



Coaching to Improve OST Literacy Programming

Philadelphia Practitioner Perspectives

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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

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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.

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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

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

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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 re-develop 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.

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

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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.

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