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Thrive by Five Washington Culture of Literacy Initiative Impact Brief



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INTRODUCTION

Early literacy has been established as a foundation for children's success in school, enabling them to develop skills that will benefit them throughout life (Dickinson & Neuman, 2001). The

“When you see that you’re teaching your child that, it’s like a reward. That first year of such hard work and diapers and bottles and feedings and no sleep and then you’re like ‘Whoa, this is really cool!’”

- Parent Tot-Spot, Walla Walla

development of early literacy has come to be understood as beginning long before children enter school; indeed, it begins within the context of secure relationships at home starting from birth (Barton & Brophy-Herb, 2005). The important contribution of multiple caregivers and resources at home and within the community have been acknowledged (Zukoski & Luluquisen, 2006), and diverse cultural and language traditions also provide children with many influences from which to draw upon when developing literacy skills (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004).

Early literacy programs targeting parents and caregivers are guided by these current understandings and capitalize on strong home-community connections that will foster sustainable practices (Rosenkoetter & Knapp-Philo, 2006; Thrive by Five Washington, 2008). Thrive by Five Washington (Thrive) created the Culture of Literacy (COL) initiative and partnered with private funders and the Department of Early Learning to fund early literacy programs serving the diverse needs of families and communities throughout the state (Thrive by Five Washington, 2008).

CULTURE OF LITERACY INITIATIVE

In 2010, Thrive implemented the Culture of Literacy (COL) initiative which sought to increase awareness of and engagement in early literacy in families with children ages birth to five years. Thrive funded four regional early learning coalitions¹ from across the Washington state, that serve populations considered at-risk and traditionally underserved (e.g., rural, migrant, tribal).

COL’s four grantees (Chelan-Douglas Partnership for Children and Families, Inland Northwest Alliance for Early Learning, Olympic-Kitsap Peninsulas Early Learning Coalition, and Walla Walla Valley Early Learning Coalition) implemented various programs to promote early literacy, including: Play and Learn, Every Child Ready to Read @ your Library (ECRR), Ready! for Kindergarten, and Tot-Spot.



¹ Thrive by Five Washington supports 10 regional early learning coalitions, formerly known as Born Learning™ Washington, that promote nurturing relationships and ways to make everyday moments into fun, high-quality learning opportunities for young children. They also cultivate champions who take action to make early learning a top priority for the local community.

“There’s a sense of isolation that child care providers have. The opportunity to actually sit down at a table with other child care providers who work with children in the same age groups and share ideas and talk and work together really was very beneficial.”

-Facilitator, Every Child Ready to Read (Spokane County Library),
Inland NW Alliance for Early Learning

In the winter of 2010, Thrive commissioned the evaluation of COL. Abi Nubla-Kung, Ph.D. and Cassandra Cerros, M.Ed., both independent consultants, were contracted to design and implement the COL study. The COL evaluation project focused on understanding how these programs have supported parents and caregivers in culturally and developmentally appropriate ways to implement evidence-based practices to support children's literacy development. This initiative was aimed at supporting early literacy through an increased awareness of and engagement in literacy activities for families with children ages birth to five years. Specifically, the evaluation sought to assess program impacts in terms of the following outcomes:

- Increased parents’ knowledge that learning starts at infancy
- Increased engagement and use of activities that promote literacy (book sharing, rhyming, singing, talking, etc.)
- Increased knowledge of activities, concepts or approaches to support early literacy
- Increased children’s access and exposure to age-appropriate books
- Beliefs and attitudes of program staff about the benefits of their programs for parents, caregivers and children
- Program staff’s beliefs and attitudes about the benefits of their programs for parents, caregivers and children

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method design was used for this evaluation: quantitative data (via retrospective Likert-scale surveys) and qualitative data (via group and individual interviews) were collected from parents and caregivers (n= 111) as well as program staff (n= 9). The survey data provided an overall sense of program success in meeting COL outcomes while the interview data enabled us to corroborate and expand on the results of the survey data. For example, data from the surveys showed that parents and caregivers increased the rate of engagement in reading behaviors with their children. This was corroborated by the interview data and provided a deeper understanding of how they engaged in reading behaviors such as what types of books they read, when and where they read to their children, and how they tried to keep the interest levels high while reading.

The vast majority of the quantitative data was statistically significant, meaning the programs had positive impacts on the parents and caregivers, resulting in changes in their knowledge, attitude and behaviors in supporting young children’s early literacy development.

The survey data was coded and analyzed statistically in SPSS.² All interviews were coded and transcribed. Transcriptions were then organized by question and themes and patterns were examined for analysis and interpretation.

FINDINGS

Because the coalitions implemented a variety of programs, the results could not be aggregated across the four coalitions for the statistical analysis; descriptive statistics and statistical analyses for each coalition are presented separately in the report. However, the results that yielded positive differences for all the programs are summarized collectively in the report and a few of these are highlighted below.

For three coalitions (Inland Northwest Alliance for Early Learning, Olympic-Kitsap Peninsulas Early Learning Coalition, and Walla Walla Valley Early Learning Coalition), statistical analyses were completed. For these three coalitions, the vast majority of the quantitative data was statistically significant, meaning the programs had positive impacts on the parents and caregivers resulting in changes in their knowledge, attitude and behaviors in supporting young children's early literacy development. For one of the coalitions (Chelan-Douglas Partnership for Children and Families), the data in the report is presented descriptively only; the sample size was too small to run statistical analyses because only a handful of parents/caregivers completed the survey.

HIGHLIGHTS ACROSS THE FOUR COALITIONS

- Grantee programs reinforced the idea that learning begins at birth.
- Parents/caregivers took the opportunity to read a variety of stories to their children wherever and whenever they could, and while doing so, engaged in reading activities that allowed active participation by the child.
- Going to the library and bringing books home to read were considered important and done with increasing frequency.
- There seemed to be no or minimal barriers between staff/trainers and parent/caregivers in terms of language and cultural background.
- Collaboration and networking were important facets of programs.
- Some barriers to attendance and participation in programs included scheduling, location, and fees (if funding did not cover all expenses).
- Staff-stated goals of programs and what parents/caregivers articulated as their goals were the same.
- Though most parents/caregivers believe that talking to children helps to build their vocabulary, only three of them listed discussion and dialogue as a definition for literacy or as an activity that prepares children to read.

² A statistical software program typically used in social sciences (www.spss.com).

CONCLUSION

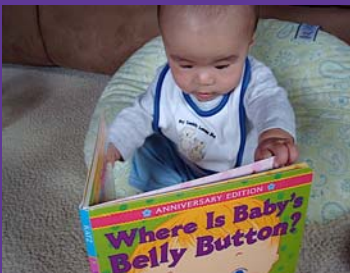
Overall, the Culture of Literacy (COL) initiative met its goals of increasing knowledge of and engagement in activities that promote early literacy for families with children ages birth to five years. After participating in myriad programs across the coalitions, parents and caregivers believed more strongly that children begin to learn at birth and perceived activities such as “reading” environmental print and singing songs as activities that help to prepare children to read. In addition, parents/caregivers more often interacted with their children while reading stories, participating in activities such as asking children to label pictures in a story, predict what will happen in a story, read books using pictures and discuss the stories. Parents/caregivers also brought books home to read more often, providing greater exposure to literature and more opportunities to engage in activities that support literacy.

Along with the successes of COL, there were also lessons learned from this initiative. Specifically, parents/caregiver responses through surveys and interviews showed that they defined literacy primarily as reading. However, speaking and listening are also major components of early literacy and many activities in the oral tradition (e.g., sharing stories, having discussions, etc.) support literacy by developing both vocabulary and schemas for narrative.

In addition, some programs struggled with having consistent parent/caregiver participation in their sessions/trainings. Some barriers for regular participation included scheduling, fees and location. Staff reported being aware of how difficult it was to reach their intended population when the times and locations of sessions were not always ideal. As well, providing programs that are totally free to parents/caregivers was not always easy or feasible (though with this funding the fees were kept to a minimum if there were any fees at all). In the same vein, some programs also struggled with the issue of reaching and responding to a diverse population. Funding was not always enough to hire additional personnel or provide materials in other languages. Some staff also expressed concern about how to increase the participation of populations who could benefit from their program but who rarely attended.

“When I’m not reading to her, I see her turning the pages and pretending to read the words...she pretends to read to her dolls. I just think that’s a great thing...She loves [reading books], and I know that it is important to her, it’s a special time for us.”

- Parent, Kitsap- Olympic Peninsulas Coalition for Early Learning



NEXT STEPS

During the first year of implementation (2010) the COL funding was distributed through four of the 10 regional early learning coalitions that are supported by Thrive; Thrive will continue to support COL in this manner for 2011. In the next year of implementation, Thrive will take a portfolio approach to introduce new programming to the communities as well as expand the reach of

existing programming. The programs in the portfolio represent nationally recognized research-based programs and locally designed evidence-based programs. They also represent a spectrum of intensity. While early literacy programs, by design, are not highly intense programs, there are some programs that can be viewed as being more intensive (higher dosage of the intervention) than others. Thrive aims to bring Reach Out and Read, a pediatrician based early literacy program that is expanding statewide to some communities that currently have had little or no funding for Reach Out and Read.

In 2011, Thrive will conduct site visits and/or interviews with other regional early learning coalitions not currently funded for COL to ensure they understand the early literacy strategy as articulated in the Washington State Early Learning Plan and to assess readiness to integrate early literacy into their ongoing early learning efforts. Thrive will also discuss the findings from the 2010 evaluation with the entire early learning coalition community so they are aware of the successes and lessons learned that may shape their own efforts to support early literacy in their communities.

“In the business of life, a lot of time parents don’t sit down and interact and play with their children. So I think that [is] a major benefit to them. I think that connecting with other parents and being a part of parent education sessions was beneficial. It gave them a chance to talk about things they were struggling with and get ideas from me and from one another.”

-Facilitator, Tot-Spot, Walla Walla

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