Family Learning and Literacy in Urban Settings

Lessons from a Network of Informal Learning and Community-Based Organizations

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ABSTRACT

We describe a study of a network that supported community-based informal learning experiences for families with young children in Philadelphia. The network has included 11 different partnerships consisting of informal learning organizations and community-based organizations. The partnerships developed programming focused on a variety of topics, that was delivered in a range of different community-based settings in order to specifically support literacy development. Findings suggest that the network had a positive impact on participating families. Children enjoyed the hands-on programming, practiced literacy skills, and explored new informal learning experiences in locations around the city. Caregivers found programming beneficial for their children, learned about family literacy practices, and valued programs as shared and special family experiences. Families who participated in programming over time developed positive relationships with educators from informal learning organizations. Our findings also explored the challenges and benefits of partnerships engaged in joint work as part of a network and learning community.

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The Informal Learning Initiative

Launched in 2017, the William Penn Foundation's Informal Learning Initiative (ILI) supports literacy-rich learning experiences for low-income families in Philadelphia. ILI was intended to bring informal learning and community-based organizations together in a collective effort to provide community-centered, family-friendly programming. ILI was designed to be well-situated with respect to two of the main goals of Philadelphia's Read by 4th campaign: "helping families to engage in literacy-building activities with their children and making sure that every community in Philadelphia has access to literacy-rich programming."

We know that students who have low literacy skills at 4th grade are four times more likely to drop out of school, and the risk may be higher for lower income children (Hernandez, 2011). Children from lower socio-economic strata are exposed to fewer words and fewer books in their formative years, have fewer books at home, and are read to less by caregivers (Golinkoff, et al, 2018; Hoff, 2013). Adult and family involvement is an important aspect of literacy development. Parent involvement positively influences children's social competence, cognitive development, communication skills, and attitudes toward learning

in early childhood (Weiss, Capse, and Lopez, 2006; Rowe, 2012). Parent involvement might be best conceptualized as a community issue addressed through co-constructed, collaborative partnerships involving families, schools, after-school programs, community-based organizations, and other key stakeholders within the social and educational infrastructure of a community (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; Luke & McCreedy, 2012).

A signature aspect of ILI is that it required informal learning organizations (ILOs) to collaborate with community-based organizations (CBOs) in both the development and delivery of family programming. We see this as serving an area of critical need in the field of informal learning. Many ILOs across the nation recognize that they have not done a good job reaching all families, and many ILOs are thus searching for better ways to engage authentically with communities who have historically not felt invited, included, or well-served by the informal learning sector. In ILI, CBOs would help to position community needs as front and center, and ILOs would then create programming that specifically responded to those needs. The CBOs who participated in ILI were trusted by families who already used CBO services, attended CBO-sponsored events, and, in some cases, had ongoing relationships with individual CBO staff. For CBOs, the project provided a means for staff to engage in new thinking about program design and education, and an opportunity to explore the literacy needs of their constituents.

Each partnership focused on a specific low-income community in Philadelphia and developed programming to support family learning through a playful exploration of topics such as science, art, creativity, nature, and health and wellness. Partnerships offered a range of programs, including afterschool biweekly programs, weekend and evening family events, open houses in museums, and at-home visits. Some programs were offered in multilingual and multicultural settings, while others were conducted primarily in English. Programs focused on children from toddlers to early elementary school. Content reflected the intersection of community interests/needs and the disciplinary expertise of informal learning organizations. As of the third year of the five-year initiative, almost 1,500 families have participated in ILI programs **(Table 1)**.

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Photo courtesy of the Barnes Foundation

Top: Storytime at a science museum in Philadelphia; →
Bottom: A family day at a fine arts museum.

Informal Learning Organizations

The category of "Informal Learning Organizations" includes cultural and educational organizations such as museums, gardens, zoos/aquaria, arts groups, media producers, and others for whom designed learning experiences are an important part of the organizational mission. ILOs hold, preserve and share valuable resources in specific content areas. These organizations offer resources to audiences in a variety of ways from one-time experiences in exhibition halls, to event-based programming, or ongoing programming and internships. Designed informal learning experiences are an important and essential part of educational ecosystems (National Research Council, 2009), where families can engage and learn about science, art, nature, culture, etc., and where they encounter educators and experts who can facilitate the development and deepening of interests and knowledge. While schools focus on proficiency and a standard curriculum, informal learning settings can play a unique role in helping children (and their caregivers) to identify individual interests and to "activate" children towards building identities and competencies with respect to content and communities that could provide life-long, life-wide learning pathways (Dorph, Schunn, Crowley, 2019; Crowley, et al.; 2015).

The challenge, however, is that while museums and other ILOs may think of themselves as shared community resources and important parts of a broader educational ecosystem, families from many communities do not visit, or otherwise use ILOs as learning resources (Dawson, 2014). Originally designed for civic purposes and enlightenment, institutions such as museums have always had a particular angle that was exclusionary and political as they were designed to showcase the treasures of the state and public education was only one small part of their mission. Curating and preserving the collection has been the dominant mode for museum work, and museums have envisioned the problem of audience as being concerned with getting more people through the door to experience their resources (Gurian, 2006; Fleming, 2012; Coffee, 2008). Museums have recognized that they need to become more accessible and inclusionary; structural barriers such as transportation, location, and cost are not the only reasons why some families choose not to visit. There are many reasons that impact why families may choose not to access museum resources. For example, visitors from historically marginalized communities can feel unwelcome in museums because of the sense that these institutions do not acknowledge or represent their history, values, or lived experiences (Dawson, 2014). In response, museums have tried to demonstrate their value to communities and to become more relevant in community life by creating exhibitions that represent excluded communities, or inviting advisory input from different communities (McSweeney & Kavanagh, 2016; Sandell & Nightingale, 2012). But organizational practices in museums

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Photo courtesy of the Barnes Foundation

have made it difficult for them to reimagine themselves as connected to local communities. Attempts to modify institutional processes have been difficult to sustain, and are sometimes critiqued as "empowerment lite" and by "doing for" and not "doing with," which further disempowers communities and maintains existing power structures (Lynch, 2011).

Efforts such as ILI are rethinking how museums consider public outreach by working closely with community-based organizations and focusing on the specific needs of particular audiences, so that they can tailor their resources and co-design educational experiences that are relevant, accessible and useful for target audiences. By supporting partnerships between ILOs and CBOs, ILI is encouraging informal learning professionals to move their practice towards collaborative, community-centered design that goes beyond traditional one-way educational outreach models. In this way, one of the more important and long-lasting impacts of ILI could be sustained changes in how museums see community in their work and how museums conceptualize their roles and responsibilities as part of a larger educational ecosystem. Through these partnerships, ILI is also encouraging community-based staff to see themselves as part of that same broader ecosystem who have the social capital, knowledge, and agency to co-design learning experiences that are accessible and welcoming to their communities.

← *A hands-on activity in the museum gallery gets children, caregivers, and program staff involved.*

Elements of an ILI Program

ILI programs exposed young children (3 to 9-years old) in Philadelphia to original artwork, live animals, science experiments, natural settings, new foods, and cultural/historical sites. Program content reflected the strengths and commitments of the ILOs. Programming was delivered at no-cost, and often in community settings. Some programming took place during afterschool hours, while other programming happened primarily on weekends. Although most programming was in community settings, programs also included sessions based at the ILO, for example, by providing a special program for families as part of an existing family or community day at a museum. Program activities were set up for families and afterwards they could explore the rest of the museum on their own. Projects varied in how they configured their programs. There were many standalone single event programs (e.g., drop in programming at a library), but most projects also developed a series of programs planned for the same families to return to over the course of weeks or months.

PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

An example program snapshot is captured in this vignette, constructed from a structured observation, a reflective summary, and photo-documentation collected on March 20, 2019:

Children and caregivers are sitting at tables in an afterschool space in North Philadelphia, sharing a take-out dinner from the local South American restaurant. As they eat, families look together through a nonfiction picture book about bugs. There are six families here today and each family has been given its own copy of the book. Most of these families have been part of a series of programs at this site. While families eat and read together, three museum staff and two staff from the community-based organization circulate, greeting and welcoming families back, and asking questions about the book that families are reading. One of the museum staff and both of the community staff are bi-lingual, and the room is filled with the sound of many parallel conversations between adults and children in both English and Spanish.

When the program begins, a museum educator refers to everyone as "scientists" and uses the book families had just read together as the basis for a treasure hunt. She asks families to find a picture of a bug that makes an "sssss" noise. Children excitedly leaf through the book to find the bug then yell it out. The game continues with different attributes of bugs, (e.g, "find a bug that hides"). Caregivers engage with their children and help younger children manage the books. Children are visibly excited and, at one point, a boy is holding his book up over his head, opened to the picture he found, waiting to be recognized by the educators.

Then comes time to introduce a real bug—a large hissing cockroach. "Ewwww!" Families are invited to hold or touch the cockroach. Educators coax families to touch it, demonstrating how to hold it, and talking about its hard exoskeleton. It is a great leveler, as parents and children experience the same level of awe and disgust, and challenge one another to get closer and touch the bug. There are lots of laughs and cell phones come out to document the moment with photos.

Next, families are invited over to a table with a plastic aquarium box on it. It's a large centipede. One of the staff from the CBO provides some background information about centipedes, the nature of it, the food it likes, etc. and the families are told that they will next try to feed it. The excitement is barely containable, and the parents are just as engaged as children. Phones are out, photos are being taken, families are mesmerized by the bug. Two crickets are dropped into the cage. And they wait. Children call out potential attacks and near misses as crickets jump away from the creepy predator. It takes a while but eventually the crickets are eaten.

Children move on to build-a-bug stations, where they construct imaginary bugs and habitats out of craft materials, in an activity intended to showcase adaptations and encourage observation and classification of insects. In addition to reading the book and using the book as an object for the treasure hunt, literacy is also supported directly by Arthropod journals, in English and Spanish, where families record information about the bugs they are learning about.

The vignette illustrates many features commonly shared across ILI programming. Caregivers and children learn, read, eat, and talk together. There are organized activities that everyone does and there are smaller station-based activities where families have more choice about how to engage. Educators facilitate, encourage, question, and notice things that children and caregivers are doing and saying. The atmosphere is comfortable and fun, and activities provide accessible engagement for children of a range of ages—because when families come together they sometimes need to bring younger or older siblings along as well. Text, talk, reading, and writing are infused throughout. There is strong informal learning content—in this case live bugs along with science-inspired activities that reflect the collection and commitments of the natural history museum that co-developed the program. There is also participation from the community-based organization, whose staff are positioned as a familiar and welcoming presence, as well as being learners and facilitators themselves. For most families, this is one of a series of programs they will attend. Many of these families speak Spanish at home and so the programming series has been designed, from the ground up, to be bi-lingual and bi-cultural.

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Literacy Features

A signature element of ILI programming was reading. As we describe later, the ILI network strategically focused on read alouds as a place to explore shared practice, with the logic that modeling read aloud techniques in a program setting could support further family reading at home. In our observations of ILI programming, all program sessions except for one included at least one read aloud. Some programs did two, spaced throughout the program. The reader was typically an educator, but some programs also involved caregivers and children in reading aloud to the whole room. Educators wanted their read alouds to be engaging and interactive, and we observed 67% of programs featuring the reader asking questions of the children while reading, 50% featuring the reader rephrasing or reframing the meaning of what they had just read, and 75% featuring active audience participation, which might, for example, involve creating opportunities for children to talk about a picture or to act out parts of the story. Beyond read alouds, every program we observed had at least one, and often multiple, literacy elements woven throughout the informal learning activities. Most programs (80%) introduced specific vocabulary related to the disciplinary focus of their programming, often reinforcing the words across multiple sessions. Programs also were observed to integrate writing/inscriptions (50%), letter recognition and sounds (33%), and other literacy activities such as following instruction sheets for an activity (29%).

Caregiver-Child Joint Participation

Another core element of ILI programming was the creation of informal learning experiences that encouraged both caregivers and children to participate. When done well, such experiences included complementary roles for adults and children, ample opportunity for intergenerational conversation, and interest-driven, free-choice activities. We saw many of these features enacted in 75% of ILI programs. This number includes programs that were in afterschool settings where caregivers were not typically present. If we consider only programs with caregivers present, 90% delivered joint activities with complementary roles for adults and children.

Rich Learning Talk

Intergenerational conversation was also a key feature of ILI programming. Programs included many adults in the room, both educators and caregivers. The average adult/child ratio approached 1:3, a high percentage which helped to ensure that children in programs had access to opportunities to engage in conversations with adults while learning. Content talk provides an opportunity for children to learn new concepts and ways of thinking: 75% of program observations recorded adults engaging children in conversations about scientific, artistic, or creative processes. Asking questions is an important strategy for supporting children's engagement and interest. Program observations showed 75% of programs involved adults asking questions to extend adult/child conversation. Every program implemented at least one of these strategies, many implemented both.

Shared Components of ILI Programs

- ☐ uses fun hands-on activities that reference expertise of cultural organization
- ☐ incorporates literacy elements, including a read aloud
- ☐ promotes adult/child conversations
- ☐ requires support of community based organization (convening, liaising, helping)
- ☐ includes caregiver involvement
- ☐ uses meals (as relationship builder and convenience for families)
- ☐ occurs at convenient location for families

Children had opportunities to engage in conversations with adults while learning. →

Photo by WPF Staff

Family Learning

By creating family programming for historically underserved and marginalized families, ILI endeavors to provide new opportunities for children and caregivers to participate in literacy-rich learning experiences that reflect the strength of informal learning settings: choice, interest-driven, multi-generational learning and engagement.

Informal learning experiences make specific demands upon research methods (Leinhart & Knutson, 2004; Crowley, Knutson, Pierroux, 2014; Diamond, 1999). Many families visit ILOs to have a fun or a social experience. Learning may not be a primary goal of the experience at all (Packer & Ballantyne, 2002; Falk et al, 1998). Thus, while tests and surveys may be appropriate to study learning in formal education, they are often at odds with engaging, continuous, and exploratory informal learning environments (Zapata-Rivera, 2012). Informal learning is fundamentally free-choice and introducing tests can make participants feel uncomfortable and undermine the key goals of a supportive, positive learning environment that builds confidence and allows a learner to try something new without feeling judged (Fu, Kannan, Shavelson, 2019).

We adopted a participatory and formative approach, which reflects an understanding that rigid test-focused approaches to evaluation can result in prioritizing measurement over engagement.

Photo courtesy of Sunrise of Philadelphia

We relied upon "light touch" evaluation methods (Borun, 1977; Leinhart & Knutson, 2004; Yalowitz & Bronnekant, 2009), so as not to disrupt the program culture and trust with families that projects were building over time. We adopted a participatory and formative approach, which reflects an understanding that rigid test-focused approaches to evaluation can result in prioritizing measurement over engagement to the extent that the evaluation itself becomes potentially disruptive to program development and implementation and oppressive with regard to the formative learning function of evaluation (Dahler-Larsen, 2009). Learning from evaluation, a recognized strength of collaborative approaches, is a form of accountability in and of itself (Cousins, et al, 2013).

We began with open-ended observations in the first year of the initiative using field notes and then, in consultation and discussion during network convenings, developed a structured observation protocol that would allow us to characterize the extent to which projects implemented key ILI programming features and the extent to which programs provided an engaging learning environment for children and caregivers. The observation protocol had specific sections focused on program implementation and on tracking the participation of individual children through a single session. In addition to these sections, researchers also noted snippets of conversation, described interactions among children, caregivers, and educators, documented the content and sequence of a program, and noted the atmosphere/appearance of the space and programming activities. Researchers took photographs during each observation to document materials, use of space, and groupings of participants. Soon after each observation, and while referring to their observation sheets and photographs, researchers wrote a reflective observation summary.

In addition, educators conducted interviews with children and also with caregivers in their programs. The decision was made to have educators conduct interviews because they were already known and trusted by families. We worked collaboratively with educators to develop, pilot, and refine interview questions, and we conducted interview training sessions for the network. Interview questions for children focused on what they remembered, learned, and were interested in. Interview questions for caregivers probed their perception of their child's participation in the program, the

← *ILI programming takes place in community centers throughout the city.*

caregiver's own participation, and whether and how any of the ideas or materials from the program found their way into subsequent family activities at home. Child and caregiver interviews were audio recorded and conducted in the language preferred by the participant. Interviews that were not in English were translated and transcribed by the educator who conducted the interview.

Children's Participation and Learning

We collected observational records for 117 children participating in ILI programming. We tracked two overall measures of children's participation: a code for child engagement with program activities (high=2, medium=1, low=0) and a code for whether children successfully completed program activities for the day (1=yes, 0=no). Findings suggest overall high levels of engagement (average: 1.75) and completion (85%). Some programs did better on these measures than others, with program-specific engagement and completion with averages ranging 1.91 to 1.20 and 100% to 70%, respectively. Our field notes contain many examples of children crowding around a demonstration, eagerly participating in discussions, concentrating on individual projects, chasing down facilitators to show off their work, or asking questions of adults and other children. Educators noted that one of the best parts of ILI programs was that they had not expected children to be paying attention and deeply engaged given their young ages. While children often became noisy and animated during programs, behavior management was not identified as a major problem by the informal educators, who are used to the high energy and somewhat chaotic flow of informal learning settings. Over time, programs across the network evolved to include more choice and a range of self-directed activities to accommodate children of different ages, abilities, and attention spans.

We also tracked children's talk, with codes for who they talked with (educators, caregivers, other children) as well as whether their talk included disciplinary content, questions, or target vocabulary. Findings from these data are at the child level and complement the program level findings discussed earlier. Observations produced strong evidence of opportunities for young children to engage in rich learning conversations with informal educators (93%). We observed many conversations in which children and educators used content-specific vocabulary and concepts to describe, question, label, connect, and explain. Other codes for talk showed that 50% of children talked about informal learning content, 46% asked questions, and 37% used vocabulary targeted by programming objectives. We frequently observed children (69%) engaging in conversations with peers. Talk with caregivers was less common overall (63% of children), but remember that some programs were afterschool programs, and although some caregivers did attend, children were mostly without their caregivers until the end of the program when they arrived to take the children home. For the programs that were designed for full family participation, we observed 88% of children talking with their caregivers while engaged in learning activities.

93% of children were observed to engage in learning conversations with adults where they asked questions, used vocabulary, and talked about informal learning content.

↑ *Programs incorporated a range of self-directed activities to accommodate children of different ages, abilities, and attention spans.*

Children who participated in ILI were exposed to new topics and themes, such as learning about the role that mussels play in filtering water, vegetables they had never eaten before, that seeds come in all different kinds of sizes, or how artists create a collage. In interviews, children gave many examples of what they remembered and learned from the books and activities that were part of the programming. For example, one four-year old recalled some facts about an animal that was part of a program:

Interviewer: *Do you remember when we did this?* (shows picture of armadillo).
Child: *He eats worms.*
Interviewer: *Do you remember what he is?*
Child: *Arm-da-dillo!*
Interviewer: *Right! He eats worms, what else?*
Child: *He has a pointy nose he can dig with his nails to find some food. He eats worms.*

In an art-based program a 5-year-old child recalled the narrative in a book that was part of the program:

Interviewer: *Can you tell me about this book?*
Child: *They paint the colors. Red, blue, yellow. When they stepped on the foots. Their footprints. The floor. I remember when rats jump into the color they mix the color. I remember the rat went into the color. The blue rat went into red color. He made purple.*

In this example, a 4-year-old child tried to define the word farmer. The child and interviewer were discussing a book from the program while paging through it.

Interviewer: *Which book is your favorite?*
Child: *Dinosaur farm.*
Interviewer: *Do you remember what it was about?*
Child: *It was, he had a pet.*
Interviewer: *He did have a pet. What's so special about his pet?*
Child: *He had a farm and then he's on his tractor.*
Interviewer: *Uh hmm. Now we used the word farmer. Can you tell me about this word?*
Child: *They do lots of things. They have tractors, then they go feed their animals.*
Interviewer: *They have to feed their animals, you are totally right. Anything else they need to do?*
Child: *They have to clean up all that.*
Interviewer: *That's pretty gross huh? Yes!*
Child: *And there's babies that hatch.*

Another interviewer asked a 4-year-old child about a past program where a chef helped families prepare a vegetable pasta dish:

Interviewer: *When we cooked that recipe that week what did you choose?*
Child: *Celery!*
Interviewer: *Did you like it?*
Child: *It was gross. I put carrots in and then it was yummy.*
Interviewer: *And then you ate the whole thing, didn't you?!*

These examples from the child interviews are one source of evidence that programs were memorable and engaging from the child's perspective. We also tracked what children were able to recall in terms of specialized vocabulary or target concepts from program lesson plans. Our findings here were less strong. While they remembered the programs in vivid detail, children did not generally do well when interviewers asked them to define specific vocabulary or concepts that were targeted in lesson plans. This was most likely due to some combination of the young age of children, the time delay of the interview after programming took place, and the lack of strong program design features that reinforced specific words or concepts.

In order to supplement our understanding of how children experienced programming beyond the child interviews and observations, we also have evidence from the caregiver interviews that some of what children learned in the programs connected to further engagement and learning at home. Four caregivers from different programs reflected on the diverse ways that children learned from ILI programs:

The program is long enough for the age of the children that participate in it. It's lots of fun. My child is always happy to come to it. He loves it! He says he learns lots of things. We at home can see that he is learning a lot.

When he comes home he tells me all the different things he learned: painting, reading. Before, he used to just play with the phone all the time and he didn't use his imagination. Now, when he is home, he asks for paint or colors so that he can paint or draw something. He also likes to practice what he learned at class.

He loved hearing the inch worm story. He went home and measured everything. He used his feet to measure and counted 17 steps.

Another caregiver spoke to the confidence the program inspired in her child:

She lacked confidence in reading, so I wanted to find something for her alone so she could get the hang of it. Her brother is an obstacle, and takes over. Now she can show her brother something he didn't know.

← *A bilingual educator shares vocabulary words with children as part of a read aloud.*

Summary

What does the evidence on children's participation and learning suggest about ILI programming? Children found programs engaging and completed the activities successfully. Rich learning conversations between children and adults was a goal for all programs, and, indeed, we observed many opportunities for intergenerational talk between educators and children as well as caregivers and children. Child interviews suggested that children had memorable experiences with novel activities where they learned new content and ways of thinking. While these were powerful, memorable experiences, when questioned, children were often not able to recall specific vocabulary targeted by some lesson plans. We saw evidence that families often extended their learning to interactions at home, using language, examples, and activities from prior ILI programming.

← *ILI experiences provide opportunities for children of all ages to have fun together in museums.*

Caregiver Participation and Learning

ILI programming was intended to be family programming, with special attention to the role of caregivers in supporting their children's learning and literacy development. This is a characteristic that separates the informal from center-based or school-based programs, which may recognize that parents can play a supportive role in learning and literacy, but have a primary focus on the child and child outcomes. All ILI projects had family learning components, with most designed for families to attend sessions together, although three did most of their programming in classrooms during afterschool time, supplemented with occasional family programming during evenings or weekends.

Reading

Read alouds emerged early in the network as a shared focus for improvement, and we devoted time in convenings for educators to discuss strategies. Reading books aloud to children helps with language development and it has been documented that early readers come from homes where they have been read to (DeBruin-Parecki, 2009). Certain characteristics of reading, whether descriptive, (focused on describing pictures during the reading), comprehension-oriented (focused on story meaning), or a performance-oriented style (with an introduction overview and questions afterward) impact children's emergent literacy (Reese and Cox, 1999).

Most programs provided families with literacy resources and opportunities to support extended learning beyond the programming itself. Resources included free picture books to take home, home learning activities, journals, and parent guides. One of the clearest messages to emerge from the caregiver interviews was appreciation for how ILI programs modeled engaging ways for adults to read picture books with young children, with 83% of caregivers saying that they had learned a new strategy for helping their child develop literacy skills. As one caregiver told the interviewer:

> *I have learned how to read to her. I explain more to her about what we're reading. Sometimes one reads to the children but one really doesn't know how to read to them.* [translated from Spanish]

By the second year of ILI, a shared set of practices had emerged for read alouds, with programs focusing on ways that readers might reframe the story or ask questions as a way to keep children interested and actively focused on the story. Our interviews suggest that caregivers noticed and took up some of these practices. The most common specific strategy caregivers found helpful was asking questions while reading (cited by 42%). One caregiver said she learned about:

> *The questions. Each page when you're reading you should ask a question and not wait until the end to do it. Each page, [you] do something.*

Caregivers also talked about using the pictures in a book as a way to tell the story (38%). In this strategy, children are encouraged to describe what they saw happening or make up their own stories about what they saw happening in the pictures. Some caregivers found this was a useful technique for them if they didn't know the English word themselves. Finally, some caregivers talked about the importance of the tone of reading. Caregivers reported that one should make reading theatrical and engaging by bringing characters to life with sounds (33%). As one caregiver described, she learned that:

> *The tone that you read in, I'm getting better at the tone that you say things, the emotion. The manner in which you read- the intensity, the tone of voice, how you ask questions with mystery or happiness. So at the same time, she…Like yesterday with* Los Gatos Negros*…I had never read it…and there was a door that made the sound AEEEEEE! Like the drama it creates, the mystery, [continues to recall parts of the book with excitement and sound effects] so, [the baby] even wanted to know what was going on!*

All projects came to see group read alouds as useful not only for exposing children to literature, but as an opportunity for modeling strategies for adults. Some projects went further, by including caregiver-only moments where they directly talked to caregivers about reading strategies and how to connect reading to children's interests and activities. As explained by one caregiver who appreciated this strategy:

> *I loved when you guys showed us the ReadyRosie videos, the day that you focused on just us, the parents. I learned how to read to the kids and make it fun for them. [And] how doing so the children pay attention to what you are reading to them.*

Another caregiver talked about how she kept the read aloud tips bookmark provided by her program with her while she read books to her child.

Some caregivers who participated in the programs were not confident in their own reading skills, which is a potential obstacle for them picking up and using literacy practices at home. Sometimes caregivers were English language learners themselves and not yet ready to read books in English. Programs that served such families were attentive to language, and often read story books using both languages. The most common practice we observed was reading books in English but translating and paraphrasing a few elements on each page. We also observed projects using story books in Spanish or books with just pictures and no words, which could be narrated and discussed in any language. A caregiver told us about using this strategy at home:

I try to read books in English to the kids. When I don't know how to read the words, I tell them the stories based on the images that I see. I make up the stories based on the images. I use English and Spanish words. Mostly Spanish but, when I know the word in English - like a color- I used the English word. My children are so surprised that I can read them the book in English. Sometimes, they read along with me.

Some caregivers were not comfortable reading in their first language. One project, serving families experiencing homelessness, had several struggling readers among their caregivers. The program developed a practice of having families sit around the room with multiple copies of a book and then inviting both caregivers and children to read aloud, while the other families followed along. We observed this practice in three separate program sessions. Our field notes suggest the program was a supportive environment for emergent readers, adult and child alike, a conclusion supported by a caregiver from this program:

It's a more inviting place to read. It's not a chore in this setting. And [my child] sees other people reading.

Staff from the CBO were key to creating this inviting place to read, as the caregivers knew the staff, trusted the staff, and could thus be encouraged to take some risks with their own learning. Everyone took a turn being the reader, even if not everyone was a fluent reader. We recorded in our notes how, if a

Encouraging Reading and Literacy Skills in ILI Programming

- ☐ Providing engaging read aloud experiences for children using books that reflect the content of hands-on activities.
- ☐ Providing books to families to take home.
- ☐ Using books in a variety of ways- sometimes as read aloud, sometimes as information source, revisiting books multiple times, etc.
- ☐ Modelling read aloud techniques for caregivers, providing tip sheets for caregivers, and suggestions for how to bring literacy activities into daily family life.

caregiver struggled to decode a word, other adults and sometimes children would call out the words and the adult would pick up and move on. After one mother slowly but successfully read two pages of a book without needing help from the group, she gave a big smile as her child leaned in to hug her and said, "Good job mom! I love you!"

← *ILI programs are working to create a safe and welcoming environment.*

Connecting With and Valuing Caregivers

How does an informal learning organization create a trusted relationship with a family? Economic and racial/ethnic disparities in outcomes have been identified before children are school-aged and persist throughout school. Many interventions that have been designed to address these disparities have been designed from a deficit approach and have targeted the development of knowledge and skills that families are seemingly lacking (Cabrera et al, 2012). By taking a deficit approach, programs may be disempowering families and ignoring rich social and cultural competences. Partners in the ILI project are attempting to be culturally responsive and take a strengths-based approach to programs. At this time, there are relatively few studies that document exactly how best to do this (Leyva et al, 2021). However, ILI educators are attempting to promote a culturally responsive approach by validating families' first languages and their cultural and historical perspectives, and by encouraging input on subjects and books that reflect the community and its interests. By focusing attention on building positive social relationships with children and adult caregivers, ILI programs are working to create a safe and welcoming environment using norms that support all participants.

One of the underlying reasons to launch ILI was to find meaningful ways to connect families with informal learning organizations in the city. Indeed, 78% of participating caregivers interviewed said that they'd never been to the partner ILO, and some said they had never heard of it. The remaining families said that they had been once before, usually when they were young. Through the course of ILI, families became more aware of museums and cultural organizations as available resources, and they noted that their comfort level increased the more time they spent in the program:

> *It was very fun! We participated in things we had never done before. It's right down the street from our house. We had never been to a museum.*
>
> *The truth is, we were never in any museum before going to [the ILO]. It's a very good place filled with beautiful paintings. Sometimes it has to do with a lack of time. Plus, I have five children and they are a bit restless, especially the baby. Then at a museum, you cannot touch anything and I have to continually tell the boy; don't touch this, don't touch that… The other day that my whole family went to the museum, everyone loved making houses with cardboard. Especially my son, he made a house with the help of his father. Then, another day, when we went back, they loved making books.*

Thus, ILOs in the network began to find new audiences for their work, in partnership with the community-based partner. And in some cases, the programs catalyzed their own communities for the families:

> *[This program] is like family. It brings people together with common ground. Community nights give us an incentive, and we get to see and spend time with parents we don't see at the community center.*

For another child, the program provided an opportunity to do something new, and it was initially scary. The caregiver spoke about how her child came to develop positive relationships with the educators ('the ladies') and looked forward to returning to the program.

> *She didn't want to do it at first, because she thought that I would be leaving her here. There were very fun things for us to do together. She kept asking "when do we get to go to the activity?" and I tell her "no, the activity isn't until tomorrow"-- "Ok are we going to see the ladies?" "Yes, we are going to see the ladies."*

ILI projects are working with very diverse audiences—during one observation we noted five different languages being spoken in the room. Multi-lingual and multi-cultural programming is a particularly difficult challenge for ILOs whose typical audiences (and the ILO educators themselves for that matter) tend to be much less diverse than the communities they serve. The model of having a CBO and ILO work together has been an important and innovative step towards bridging these cultural differences. Projects with English language learners have been careful to value and include first languages (Auerbach, 1989; Reyes & Torres, 2007). As many caregivers were not fluent in English, they appreciated that programs took special care to create multilingual and multicultural settings where families felt comfortable learning together.

> *I like that the teacher speaks Spanish. This way, [my son] is comfortable in class. For me, I know that he'll be understood and that he can participate in class. He is also learning English words. He now knows the names of the colors in English and in Spanish.*

Researchers have noted the importance of building relationships and paying attention to the needs of parents (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2019; Bess & Doykos, 2014). They have also placed an emphasis on the importance of developing leadership skills of parents (Warren et al, 2009). The norms, expectations, ways of knowing, cultural resources, and forms of expertise associated with underrepresented minority parents often have less currency and impact in schools than those typically associated with White, middle-class behaviors and practices (Baquedano, et al, 2013). Many families who participated in ILI have not previously used the cultural resources of museums. Finding a way to help these families feel invited and take ownership of these programs has been an important part of the work of the ILI network.

> *I love this program because it taught me a lot of things that I didn't know and had never done, especially to participate with my children… I had never done a program like this. I liked it a lot. I felt very good.*

The truth is, you all are very nice, very helpful, you pay attention to each person, to each group, to each child. You give us suggestions… to the parents. The truth is, it feels very full. You give the best of yourselves. You provide complete activities for us to do. It is super good. I hope it continues.

We don't take time to dedicate to the kids, share with the kids things that they did at school. This is a good little bit of time that I get to spend with them and let them know that what they do matters to us….

Some programs used a model of engaging directly with caregivers to great effect. One project had caregivers gather without their children to discuss books they would recommend to others in the group. Caregivers turned this into a broader discussion of internet resources for literacy and family friendly play activities. Another project, working with African American families, built caregiver feedback sessions into their regular programming. One thing they heard early in these sessions was that families wanted more books featuring African American authors or featuring African American leads so that their children could see themselves represented in the text. These moments helped the program improve and better reflect the needs of their community. As an example, when we later interviewed the program staff about this process, we heard this from one project team:

Staff 1: *I know we all agree on this. Ownership is a key tool to get folks to invest and show up. And the team did an amazing job of coalescing caregivers to make some of those decisions…*

Staff 2: *One fun thing [we did together]. It's worked best so far to see the ownership of the families taking it over. They've pointed out good books. That was one of the best learning experiences I've had so far. They took us to a really good place.*

Staff 3: *Right, the value should be placed on where they're coming from. To be reflective [in our program design] is what I'm most proud of and making the shifts. We want to get good rich literature where they can see themselves. We're putting it in their hands.*

In a reflective evaluation interview at the end of the year, team members talked about just how hard it was to get everyone on the same page about how to be culturally sensitive, and that it took time to work with partners to understand the specific needs of their families. At the same time they appreciated seeing the change in children's artwork when they used books that represented them. They talked about the best thing of ILI being the connection with communities. They were excited to see adults enjoying the programs and feeling comfortable in the museum. They also spoke about broader effects, such as a community event where other school staff could see the value of family engagement in ILI programming. And as one partner explained, the best part was all about "community in action, love in action. And joy."

Community/Caregiver Engagement

- ☐ Scheduling is hard for caregivers. Weekends are better for caregiver attendance, but programs that provide dinner are also helpful to support caregiver attendance and participation.
- ☐ Design program activities and setting to suggest and support caregiver engagement. Encourage side-by-side or family seating groups.
- ☐ Instructions for activities at tables can be used to encourage caregivers and to give them an obvious role in the activity. This is helpful for caregivers that may be reluctant to join in.
- ☐ Recognize caregiver participation. Some programs experimented with program attendance milestone rewards or certificates of completion.
- ☐ Provide opportunities for caregivers to engage with other adults in their own activities.
- ☐ Educators can model engagement strategies for caregivers to try with their children during activities.
- ☐ One on one conversations between educators and caregivers help to build a relationship and improve comfort levels for new participants.
- ☐ Use culturally relevant materials and provide validation for preferred language use.

In interviews, children gave many examples of what they remembered and learned. →

Photo courtesy of Sunrise of Philadelphia

Summary

Caregivers learned new strategies to support children's reading and learning at home. They felt welcomed and connected to the programs, which they found responded to their needs. They formed relationships with educators and other families and discovered new resources to support family learning. These relationships could prove to be some of the most important outcomes of ILI, as they empower caregivers to be brokers for their children's education. However, across ILI projects we found that there could be more opportunities for caregiver engagement. Some programs tended to have caregivers standing on the sidelines and other programs were scheduled so that caregivers could not easily attend. Caregiver engagement could be strengthened by programming that engages adults as learners, not just as facilitators of their children's learning. Although all projects had some family events, not all programs had sustained family learning. Several educators told us that they were learning that the occasional family night at an ILO did not provide the same supported and focused experience as their typical programming, and identified it as an area for improvement.

Partnership and Network: Supporting a Learning Community

As the evaluation team for ILI, we structured our work to support the development of a networked community of practice, collecting data for improvement and exploring the best ways to measure impact across projects.

We began by conducting structured observations of programming produced by each of the partnerships. We conducted thematic analyses on these data and shared findings with the network, and with individual project teams as part of a formative process of refining programming. The decision to focus more closely on developing a networked community of practice emerged early on, as we discovered that there were many common challenges facing the projects in the design and implementation of their programs. There were also a number of distinctive areas of expertise across projects that would be of benefit to other projects in the network. As a result, the network decided to expand the number of in-person network meetings and we also encouraged staff from one partnership to observe and conduct structured reflections on programs run by other partnerships. In doing so, we took the first steps towards embracing a more explicit model of networked improvement. We worked to establish routines where we collect and reflect on evidence to iteratively develop programs that are tailored to the needs, interests and resources of specific families in Philadelphia.

Partnerships as opportunities to learn/change/grow

We periodically interview ILO and CBO staff as a way to track partnerships and the network. In the first year, findings suggested that most projects approached the required partnership component of the grant from the standpoint of efficiency—as a way to divide and conquer—with the ILO focusing on the content of programs and the CBO assigned to recruit and retain families from a specific neighborhood and/or specific ethnic/demographic backgrounds. Staff described a division of labor. Learning experts and community experts would focus separately on their respective strengths, an additive strategy that often seemed to be primarily about access—bringing informal learning programs to new audiences as opposed to rethinking informal learning with a community's needs and resources at the center. Staff from several projects talked about managing the partnership as being the most difficult part of ILI, either communication in general, or specifically that it was difficult to "get the CBO" to take ownership of the program. Several CBOs said that the thing they wished they had known at the beginning of the project had to do with their role in the project, that they had the freedom to change programing to better suit their families, and that they could "say no," that it was OK to have their input heard about things like the importance of changing a venue for programming.

As ILI continued into its second year, we asked staff to estimate and talk about the percent effort that the ILO and CBO put into recruiting families, designing programs, and staffing programs. Recruitment of families continued to be seen primarily as the work of the CBO, with 71% of projects estimating that the CBO did 90% to 100% of recruitment. This is perhaps not surprising, as CBOs were included in the initiative with the logic that they were rooted in community and could build on and extend their existing trust with families. There were two projects that reported the ILO and CBO making more equal contributions to the recruitment of families. In both cases, there was major staff turnover in the CBO from Year 1 to Year 2, and the ILO continued to connect and work with some families from the first year while the new CBO staff brought in new families.

Managing the partnership was sometimes seen as the most challenging part of the project.

Photo by WPF Staff

Photo courtesy of Puentes de Salud

Photo by WPF Staff

By the end of year two, there was clear evidence that many partnerships were engaged in co-design and joint work.

In contrast to the CBOs generally maintaining the responsibility for recruiting families, 86% of projects reported that the design and improvement of their programs had moved from mostly the job of the ILO, into the realm of shared responsibility and joint work between ILO and CBO. The initial plan for many projects was to adapt existing programming to meet the requirements of ILI and the needs of a specific community. In our initial interviews, projects described collaborating, but in ways that fell short of true co-design, with goals for the collaboration sticking closer to the a priori roles (informal learning or community support/engagement) defined by their expertise coming into the initiative. In year one, cross-organizational project meetings, if they did occur, were most likely to be devoted to report outs, logistics, and scheduling. However, by the end of year two, we were hearing clear evidence of co-design as joint work. Staff told us about project retreats, reflection sessions, and discussions across the ILO/CBO boundary that led to new questions and insights on both sides. Deciding how to staff programs also became a point of collaboration, with ILO and CBO staff both attending programming as educators or as observers. Sometimes projects hired new staff who straddled the ILO/CBO boundary especially for the project (e.g., Spanish-speaking artists for an informal art program in a Spanish-speaking community). We heard about the use of feedback from the communities, and we documented frequent participation of the ILO staff in programming held at community sites. High levels of programming adaptation were also evident, as some programs were eager to try new approaches rather than try minor variations on existing programs.

Only one program continued to have the ILO as sole developer of programs by the end of the second year of ILI. This ILO (which was also one that reported doing a significant share of family recruiting) was one that had initially struggled with its CBO partnership. The initial CBO was a recreation center that had been chosen primarily for its physical location in an underserved neighborhood. Thus, this CBO's connection to families was location-based rather than relationship-based, and the partnership struggled to recruit and retain families. They could count on some number of families dropping into the recreation center, but these were not predictable numbers nor necessarily the same families coming back to complete the programming series. As the CBO did not have capacity to work with individual families, the ILO ended up taking on this work as best they could by themselves, on top of designing the program without any meaningful input from the CBO. The ILO has since changed partners to a community school,


Photo courtesy of The Clay Studio

which combines location-based advantages with stronger family relationships as well as after school educators who have become, in the third year of the initiative, involved in programming co-design.

One ongoing challenge for the ILI project teams was the location of programming. While ILI was designed to introduce families to the cultural resources of ILOs in Philadelphia, for many projects it was logistically difficult to run programs at ILO sites. Transportation issues were one of the causes, but finding a convenient and trusted community setting for programming also helped with recruitment and retention. In many cases, programming sites were neither the cultural venue, nor the community-based organization, but rather, a third space. A community center room, a conference room in a library or a school auditorium, or a classroom were all used for programs. Some sites did not lend themselves to easy implementation of programming. Educators would show up with activities but might not know the site they'd be working in. In other cases, there were space issues that lent the program to feeling cramped, programs with other activities going on in the same space, or locations that families didn't want to visit such as a community center in a neighborhood where families didn't feel comfortable. As one educator described:

In many cases, programming sites were neither the cultural venue, nor the community-based organization, but rather, a third space.

> *The space…presents several challenges that are perennial points of discussion for planning. Families coming for the first time sometimes divert their drivers to [the ILO location] despite prior same-day phone conversations about their destination when they see they are coming to "the projects." The corner… and many surrounding the site have regular drug trade activity, and the area has a reputation for violence. As you saw, the room we occupy…is a multipurpose space that we exercise very limited control over, is not equipped for children or families, and has very few design gestures toward friendliness or warmth.*

Team members described how they tried to do what they could to make families feel more comfortable in these locations by including routines across programs, adding decorative touches, and making sure that food was plentiful and good. Across projects, team members noted that the ILO context was more desirable for programs, and provided a unique and special moment for families who hadn't visited before. The trip to the ILO was seen by families as an event and something special, a chance to leave one's neighborhood, and many families described that they had not been to the ILO before. While special, the novelty can also wear off, and some project team members discussed that they would like to explore ways to make the ILO experiences inspiring and engaging after the initial visit.

← *ILI programming includes station-based activities where families have more choice about how to engage.*

Summary

ILI required partnerships between ILOs and CBOs. Partnerships were a common organizational practice for both ILOs and CBOs, but many began the ILI project with a typical outreach model in mind, where the ILO delivers programming to audience recruited by the CBO. Most of the projects were initially instigated by the ILO, and this may have created the sense that they were taking the lead in program design. Some ILOs had run similar programs in the past, and simply created a slight modification to run their prior programs with new audiences. In these projects, we did not see programming stretching to meet the very specific needs of these ILI audiences. However, by the third year of ILI, projects increasingly framed partnership as an opportunity to learn about each other's practice, often in ways that center families and communities. We saw this move towards joint work in the evolution of co-design and in the mix of ILO and CBO staff who delivered programming. Still, joint work is an ongoing challenge that all partnerships have to negotiate and renegotiate. Some partnerships did not gel and had to be reformulated.

Converging on, and refining outcomes/goals as a network

In terms of the network, we saw growth in the collective identity across the partnerships and the beginnings of a coherent community of practice. We heard from project staff that they generally valued the network convenings, appreciated meeting new colleagues and learning from each other's experience, and found observing other programs to be an interesting and unique opportunity to reflect on other audiences, approaches, and content areas.

In an effort such as ILI, one might be concerned about power and capacity differences between organizations who vary quite a bit in terms of staff, budget, and other resources. We did not, however, uncover much evidence that this undermined the nature of interactions. One reason, perhaps, is that ILOs and CBOs, regardless of size and stature, both came to the table with a piece of unique expertise required for a successful project. It was clear during the network convenings, and from the staff interviews, that participants in the network generally had respect for each other's unique expertise and viewed network interaction as an opportunity to learn. This helped to address any power or status differential, and was important for ILI growing into a networked learning community.

In the first few ILI network convenings, when asked about areas where they needed help, projects often brought up recruitment and retention. Programs discussed (and later implemented) ways to make program

schedules more convenient for families, novel transportation solutions to get families to programming locations, incentives for caregivers to attend multiple programs, technology for staying in contact with families, and providing family dinners, ideally high-quality food from neighborhood restaurants, and ideally in enough quantities that there would be leftovers for families to take home.

As an example of how the network worked together, consider the shared problem of developing and refining read alouds as part of programming. One of the most widely shared problems across projects was integrating early literacy into a family-centered informal learning program – an area where some CBOs or ILOs had experience, but none considered themselves expert. The nature of early literacy, the best ways to support it, and the best ways to measure impact were frequent topics of focus in network convenings. This problem responded to a tension deep at the heart of ILI. At the official launch event, attended by many of the program staff, it was clear that the initiative was publicly aligned with a city-wide reading proficiency campaign. It was also explicitly an effort to draw cultural organizations into a new area of education. But reading is traditionally the turf of schools. How should projects best address it within the genre of informal learning?

One of the most widely shared problems across projects was integrating early literacy into a family-centered informal learning program—an area where some CBOs or ILOs had experience, but none considered themselves expert.

In an early network convening, a technical assistance provider who works mostly in formal settings gave a presentation that outlined six interlocking "puzzle pieces" of early literacy: Oral language; phonological awareness; letter knowledge; print awareness; vocabulary; and building background knowledge. This was compelling to the network. These were clear, easy to define (if not easy to implement) goals for programming. The network discussed how their work would include vocabulary building aspects, use conversation as a focal point or perhaps help to build background knowledge around a new content area supported by program activities. Discussions also noted that it would be difficult for informal educators to develop programming that resembled classroom-based instruction around phonological awareness or letter knowledge. One program did include phonological drill instruction and practice as a key part of programming, but decided to drop this aspect of programming within the first year.

The "puzzle pieces" were a great visual to help establish a starting place for the network to think through just how they wanted to support literacy development. Through discussion however, the pieces were seen as poorly aligned with the network's expertise and potential impact. With support from the technical assistance provider, projects refocused on the question: How are books and specialized vocabulary used, and how are caregivers invited to participate in reading with their children?

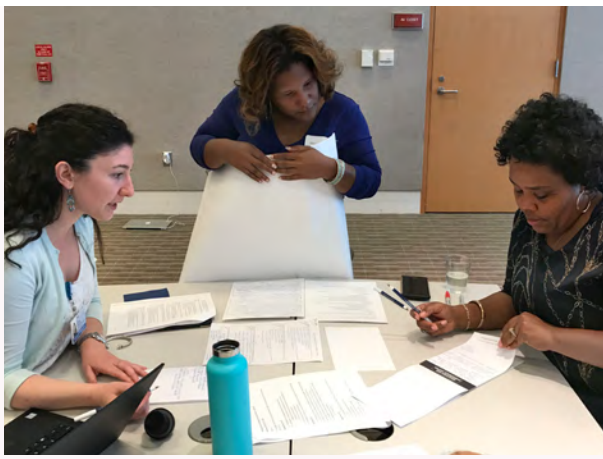
The ways the network approached integrated literacy capitalized on programs' existing strengths and resources. For a shared activity, teams thought that the use of a read aloud was something that all projects could authentically include in their programming, and it matched well with book giveaway incentives. Programs experimented with different strategies for read alouds during programming. These strategies included using books:

- as tools and information sources, asking families to look for specific evidence
- without words to great effect, encouraging children to describe what they were seeing and create a story from the pictures
- with a very theatrical storyteller to model question and answer, and create excitement for the emerging narrative.
- for each family who then followed along with their child while the educator at the front of the book read through the story, allowing children to turn the pages together.
- with tip sheets to help their families ask questions while reading.
- for a "picture walk through the book" in the hopes that families would read the book together after the session.

The discussion of read alouds across the network shows how the network was working through a shared problem of practice and thinking through the implications of how one important aspect of literacy-rich programming could be integrated across sites. The read aloud was a shared object promoting stronger practice. Projects felt that adding literacy components was a stretch, but there were many other aspects of programming that are also being visited and revisited in the network. Through convenings and sharing experiences and practices there is an opportunity to strengthen expertise across the network.

Summary

The network and learning community is a key driver for the success of ILI. Network convenings were helpful, especially when convenings responded to the evolving needs of the network and supported reflection connected to program design. Staff from CBOs and ILOs alike appreciated the opportunity to learn from the work of colleagues—a rare opportunity for professional development in the non-profit education and community service sectors. Shared problems of practice were workshopped, from logistical challenges of transportation and food, to programmatic challenges of how to infuse literacy, engage caregivers, and be culturally responsive. Although greatly valued by participants, it is worth noting that maintaining a network and learning community requires significant time and effort. Attending meetings, preparing presentations and reflections, and visiting other programs were sometimes difficult to add on to the already large demands of participants' jobs.



Photos by WPF Staff

Many aspects of programming are being visited and revisited in the network. →

Investing In Equitable Ecosystems For Family Learning

Supporting equitable educational outcomes in urban settings is a wicked systems problem that goes far beyond schools to involve all aspects of life, including families, neighborhoods, and communities. Children spend most of their time outside of classrooms—what learning opportunities will they have when they are not in school?

Healthy educational ecosystems provide equitable access to learning resources and learning pathways (Akiva et al, 2020; Hecht & Crowley, 2020). Communities feel invited to participate in informal learning and empowered to co-construct those experiences to reflect their values, needs, and strengths. There are diverse opportunities and pathways that allow children to pursue differentiated interests and identities aligned with pursuits such as science, art, health, and the humanities. These learning opportunities are

often informal, place-based, and distributed across the city. In their daily lives, children encounter all sorts of adults—educators, caregivers, role models—who know how to facilitate learning experiences through collaboration, conversation, and the brokering of new learning opportunities. The city sees itself as a managed ecosystem and makes educational investments to improve the overall health of the system as opposed to restricting investment to a single niche, connection, or entity in isolation.

Our study of ILI examines how ILOs can be better connected to collective impact efforts in literacy and how informal learning programming can be re-oriented to be more responsive to community needs. Findings in this report suggest that ILI has made a positive impact on Philadelphia's educational ecosystem so far, and there is potential for greater impact as the network identifies and collaborates on areas for improvement.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We close this report by highlighting four elements of the ILI approach that we think have been particularly important for challenging ILOs and CBOs to move beyond their traditional roles and become more central actors in a city's educational ecosystem.

Center Community

Funding CBOs was a strategy to bring community into the work as ILI began. Building from prior trust and relationships with their communities, CBOs recruited families for the programs and supported the continued community engagement as programs evolved. Language, culture, and neighborhood became woven into programs, providing educators new opportunities to connect with and learn about families who rarely visit, or perhaps didn't even know about, ILOs. ILO educators also became aware of new responsibilities and roles, moving beyond learning outcomes to also think of their practice as addressing socio-emotional learning, food insecurity, and adult learning. ILI projects aspired to work with, and in, communities. CBOs helped to push back against deficit perspectives and to focus the network on strengths-based approaches.

Support Family Learning and Caregiver Engagement

Caregivers were central to ILI programming and findings suggested that they often felt like full participants in the program, learning new strategies to support their children's learning but also learning new things themselves. Informal learning is life-long and free-choice. By giving caregivers meaningful roles, and treating them as learners in their own right, ILI programming helped them stay interested and engaged enough to return for multiple sessions. Caregivers reported using strategies from the program at home, creating the possibility that program impacts could resonate far beyond the end of ILI.

Develop, Support, and Value Informal Educators

Educators in ILI developed relationships with children and caregivers over time, learning about them and their communities. The educators developed new practices and routines, especially with respect to supporting early literacy. Compared to many out-of-school learning programs, ILI programs featured a high number of adults in the room. This came from a recognition that rich learning conversations with children and caregivers were an essential aspect of informal learning and literacy and contributed to personalized experiences where families felt included and empowered.

Approach Your Work with a Focus on Learning and Innovation

Recognizing that education is a systems problem, the work of ILI did not begin by identifying proven strategies to implement in similar ways across the city. It started instead by betting on partnerships between ILOs and CBOs as a catalyst for exploration and change. We saw evidence that the partnership strategy was successful in terms of projects spending time learning, reflecting, and experimenting together. People were engaged in new kinds of work that spanned the ILO/CBO boundary. By networking the partnerships together, ILI supported broader conversations and encouraged a culture of co-design and iterative improvement. This is an impact far beyond what individual children or caregivers learned from a program. This is an investment in connections within the ecosystem; a collaboration infrastructure that can be reused and extended by future investments. Of course, this takes time and patience. It took two years for most ILI partnerships to really begin smooth functioning and the network is still in its formative phases. Continued investment in joint work and innovation is needed for the network to become a sustainable learning community.

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Table 1: Organizations Participating in Philadelphia's Informal Learning Initiative

Project Title	Focus Area	ILO	CBO	Families Served 2018	2019	2020
Participating in Both Cohorts						
Bridges to the Arts	Art	Barnes Foundation	Puentes de Salud	78	48	83
Discover, Play, Share	Animals & Nature	Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University	Congreso de Latinos Unidos; ASPIRA Inc. of Pennsylvania	90	74	67
Everyday Literacy	Play & Creativity	Smith Memorial Playground and Playhouse	ParentChild+, managed by Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC), and Tiny WPA	55	71	31
Nature, Play, Read	Animals & Nature	Center for Aquatic Sciences at Adventure Aquarium	Indochinese-American Council, Tacony Library branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia, and Tacony Community Development Corporation	34	74	19
Our Stories	Art	Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial	Sunrise of Philadelphia	48	30	17
Watershed is an Open Book	Water & Environment	Fairmount Waterworks	Mander Recreation Center/ Edward Gideon Community Partnership School	53	90	32
Cohort 1 Only						
Family Science Story Time	Science	The Franklin Institute	Children's Village	116	63	—
Young Chefs	Health & Wellness	Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP)	Travelers Aid Society (Families Forward Philadelphia), and People's Emergency Center (PEC)	72	115	—
Cohort 2 Only						
Big Ideas for Little Learners	Social-emotional	National Liberty Museum	Salvation Army Kroc Center	—	—	57
Clay, Play, Read	Art	Clay Studio	Cecil B. Moore Library and Kensington Library branches of the Free Library of Philadelphia	—	—	11
Mill Creek Early Learners	Writing & STEM	Mighty Writers & WHYY, Inc.	Mill Creek Recreation Center	—	—	66

STAY TUNED

The Informal Learning Initiative is an ongoing collaboration.
We look forward to sharing more learning with you in late 2023.

WILLIAM PENN
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