



Children's Perspectives on Literacy Skill-Building Activities in OST Programs

Researcher's Notebook

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In 2019, NIOST began working on the Philadelphia Out-of-School Time Literacy and Quality Improvement Initiative (OSTLit), which continued through December 2023. During these four years, with funding from the William Penn Foundation, NIOST trained program leaders and staff at 10 Philadelphia afterschool programs to facilitate literacy skill-building experiences for elementary school aged children. NIOST investigated the impacts of this support by observing program practices and interviewing program staff.

In addition, to understand OSTLit's impact on participants, NIOST researchers conducted three focus groups, each consisting of three to seven children

who had attended one of the afterschool programs for at least one year. The participants, who were selected by program staff, were mostly second- and third-graders. Researchers facilitated conversations designed to elicit children's perspectives on three key questions:

- What literacy skill-building activities did they experience in their afterschool programs?
- In what ways did their participation in these activities impact them?
- How did the literacy skill-building activities differ from their experiences in school?

Literacy Skill-Building Activities

In all three focus groups, children conversed about activities that involved independent reading, reading aloud, and writing stories. Children in two of

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the three groups reported both reading aloud to a friend and reading aloud to the class. Two participants in one group also mentioned reading aloud to an instructor as a regular activity. Writing stories and journaling were common activities mentioned in all three focus groups. Collaborative writing and word games were mentioned by multiple children in two focus groups.

In each focus group, children expressed that their afterschool program's literacy skill-building activities were often enjoyable and exciting. They preferred literacy activities that allowed them to be playful and creative. Games such as word searches and vocabulary guessing games were particularly popular among participants in two of the three focus groups. One participant explained, "We did a spelling bee and everybody ... was so excited because that's the game that everybody loves to play." Children in all three focus groups mentioned that anything involving peer collaboration, such as reading aloud with a partner or writing a book with the whole class, were the most favorite activities.

Another key characteristic of "fun" literacy skill building was room for choice and creativity. Children in one focus group concurred that journal writing was enjoyable because they had the freedom to write about a wide range of subjects and feelings. One participant explained how journaling meant "you can write any story you want, like a friendship story, a sad story, a happy story, or a silly story." Another participant elaborated, saying that writing after school was different from writing during school, because "in school ... right now we aren't writing fiction stories, so [after school] we get a chance to write made-up fantasy."

Moreover, participants' anecdotes about their journals indicated that they were working on a variety of skills. One used their journal to make observations: "I make maps of the room.... I write about the maps and write about what the room looks like." Another described collaborative writing: "Some days me and [my friend] will write in our journals, and we'll make a story that's six pages.... Our stories are connected."

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Impacts of Literacy Skill-Building Activities

In all three focus groups, children were proud to share that their literacy skills were getting better over time.

In one group, two participants described how their writing skills improved as a result of journaling after school. One explained how journaling generally "helps you with writing" because it is an opportunity to practice "making more stories and being more creative." The other participant added that journaling had helped them use correct spelling and grammar in school writing assignments. Similarly, in another focus group, a participant credited their improving grades

to their participation in the afterschool activities:

In school, we learn a lot with our teachers, but also this [afterschool program] has been a very big help for me.... When I got to this school, I went in the program, and my mom said that my grades have been going up a lot.

Children expressed a sense of accomplishment at having mastered literacy skills and were proud of the amount of time and work they had devoted to this mastery. One child exclaimed, "I literally read every single day!" Children in all three focus groups brought up their enjoyment of literacy-oriented project-based learning that resulted in a product, such as a book in which each student wrote a page or a collaborative "word wall" placed in the hall outside the classroom.

A Different Way of Reading

Children experienced reading in their afterschool program as different from reading at school, describing a more relaxed and social environment. One participant explained that, although they were "bored" by reading and writing for "practice," they were excited to be part of a "special activity, and it's something cool, and we celebrate it."

In two of the three focus groups, children mentioned that their afterschool programs allowed them to read alongside or in collaboration with friends who were not in their class at school. One child explained

that being with these friends in a relaxed, familiar setting allowed them to have more fun while reading:

When you're with your friends you feel more comfortable reading.... I'm not trying to say that we don't have friends in school, but I feel more comfortable here [at the afterschool program] because the activities are more fun and also some of us have been here for three years.

According to another child, reading was a way to make new friends and strengthen friendships: "If you read to somebody, then you become friends, and then when they read to you, that's just called *good friends*."

Focus Group Insights

Findings from the focus groups demonstrate that children were excited about the ways in which their afterschool programs facilitated literacy skill-building activities. This message is consistent with outcomes reported in the [NIOST research brief on OSTLit](#). According to pre-post program observations, the variety and frequency of literacy skill-building activities offered in afterschool programs increased after staff members received training and support. Children were observed engaging significantly more with light-touch literacy practices, such as sharing their writing with peers and conversing about books they had read. In interviews, staff members discussed key benefits of OSTLit interventions, including their increased confidence in teaching literacy and children's increased engagement in and enthusiasm about literacy. These focus group results should further encourage program leaders and staff members to be confident and enthusiastic about creating a literacy-rich afterschool environment for children through the intentional integration of playful and interactive literacy activities.