NIOST

NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME

WILLIAM PENN FOUNDATION

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

Research Brief

August 2019 - December 2023

niost.org

Overview

From August 2019 through December 2023, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) partnered with 14 Philadelphia out-of-school time (OST) programs as part of the Philadelphia Out-of-School Time Literacy and Quality Improvement Initiative, funded by the William Penn Foundation to create and sustain literacy-rich environments. Early findings from the first five programs of this project are captured in the paper "Coaching to Improve OST Literacy Programming," available at https://www.niost.org/Afterschool-Matters-Spring-2022/coaching-to-improve-ost-literacy-programming.

In the fall of 2022, building on the original three years of project work, nine new programs participated in an initial onboarding phase followed by an implementation phase. Each month for a five-month period, program leaders and their staff engaged with 15- to 20-minute training videos on light-touch literacy practices and implemented a variety of these strategies. NIOST coaches provided monthly coaching calls to address questions and challenges and offer overall support. At the end of each month, program leaders met in a virtual Community of Practice (CoP), Zoom meetings with NIOST and staff from other programs, to share their experiences and learn from each other.

Project Goal

The goal of this initiative was for participating programs to enhance their capacity to integrate literacy practices into daily OST activities in order to create and sustain a literacy-rich OST program environment. As a result, children served by the programs would experience new ways to regularly engage in literacy skill-building activities.

The project had three research and measurement aims:
(1) capture program experience information and progress through interviews with program staff and leaders and program observation;
(2) observe activities at participating programs (pre-/post-capacity-building interventions) and utilize the OST Program Literacy Skill-Building Inventory Tool to document use of light-touch literacy skill-building practices;
(3) interview a sample of program staff representing participating programs and use findings to inform coaching strategies and program quality-building/literacy skill-building approaches.

Interview Methods

Data were collected by NIOST via semi-structured interviews with program staff who participated either directly or indirectly in initiative activities. After site directors provided staff names and contact information, NIOST staff reached out via email. The email invited program staff to participate in an interview to share their experiences with literacy coaching, video training created by the NIOST literacy coach, or CoPs. A $25.00 gift card was offered to those who agreed to participate. NIOST research staff completed 11 interviews (representing seven programs), which averaged about 30 minutes each. Interviews were held via Zoom and generated audio recordings, with verbal permission from participants, and written transcripts. NIOST researchers reviewed the transcripts and used research-based procedures to categorize the qualitative data.

At the start of each interview, staff were asked about their position at their OST program and how they worked directly with children in delivering program activities. Staff also were asked to identify any activities they participated in related to the literacy skill-building initiative. Follow-up questions asked about their experiences in delivering literacy-based activities in their programs and asked interviewees to identify some of the changes made to their programs. We were particularly interested in learning about their understanding of literacy skill-building and the training's impact on how they delivered these skills to program children, their level of confidence in delivering literacy skill-building activities, and changes to the level of engagement of program children in literacy activities. Staff titles and length of employment differed across programs and included titles such as lead teacher, youth coordinator, site director, and group leader. All staff interviewed work with children in pre-K through third grade.

Observation Methods

In year four of the initiative, nine in-person observations were conducted in fall 2022 and four in April and May 2023 using the ELA/Literacy Observation Inventory for OST programs instrument. During each visit, three or four classrooms were

observed for 30 consecutive minutes. Across the four sites, a total of 12 activities were observed. Six areas of literacy skill-building were investigated:

1) Reading Skill: Staff promotion
2) Reading Skill: Youth building/practicing
3) Written Communication: Staff promotion
4) Written Communication: Youth building/practicing
5) Verbal Communication: Staff promotion
6) Verbal Communication: Youth building/practicing

The observation data tracked a variety of literacy skill-building behaviors facilitated and/or encouraged by staff. Reading and written communication skill-building behaviors included reading to children, facilitating child engagement in reading, engaging children in writing activities, and facilitating activities where children are writing and editing their work. Verbal communication behaviors included staff engaging children in conversations, encouraging children to elaborate on their ideas, and modeling standard English while speaking to children. The observation data also tracked child engagement in reading skills, written communication skills, and verbal communication skills. If a type of behavior was observed at least once during the 30-minute observation, it was noted as having occurred. A behavior was recorded as just one check mark regardless of its duration or if it happened more than once during an activity.

Findings

Interviews

Participating staff were asked to identify which activities they participated in related to the literacy skill-building initiative: video trainings, NIOST coaching, or CoP. All 11 participants had participated in a coaching meeting. Nine participants had viewed at least one video training, and nine had also participated in at least one CoP. Participants shared how these aspects of the initiative influenced their knowledge, strategies, and confidence in delivering literacy skill-building activities and youth engagement with literacy skill-building activities.

Coaching

Programs received ongoing one-on-one coaching to support targeted literacy improvements based on the specific needs of each program. Program staff reported that the coaches shared techniques for keeping children engaged in literacy skill-building activities, especially during read-alouds. Staff felt encouraged to try new things, tweak activities they were already doing, and learn how to include new literacy skill-building moments into their programs. Staff noted that they often had difficulty getting children interested in reading, so having coaches walk through ways to "meet the youth where they are," such as letting children choose books they were comfortable reading or setting attainable goals for them to feel successful, was very helpful.

Community of Practice

This initiative provided monthly virtual meetings with participating programs to reflect, learn, plan, and support each other. Staff found the CoP meetings extremely helpful, particularly the use of breakout rooms where they could engage in small-group conversations with staff from other programs. These discussions provided staff with new creative approaches to lesson planning and alternate ways of delivering literacy skill-building in their program activities. Through sharing challenges with other program leaders, staff could explore modifications to overcome similar obstacles.

> "I would say that if I didn't have the coaching, I would definitely be lost, because literacy was never a part of our programming and having the literacy coach has increased my love for literacy and also our children's love of literacy."
> - Interview Participant

> "[The coach] came in and did a read-aloud for my class so I could see her techniques, which was really great because I was able to see how she kept them engaged throughout, like doing physical things while reading. That was really helpful for me."
> -Interview Participant

> "My biggest struggle with my kids was having them sit down and start reading … so my coach gave me some really great advice to have youth pick their books based on their interest, even if it was below their grade level … and that's been extremely helpful."
> -Interview Participant

Light-Touch Literacy Monthly Focus Areas for Video Training
The Perfect Read-Aloud
Book Looks: Supporting Independent Reading
Literacy Play in OST
Reader's Workshop
The Art of Conversation

> "Just hearing all the different ideas that all of the other organizations are doing, and what's working for them, I think has been really helpful."
>
> -Interview Participant

> "I like when we get together and all start brainstorming, you really start thinking of things you didn't think of before. I usually have three pages of notes of all the great ideas."
>
> -Interview Participant

Video Training

What program leaders appreciated most about the video training was its step-by-step guidance that they could share with other program staff. Sharing the video training with staff provided opportunity to collaborate and brainstorm within their programs and create consistent approaches to support literacy skill-building. One participant noted that watching the videos helped them realize how small things can make a big difference. Another participant shared, "The kids in my program don't know how to read yet, so I used the 'book look' from the videos and have the kids look for sight words and draw me a picture of something meaningful from the book … they are so engaged in the activity."

Confidence Levels

Many program staff members have a background in childcare and less experience in supporting academic improvement, particularly literacy. Coaching and training expanded their toolbox to support literacy skill-building while increasing their confidence in offering and leading literacy-based activities. Some staff commented that children became more engaged in activities that offered creative literacy skill-building components.

Examples of New Activities Introduced

Picture Story:
Children look at a picture together, take turns building a story about the picture, and then read the story they created.

Literacy Eye Spy:
During free time, the children played Eye Spy during which they needed to find their sight words, "and they love it."
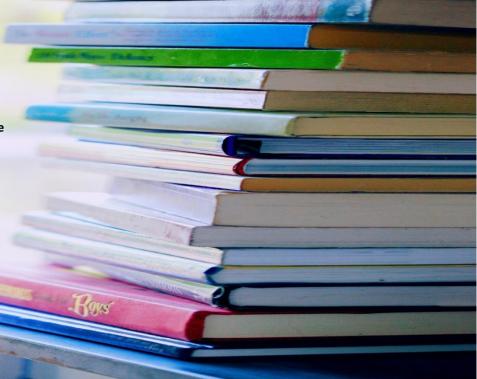
Daily Journaling:
Using a question or a phrase reflecting on the project for the day, children need to write at least three sentences. "Now I have kids writing two pages' worth!"

"I feel like I have a lot more knowledge of how to interact with youth and how I can better support their literacy skills, whether it be with homework, during our story time, or during our independent reading time."

"This program was able to give me a lot of ideas, and knowing what I can do and how creative I can be, I've been more confident in terms of how creative lesson planning can be and how fun it can be."

"I would say overall the children are more interested and excited about reading. The children that don't have homework, instead of coloring, they want to take out a book. They all can't wait until after homework time for us to read their books."

"In the beginning of the year, the kids were bringing toys to afterschool, and now they no longer bring toys, they bring books. One day after Read Across America, they brought in 20 books. I made sure we read them all."

Observations

Observed behaviors were recorded on the observation tool and analyzed to determine whether a behavior occurred at high frequency (4 or more times across activities), low frequency (2-3 times across activities), or rarely (only once across

activities). Table 1 illustrates the items that occurred at each frequency level for all activities observed. Twenty-one items were deemed high frequency (primarily verbal communication skills), 12 low frequency, and six were rarely implemented. It is worth noting that four items were observed more than 10 times across activities (italicized below). Observations were also conducted earlier in the initiative in February 2020, April 2022, and October 2022. Items that were designated as high frequency during those visits are marked in the table as well. It is evident that programs engaged youth in more literacy skill-building experiences in the Spring 2023 cycle.

Table 1. Frequency of items on the ELA/Literacy Observation Inventory

High-Frequency Items (4 or more times)

- Staff read to youth.*
- Staff facilitate youth engagement in reading. X
- Staff model reading comprehension strategies (make personal connections, predictions, ask questions, summarize).
- Youth read independently, not as part of homework. X
- Youth are read to.
- Youth discuss or write about books they are reading.
- Staff engage youth in writing activity.
- Youth write or dictate stories, poems, or newspaper articles.
- Youth with guidance and support respond to questions and suggestions; share writing with peers.
- Staff engage in frequent 1:1 conversations with youth.* X
- Staff frequently ask youth open-ended questions.* X
- Staff encourage youth to verbally elaborate on their ideas.* X
- *Staff model use of Standard English (proper grammar and pronunciation) when interacting or reading with youth*.*
- *Staff listen attentively to youth*.* X
- Staff encourage youth to participate in conversations/discussions. X
- Staff encourage youth to work in cooperative groups.*
- *Staff use proper vocabulary specific to the subject they are teaching*.
- *Staff demonstrate how language is used for a variety of purposes and audiences*.*
- Youth participate in group discussions or debate.
- Youth explain ideas or experiences to adults/peers.
- Youth explain their own thinking process.

Low-Frequency Items (2 to 3 times)

- Staff sit with youth reading.
- Staff help youth sound out words, figure out meaning from context, and encourage when stuck.
- Youth play word games.
- Youth receive reading assistance by staff/tutor.
- Youth investigate unfamiliar vocabulary words.
- Staff suggest youth write as part of other non-literacy activities.
- Staff encourage youth to review and edit their own writing.
- Youth receive writing assistance/guidance from staff.
- Youth write about topics that matter to them.
- Youth collaborate with one another to produce/share writing.
- Youth present in front of peers. X
- Youth play games that require verbally describing or explaining objects.

Rarely implemented Items (1 time)

- Staff help youth find books or reading materials.
- Youth read in practical situations.
- Staff elicit writing topics from youth.
- Staff encourage youth to share their writing with peers.
- Staff explain strategies for reviewing and editing writing.
- Youth play word games that require writing.

* **Note.** Items observed at high frequency in previous observations are marked with * (February 2020 and April 2022) and X (October 2022).

Summary

The Philadelphia Out-of-School Time Literacy and Quality Improvement Initiative has continued to support OST program staff capacity-building in order to infuse literacy skill-building activities into daily OST program experiences. Data gathered from interviews and observations of program leaders and staff participating in literacy training videos, coaching, and Communities of Practice suggest that initiatives such as this can contribute to expanding the kinds of literacy skill-building activities available to children during OST program hours. Program staff pointed to the value of receiving coaching and training on specific strategies and approaches for integrating literacy skill-building into activities that were already taking place. It is evident that program staff confidence level grew, and this translated into a greater sense of excitement for implementing literacy-based activities, as well as a new interest and engagement from children in books and reading. While there is opportunity for programs to continue to expand the ways in which they include and highlight literacy skill-building in their activities, there is convincing evidence that staff-level interventions can raise the frequency of these experiences taking place in OST programs.

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Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia
Camp Endeavor
Catholic Social Services – Mayfair Out-of-School Time Program
Children's Village – Philadelphia
Episcopal Community Services (ECS)
Launch of Philadelphia
Methodist Services
Providence Center
The Learning Institute of Philadelphia