

CLI Social Innovations: Quality Matters in PreK Instruction for Reading by Fourth Grade

Joel Zarrow 27 February 2015

Current national and state-level initiatives emphasize expanding access to high-quality prekindergarten (pre-k) as an early but critical strategy to ensure students' ability to read by the time they enter fourth grade. These programs help children gain early reading skills, develop an interest in books, larger vocabularies, and letter recognition, learn to sound out letters and words, plus learn how to handle a book, and read from left to right. Yet in 2014, only 34% of Philadelphia children ages three and four were enrolled in high-quality pre-k programs.

As the drum beats to expand the quantity of prekindergarten seats, emphasis must also be maintained on quality. This is no small challenge. Preschool quality depends on the experience, training and skill levels of prekindergarten teachers. However, pre-k teachers tend to be low-paid and under-trained, especially in settings that serve children from lower-income households. The Children's Literacy Initiative (CLI) offers a proven solution, combining professional development and curricula that

can increase prekindergartenteachers' effectiveness and improve their students' vocabulary and other pre-reading skills.

The Issue

Children from lower-income households typically enter kindergarten already with a literacy deficit. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2013 policy report *The First Eight Years* estimates that, "By the time a child in a very low-income family reaches age 4, she will have heard only two words for every seven that a child in a higher-income family has heard. By the time children in families with very low incomes enter kindergarten, they are 12 to 14 months behind in language and pre-reading skills, compared with children in higher-income families, where reading books and engaging in regular conversations with adults help build much larger vocabularies." [1]

CLI has documented similar trends in Philadelphia. In partnership with Drexel University, the program in early 2014 conducted a baseline vocabulary assessment of 199 low-income pre-k students (ages 2.5 to 6 years old) using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT). Data were collected from 11 pre-k centers in West Philadelphia that varied in terms of level of quality (as measured by the Pennsylvania Department of Education's *Keystone* STAR rating system) and also setting. The assessment included children in home child care, Head Start and community nursery centers. The results were astounding. On average,

the Drexel/CLI assessment found that **prekindergarten children were already six months behind the national average, with some five- and six-year-old children scoring as far as three years behind.** Furthermore, the children **scored on average nine points below the national means for their individual ages.**

Attending a high-quality preschool can help a lower-income child overcome his or her literacy gap. However, unless that preschool's teachers are experts at literacy instruction, that young student is unlikely to gain the early reading and writing skills needed for kindergarten and future learning.

The Solution

Research-based best practices for teaching young children how to read and write are well documented and available. However, preschool teachers and teaching assistants may not have the knowledge, training and/or instructional skills needed to implement these practices. The Children's Literacy Initiative is working with preschool educators to transform daycare environments into high-quality preschools by grounding teachers and their assistants in the best practices for effective literacy instruction. To do this, CLI provides training, job-embedded coaching, high-quality children's book collections and its innovative pre-k curriculum Blueprint for Early Literacy. Working with CLI, educators learn how to build their young students' foundational skills in

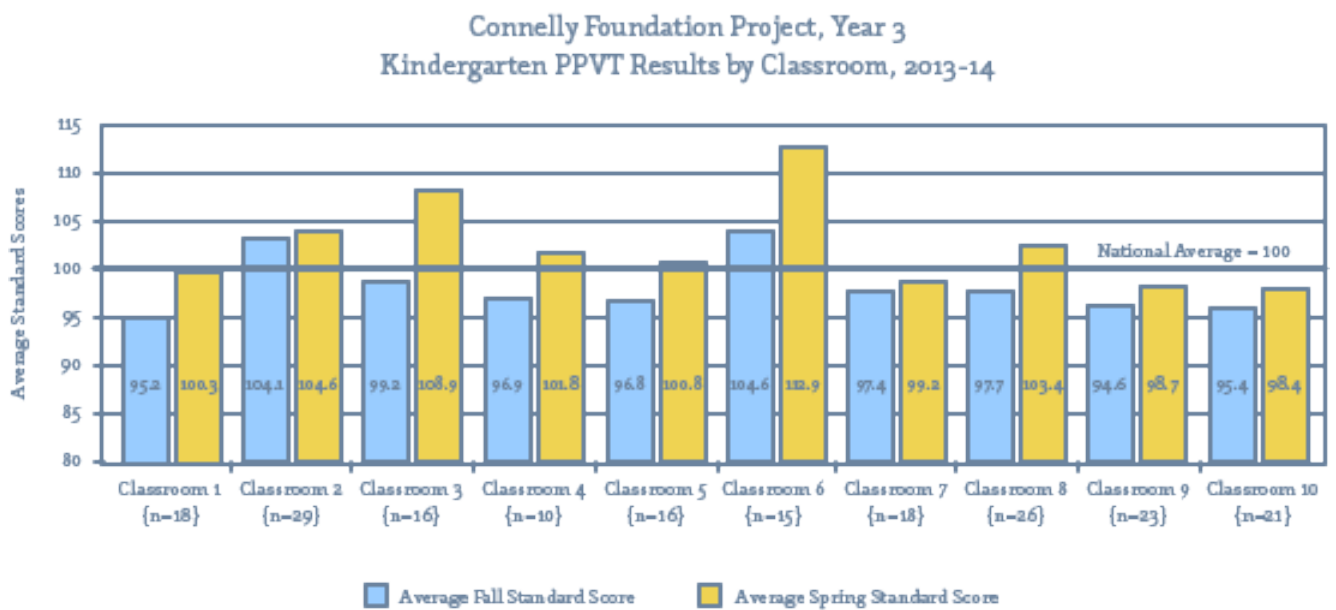
phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, sight-word vocabulary and oral language development. Supported by CLI's highly trained professional developers, preschool educators become more intentional and effective in their instruction and better meet their students' learning needs.

The Differentiation

CLI's proven theory of action shows that teachers can become exemplary instructors when they receive the right combination and intensity of training, coaching and materials. CLI's professional development model includes the components that research has confirmed as effective: intensive and ongoing support, content and classroom focus, peer learning and observation, applying knowledge to practice, and reflecting with peers. Professional, collegial relationships with CLI professional developers—built on trust and mutual respect—support teachers in their adoption of instructional best practices. CLI extensively trains its professional developers in literacy instruction and coaching technique and empowers them to develop innovative responses to school conditions and teachers' needs.

CLI is currently engaged in two very exciting but very different prekindergarten-related projects in Philadelphia that illustrate the potential of its approach. The first, funded by The Connelly Foundation, began when CLI trained, coached and supplied material to 19 prekindergarten teachers in 14 Archdiocese of

Philadelphia Catholic schools, focusing on the Blueprint curriculum and Message Time Plus instructional tool, during the 2011-2012 school year. After early success within its prekindergarten classrooms, the Connelly-funded project expanded to serve a total of 30 teachers, from pre-k to 2nd grade, in 12 schools. CLI's flexible, high-impact service delivery model improved instruction standards, provided much-needed classroom resources and positively transformed the literacy education received by Archdiocese of Philadelphia Catholic school students.



In a sample of 10 Connelly-supported Archdiocese of Philadelphia Catholic elementary school classrooms, 97.4% of children scored at or above the national average[2] on the PPVT in spring 2014. This assessment measures individuals' receptive (hearing) vocabulary, one of the primary predictors of later literacy ability. In fall 2013, students in the 10 classrooms who were sampled scored slightly below the national average. By spring 2014, students had made more than the average growth expected for their age, surpassing the national average.

Separately, CLI partnered with Drexel University for a project funded by the Brook J. Lenfest Foundation to provide CLI professional development to 12 prekindergarten teachers at four sites in West Philadelphia: Morton McMichael Elementary school and three preschools that send children to McMichael Elementary (the Caring People Alliance West Philadelphia Community Center, the Montgomery Early Learning Center, and Brightside Academy). For this project, CLI supports prekindergarten teachers and their assistants in implementing best literacy instruction practices within their non-CLI curricula. In the Drexel project, CLI training, coaching and resources have heightened teachers' professionalism and helped establish classroom routines and practices for a high-quality learning environment, complete with inviting classroom libraries that are well-stocked with high-quality books. With CLI, prekindergarten teachers are learning to be more intentional with instruction, planning lessons more carefully to meet their students' needs.

CLI's program provides educators with high-quality children's book collections, training in best instructional practices and follow-up coaching support. The interaction between this system of professional learning and its quality implementation makes all the difference for the students it seeks to serve. Teachers use CLI's carefully selected books to help children love reading. To help teachers effectively use the books, CLI provides high-

quality training on specific best practices for building phonemic awareness, conducting read-alouds, and also creating and maintaining a high-quality literacy environment for learning. It is difficult for a prekindergarten teacher to attend even the best training and be able to successfully implement it back in the classroom. So CLI's job-embedded coaching helps teachers think through the core issues of effective instruction, including addressing individual student needs and learning styles, as well as lesson objectives and lesson design. CLI also provides instructional leadership training to help preschool directors and school principals develop the skills and strategies needed to support their teachers' instructional improvements within their schools.

Finally, CLI's comprehensive prekindergarten curriculum, *Blueprint for Early Literacy*, based on 125 high-quality children's books, builds children's literacy skills through engaging, rich and meaningful learning. Its lesson plans help teachers make each book a launching pad for teaching vocabulary, building comprehension and developing phonemic awareness, phonics and oral language skills. A fully revised *Blueprint 3.0*, due for release in August 2015, will align with the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale that is used for assessing preschools, as well as the Pennsylvania Standards for Prekindergarten; it will enable teachers to prepare young children for the Common Core State Standards for kindergarten.

CLI's professional development has already proven effective in improving students' vocabulary. PPVT scores from students in multiple CLI pre-k projects—conducted in cities including Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore from the 2007-2008 through the 2012-2013 school years—suggest that **prekindergarten children exposed to CLI best practices move, on average, nearly eight points closer to the national average** over the course of a school year. With CLI intervention, pre-k centers are more able to develop their students' early literacy skills; enough so that students can leave pre-k scoring at or even above the national average.

CLI has proven that it's possible to elevate literacy instruction and student vocabulary growth in prekindergarten. As a nation, we must improve our prekindergarten options to give the youngest children their best chance for a lifetime of reading, writing, learning and success.

Reference

Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (2004). The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap by age 3. *American Educator*, 77(91), 100–118. Retrieved from http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/The_EarlyCatastrophe.pdf

[1]Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (2004). The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap by age 3. (91), 100–18.

<>[2] Within one standard deviation of the national mean