaps—if those programs receive the right support. The National

MAGGIE GILBERT is a research assistant at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at Wellesley College.

JULIE DENNEHY is a research associate at NIOST.

DIANE GRUBER, LMHC, is a research associate at NIOST.

GEORGIA HALL, PhD, is director and senior research scientist at NIOST.

Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at Wellesley College implemented and then studied a Philadelphia initiative designed to provide that support through staff development and coaching. Preliminary findings suggest that this initiative is beginning to influence staff members' practices in ways that promise to improve the ability of their programs to develop children's literacy skills.

Background on OST Literacy Programming

Significant evidence suggests that OST programs can provide literacy-rich environments to help children build their literacy skills (Afterschool Alliance, 2015; Hartmann et al., 2017; Kidron & Lindsay, 2014; Lauer et al., 2006; Redd et al., 2012; Wilson-Keenan et al., 2018). OST is uniquely positioned to link literacy-building activities with meaningful learning experiences that not only are enriching and engaging for children but also support in-school learning (Afterschool Alliance, 2015). When children are able to choose literacy-building activities whose topics interest them, they are more likely to complete tasks and assignments (Afterschool Alliance, 2015).

A comprehensive meta-analysis that included qualitative and quantitative studies on the learning of low-achieving youth found that OST programming can significantly increase reading achievement (Lauer et al., 2004). Similarly, the National Summer Learning Project investigated the extent to which voluntary summer programs that offered both academic and enrichment activities improved children's reading and math skills. Children who received a minimum of 34 hours of quality summer language arts instruction outperformed control group peers in state language arts assessments. The benefits were more pronounced after two summers of attendance (Sloan-McCombs et al., 2020).

OST literacy-building activities can be particularly effective in helping ELL children develop confidence as readers and writers. Research shows that OST programs can provide the additional time and support ELL students need to build vocabulary and develop the cultural dimensions of literacy while helping them to connect reading to their daily lives (Spielberger & Halpern, 2002). ELL students who attend OST programs perform better on statewide English language tests and are more likely to be redesignated as English proficient than ELL students who do not attend OST programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2017).

The Philadelphia Out-of-School Time Literacy and Quality Improvement Initiative

The Philadelphia Out-of-School Time Literacy and Quality Improvement Initiative (OSTLit), funded by the William Penn Foundation in 2019, aims to build OST staff and program capacity to employ teaching and facilitation strategies that embed literacy skill building in daily program activities. The initiative focuses on children in grades K–3, though staff in many programs serve older children as well. Components of OSTLit include literacy and program quality coaching, program observation, literacy training, and facilitation of a community of practice (CoP). The William Penn Foundation invited five Philadelphia OST programs to participate in the initiative. NIOST coaches have provided training on continuous program quality improvement and on literacy enrichment strategies and activities.

The partnership began with program observations using NIOST's Assessment of Program Practices Tool (APT; Tracy et al., 2016) during the 2019–2020 school year. Another part of NIOST's quality-building technical assistance was a literacy activity inventory with each program participating in the initiative. In addition, NIOST coaches delivered an average of 17 hours of coaching to each program between February 2020 and April 2021. They also facilitated five CoP meetings between March 2020 and March 2021 and facilitated a three-part virtual literacy training in October 2020. During coaching and training, the coaches shared literacy-building resources including websites, games, and apps.

The program quality coaching had three areas of focus:

1. Research-based methods and approaches for planning and organizing engaging activities, including continuous use of the APT for program improvement
2. Staff practices that promote and sustain engagement
3. Strategies for building and sustaining child–adult relationships

CoP meetings provided opportunities for OST program leaders and staff to share experiences with each other and to engage with invited literacy expert presenters. The box on the next page lists literacy-building strategies promoted during the training and coaching.

We were interested in understanding how staff experienced OSTLit. We therefore gathered practitioners' perceptions of:

- How participation contributed to their delivery of literacy skill-building experiences
- How they experienced the components of the initiative related to literacy skill building and creating literacy-rich environments

Methods

To investigate these questions, we conducted 11 semi-structured 30-minute interviews with staff from four Philadelphia OSTLit programs in March and April 2021. The fifth program was not able to participate in data collection. Interviewees received electronic gift cards for their participation. The interviews gathered information about literacy skill-building activities in each program and about the respondents' experience with literacy skill-building coaching, the CoP, and literacy activity training. Interviews were arranged through program leaders. One interviewer conducted and recorded all interviews by phone or on Zoom. We used NVivo software for thematic coding of interview transcripts. Two researchers reviewed, analyzed, and summarized the coded transcripts.

Staff Perceptions of the Philadelphia OSTLit Initiative

Early findings from our interviews indicate that OST program staff found many aspects of the OSTLit initiative helpful in deepening their ability to engage children in building literacy skills.

Coaching Support

When asked what they found most helpful about participating in OSTLit, respondents noted the support they received from coaches. Interviewees mentioned that they particularly appreciated the program tools coaches provided—games, websites, and apps that were specific to literacy development and could be readily implemented. One interviewee remarked that her program benefited from integrating new activities suggested by coaches into existing program activities, both those that were specifically literacy-based and those that were not. Interviewees acknowledged that coaches helped them develop a robust program whose variety of activities encouraged child attendance and engagement. One interviewee commented:

> That was the most surprising, that some kids wanted to come…. They heard how great it was because … sometimes, like, "It's boring, we have to read." But when they find out we do fun activities which are related to reading…. It was just amazing.

One participant remarked that use of the program assessment tool enabled

---

OSTLit Literacy-Building Strategies

- Staff read to children.
- Staff engage in frequent one-on-one conversations with children.
- Staff model use of Standard English (proper grammar and pronunciation) when interacting or reading with children.
- Staff listen attentively to children.
- Staff sit with children as they read.
- Staff help children sound out words and figure out meaning from context. They encourage children when they get stuck.
- Children play word games.
- Children receive reading assistance from staff members or volunteer tutors.
- Children are read to.
- Children read in practical situations.
- Staff engage children in writing.
- Children play word games that require writing.
- Children receive writing assistance and guidance from staff members or volunteer tutors.
- Staff encourage children to participate in conversations and discussions.
- Staff use proper vocabulary specific to the subject they are teaching.
- Staff use intonation and facial expressions and ask questions.
- Staff help children find books and other reading materials.
- Children read independently.
- Staff model reading comprehension strategies.
- Children investigate unfamiliar vocabulary words.
- Staff offer examples to illustrate different styles of writing.
- Children write about topics that matter to them.
- Staff frequently ask open-ended questions.
- Children explain ideas or experiences to adults or peers.
- Children explain their own thinking processes.

program staff to check in and assess the effectiveness of the program, what they were doing well, and where they could improve.

Respondents who received information from lead staff rather than participating directly in one-on-one coaching noted that staff meetings in which they discussed program effectiveness and new ways to incorporate literacy were especially helpful. Those who did receive individualized coaching acknowledged the responsiveness and resourcefulness of the literacy coaches. When asked what she particularly appreciated, one participant said:

> Being able to have our quality coach, [and other coaches] … having people that are available to … ask questions, give resources, give tools … and reach back to me quickly … saying, "Hey, I have some things that may work for you."

Activity Expansion

Interviewees identified numerous changes their programs made to activities as a result of the OSTLit initiative. New activity suggestions came from conversations with coaches, the literacy training, or CoP discussions with leaders and staff from other participating programs. Interviewees referenced the use of specific apps and websites to support literacy skill building. For example, they used Kahoot, a game-based learning platform, to check children's comprehension of literacy content and to collect data that could be used informally to demonstrate progress. Some used GoNoodle, a mindfulness and yoga program, to incorporate literacy into movement. Staff used i-Ready, a literacy program, to encourage children to develop literacy skills independently. One participant explained the use of i-Ready, saying:

> [Children] can work on their own to increase their own reading … because even though you may be teaching a certain grade, a lot of kids are not [functioning] on the same grade level. So it's good to help … to get them onto the grade level or have them improve.

Multiple interviewees from different programs mentioned the use of literacy scavenger hunts, in which the staff facilitator chooses an object and children need to find a related object whose name starts with the same letter. Children then explain how their object relates to the initial object, in the process gaining practice in oral communication.

Interviewees pointed to a number of new activities their programs had implemented since participating in OSTLit, including a writing club, a chess club that incorporated reading about the history of chess, "chat and chew" open discussions on topics brought up by the children, journaling, use of audiobooks, read-alouds and discussions, a literacy corner, sight-word games, a word-of-the-day activity, writing of acrostic poems, and storytelling sessions.

Literacy Across the Program

Interviewees described a shift in which their programs incorporated literacy in all aspects of programming—not just English or literacy blocks but also math, art, and physical activity sessions. They also mentioned an increase in intentional discussions among staff about implementation of literacy skill building. One participant commented:

> It's a more conscious topic, and it was something like, "Okay, yeah, we obviously wanted to talk about literacy and have literacy in our programming," but it's more of a conscious effort. I think it's a bigger deal. You see how beneficial it is, and then how can we improve it and how we can grow it more.

Respondents in an arts-focused program mentioned using the "popcorn" reading style when reading instructions for projects. In this style, one child starts reading aloud and then chooses another child to continue. This activity engages the whole class in reading aloud. A yoga instructor noted that she used GoNoodle to teach children yoga vocabulary and the meaning of the words and moves. She also mentioned playing a movement and literacy "Would you rather?" game in which children read the names of two different yoga moves and choose which one to perform. These interviewees said that incorporating literacy into art and yoga was new for their programs.

Some interviewees identified real-life applications for literacy skills, such as encouraging children to read labels and advertisements critically and to question

Interviewees described a shift in which their programs incorporated literacy in all aspects of programming—not just English or literacy blocks but also math, art, and physical activity sessions.

sales and social media messages. One staff member recalled collaborating with program participants to rewrite a popular story in a number of different ways, based on their interests. Some children transformed the story into a play. Others rewrote the story using modern themes and terms, provided a synopsis, developed a storyboard, or created a musical rap. The wide variety of options allowed participants to pursue their interests while refining their literacy skills.

Responsiveness to Participants' Literacy Interests

Another key shift for staff involved the way they thought about children's input and autonomy in literacy skill-building activities. Before OSTLit, they said, they typically chose the books the children would read and the related activities in which they would participate. Some interviewees reflected on the realization that children need to have choice in and control over their literacy activities. Increasing children's choice and control led some programs to a shift in the types of books they collect. One respondent said that children asked for books that were more "relatable." In response, program staff incorporated more representative books into the collection. This interviewee commented:

> Staff noticed that they were reading books that these kids … don't relate to. And then, when we provided them with books that did relate more to them, they … could see themselves in that book and those experiences. They were actually more intrigued in reading than they were previously. Reading wasn't such a task—more as an enjoyment. It didn't feel like school to them.

Several interviewees also noted that, before participating in the OSTLit initiative, they tended to have children read independently and then demonstrate their understanding by completing worksheets. Following OSTLit training and coaching, these same staff members said they made a conscious effort to engage in read-alouds with the entire class. They then facilitated discussions, using open-ended questions and reflection to assess understanding, spark collaboration, and enable children to share their ideas.

Benefits of the Community of Practice

Six of the interviewees participated in the CoP webinars. They noted that the webinars centered on program components that support literacy skill building. All six referenced the most recent CoP topic, trauma-informed practices, throughout their interviews. All six found the CoPs helpful for enhancing programming. They suggested that the usefulness of CoPs extended beyond content to encompass the opportunity to collaborate with other OST providers and to share what was working well and where they were struggling. One interviewee shared:

> I think outside of some of the literacy components that we use … it was interesting to be able to be in a space with other providers and … share what things have been working. And we as a collective have been able to share not only with just coaches, but with each other about different components, different things that work…. I think any space that allows for truthful and honest engagement with others is definitely needed, especially in these times…. It's definitely easy to … get caught up in your own bubble and your own space, but those communities of practice allowed you to be around like-minded individuals who are working to build programming … for the young people of this city.

Interviewees expressed appreciation for the opportunities in CoP meetings to discuss challenges associated with virtual programming, such as low attendance, low child engagement, and child Zoom burnout. They said that sharing their struggles and hearing that other programs are experiencing similar problems with virtual programming helped them feel less alone. One participant said:

> I like when the other organizations are present, because then you get to hear some of the issues they are facing, and it leaves you feeling like you're not alone. The other organizations, too, they're struggling with attendance, and they're struggling with trying to pivot and do things differently in light of what's happening.

Three of the six interviewees who participated in

Interviewees expressed appreciation for the opportunities in CoP meetings to discuss challenges associated with virtual programming, such as low attendance, low child engagement, and child Zoom burnout.

the CoP sessions elaborated on how they had used what they learned in their programming. Interviewees cited specific examples from the CoP sessions of guidance on building culturally relevant programming. One participant shared:

> [The community of practice] felt very tangible, and I think that's the most helpful thing for me personally, moving into the virtual setting—is actual things rather than ideas, actual things that we can do in a virtual setting that will be culturally relevant to our young people.

Training Impacts

Interviewees commented that the literacy training was helpful in several ways. Staff reported that they learned to be more flexible in their thinking. The training gave them the ability to help children go deeper into their learning and understanding of activity materials. The discussions on how to infuse literacy into existing programming and the opportunity to share what was and was not working helped them to keep literacy as a focus in their programs.

> I think there has been a larger focus on not just the activities that we do, but how we actually go about delivering the activities.

> We have weekly meetings geared towards programming … How … can we infuse literacy into programming we already have without taking stuff away and just improving it? … I think that was the biggest change.

Content from the literacy training helped respondents think outside the box and see literacy opportunities outside of books. Respondents said the trainings helped them to make changes in how they deliver the material, keeping it fresh and fun for program participants.

> I didn't know that … literacy can be found in so many ways, and I was very single-track minded, only reading a book or only writing. I didn't know that you could find literacy moments in almost everything. So that was a change for me that was different.

Not all staff remembered the program observations that were conducted at the beginning of the study; some had been hired after the observations took place. Interviewees who did remember commented on how the program observation and the feedback they received helped them change their delivery of program material, not only to meet best practice goals, but also to increase children's understanding of the material. Some said that they found the feedback helpful in identifying different ways to reach more children.

> I'm into and truly [appreciate] constructive criticism of how I can get to all of my children, not just some of them…. It's hard for me to observe when I'm doing the act of teaching…. But … someone sitting in the back of the room observing and noticing all these kids were not involved … helps me to help them get on board.

Remote Learning Challenges

Nearly every interviewee identified benefits to literacy programming and program quality improvement associated with participating in the OSTLit initiative. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated challenges of remote learning often limited progress. One interviewee explained:

> [Our program] is at a really vulnerable spot right now with this virtual programming. Not only is it hard to implement these wonderful things that the literacy programming has presented to us, but it's also hard to maintain our children's attention with the virtual learning…. Some days I'll log on and I won't see any of my kids at all. It's depending on the day, it's depending on the weather, it's depending on how they're feeling.

Another participant from the same program mentioned that, during the pandemic and virtual programming, program staff shifted their focus to forming and maintaining relationships with children and families. One participant remarked:

> Right now, it's been more about maintaining relationships with children and connecting with families…. We reach out to families every week. That's something that I've not been asked to do in the past much at all.

Three interviewees said that, although the literacy coaching was important and they wanted to implement the activities and skills they had acquired, low attendance and engagement in virtual programming stood in their way.

Staff Confidence in Delivering Literacy Skill-Building Activities

All interviewees reported that their confidence in delivering literacy skill-building activities had improved, but they gave different reasons. Some reported that they were more comfortable asking questions and engaging children in more open discussions. Others said that they had a deeper understanding of how to incorporate literacy into programming and had found a new level of excitement about researching new resources. Several respondents used ideas from the training to redevelop their lesson plans.

> This program has given me a couple of new ideas, different perspectives and different ways of engaging the kids. So, yes, it gave me confidence as far as that, coming up with new ideas.

> Doing the training and having monthly meetings—it was great to see that we were … doing some of these things already. And just seeing how we could level up what we were already doing, coupled with a lot of resources, made me more confident in knowing that I could deliver quality to our children.

> It definitely has increased my confidence in my excitement about creating programming and makes me want to research more and look into what else—what other activities we can do, what other ways we can draw [children] in, what resources can we get to make the programming more accessible to children.

"And just seeing how we could level up what we were already doing, coupled with a lot of resources, made me more confident in knowing that I could deliver quality to our children."

Building Literacy-Rich OST Environments

The coaching and training interventions of the OSTLit initiative, funded by the William Penn Foundation, have made meaningful contributions toward building literacy-rich environments in a cohort of Philadelphia afterschool programs. A multi-pronged approach including baseline quality assessment and improvement activities, along with coaching and topical trainings focused on staff practices and related support elements, has contributed to observable change in the ways programs approach literacy skill building.

Interviews with program staff suggest that coaching and training interventions are associated with:

- Expanded staff understanding of how to infuse literacy into all program activities, not just English language arts
- Increased discussion of literacy skill building at staff meetings
- Increased staff confidence and intentionality in delivering literacy activities
- More real-life applications of literacy skills, such as group reading of instructions and interpretation of advertisements or news articles
- More attention to children's choices and selection of more culturally diverse and representative materials for reading and discussion
- Increased participant engagement with and enjoyment of reading content
- Staff desire for ongoing support for literacy skill building and program quality improvement

In the 2021–2022 program year, researchers are continuing to investigate the impact of ongoing coaching and training along with participation in CoPs. They will track whether changes in practice persist over time, given staff turnover and the challenges programs manage in meeting priorities attached to state and foundation funding. These early findings suggest that OSTLit and similar interventions can help OST programs to provide high-quality, literacy-rich programming and environments for children.

References

Afterschool Alliance. (2015). *Building literacy in afterschool.* Dollar General Afterschool Literacy Brief No. 67. http://afterschoolalliance.org/issue_briefs/ issue_building_literacy_67.pdf

Afterschool Alliance. (2017). *Afterschool providing key literacy supports to English language learners.* Dollar General Afterschool Literacy Brief No. 69. https://files. eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED582327.pdf

Chall, J. S., & Jacobs, V. (2003). *The classic study on poor children's fourth grade slump.* http://aft.org/ periodical/American-educator/spring-2003/classic-study-poor-children-fourth-grade-slump

Chall, J. S., Jacobs, V., & Baldwin, L. (1990). *The reading crisis: Why poor children fall behind.* Harvard University Press.

Hartmann, T., Comly, R., Reumann-Moore, R., & Bowditch, E. (2017). *Supporting literacy in out-of-school time: Summary of evidence.* http://ost.phila.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Supporting-Literacy-in-OST-Summary-of-Evidence-June-2017-Lit-Review.pdf

Kidron, Y., & Lindsay, J. (2014). *The effects of increased learning time on student academic and nonacademic outcomes: Findings from a meta-analytic review* (REL 2014–015). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/appalachia/pdf/REL_2014015.pdf_

Lauer, P., Akiba, M., Wilkerson, S., Apthorp, H. S., Snow, D., & Martin-Glenn, M. (2004). *The effectiveness of out-of-school time strategies in assisting low-achieving students in reading and mathematics.* Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning.

Lauer, P., Motoko, A., Wilkerson, S., Apthorp, H. Snow, D., & Martin-Glen, M. (2006). Out-of-school time programs: A meta-analysis of effects for at-risk students. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(2), 275–313. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543076002275

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). (2013). *Reading framework for the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress.* Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://www.nagb.gov/naep-frameworks/reading/2013-reading-framework.html

National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2017). *NAEP reading report card.* Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2017/nation/scores?grade=4

Redd, Z., Boccanfuso, C., Walker, K., Princiotta, D., Knewstub, D., & Moore, K. (2012). Expanding time for learning both inside and outside the classroom: A review of the evidence base. *Child Trends.* http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED534555

Sloan-McCombs, J. S., Augustine, C. H., Pane, J. F., & Schweig, J. (2020). *Every summer counts: A longitudinal analysis of outcomes from the National Summer Learning Project.* The Wallace Foundation. https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Every-Summer-Counts-A-Longitudinal-Analysis-of-Outcomes-from-the-National-Summer-Learning-Project.pdf

Spielberger, J., & Halpern, R. (2002). *The role of afterschool programs in children's literacy development.* University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children.

Tracy, A., Charmaraman, L., Ceder, I., Richer, A., & Surr, W. (2016). Measuring program quality: Evidence of the scientific validity of the Assessment of Program Practices Tool. *Afterschool Matters, 24,* 3–11.

Wilson-Keenan, J., Schleyer, K., & Gannett, E. (2018). *Light-touch practices to operationalize early literacy in Philadelphia's out-of-school time programs.* National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Wellesley College.

OST Program Strategies to Promote Literacy Skill-Building

Kathryn A. Wheeler, Georgia Hall, & Neil Naftzger

Research indicates that struggling readers are more likely than proficient readers to have long-term negative outcomes. Hernandez (2011) found that children who scored low on literacy tests in third grade were four times less likely to finish high school by age 19 than higher-scoring peers.

Poverty and race have a compounding effect: Children who experienced poverty and were not proficient readers by the end of grade 3 were six times more likely to fail to graduate from high school than proficient readers. Graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students who were not proficient readers in third grade lagged far behind those for White students with the same reading skills (Hernandez, 2011).

Out-of-school time (OST) programs can play an important role in fostering the development of literacy skills among children and youth (Rasco et al., 2013). Research suggests that OST programs can help build reading skills (Afterschool Alliance, 2015, 2021; Reading Roadmap, 2018) and that summer learning programs can strengthen reading skills in ways that carry over to school days (McCombs et al., 2020). In fact, participation even in OST programs that do not specifically focus on literacy development has been associated with improved reading scores (Afterschool Alliance, 2015).

KATHRYN A. WHEELER, EdD, is a research associate at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time at Wellesley College.

GEORGIA HALL, PhD, is senior research scientist and director of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time and associate director of the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College.

NEIL NAFTZGER, PhD, is a principal researcher working on community school, afterschool, and youth development initiatives at the American Institutes for Research.

Debate about the *best* way to teach literacy skills has been vigorous (e.g., Bowers, 2020; Buckingham, 2020). Still, OST programs can help children enhance and practice their literacy skills in formal and informal ways that do not require large investments of resources, planning, or staff training. For example, "light-touch" literacy practices, such as reading aloud and sustained silent reading, have been shown to engage children and foster their love of reading as well as their reading skills and vocabulary (Wilson-Keenan et al., 2018).

To investigate the variety of literacy skill-building strategies OST programs use, researchers from the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) examined the practices of 31 programs in Massachusetts. This exploration was part of a larger four-year project (2016–2020) with the American Institutes for Research, in collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) and the Minnesota Department of Education, funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. This study, Quality to Youth Outcomes, followed two cohorts of elementary-aged children during two years of sustained participation in 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) programming at 54 centers in Massachusetts and Minnesota to investigate the relationship between high-quality OST programs and the development of social-emotional and literacy skills. Findings from this larger study are under review and will be reported later in 2022.

Our sub-study focused specifically on literacy activities. We went beyond the comprehension and vocabulary skills typically measured by elementary-age reading assessments to incorporate writing and speaking skills in our investigation. The resulting compendium of literacy-building strategies can help OST programs consider how to grow intentionally as literacy-rich learning environments.

Methods

Researchers examined archival data: four years (FY16 to FY21) of funding requests to MA DESE from 31 Massachusetts 21st CCLC programs serving elementary school children. MA DESE had classified these programs as "exemplary": They met quality benchmarks and were mentoring or coaching other OST programs. Although the application format varied slightly from year to year, all applicants were required to reflect on their program goals, their past accomplishments, their plans to build on prior experience, and their proposed activities for the upcoming year. Our review of these

programs' literacy-building activities thus included both activities that had previously been executed and planned activities for the next year. Literacy activities, though critical, were not the only programming component in the applications. Many programs also offered, for example, STEM, arts, and physical activities.

To find the strategies and instructional practices these 31 programs used to support literacy-rich environments, we reviewed the section of the applications that focused on activities the programs proposed to use to address needs, priorities, and child outcomes for the coming year. This section required programs to list, in a table, what activities they proposed to do; what needs and priorities or outcomes would be addressed; and whether the activity was new, enhanced, or ongoing. Activities that specifically targeted "English language arts" or "ELA" as an outcome were coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2019) using NVivo 11 software.

Next, researchers read each application in full to look for additional references to strategies to support literacy development and teach ELA. These strategies were located in various parts of the application, such as descriptions of programs run in the past, explanations of literacy-building strategies used or planned, descriptions of staff professional development, and family engagement plans.

The coding team derived themes and categories inductively and coded some data in multiple categories, as appropriate. To maximize reliability and validity, the initial codes were reviewed by two members of the research team, and consensus on category names was built through discussion and revision.

Sample

Most (87 percent) of the 31 Massachusetts 21st CCLC programs were located in urban school districts. Four of the 31 host schools had been designated as requiring assistance or intervention from the state based on assessment scores, progress toward improvement goals, accountability percentiles, and graduation rates.

The average size of the population of host schools was 595 students. In those schools, English language learners (ELLs) averaged 21 percent of the population, students with disabilities 19 percent, and economically disadvantaged students 51 percent. Overall, the students in the schools were 40 percent White, 38 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Asian, 8 percent African American, 4 percent multi-race/non-Hispanic, and less than 1 percent each Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Native American. On average, these schools had more

students of color, more ELLs, and more economically disadvantaged children—but not more students with special needs—than the Massachusetts average (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2019).

These demographic data come from the host schools and do not necessarily reflect the participants in the co-located 21st CCLC programs. The OST programs may have had, for example, more economically disadvantaged students or special needs students than their host schools.

Results

Our study found three main types of strategies the exemplary Massachusetts 21st CCLC sites used to promote literacy development:

1. **Direct literacy instruction** strategies offered children direct instruction and practice in using literacy skills. Specifically, children had hands-on opportunities to speak or perform publicly, read independently or as a group, write, and get homework support.

2. **Broad literacy strategies** engaged children in activities that were not direct literacy instruction but were broadly tied to literacy skills. For example, children had opportunities to conduct research, analyze what they read, learn new vocabulary, make interdisciplinary connections, and capitalize on strategies known to promote learning.

3. **Contextual supports for literacy learning** fostered effective literacy development by supporting the adults who work with children. Programs provided professional development for OST staff, coordinated with school staff, and involved families in literacy-building activities.

Some of these strategies overlap. All are described below with examples of activities described in the applications. Most programs served a range of student grade levels (for example, K–5), but few activity descriptions specified what groups of children would be targeted. Under each of the three broad types of strategies, the specific strategies are listed in order of their frequency in the applications.

> Each week, children review, discuss, and practice reading aloud poems from a selected genre, such as acrostic poems, diamante poems, haikus, sonnets, and limericks.

1. Direct Literacy Instruction Strategies

The most commonly mentioned strategy for supporting literacy learning was direct instruction to build foundational reading, writing, and speaking skills.

Engage Children in Speaking or Performing Publicly

Encouraging children to speak in front of other people, whether in a formal group presentation or performance or simply by participating in group discussion, was described by 23 of the 31 programs. Of these, 18 focused on formal presentations, such as presenting research, performing poems and plays, conducting radio or TV news broadcasts, speaking in public to advocate for a cause, and telling stories. Preparing for the debut was a key part of the experience. Two specific activities from applications are described below.

Rainforest Adventures. Working in teams with computer tablets, students research rainforest animals and plants, the layers of the rainforest, and the importance of rainforests. They present the resulting report, with an accompanying visual component such as a shadow box, to their peers.

Poetry Slammers. Each week, children review, discuss, and practice reading aloud poems from a selected genre, such as acrostic poems, diamante poems, haikus, sonnets, and limericks. Then children select a favorite piece of poetry, practice it, and perform it for their families at a program celebration.

Promote Group and Independent Reading

Reading was the second most frequently mentioned literacy-building activity in the applications. Two-thirds of the programs (22) explicitly described reading as an activity that they had done or planned do with children, who would either read aloud in a group or engage in sustained silent reading. Often, reading was described as being embedded in another activity, for example, as the precursor to a STEM, art, theater, or history project. Examples are described below.

Running an Animal Shelter. After reading Ann Martin's novel *A Dog's Life*, children bring the book to life by visiting a local animal shelter, learning how to create an animal shelter, and developing a fundraising plan for a local shelter.

Rube Goldberg. Students read about the many

talents of Rube Goldberg: cartoonist, author, engineer, and inventor. After reading about complicated machines that perform simple tasks and watching related videos, they design and create their own Rube Goldberg machine using everyday items.

Ancient Egypt. Students study ancient Egypt by reading books about pyramids, mummies, hieroglyphics, and other ancient artifacts. Then they work individually and in teams to craft their own versions of these artifacts.

Therapy Dogs. Reading aloud to a social-emotional support dog encourages reluctant readers. Students take 15-minute turns reading to their canine friend. The goals of this activity are to enhance literacy skills and attitudes, improve well-being, improve school climate, build a sense of community, and reduce absenteeism.

Encourage Writing

Writing activities were described by 21 of the 31 programs. Activities ranged from making a book to writing a story, play, legend, script, letter, email, book report, or thank-you card. Students also recorded observation logs and did research-based writing such as essays or tourism brochures. Three projects in which writing plays a role are described below.

The Leadership Club. Students interview community and school leaders, research historical leaders, and write about what being a leader means to them. The program partners with a local publisher that helps to produce a book of the children's essays, which is presented to families and used for community outreach.

Discovery Club. This project-based learning program tasks students with finding a way to improve the school climate. The students came up with the idea of writing a book to welcome new students. They wrote the text—in both English and Spanish—illustrated it, and published copies. The school principal still gives the book to new kindergartners and features it at open houses.

There's a Lot to Like About Our City. Students learn about their city's place in the Industrial Revolution and the role of newcomers then and now. They take field trips to local parks and museums and document their visits with photography, art, and short

movies. The children write scripts and interview community members. They also read and write about the city in the past and contrast these stories with life today.

Provide Homework Help

Of the 31 programs, 22 provided intentional homework support. A few specifically targeted literacy development; others described more general homework support. Some programs provided extra staffing—school-day teachers or inclusion specialists, or sometimes adult volunteers—to give struggling children individualized attention. Some program staff checked in with school-day teachers to find out what they expected and which children needed help. Homework help was facilitated by providing bilingual staff and by giving parents information on assisting their children with homework. We identified three models for homework help from the funding applications.

Homework Time. Students work in small, multi-age groups, focusing on reading along with homework assignments. Skill building for sight words is incorporated, and students help each other to reach benchmarks. The goal is to teach children how to learn from one another rather than rely on adults to lead all activities.

Tutoring. Academic specialists work in the OST program for one hour, three days per week, providing small-group instruction or one-on-one academic support to enable underperforming or at-risk students to complete homework assignments, master school subjects, and build competence.

Learning Centers. Students get help as needed in doing their homework. Once they finish, they can choose from a variety of stations that offer activities in math, reading, expressive writing, sketching, and word puzzles.

2. Broad Literacy Strategies

This second category of strategies engaged children in practicing literacy skills; some activities were explicitly related to literacy development, while others were implicitly related.

Engage Children in Conducting Research

A total of 17 programs described programs or plans in which children conducted research as a means of strengthening literacy

> The students came up with the idea of writing a book to welcome new students. They wrote the text—in both English and Spanish—illustrated it, and published copies. The school principal still gives the book to new kindergartners and features it at open houses.

skills. Most programs implied that the research would be conducted online, although five specifically described having children interview someone.

Liberty and Justice for All. Students research significant figures and events of the Civil Rights Movement, sequence the events in a timeline, discuss the importance of appreciating individual differences, and build vocabulary. As a final product, students select one figure from the Civil Rights Movement to bring to life in a program showcase.

Biography Buddies. After exploring different types of biographies, students research a person of their choice, their "buddy." They write and decorate biographical flip books on their person. As a culminating activity, students present five-minute talks on their buddy and answer questions from the group, thereby practicing speaking skills as well.

Help Children Analyze What They Read or Watch

Sixteen of the programs engaged children in some type of analysis of what they read or watched. Activities in this category included analyzing text, comparing and contrasting, exploring themes in books and videos, discussing big ideas and essential questions, and connecting with teen mentors who read the same book.

Author Study. Students read aloud several books by a local author who is the son of an immigrant. They create a class chart, make text-to-self connections, and discuss the author's viewpoint and characters' traits. Students simultaneously study the elements of a good story and make personal connections to the author.

Folk Tales. Students read and compare five versions of the Cinderella story from different cultures, listing common elements. As a whole group, the students create their own Cinderella puppet show, for which they design and sew the puppets.

Teach Vocabulary and Facilitate Practice

Vocabulary building, both learning new words and practicing already-learned words, was mentioned by 15 programs as a means to build literacy.

Acting Out. Students act out stories, vignettes, and presentations, learning ways to express themselves artistically and to take risks in a safe and supportive environment. They develop ELA skills by memorizing lines, reading scripts, improvising, and learning new vocabulary.

Kickboxing. As they learn and practice kickboxing techniques, students learn three new associated vocabulary words each week. At the end of each session, children journal their feelings about the kickboxing workout and then participate in an open discussion on subjects that come up in their journals.

Women's Suffrage. Students read about the quest by women around the world to win the right to vote, building vocabulary skills in the process. As a final product, students prepare a news report on a woman who voted for the first time, including the history of the movement and challenges facing women voters.

Make Interdisciplinary Connections

Fifteen programs described activities designed to make explicit links between literacy and other disciplines such as the arts, math, science, engineering, history, and physical education. Their goals typically included stimulating learning and promoting children's engagement in and enjoyment of literature while building awareness of the relevance of literacy skills to a broad array of topics and activities.

African Folktales. Students explore the connections among art, dance, literature, and culture, focusing on Africa and specifically on Cape Verde. They work to understand African-American history and the connections between African and American forms of storytelling and dance.

Food Adventures. Assisted by staff of a nutrition center, children experiment with new foods and cooking techniques, calculate appropriate portions, and learn about local food ecosystem producers and decomposers. They write about their family food traditions, exercise habits, and ideas about sustainable agriculture. At the end of the course, they compete in an *Iron Chef*–style cook-off.

CSI. As they work to examine "crime scenes" and question "suspects," students use science knowledge to investigate physical evidence, oral communication and collaboration skills to discuss with their groups what they know and what they need to learn, reading skills to decipher written clues, and writing skills to record and analyze evidence in their notebooks. Ultimately, students get hands-on experience using critical thinking skills to solve problems.

Fun with Yoga. Students learn and play yoga games and create yoga poses to words. Students read books and write stories on their own, and then com-

> Sixteen of the programs engaged children in some type of analysis of what they read or watched.

municate the content orally to their peers. They learn how to make reading an interactive activity, which allows them to better understand their books.

Capitalize on Strategies Known to Promote Learning

Programs mentioned a variety of other strategies, some of which were specific to literacy learning. Other strategies fostered learning in general, but applicants recognized that these activities contributed to literacy skill-building and motivation.

Promote Reflection. Thirteen program applications named reflection as a technique for enhancing literacy development and learning in general. One program with six sites dedicated the last 15 minutes of every class to a reflection discussion. Other programs fostered reflection through journaling or other written or oral means, including "connection notebooks that travel with a student from class to class."

Use a Formal Literacy Curriculum. Eight programs used published curricula to teach literacy; some of these were technology-based literacy skill-building programs.

Set Up Peer and Cross-Age Mentoring. Six programs described the use of some type of mentoring. One engaged the oldest children, fourth and fifth graders, in helping kindergartners and first graders with math and reading. Another connected program participants with college students to discuss books. Yet another had children write letters to students at a local college; this pen-pal connection culminated in a face-to-face meeting. High school students also came into this program to reinforce the importance of attendance and effort.

> Six programs described the use of some type of mentoring. One engaged the oldest children, fourth and fifth graders, in helping kindergartners and first graders with math and reading.

3. Contextual Supports for Literacy Learning

The third set of strategies focus on the experiences and preparation of activity leaders and other adults.

Offer Formal, Structured Staff Development

Of the 31 sites, 22 described professional development forums in which their staff participated; some were designed specifically to enhance skills in fostering literacy development, others were more generally focused on improving teaching skills. MA DESE, school districts, and the programs themselves all provided trainings. Training topics mentioned in applications included picture writing, literacy and ELA programs, coding, and integration of literacy with other disciplines.

Some applications noted that staff appreciated the exposure to new resources such as printable biographies written at varying grade levels, read-aloud websites, and writing resources. Staff also enjoyed the chance to learn new techniques for building literacy skills, such as use of picture writing, and instructional suggestions from coaches.

Coordinate with School Personnel

Twenty-two programs aimed to coordinate with school personnel so they could reinforce what children were learning during the school day and could meet children's needs in ways that support positive child growth and development. Some of these strategies were mentioned specifically in the context of teaching literacy; many were not, but appeared to be likely to improve learning and literacy practices. Strategies included working with school staff to identify and recruit students who would benefit most from the program; hiring school staff to work in or with the OST program; sharing data on student needs and outcomes; working together to develop and implement consistent strategies for meeting the needs of individual children; aligning priorities and strategies; linking curricular themes and strategies; coordinating homework help; and attending one another's professional development trainings.

Shared Pedagogy. After becoming aware that many after-school staff were not familiar with the reading and writing methodologies used by the school district, one program is working with the city's literacy coach to develop guides that explicitly outline these methodologies. Site-based trainings for all OST staff are also planned.

Connection to Academics. One program that includes school staff carefully connects OST projects and activities to the academics taught during the school day. The OST project-based, service, and experiential learning opportunities build on the academic skills students learn in school.

Engage Families in Literacy-Building Activities

Fifteen programs mentioned activities to raise awareness among families of the importance of literacy building and to engage families in developing their children's literacy. For example, some programs invited families to program events or exhibitions of student work such as readers theater presentations. One program invited family members to volunteer as reading partners. Some encouraged parents to read with their children and either gave them appropriate books for a home library or suggested visiting the public library. Others had children interview family members for projects involving, for example, local history, family trees, family recipes, or cultural backgrounds. A few promoted websites where children could practice literacy skills.

Many applicants emphasized the importance of creating a program environment that feels welcoming and culturally relevant to families. They described the significance of having bilingual staff and translating all materials that are sent home. To reach all families, some programs work with their school's family engagement director, a couple have hired an OST family liaison or family engagement director, and one created a volunteer family liaison position. Because 21st CCLCs focus on serving low-income students, working with underperforming schools, and engaging families, they may be especially well positioned to address equity issues in literacy skill-building.

Literacy Night. Families read stories aloud to children, act out the stories with their children, and participate in a family spelling bee. Families are invited to join program story time sessions and to read to the younger program participants.

Family Forum, Showcase, and Dinner. This event combines an educational session for parents on the power of storytelling with craft activities for children, a student exhibit of work completed during the semester, and a traditional family-style Caribbean meal prepared by community members. During dinner, the student theater group performs the play on which the group has worked all semester. Spanish interpreters enable Hispanic families to participate fully.

> Others had children interview family members for projects involving, for example, local history, family trees, family recipes, or cultural backgrounds.

Implications and Conclusions

Funding application documents described the activities OST programs implemented to support children's development of literacy skills. Throughout the documents reviewed, direct literacy instruction was paired with activities and games that provided opportunities to practice literacy skills in fun, creative ways. Many of these activities would not be as likely to occur during the school day. In their applications, program leaders noted that supporting children to develop literacy skills is not enough; contextual supports are also needed. Adults who facilitate learning activities need support, training, and time for planning and coordinating.

The activities we identified come from a sample of OST programs located in Massachusetts that, as 21st CCLC programs, are mandated to provide academic enrichment to students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. All programs in the sample were designated by MA DESE as exemplary. It is not possible to know whether or how the strategies these programs use would be relevant or useful to programs that are located elsewhere, that serve different populations of students, that have other priorities, or that operate at a different level of quality. Furthermore, the programming and activity data were all self-reported.

Despite these limitations, our review of program funding applications revealed a plethora of activities that can involve children in literacy skill building and interactive experiences in a supportive OST environment. We noted seven themes that OST programs may consider when striving to foster literacy development:

1. Programs should foster writing and speaking skills as well as reading skills.
2. Although children need structured literacy instruction, they also benefit from creative games and project-based learning that can make learning literacy more fun and less intimidating.
3. Using a variety of approaches helps programs meet children's diverse needs and accommodate a variety of learning styles.
4. To stimulate interest and motivation, programs can implement culturally responsive practices and prioritize youth choice in the selection of reading, writing, and speaking content as well as presentation medium.

5. Literacy can be woven into almost any type of OST program activity.
6. Literacy learning doesn't need to be a solitary activity.
7. School-day educators and families are key partners in teaching literacy skills.

One avenue for future research would be to investigate how operationalizing these themes or implementing the strategies the Massachusetts 21st CCLC programs described affects children's literacy skills or attitudes. In the meantime, we hope that OST programs nationwide find some of these activities helpful in planning their own literacy-building strategies.

References

Afterschool Alliance. (2015). *Building literacy in afterschool.* Issue Brief No. 67. Dollar General Literacy Foundation. http://afterschoolalliance.org/issue_briefs/issue_building_literacy_67.pdf

Afterschool Alliance. (2021). *The evidence base for afterschool and summer.* Research Brief. http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/The-Evidence-Base-For-Afterschool-And-Summer-2021.pdf

Bowers, J. S. (2020). Reconsidering the evidence that systematic phonics is more effective than alternative methods of reading instruction. *Educational Psychology Review, 32,* 681–705. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09515-y

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Buckingham, J. (2020). Systematic phonics instruction belongs in evidence-based reading programs: A response to Bowers. *Educational and Developmental Psychologist, 37*(2), 105–113. https://doi.org/10.1017/edp.2020.12

Hernandez, D. (2011). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation.* Annie E. Casey Foundation. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED518818.pdf

Massachusetts Department of Education. (2019). *School and district profiles.* https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/general/generalstate.aspx

McCombs, J. S., Augustine, C. H., Pane, J. F., & Schweig, J. (2020). *Every summer counts: A longitudinal analysis of outcomes from the National Summer Learning Project.* https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Every-Summer-Counts-A-Longitudinal-Analysis-of-Outcomes-from-the-National-Summer-Learning-Project.pdf

Rasco, C. H., Cheatham, J. B., Cheatham, S. H., & Phalen, E. M. (2013). *Using afterschool and summer learning to improve literacy skills.* https://www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds/article/using-afterschool-and-summer-learning-improve-literacy-skills

Reading Roadmap. (2018). *Afterschool attendance correlates with early reading proficiency.* https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5990cdcfdb29d643eb0e1f84/t/5d0113f530697000010bd6bf/1560351736048/Attendance+Matters+final+version+of+report.pdf

Wilson-Keenan, J., Schleyer, K., & Gannett, E. (2018). *Light-touch practices to operationalize early literacy in Philadelphia's out-of-school time programs.* [Unpublished manuscript.] National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Wellesley College.

Partnering for Literacy Impact

Susan Matloff-Nieves & Rebecca Wallace-Segall

All young people have stories to tell. Yet when children and teens declare that they hate writing or are too embarrassed to admit they like it, elevating their voices becomes challenging. It is urgent that educators, policy makers, youth development workers and leaders, and philanthropists work together to find a way.

In 2018, only 36 percent of black middle schoolers and 38 percent of Latinx middle schoolers in New York City were proficient in English language arts, compared to 74 percent of White middle schoolers (Domanico, 2018). Since then, the achievement gap has deepened nationwide, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2021). In the land of free speech, far too many lack the skill to exercise that basic, human,

American right. The reasons are complex and systemic, and the resulting reluctance to read and write during free time further widens the skills gap.

The good news: taking on this challenge can be life-changing for all involved.

SUSAN MATLOFF-NIEVES is a senior leader at Goddard Riverside Community Center in New York City. A youth and community worker for over 30 years, her interest is the intersection of social justice, practice, and research. She has contributed to *The SAGE Handbook of Youth Practice, Youth and Inequality in Education* (Routledge) and coauthored *Breaking Through*, a guide to engaging girls in STEM.

REBECCA WALLACE-SEGALL, executive director of Writopia Lab, founded the organization and its educational framework and no-barriers sliding-scale model in 2007. She is a master's candidate at City University of New York Graduate Center in Urban Education Policy. She studied performance measurement at Harvard and was a 2021 scholarship recipient for Columbia University's Senior Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals. She has published in <u>The Atlantic</u> and <u>The Wall Street Journal.</u>

Voices from the Field essays are not peer reviewed.

Our story shows how two nonprofits with distinct but overlapping missions partnered to better address the literacy needs of our city's youth. We brought to the partnership a shared vision and radical empathy for the other. We had the support of a steadfast funder. Marrying each organization's reach and expertise, both organizations improved. More importantly, our partnership empowered young people to find joy and fulfillment in writing.

Taking a Risk

In *Emergent Strategy,* adrienne maree brown (2017) challenges people to create, on the smallest level, what they wish to see in the larger society. For us, that meant taking the risk to trust each other so we could build robust, far-reaching youth literacy programming—together.

Goddard Riverside, where Susan is deputy executive director, is a large, holistic, multiservice agency with decades of broad and deep reach into underserved communities of the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Writopia Lab, Rebecca's organization, is a creative writing youth development nonprofit based in several large cities nationwide including New York. Beginning in 2016, a shared funder, the Pinkerton Foundation, brought us together to explore ways we could partner for greater impact. Our program officer, Erickson Blakney, noted the synergy between our organizations. He encouraged us to look at ways to support each other's work by leveraging our separate strengths and collaborating more closely. Motivated by a trust in our expertise and vision and a belief in giving space to changemakers to take risks in order to pursue change, the foundation allowed us, from that point onward, to develop and modify our own plan.

We were thrilled to have this opportunity. But fear also crept in. Each organization would need to make space for the other's unique set of concerns. Learning requires vulnerability—an openness to missteps, an acknowledgment that we have room to grow. As the leader of Writopia Lab, Rebecca feared that Susan or her team might feel imposed upon by the funder and resent the partnership. Meanwhile, Susan was grateful for the resources Writopia Lab offered to Goddard participants but feared that her staff would reject the idea that their participants would *want* to write as part of an afterschool program. Our willingness to take a risk to trust each other called upon the same resilience we were expecting of young people. We ask program participants to trust both our staff and their own abilities so they can push themselves to engage in writing. We decided to trust each other, our staffs, and the abilities of both nonprofits.

Goddard Riverside brought to the partnership a multi-decade history of youth work and embeddedness in the community. Writopia Lab brought a social-emotional approach to teaching writing that had, for more than a decade, transformed thousands of reluctant writers into enthusiastic ones. Both organizations brought a culture of inquiry for program improvement. Writopia Lab was already running writing workshops at several Goddard sites; nearly 30 participants had been ignited by a love of writing anything from short stories and graphic novels to college essays.

But we and our funding partner knew we could go both deeper and broader. If we strengthened the principles and goals of our partnership and worked to codify, replicate, and evaluate the partnership model, we could institutionalize the model to further develop a positive literacy culture in the Goddard Riverside afterschool programs. We hoped that, ultimately, this model could influence the whole youth development field.

Hence, the Positive Literacy Collaborative was born. We use the word *collaborative* intentionally as defined by a Harvard and Tufts research team: "Compared to cooperation and coordination, collaboration is less transactional and more transformational" (Samali et al., 2016). That was exactly what we wanted: to transcend the business-like relationships that typically define partnerships to move into the realm of wholehearted connection to each other, our teams, and the youth we serve. Brené Brown's (2013) work on vulnerability applies to every moment of our work together. By seeking each other out as partners, we each acknowledge both our own limited scope as just one person and our organization's limited scope as just one organization working to transform young people's lives.

> That was exactly what we wanted: to transcend the business-like relationships that typically define partnerships to move into the realm of wholehearted connection to each other, our teams, and the youth we serve.

Our partnership evolved over the years. In the earliest iteration, Writopia ran weekly programs at Goddard sites throughout the school year, meeting with about 10 children per group, once per week, for 1.5 hours at a time. Instructors inspired writers with open-ended, original writing games and prompts. Ultimately they helped writers articulate and meet their own writing goals, like completing a short story or creating a graphic novel. In years 2 and 3, Writopia staff worked with Goddard leaders to identify which line staffers would serve as the best literacy mentors to work side by side with Writopia staff. Then, from 2019 to 2022, with support from the Pinkerton Foundation, Goddard Riverside and Writopia took the partnership to the next level. We jointly hired a Writopia-trained staff member to embed in afterschool programs while meeting periodically as senior leaders to begin the process of articulating and defining best practices.

The potential impact of our partnership was more important than the vulnerabilities it brought to light. For decades, we both served on the front lines in battling the literacy crisis in our community. We needed to join forces to tackle the crisis together to increase our efficiency, effectiveness, and impact. Together, we could reach more children, create new pathways for them, and share our stories with those who can expand the work further. We also would enjoy having a partner with whom we could witness the meaningfulness of the work.

What the Partners Brought

The prior experience that Goddard Riverside and Writopia Lab brought, along with our openness to learning from each other, set the partnership up for success in fostering literacy among program participants.

Goddard Riverside's Culture of Literacy and Learning

Goddard Riverside has long worked to embed a literacy culture into youth programming. As Roy Baptiste, afterschool director, constantly points out, one key role of youth programs in promoting literacy is to foster a love of reading. Years ago, Goddard participated in a library development and literacy support project funded by a local foundation. Regular meetings with staff from other programs interested in developing their literacy programs, facilitated by an experienced educator, helped staff to become comfortable leading literacy activities with children. Staff at one Goddard site embraced a program that trained them to run engaging book clubs.

They are adept at leading shared reading with discussion and regularly explore themes related to social justice. Staff also draw connections between popular culture and literature—for instance, comparing Marvel movies with Madeleine L'Engle's classic science fiction novel *A Wrinkle in Time.* Reading in groups fosters peer support and reinforces a pro-literacy culture.

For children who struggle with reading and writing, Goddard sites offer targeted tutoring supervised by a reading specialist and implemented with the help of volunteers recruited from local schools and the community. Some children and tutors create bonds that last for years. These and other interactions have taught Susan and her staff that relationships are a key strategy for developing a love of language. Feeling close to a caring adult and friendly peers enhances and reinforces the experience of reading and writing. Reading groups tie the power of literacy to the relationships fostered by the afterschool community.

A core principle of a culture of literacy is giving children access to an ample supply of varied and engaging literature. Every Goddard site has a circulating library. In addition to the library development grant mentioned above, Goddard has benefited from long-standing relationships with the publishing industry. An annual book fair, which offers books donated by publishers for sale at half price to the public, raises money for Goddard programs. This major local event attracts a wide variety of shoppers, from wealthy residents to clients of the agency who pull quarters from their pockets to pay for books. Leftover items are distributed to sites to refresh their libraries or are given to participants for home libraries.

Through these efforts, Susan and her team found that, although some staff were comfortable with literacy activities, others brought negative past experiences with formal schooling and anxiety about their capabilities. The literacy and book club staff development programs have helped, establishing a staff culture of learning and inquiry. To reach the next level, Goddard Riverside needed a partner like Writopia Lab.

Writopia Lab's Culture of Joy

According to Graham and Perin (2007), writing makes better readers—and thinkers and learners. Writopia Lab's own data bear out this idea. In one recent survey, 90 percent of parents of self-identified reluctant writers at Writopia Lab reported that their children became more engaged in both writing and reading by the program's end.

Writopia Lab partners with local community-based organizations and schools to bring its model of process-oriented writing labs to children and youth of all ages. The program inspires participants as both consumers and creators of language. Children and teens cheer as their instructors enter classrooms. Writopia's mission is "to foster joy, literacy, and critical thinking in all youth through creative writing workshops." Note that *joy* comes first. In the current historically and culturally fraught literacy sphere, Writopia Lab contends that transformative impact can occur only when participants are galvanized by the pursuit of happiness (Sheeler, 2021). Indeed, there is a well-established link between joyful play and academic and social-emotional growth (Fisher et al., 2013).

The joy-based training model has three basic tenets: role modeling, critical affirmations, and public celebration. First, Writopia instructors lead staff on a journey to finding their own voices through a series of writing games and exercises. These training workshops aim both to bring joy to staff and to prepare them to support the establishment of a positive literacy culture at their sites.

Only when the adults in the room harbor positive feelings about writing can they begin the work with youth. The next step in Writopia's method calls for the trained program staff and Writopia writing instructors to co-facilitate workshops. These facilitators have learned to celebrate self-expression from the very first risk a student takes by, for example, laughing easily and openly in response to all text that is meant to be funny or letting themselves be deeply moved by riveting personal writing. Writopia trains staff to give constructive feedback only after writers are sitting firmly in their work. On the first day of workshop, youths engage in playful collaborative story writing exercises or "games," followed by instructive, individualized exercises that culminate in the establishment of short-term and long-term writing goals. Instructors check in with each writer during each session about their goals, offering specific, student-centered guidance on moving forward toward each goal incrementally. For the program staff, working with a partner boosts confidence and energy from a skilled role model.

Ultimately, the Writopia Lab model turns writers into rock stars by putting them on stage in presenta-tions, productions, and publishing parties. Writopia staff collaborate with Goddard program staff to encourage attendance at these events by the largest possible audience. Younger participants witness literary stardom and ask to take part the following year.

When the focus rests on process rather than product, the joy of writing lends itself to improvement of both social-emotional and literacy skills. In 2019, Writopia Lab measured the impact of its work in a Title I school in the Bronx. Students—particularly those with the highest needs—showed remarkable gains across the board: 97 percent improved in one or more of these social-emotional skills: positive identity, self-management, academic self-efficacy, social skills, and social capital. A study of literacy impacts conducted by the Columbia University School of Social Work (Arduini et al., 2019) found that Writopia Lab's creative writing workshops had strong literacy impact on 22 students at a Title I school in Harlem. Students improved substantially in every single Common Core category, from control of conventions to syntax and coherence (Arduini et al., 2019).

Anecdotally, Writopia Lab staff have seen how their work transforms lives. A family court employee shared a story about an adjudicated teen in a residential treatment facility who participated in a Writopia workshop. When asked by the judge what progress he had made, the teen said that he had written a play exploring family and addiction that was selected for production by Writopia's Worldwide Play Festival, an annual festival of professional productions of youths' works. The judge, who was described by a clerk as typically stern, became genuinely happy. Similarly, in work with Homes for the Homeless, Writopia Lab staff overcame youth participants' initial reticence, transforming their site into a creative, voice-affirming space peppered with regular literary presentations, play productions, and publishing parties. Time and time again, Writopia staff have seen tweens and teens grow in their self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, preparedness for high school, and literacy skills.

Making Writing Cool

Rebecca and her Writopia team entered Goddard's spaces in 2016 poised to show Goddard's young readers that they are also young writers, filled with many

> Only when the adults in the room harbor positive feelings about writing can they begin the work with youth.

stories. We wanted to offer both staff and participants who felt resistant to literacy, and particularly to writing, another way in. We were obsessed with this idea: How can we make writing cool? From Writopia Lab's perspective, the answer is simple: through intentional role modeling, critical affirmation, and public celebration. The principles are simple, but the execution is demanding.

Initially, as Susan predicted, some Goddard staff were hesitant. "Our children aren't interested in more writing. They already do so much for school and won't want to do it," one staffer shared. Many of these staff members carried their own trauma related to writing and wanted to protect their kids from negative experiences. Both partners knew that many staff and participants had been devastated by teachers' red pens and eye rolls conveying the message that the English of their homes was bad English. Teachers of children for whom English is a second language often focus on the deficits of their English mastery rather than on their remarkable ability to tell their stories in two languages. Both partners also brought to the work an understanding that some staff and participants likely had undiagnosed learning disabilities. These barriers could be overcome with the useful strategies Writopia had to offer.

Overcoming past negative experiences with literacy requires addressing both organizational culture and individual identity. Goddard Riverside drew upon past positive history with organizational learning and placed its most enthusiastic and charismatic staff on the initiative. The initial resistance to writing programs was a formidable barrier, but Writopia staff members have worked for over a decade with both young people and adults who have experienced trauma around writing.

At the first meeting with about 15 Goddard staff members, Writopia Lab's trainers situated everyone in a circle and started the session by turning a typically anxious conversation about the idea of writing on its head. They asked staffers to share a time when writing served as a powerful tool in their lives. "You can share anything from a time you used writing to get out your feelings and rant, or a time you wrote an effective email, or a poem, a school paper, a short story, anything," they said. Despite the many negative experiences the Goddard staff members had had

around writing, the group immediately began sharing inspiring stories, each participant beaming or laughing as they remembered their valedictorian speech or a rant-y poem series they wrote after a breakup. Writopia Lab finds, time and time again, that nearly everyone has a story of this kind to share, no matter their academic experience or level. After sharing the positive stories, participants were invited to share stories of pain regarding writing. These training spaces are filled with empathic listeners, modeled by Writopia staff.

The tone was set, and the staff participants were poised to take a risk by trying some reflective or creative writing. Within 20 minutes, they were sharing their short writing bursts with the group, and their peers were responding with gasps and snaps. Through ongoing writing workshops with Goddard staff, Writopia has addressed both the creation of positive culture and the strengthening of individual identity that are integral to its strategy for tackling the literacy challenge.

Finding Credible Messengers

Finding champions at Goddard who were unafraid of writing and could model enthusiasm for it was key. Recognizing that leaders emerge from all levels of an organization, Susan and her team identified two. The first was a site program director who loved writing and embraced opportunities to create a rich literacy environment through staff development.

The other was Walter, a college student who worked in the afterschool program as a group leader. Having excelled at giving his group a safe environment, help with homework, and opportunities for engagement and support, he was ready for a challenge. His confidence in his own literacy skills was reinforced by his positive experience with higher education and by strongly supportive home and work environments. While he had not previously been exposed to Writopia Lab workshops, he embraced the opportunity to train with Writopia Lab specialists. The Writopia practice-what-you-preach framework encourages instructors to engage in Writopia instructional methods as students before integrating these methods into their teaching practice. So Walter reflected, imagined, and wrote with the Writopia Lab team before he set out to bring his extended skill set to the children and teens at God-

> The initial resistance to writing programs was a formidable barrier, but Writopia staff members have worked for over a decade with both young people and adults who have experienced trauma around writing.

dard with Writopia staff. Walter's self-confidence and gregarious warmth were elements of his program leadership that inspired staff and youth interest. In order to encourage enrollment, the Goddard site slotted the writing group into a choice activity rotation that was already on the schedule, with one group for elementary children and middle schoolers and a separate program in which high school seniors could work on their college essays.

As a result of the integration into the programming schedule, Walter's enthusiasm, and the structured support of Writopia Lab, groups of children and teens engaged willingly in their workshops. Walter's openness to creative challenge served as a model for the children, and the joy he emanated reinforced writing as joyous exploration of self-expression.

As the first year came to an end, we began to see the same impact Writopia workshops had fostered at other program sites. In year 2, we imagined together ways to bring lasting change. "Can we hang photographs of kids in the act of writing on the walls?" Rebecca asked Susan. Soon we were planning an array of pro-literacy decorations to line the walls of writing rooms at Goddard sites. Susan's staff made space for the posters and asked for images that would reflect the multigenerational nature of their programming. Writopia provided images of children and young adults reading their works that appealed to multiple age groups and populations.

In 2019, our three-year funding cycle was coming to an end. We saw the timeline as an opportunity to reflect and redesign the initiative with programmatic sustainability and sector-wide impact in mind.

Building a Positive Culture

So came phase 2. Just as the previous funding cycle ended, Goddard and Writopia won additional Pinkerton funding to further develop and share our work throughout the youth development sector. For the next three years we added three elements to our funded partnership: an embedded Writopia staffer into the Goddard staff; a cross-organizational teen internship program; and a chance to take the time to reflect, write, and submit our work to journals and conferences.

> The vision was exciting to both of us. But, in all honesty, the idea of finding one instructor who met all of both organizations' criteria seemed idealistic, if not naive.

Finding the Right Staff

We designed the Positive Literacy Collaborative to allow us to embed a Writopia instructor into the Goddard staffing structure. In order to create program-wide momentum toward a positive writing culture, we invited all Goddard line staffers, program managers, and program directors to train in the Writopia method if they chose. The ongoing presence of a shared staff member, fully supported by a leadership team that deeply understood the needs, philosophy, and goals of both organizations, would firmly embed the literacy culture and Writopia practices in Goddard programs. We sent in our grant application and then embraced our wonderings and worries about what we hoped was to come.

The vision was exciting to both of us. But, in all honesty, the idea of finding one instructor who met all of both organizations' criteria seemed idealistic, if not naive. Could we find an instructor who could meet the needs of children and teens who had painful associations with writing? Would they have the expertise required of a high-level, authentic creative writing instructor? Would we be able to communicate with enough clarity so that they wouldn't get hopelessly lost navigating the instructions of both institutions? As was the case with the entry into the first Goddard site, finding the right champion was key.

Writopia staff shared their standard job listing and approach for hiring writing instructors with Goddard's hiring team, including the values and traits they look for when hiring. Goddard launched the search and conducted the first interviews; Writopia conducted the last interviews.

Together our two organizations decided on the final hire: the fabulous Jane Y. Where other people might have been put off by the complex vision of the program, Jane loved the notion of working with—and learning from—both organizations in support of the underserved youth who attend Goddard's programs. She was a produced playwright and a highly experienced teaching artist in low-income communities. Jane was our magical person, combining writing expertise with knowledge of young people. Now she would be trained at Writopia and then teach at Goddard for the entire school year.

Strengthening Culture and Identity Despite Adversity

The first year of Jane's tenure was a fabulous practice round, as Jane joyfully and thoughtfully navigated both organizations. Little did we know what we were preparing for: the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of Writopia Lab's partner programs stopped their literacy endeavors in the face of profound health and economic crises, but Goddard Riverside continued its program through the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. Having an embedded Writopia staff member made it easier for Goddard Riverside to respond to local emergencies *and* keep the essential pieces of literacy programming together—without having to spend time communicating, planning, and staffing with a partner organization. During lockdown, Jane was able to seamlessly move to the online space to conduct writing workshops with our city's most vulnerable youth, participating in team meetings with the Goddard program staff. As in-person activities resumed with COVID restrictions, her status as a member of the Goddard staff ensured her continuing presence.

One child who benefited was eight-year-old "Alicia." As a child with special needs, Alicia lost most of her services during lockdown; she had only about an hour of online school per day. "I'm scared of her joining a writing workshop," her mother whispered to Rebecca over the phone. "She was behind a year in writing at the onset of the pandemic, and she rarely speaks to anyone besides her family ... and now it's all gotten worse." Rebecca promised her that Jane was warm and supportive, that she would help Alicia and never shame her. A few weeks later Rebecca received an excited email from Jane:

> We had a breakthrough with Alicia yesterday! We were playing Character Hot Seat [a role-playing character interrogation game] and she started making hilarious comments about her real family. Our raucous laughter then seemed to encourage her. So she opened up and began talking in a loud, clear, confident voice I'd never heard her use, AND she was speaking without being prompted. [The other staff member] and I were thrilled! … When math started, I stuck around to observe. That confidence was still there in Alicia's voice. It was such a beautiful thing to witness, I had to share it with you.

Despite her previous difficulties and a worldwide education crisis, Alicia had a creative outlet in which she could find her voice and its connection to literacy.

The world had gone on pause, but our partnership gave Alicia a place to grow.

Why It Worked

The partnership between Goddard Riverside and Writopia Lab was complex, and implementation wasn't always easy. With the support of our visionary funder, we learned a lot about what is required to change organizational culture and individual identity. Our success so far rests on two keys: relationships and the right champions.

Partner and Funding Relationships

Partnerships for collaborative work with youth have the same essential requirements as any other relationship. They must be based in mutual respect and in ethical and respectful behavior. Both parties must have something to offer and something to gain; relationships of equality are most productive. An open mind toward learning from each other and flexibility toward the other result in rich rewards. The Harvard and Tufts team suggests that collaborating organizations "Be agnostic on the 'how'" of partnership (Samali et al., 2016). Organizations must remain open and flexible in order to learn as much as possible from the process and to reshape plans productively as needed. Trust and mutual respect provide the space for self-directed change to emerge, whether it is at the organizational or the individual level.

What we found most important was a sustained willingness to treat each other with kindness. We began with a common appreciation for a holistic approach to youth work. Our organizations brought complementary strengths. Goddard Riverside had broad reach into the community and a multi-decade history of youth work. Writopia Lab brought expertise in teaching writing to young people of all ages and a team of passionate content specialists. Each of us, Susan and Rebecca, brought a desire to support each other's work and further each other's success, building on our organizations' previous work together. From an informal discussion in 2019 of how we could continue our work together and further our impact in the field came the idea of documenting our experiences and disseminating what we are learning. We started writing monthly summaries of our lessons learned with the plan of sharing them in publications like this one and at conferences including the 2022 New York State Network for Youth Success. Rebecca and the Writopia team also are developing two books for schools and nonprofit orga-

nizations who want a step-by-step guide to creating positive literacy culture and workshops.

The Right Internal Champions

Finding good-fit staff is key. Staff members must have an empowering and positive attitude toward young people. They need to have faith in their abilities and be competent writers and teachers. They must be able to convey enthusiasm, warmth, and a genuine belief that children can write when given the right encouragement and space. They must be confident enough to handle the vulnerability that learning requires. They must be willing to take risks, and they need heart as well as ability.

> Finding good-fit staff is key. Staff members must have an empowering and positive attitude toward young people. They need to have faith in their abilities and be competent writers and teachers.

"A company that cannot self-correct, cannot thrive," says Carol Dweck, the leader in growth mindset thinking (2006, p.109). Youth development leaders are deeply inspired by Dweck's thinking when it comes to youth. It isn't always easy to remember to apply the same mindset to ourselves. Collaborations can be complicated, but they can also be a foundation for growth and for the development of durable and resilient specialized programming. For Dweck, the most meaningful, transformational work should leave you saying, "This is hard. This is fun." That is exactly what we want our young people to say about writing. And that is exactly what we can say about partnering for impact.

References

Arduini, B., McQuail, M., Sheeler, D., & White, C. (2019). *Writopia Lab's after-school creative writing program: A study of advancing literacy rates of students from a Title I middle school.* [Unpublished manuscript.] Columbia University.

Brown, A. M. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds.* AK Press.

Brown, B. (2013). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead.* Portfolio.

Domanico, R. (2018). *Closing the racial achievement gap in NYC schools: Integration is not enough.* Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED594243.pdf.

Department of Education Office of Civil Rights. (2021). *Education in a pandemic: The disparate impacts of COVID-19 on American students.* https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success.* Random House.

Fisher, K. R., Hirsh Pasek, K., Newcombe, N., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2013). Taking shape: Supporting preschoolers' acquisition of geometric knowledge through guided play. *Child Development, 84*(6), 1872–1878. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12091

Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools.* Carnegie Corporation of New York. https://www.carnegie.org/publications/writing-next-effective-strategies-to-improve-writing-of-adolescents-in-middle-and-high-schools/

Samali, M., Laidler-Kylander, N., Simonin, B., & Zohdy, N. (2016). *Why and how do nonprofits work together?* https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/columns/the-sustainable-nonprofit/why-and-how-do-nonprofits-work-together

Sheeler, D. (2021). Inviting joy into classroom writing instruction: An exploration of the use of creative writing within the neoliberal context of standardization. *The Educational Forum, 85*(3), 249–255. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2021.1908467

We want to know your story!

You are passionate, committed, creative, resourceful, resilient, and powerful.

This is the Power of Us—a united workforce coming together to tell our story.

All youth-serving professionals are invited to complete the Power of Us Workforce Survey—a first of its kind study that seeks to know and understand the broad, thriving workforce of youth-serving professionals and volunteers who work in diverse settings including afterschool programs, libraries, summer camps, and more!

Administered by the American Institutes for Research (AIR)
in partnership with NIOST and a constellation of partners.
Supported by the Wallace Foundation.

··

If we know more, we can do more to support the youth fields workforce to thrive—as you continue to support youth to thrive.

POWEROFUS
2022 WORKFORCE SURVEY

Visit Powerofussurvey.org
to take the survey and share
your story with the campaign.

Afterschool Matters

Call for Papers

Afterschool Matters is a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to promoting professionalism, scholarship, and consciousness in afterschool education. Published by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time with legacy support from the Robert Bowne Foundation, *Afterschool Matters* serves practitioners who work with youth in out-of-school time (OST) programs, as well as researchers and policymakers in youth development.

We are seeking articles for future issues of the journal, beginning with Spring 2023. Scholarly or practice-based work on all aspects of OST programming for children and youth, from a variety of disciplines and academic perspectives, will be considered. We welcome submissions that explore practical ideas for working with young people in OST programs. Personal or inspirational narratives and essays are appropriate for our section "Voices from the Field."

All articles, whether scholarly or practice-based, should connect theory to practice and should be broadly applicable across the field. Articles must be relevant and accessible to both practitioners and academic researchers.

We invite you to discuss possible topics in advance with us. A broad variety of topics will be considered, including the following:
- Innovative program approaches in creative youth development, STEM, civic engagement, social and emotional development, or academic improvement
- Research or best-practice syntheses
- Key aspects of program leadership and administration
- OST system-building, such as cross-city and statewide initiatives
- Expanded or extended learning time and the OST hours
- School-community partnerships that support OST programming
- Physical activity and healthy eating
- Special needs youth, immigrant and refugee youth, or other vulnerable populations in OST
- Youth-centered participatory action research projects
- Gender-focused research and policy initiatives related to OST

Submission Guidelines

- For consideration for the Spring 2023 issue, submit your article no later than June 30, 2022, to ASMsubmission@wellesley.edu.
- Submissions should not exceed 5,000 words.
- Submit your article electronically in Microsoft Word or rich text format. Use 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all sides. Leave the right-hand margin ragged (unjustified), and number pages starting with the first page of text (not the title page, which should be a separate document).
- Include a separate cover sheet with the manuscript title, authors' names and affiliations, and the lead author's phone number and e-mail address.
- The names of the authors should not appear in the text, as submissions are reviewed anonymously by peers.
- Follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 7th Edition* (2019), for reference style guidelines. Present important information in the text and do not use extensive footnotes.

We welcome inquiries about possible article topics. To discuss your ideas, please contact:
Georgia Hall, PhD
Director and Senior Research Scientist, Managing Editor
National Institute on Out-of-School Time
E-mail: ghall@wellesley.edu / Phone: 781-283-2530

Submit manuscripts electronically to ASMsubmission@wellesley.edu

NIOST

National Institute on Out-of-School Time

Wellesley Centers for Women

Wellesley College
106 Central Street
Wellesley, MA 02481