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.

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.

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 firsthand 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

Related articles

For more than a decade, afterschool programs have been under pressure to improve academic outcomes without adequate funding. Quality is getting the squeeze. Anne and other OST professionals examined this problem in "The Accordion Effect" (Fusco et al., 2013) and made recommendations toward better support for afterschool quality.

Engagement is key to literacy development—and to every other OST program outcome. Lena's article "Transformative Work in Programs for Children and Youth" (Townsend, 2003) outlines characteristics of engaging work and suggests strategies OST programs can use to foster engagement.

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 illustrated 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.

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

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.

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/