

# The Context and Content in After School Literacy

Bill Richards 18 June 2014

Teachers, youth workers, librarians, and extended care workers remove backing from thin copper tape with sticky backing to connect coin cell batteries and LEDs (light emitting diodes) to create light-up notebooks at a workshop at the Free Library of Philadelphia. These small books will collect fiction or nonfiction writing using the light on each page as a focal point. Participants learn about circuits, on/off switches, and conductivity. They actively analyze problems and try new solutions, follow complex directions, fill in background information and create an original presentation. Participants are engaged from both the passion of the workshop trainer as well as from the intrinsic allure of science. They pause to think about what they will need to do to take these ideas back to their organizations and create hands-on, low-stakes, interesting activities for youth in their after school programs. With a copy of a book about electric circuits, they are poised to show youth how to gain information from nonfiction and spark their curiosity. In this science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) workshop, participants leave with an activity to try, a model for inspiring inquiry, and ideas for creatively infusing literacy into compelling content.

Motivating and well-designed professional development is a significant part of building high quality OST programs that work, but it is not sufficient. The innovative approach used in the POSTLI program is meant to assure use of training through a combination of supports. POSTLI support begins with a site survey and interview aimed at establishing literacy goals that honor the unique culture, interests, and needs of the site. Every site or organization is unique. Youth interests and passions vary. Goals therefore vary, approaches vary. Content is also diverse: some sites might engage in an anti-bullying campaign, another explores careers, or dance, drama, marine life, fashion, financial literacy. Literacy support must infuse these activities and be customized. An organization may simply want their staff to learn how to deliver an effective read aloud, one of the essential activities that impacts student achievement . Or they may want to address the needs of seriously struggling readers. Or leaders may want to develop ability to observe, reflect from hands-on observation. Whatever the goals set with POSTLI staff, a process of continuous program improvement and development begins.\

About 45% of youth in Philadelphia are reading at grade level according to the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment (PSSA) results . This means that 55% are not reading up to potential. We need to provide additional high quality opportunities for youth to practice what they learn during the school day, and in some cases, provide

additional primary learning experience. Research demonstrates that student motivation and engagement are essential to improved literacy learning. Topics and activities must be responsive to youth interests and must honor student choice. Sara Hill demonstrates how creative programs can artfully build on youth development principles while being culturally responsible and cultivate success through attention to multiple intelligences while simultaneously impacting retention and achievement. Most practitioners and policymakers in the after-school arena have noted several general themes about how after-school should address academic work. They include (1) experiential learning that is relevant, exploratory and hands on, (2) the use of engaging topics that capture participants' imaginations and allow for a variety of learning modes and (3) reinforcement of literacy and numeracy skills that relate to meeting project goals.

Honoring the unique context of each after school environment must be considered. In *Afterschool Education: Approaches to an Emerging Field*, Gil Noam, director of the Program in Afterschool, Education, and Research, and his colleagues discuss bridging after school and the school day, but emphasize the importance of protecting the unique after school environment from becoming too much like school (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay, 2003). The authors make the distinction between extended learning and enriched learning, the former tightly aligned with the school day in the form of

tutoring and/or homework help (most often worksheets), and the latter possibly aligned with the school day but taking many forms, including project-based learning and hands-on activities. POSTLI coaches and after school staff have the strategic view of how school day learning transfers, of what comprehension and thinking skills are in place and then providing the supporting practices for these skills.

POSTLI provides four essential ingredients to infuse literacy that have been shown to work: staff training, support visits, coaching, and data collection and analysis . Staff attend workshops that target the high impact literacy strategies that will help meet their program goals with clear youth outcomes. POSTLI focuses on interactive read aloud, oral language and vocabulary development, writing, vocabulary development and independent reading. Higher order thinking skills underlie all four elements. Without frequent exposure to best practices, staff might revert to archaic practices from past experience. Coaches visit sites with enough frequency to assure that strategies are in place and working well. Using rubrics, staff set goals for their practice. Coaching and demonstration through a gradual release of responsibility model then allows teachers to watch, incorporate feedback, use new curriculum, or plan to attend additional staff development. Sites collect a variety of data that demonstrates use and impact of literacy best practices, informing program quality: a field tested staff observation

protocol used for goal setting and recording evidence of use of professional development learning, informal reading level assessment, minutes of program time devoted to literacy, and youth attendance are some of the important indicators. This data is analyzed to determine impact and more precisely to develop the coaching/technical assistance plan. Several Philadelphia sites use more formal pre- and post- reading and/or writing assessments to confirm their effectiveness for parents, funders, and the wider community.

The Philadelphia Out-of-School-Time Literacy Initiative (POSTLI) began as Youth Education for Tomorrow. In 2000, Public/Private Ventures developed the Youth Education for Tomorrow (YET) balanced literacy model to improve reading outcomes for youth served in OST programs located primarily in communities of faith. This model provided certified teachers to implement the approach, developed the continuous improvement OST model, and continued to refine technical assistance repertoire based on local needs. In its 11 years, YET served over 15,000 youth in 17 cities across the country, and served over 2500 youth in 2012-2013. This model shifted as POSTLI began to serve all programs with a greater range of staff experience. For young staff, it provides high expectations for their work and a model and motivation for expanding professional careers by teaching both systems and problem solving approaches. It challenges and encourages a personal look at leadership

and educational skills. It is clear from staff feedback that workers expand boundaries by taking back their learning and sharing it with family and their communities.

Comments like, "I used this with my three year old daughter and she loved it and is starting to read letters," is not uncommon. In this way OST functions as a laboratory.

In responding to the needs of Philadelphia OST community, POSTLI joined the Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation in 2011 to capitalize on use of the rich variety of FLP resources, to provide literacy professional development to the after school community, and to expand use of successful literacy practices in all settings. The Free Library of Philadelphia has continued to provide programs, services, and resources for out-of-school-time youth and youth serving programs. Celebrating 25 years of continued service, The Literacy Enrichment After-school Program (LEAP) has evolved over time to meet the needs of communities across Philadelphia by providing supports for 21st Century skill development. A variety of programs and services, including LEAP, offer a mix of homework assistance, digital literacy experiences, and library and research skills for students in grades K-12. Daily literacy enrichment activities for elementary school students are also provided. As drop-in programs, LEAP and the Summer Reading programs promote traditional print literacy while making highly engaging literacy connections in science, technology, social studies, humanities, and cultural arts. The Free Library of

Philadelphia Summer Reading programs have been preventing "summer slide" for over 75 years. Over the last couple years, POSTLI and the Free Library have been working together to develop synergy for this work. Online resources are one great area of synergy that allows all OST programs to use the very popular Homework Help Online, powered by Brainfuse, which allows students of all ages to chat with a tutor to get specific help for their homework questions, but also allows students to use do skill building and use the writing lab and more. In addition, high quality e-books are available for everyone from young children through adults, enabling students to have access to books wherever they are on their phone, their tablet, or their computer. Online databases also allow students to access accurate information to support both their formal school assignments as well as their informal learning. POSTLI and The Free Library of Philadelphia are continuing to work together to strengthen all our services to students, staff, and the whole OST community.

To replicate and sustain high quality performance, technology will be expanded into POSTLI. A website at the Free Library of Philadelphia is under development which will connect staff to curriculum and teaching modules such as webinars as a scaffold for the path from initial learning to effective practice. Such tools provide flexibility and additional support on demand. Teaching reading is rocket science. People are often surprised at just how much you need to know to help youth who haven't had

the success they deserve in traditional settings. Teaching literacy requires quality professional development and well-crafted technical assistance. Adults working with youth must be willing to examine their own literacy lifestyles, to find their passions and connect with innate curiosity as a source of power in shepherding young people through the rigorous demands of the 21st century.

## **References**

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