Evidence Brief

Eight Best Practices for Extracurricular Literacy Programming for Black, Racialized, and Low-Income Youth

The Summary of Evidence is structured in three parts:

A. Three Sites of Marginalization
B. Eight Best Practices for Extracurricular Literacy Programming for Black, Racialized, and Low-Income Youth
C. Three Considerations for Online Book Clubs

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "literacy", "intervention", "program", "book club", "marginalized", "low-income", and "youth".

A. Summary of Evidence: Three Sites of Marginalization

Research suggests that young people may experience marginalization at three key sites of literacy learning: reading curricula, standardized testing, and institutional settings.

1. **The 'hidden curriculum'.**
   An analysis of a widely-used reading intervention for youth in the United States found that many of the books portrayed people of colour as "inferior, deviant, and helpless," and white people as "heroic, determined, innovative, and successful" (Thomas & Dyches, 2019, p. 601). This suggests that literacy programs may contain a ***hidden curriculum*** (Anyon, 1980) that can reinforce oppressive narratives and diminish the self-concept of racialized youth.

2. **Standardized literacy testing.**
   Research shows that standardized literacy testing, such as the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), may "constrain marginalized youth's possibilities, freedom, and [diminish] the value of literacies and knowledges they may possess" (Kearns, 2016, p. 123). Conventional testing mechanisms, which define literacy in relation to "an ideal white, male literate citizen" (Kearns, 2016, p. 121), construct students who fail – often, young people from marginalized communities – as 'illiterate' youth.

3. **Institutional contexts.**
   Some evidence suggests that young people may be positioned as deficient readers through

the **conflation of reading difficulty and behaviour problems** in educational settings (Learned, 2016). The marginalization of racialized youth within school settings is well-documented, and evidence suggests that this extends to their literacy abilities (Thein & Schmidt, 2017).

B. Summary of Evidence: Eight Best Practices for Extracurricular Literacy Programming for Black, Racialized, and Low-Income Youth

1. **Take a strength-based approach.**
   Young people from marginalized communities are often labelled as 'struggling readers', even when they are able to skillfully draw on their literacy resources (Learned, 2016; Thein & Schmidt, 2017). Youth workers can disrupt these deficit-based narratives by **recognizing young people's literacy strengths** (see #5, below), which may fall outside conventional literacy practices, such as reading and writing fluency (Thein & Schmidt, 2017). The name of Kumasi's (2014) Young Urban Scholars Book Club intentionally disrupts deficit frames by positioning young people as "knowledge constructors capable of generating robust dialogue, questions, and critique of the societal dilemmas they see in their community" (p. 11).

2. **Develop a curriculum that reflects young people's lived experiences.**
   Evidence suggests that the most effective literacy programming is centered around texts that reflect young people's lives (Facing History and Ourselves, 2020; Kooy & Colarusso, 2014; Kumasi, 2014; Learned, 2016). Low engagement is often "more of an issue of context (i.e., accessibility to interesting texts) than motivation or comprehension" (Learned, 2016, p. 1294). Educators can make curricula culturally relevant by catering to young people's interests, experiences, and literacy practices (Kumasi, 2014).

   Research shows that **choice** is a key component of effective literacy programming for all children and youth. If feasible, programmers should allow youth to choose texts; this may create space for youth to share personal stories, and make connections to their own histories and identities (Kooy & Colarusso, 2014).

3. **Be responsive to young people's needs.**
   Program staff should be familiar with young people's backgrounds, communities, home lives, and first languages/language spoken at home, and use this information to develop programming that is responsive to **each student's unique needs, challenges, and resources** (Rasco et al., 2013). For example, programmers can recognize the competing demands on young people's time by creating a book club that is focused on short stories, rather than full-length novels (Kumasi, 2014). This can foster a more welcoming environment and ensure that youth who join throughout the program feel comfortable contributing to discussions.

4. **Engage in critical witnessing.**
   Critical witnessing (Dutro & Bien, 2014) is the practice of "listening to and acknowledging students' individual stories of trauma and disrupting the marginalization students experience through schooling" (Thein & Schmidt, 2017, p. 315). In the context of a literacy intervention, critical witnessing can **create space for young people to take risks** by sharing their own stories and engaging in challenging literacy practices (Thein & Schmidt, 2017).

   Program staff can engage in critical witnessing by (Thein & Schmidt, 2017):
   - challenging their own assumptions about young people's abilities, backgrounds, and behaviours;
   - acknowledging young people's stories with empathy, and without judgment;
   - embracing stories even if they feel "resistant, off-task or 'inappropriate'" in order to make connections between home life and learning (p. 319); and
   - being vulnerable and sharing their own stories.

5. **Embrace multiple literacies.**
   It is important to recognize literacy as "much more than a cognitive ability to read and write, but also [as] a social act that involves basic modes of participating in the world" (Kumasi, 2014, p. 9). Mainstream education systems are increasingly recognizing the relevance of **multiple literacies**, including media literacy, digital literacy, and critical literacy. Evidence suggests that integrating non-traditional literacies (such as hip hop, spoken word, and urban vernacular) into educational programming can be affirming for youth of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Kumasi, 2014). Evidence suggests that the literacy resources of Black girls and young women include creative practices such as storytelling, performativity, reading as identity exploration, and code switching (e.g., alternating between "standard" English and African American Vernacular English) (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016).

   When school-based pedagogies are rigid and at odds with young people's conceptualizations of language and literacy, they may "[close] down rather than [open] up multiple possibilities for true learning to occur" (Alim, 2011, p. 132). Educators should **affirm the wealth of cultural and linguistic resources** that youth bring to school or program spaces. **Recognize the skill and creativity** in young people's literacy practices, which often challenge conventional linguistic norms, while expressing "intimate, lived experiences as a means to work toward a collective social transformation" (Alim, 2011, p. 123).

   Instead of measuring success based on traditional literacy outcomes – such as spelling, grammar, and comprehension – consider young people's abilities to critically engage with the text, make connections to their lived experience, and creatively express themselves through diverse/hybrid literacy practices.

6. **Coordinate programming with learning in the classroom.**
   If possible, programs should communicate with school staff to ensure materials are aligned with school curricula (Hartmann & Reumann-Moore, 2017; Rasco et al., 2013). Out-of-school literacy programming is most effective when it ***reinforces*** **or** ***pre-teaches*** **material**, and when it offers children and youth **additional opportunities to process, practice, and reflect** on their learning. In contrast, the misalignment of afterschool, in-school, and summer programs can create missed opportunities (Rasco et al., 2013).

   For example, an afterschool program can reinforce in-class learning by arranging a field trip or bringing in a guest speaker. In the aftermath of these activities, staff can encourage young people to reflect on the experience through an informal discussion (e.g., "Where did we go? Why? What happened there? Did you learn any new words?") or an activity (e.g., drawing a picture, writing a story for friends/family, writing in a journal, adding new words to a vocabulary list) (Rasco et al., 2013).

7. **Incorporate tutoring supports.**
   Research suggests that one-on-one tutoring is more effective than other forms of literacy programming, including teacher-led small group instruction (Hartmann & Reumann-Moore, 2017; Slavin et al., 2011). In fact, tutoring programs can **improve literacy outcomes regardless of whether tutors are professionals or volunteers** (Jacob et al., 2015; Slavin et al., 2011). Some of the characteristics of effective tutoring programs include the following (Hartmann & Reumann-Moore, 2017):
   - Clear structure
   - Tutors who are volunteers or paraprofessionals, and supported by literacy content experts, teachers or principals
   - 60-160 minutes per week over the course of the school year
   - Stand-alone or offered as a pull-out option within out-of-school time

   Programs that rely on volunteers should establish **an infrastructure for volunteer recruitment and support** (Hartmann & Reumann-Moore, 2017). A rigorous evaluation of Reading Partners, a volunteer-driven tutoring program, found positive impacts on reading proficiency across diverse groups of youth, including English language learners (Jacob et al., 2015). Although the program relies on volunteer tutors who receive minimal training, tutors are provided with a structured curriculum and ongoing support/guidance from site coordinators.

8. **Engage parents/guardians.**
   Research suggests that parent/guardian involvement is critical for the successful

implementation of afterschool literacy programs (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hartmann & Reumann-Moore, 2017). Organizations should create an environment that "values the parent as the child's first teacher" (Rasco et al., 2013, n.p.). **Be flexible and accommodating** (Rasco et al., 2013):

- offer multiple opportunities for open houses and information sessions;
- communicate in a way that is accessible (e.g., by phone, text or postcards); and
- provide translators, if needed.

Programs should **communicate frequently and consistently with parents/guardians**. Provide families with opportunities to observe and participate in literacy activities, and suggest specific ways they can support their children's learning. The goal is to empower parents/guardians to model and encourage literacy activities, such as going to the library and storytelling (Rasco et al., 2013).

C. Summary of Evidence: Three Considerations for Online Book Clubs

Although book clubs can build literacy skills, it may be best to focus on **instilling a love of reading in young people**, and **fostering community around literature** (Facing History and Ourselves, 2020). In many ways, the practices that make online book clubs effective mirror those of in-person programs: staff should provide young people with choice, foster thoughtful dialogue, and encourage self-reflection. However, virtual programming comes with its own challenges, with three considerations outlined below.

1. **Accessibility**

   Many low-income families lack reliable access to high-speed internet and internet-enabled devices. Staff should check in with young people to assess their home setup, and use this feedback to inform programming choices (Jungels, 2020; Trust, n.d.). Considerations specific to literacy programming may include (Facing History and Ourselves, 2020, p. 4):

   - access to books/e-books, or a library card;
   - access to internet-enabled devices, including e-readers and tablets; and
   - accommodations, such as audiobooks, large-print text, enlarged text, and legible typefaces (e.g., OpenDyslexic).

   *See also *The 'Digital Divide' and Six Promising Practices to Ensure Greater Access to Online Programming*

2. **Structure**

   Virtual book clubs are most effective when they are intentionally designed with a group's unique needs in mind. **Ask young people how they would like to meet** (through video, chat, email, or text); keep in mind that they may need to experiment to figure out what works best

(Facing History and Ourselves, 2020).

Host regular meetings, and keep the length of meetings age- and developmentally-appropriate. Some educators suggest keeping sessions to 30 minutes for elementary and middle school students, and up to an hour for older youth (Milligan, 2020).

If possible, **keep groups small** (Facing History and Ourselves, 2020; Milligan, 2020). A close-knit setting "encourages students to take healthy risks, practice self-reflection and empower themselves as learners" (Milligan, 2020, para. 13).

As with traditional group programming, facilitators may want to (Milligan, 2020):

- **agree on group norms**;
- **use icebreaker games** to encourage young people to get to know each other, which may allow them to feel safe to share their thoughts/feelings; and
- **encourage young people to lead the discussion**, in order to build community and instill confidence in their literacy skills.

3. Digital Tools

Virtual programming allows facilitators to draw on a wealth of online resources to build community and support youth engagement. Be creative, and leverage technology to make programming more engaging, relevant, and meaningful for your audience. For example, consider the following platforms (Gold, 2020; Johnson, 2019; see also Facing History and Ourselves, 2020, for more resources):

- OurStory by We Need Diverse Books, which can help young people discover books by authors from marginalized communities
- Loose Canon, a social media platform that allows schools and organizations to build online reading communities by allowing youth/educators to join book clubs, build 'reading resumes', write reviews, and create reading lists
- Book Club for Kids, a podcast "where middle schoolers talk about books"
- **Booktube**, an informal name for a community of reading-focused channels on YouTube

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