



RESEARCH REPORT

Supporting Literacy and Numeracy Skills among Out-of-School Youth

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Executive Summary

Many young people in the United States do not have the literacy and numeracy skills required to succeed in postsecondary education and training or to find gainful employment. Local organizations offer programs and services to out-of-school youth to help them reengage in their education and build their literacy and numeracy skills. This is often a critical step to help them earn a high school credential, complete postsecondary education and training, and find a good job. This report presents findings from an exploratory study of strategies, approaches, and practices to support building the literacy and numeracy skills of out-of-school youth, based on a review of the literature and interviews with staff from 12 youth-serving organizations.

Our review of the literature revealed limited evidence of effectiveness or best practices to help out-of-school youth increase their literacy and numeracy skills. Existing research highlights interventions such as integrated basic skills training and postsecondary education, career pathways, apprenticeships and other “learn and earn” approaches, postsecondary bridging, and collective impact approaches. These interventions include literacy and numeracy skill building, but typically provide a range of education, job training, and supportive services. Key elements of these interventions include outreach and recruitment strategies, support services, transitional jobs, pay and stipends, nonacademic skill building, uninterrupted continuum of services, needs assessments, culture of data use, and early intervention.

Interviewees from the 12 youth-serving organizations elevated the following themes:

- **It is critical to take an individual-oriented approach, because programs serve youth with different barriers and needs.** Few special approaches for specific subpopulations and programs are designed to address a range of needs that youth may have to support their success.
- **Motivating youth to build literacy and numeracy skills poses challenges.** Youth may not be motivated to improve their literacy and numeracy skills to obtain their high school equivalency credentials because of challenging experiences in traditional school settings or because they want to quickly find a job to support themselves and their families. Contextualization is one effective motivation strategy. Other strategies include mentorship, connections to goals, and financial incentives.
- **Programs use various instructional strategies, tools, and approaches to help youth advance in literacy and numeracy.** Instructors at the programs in the study differentiate by students’

learning styles, though there are some best practices in instruction, such as scaffolding, interactive learning, and demonstrating student progress. Respondents had mixed views on accelerated learning. Overall, program structures differ, and instructors have substantial autonomy over their course content.

- **Technology use is rapidly evolving, but barriers remain.** Programs are using digital tools and other technology to modernize and continue services during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, lack of equipment or internet, digital literacy challenges, and difficulty translating services to virtual platforms can hinder the transition to technology-enabled learning.
- **Providing supports for participants' basic needs can help them advance in literacy and numeracy skill building.** Respondents believed they needed to meet basic needs and emotional supports before they could address academic growth. Programs use coaches, case managers, or advisors to support youth needs. Overall, respondents thought that programs need to be understanding of the challenges that youth face while having clear expectations, though sometimes "other needs" can take attention away from academics.
- **Programs may lack sufficient tools for measuring and tracking youth advancement and academic growth.** Baseline and placement tests are required and can be useful, and follow-up assessments help track progress (unless the instruments change). But standardized tests may be inaccurate, and they may perpetuate socially oppressive systems, so many instructors use multiple or alternative assessments, often of their own design. Despite its shortfalls, testing can drive curriculum.
- **Programs help youth bridge to next steps, but those pathways depend on skill levels and life circumstances.** Respondents indicated that baseline levels of literacy and numeracy are important, though the necessary levels vary by pathway. And the skills young people need to bridge to the next level may not be primarily academic. Bridging strategies may include helping students understand their postsecondary options or helping them move from a "job" to a "career" mindset. Role models can also help young people envision their future.
- **External factors can facilitate and hinder organizations' ability to serve out-of-school youth.** Organizations rely on multiple funding sources, and policy tied to funding may constrain how they serve youth. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic is changing how services to youth are delivered now and potentially in the future.

We conclude that increased communication and more standards of practice for youth literacy and numeracy development programs would likely be beneficial, perhaps through a professional learning

community. These are common among K–12 educators, but like out-of-school youth themselves, the educators who serve them appear to operate outside of supportive systems. More research on these topics, including what approaches work for which learners, particularly when it comes to technology-based tools during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, would be valuable to inform future practice.

Authors' Note

This report was revised November 9, 2020. On page 11, we corrected a typo in the author-date citation at the end of the first bullet. On page 19, we added a sentence to the direct quote in the first paragraph, at the respondent's request. This small addition caused text to reflow on pages 19–23. In addition, we added a photo credit to page ii.

Introduction

Many young people in the United States lack the literacy and numeracy skills to help them succeed in postsecondary education and training or find gainful employment. They may lack a high school diploma or equivalent certificate, or have a high school credential but lack basic literacy and/or numeracy skills to advance in their schooling and employment. Out-of-school youth (sometimes known as *opportunity youth* or *disconnected youth*)—the focus of this study—are young people ages 16 to 24 who are not in school or meaningfully employed (Anderson et al. 2019). These include the estimated one million students who drop out of high school annually, as well as those who are underprepared for college or other job training and those involved in the justice and foster care systems.¹ Youth-serving organizations across the country offer programs and services to out-of-school youth to help address the challenges of reengaging in school by building their literacy and numeracy skills to help them earn a high school credential, complete postsecondary education and training, and find a good job with livable wages, benefits, and potential to advance.

This report presents findings from an exploratory study of strategies, approaches, and practices to support building literacy and numeracy skills of out-of-school youth. In our review of the literature, we summarize the limited evidence on how organizations can effectively increase literacy and numeracy skills for out-of-school youth and support their educational and workforce success. We then present findings from interviews with leaders at 12 youth-serving organizations that provide literacy and numeracy instruction to out-of-school youth. The report concludes with several implications for how to build evidence of strategies, approaches, and practices that can effectively increase youth literacy and numeracy skills.

Study Overview

This study explores literacy and numeracy skill building for out-of-school youth. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which supported this study, asked that we highlight literacy and numeracy issues and approaches that pertain to the needs of five subpopulations of youth that have been a focus in their grantmaking:

- youth of color with low income or living in low-income communities
- youth who are involved in the justice system
- youth who are involved in the child welfare system

- young parents
- youth who have limited English proficiency

We developed the following research questions in coordination with the Casey Foundation:

1. Understanding that literacy and numeracy are major issues in terms of older youth's ability to get onto a career pathway, which intensive practices and models appear to be showing the most promise of helping young people **accelerate** their learning? What practices exist in industry-specific curriculum versus those taught independently in educational settings?
2. What practices around literacy/numeracy can be **scaffolded** (i.e., systematically built upon existing skills) onto different attainment levels (such as through third grade, fourth to eighth grade, eighth grade and up) and **how quickly** can individuals realistically advance through these levels? How do we understand these categories better in terms of competencies?
3. What are **promising practices** at both the secondary and postsecondary level that can support out-of-school youth?
4. We know that many youth with a high school equivalency (HSE) or high school degree have low literacy levels—are there best practices for helping these out-of-school youth enroll and succeed in postsecondary education and training (i.e., **bridging**)?
5. What are the numeracy and literacy disparities around our **subpopulations** of interest, and what promising practices/models are targeted to these subpopulations?

Methodology

To address the research questions, we first conducted a literature review to explore existing strategies and approaches aimed at building literacy and numeracy skills for youth and identify programs that use these strategies. We compiled literature from a scan of online resources and reports from major evaluation firms, government and nongovernment research clearinghouses, and research conference websites.

We also conducted interviews with staff at 12 organizations across the country that offer programs that help out-of-school youth ages 16 to 24 build literacy and numeracy skills. Through those interviews, we gathered practitioners' perspectives on promising strategies, approaches, and practices they use for serving their youth participants. We developed an initial list of programs by cataloging those that appeared in the literature review. The Casey Foundation also identified grantee organizations that fit within the study criteria. From the initial list of 29 programs, we sought to recruit

a range of informants, based on their model/approach, the initial skill levels of youth served, subpopulation(s) of focus, and geographic location. We reached out to 16 programs using professional connections where possible or through “cold” outreach, and ultimately conducted interviews with 12 programs, which was our target sample size. Programs not interviewed did not respond to our outreach or were no longer in operation; none explicitly declined to speak with us. We interviewed a range of staff members, including deans, program managers, instructors, youth coordinators, and case managers. Table 1 lists each program interviewed and relevant details.

LIMITATIONS

This study is exploratory. It examines an issue that has not been deeply documented in the existing literature. Though we tried to compile material from a range of sources, the literature review may not cover all relevant or tangentially relevant research. And because we only spoke with 12 programs doing literacy and numeracy interventions for out-of-school youth as part of adult education, workforce, and community-based programs, the findings are preliminary. We designed this small project to identify possible areas for future research and investment.

Another potential limitation is that the interviews informing this report took place during the early months of the national shutdown from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. We oriented the data collection to be broader than the context of the public health emergency, but the pandemic and associated sharp economic recession may have affected responses. In addition, COVID-19 will likely have lasting effects on the youth service landscape, though the nature of any permanent shifts in programming remain unclear.

TABLE 1

Description of Interviewed Programs

Organization	Location	Average students served per year	Initial literacy/ numeracy level	Primary subpopulations served	Primary funding sources
The Door-A Center of Alternatives, Inc	New York City: Bronx and Manhattan	500	None or below 6 th grade	Low-income youth of color or living in low-income communities, Justice system involved, Child welfare system involved	WIOA, Philanthropic, Other (city funding from the department of youth and community development in NYC)
YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School	Philadelphia, PA	NA	None or below 6 th grade	Low-income youth of color or living in low-income communities, Justice system involved, Young parents	WIOA, K-12 System, Philanthropic
Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD)	South Los Angeles, CA	1,000+	None or below 6 th grade	Justice system involved, Child welfare system involved, Young parents	WIOA, Philanthropic, Other (DOL)
Youth Development Institute (YDI)	Based in Albuquerque, NM but provide services in 16 counties throughout NM	1,200	None or below 6 th grade	Low-income youth of color or living in low-income communities, Justice system involved, Child welfare system involved	WIOA, Other (US Department of Health & Human Services; State of NM)
The Excel Center	Indianapolis, IN	350	None or below 6 th grade	Low-income youth of color or living in low-income communities, Young parents, Limited English proficiency	Other (Separate budget line item/appropriation)
Academy of Hope Adult Public Charter School	Washington, DC: locations in both Ward 5 and Ward 8	500	None or below 6 th grade	Low-income youth of color or living in low-income communities, Justice system involved, Young parents	WIOA, Philanthropic, Other (DC Public Charter School Board)
JEVS Human Services	Philadelphia, PA	100	None or below 6 th grade	Low-income youth of color or living in low-	Other (TANF: Youth Development)

Organization	Location	Average students served per year	Initial literacy/ numeracy level	Primary subpopulations served	Primary funding sources
				income communities, Justice system involved, Young parents	
Roca, Inc.	Chelsea, MA (HQ), Lynn, MA, Holyoke, MA, Boston, MA, Springfield, MA, Baltimore MD	Approx. 500	None or below 6 th grade	Justice system involved, Young parents, Limited English proficiency	Justice system, Philanthropic, Other
Project for Pride in Living (PPL)	Minneapolis, MN	275	At least 8 th or 9 th grade	Justice system involved, Child welfare system involved, Young parents	WIOA, K-12 system, Philanthropic
I-BEST program at Skagit Valley College	Mount Vernon, WA	NA	At least 8 th or 9 th grade	Low-income youth of color or living in low-income communities, Young parents, Limited English proficiency	Other (State adult education funds)
Career Education Options (CEO) of Bellevue College	Bellevue, WA	300	At least 8 th or 9 th grade	Low-income youth of color or living in low-income communities, Young parents, Limited English proficiency	K-12 system, Other (grants)
English Literacy for Career and Technical Education (ELCATE) Academy, Collier County Public Schools Adult Education	Naples, FL	2,000	None or below 6 th grade	Low-income youth of color or living in low-income communities, Child welfare system involved, Limited English proficiency	WIOA, Other (State Workforce Funds)

NA: Information not provided.

Existing Literature on Serving Out-of-School Youth

Out-of-school youth have long been a target population for social interventions, as programs seek to reconnect young people with school and/or the labor market. They often face unique challenges to succeeding in education and the workforce and may be forced to choose between preparing for their futures through continuing their education and supporting the immediate financial needs of their families (Spievack et al. 2020). An estimated 4.4 million Americans ages 16–24 were disconnected from education and employment in 2018 (Lewis 2020).

Individuals ages 18 and older who did not complete high school may be able to continue their education through adult education programs. But these programs have historically provided weak links to postsecondary education and the workforce (US Department of Education 2013). In 2010–11, 56 percent of individuals in federally-funded adult basic skills programs who intended to pursue postsecondary education did so (US Department of Education 2013). Further, postsecondary education and training programs might not enroll individuals with low levels of literacy and numeracy,² especially older out-of-school youth, who may or may not have a high school credential (Bloom et al. 2010; Bragg et al. 2019). Ultimately, this leaves out-of-school youth with low skill levels few options to improve their life circumstances.

Having low literacy and numeracy skills is typically one of multiple challenges out-of-school youth face. Many of these youth have low incomes, have difficult family lives, or are supporting children of their own. They may face challenges such as hunger, lack of stable housing, and involvement in the justice or child welfare systems. These stem from many well-documented factors, including structural racism and other social mobility limitations for families living in poverty, especially families of color.³ Or they may result from homophobia/transphobia that leads to homelessness (Morton et al. 2017), legacies of abuse, or other forces outside of a young person's control.

To help youth succeed in meeting their goals, which often involve postsecondary education and training or employment, programs have to address basic needs and students' trauma from earlier educational and social challenges in addition to teaching literacy and numeracy skills. Box 1 provides a brief summary about the subgroups of focus in this report. Many young people belong to more than one of these groups.

BOX 1

Summary Data on Out-of-School Youth Populations of Interest

- **Youth of color with low income or living in low-income communities:** Most out-of-school youth are concentrated in cities, though youth in many impoverished rural areas experience high levels of disconnection from education and meaningful employment as well. The rate of disconnection varies considerably between urban areas: Las Vegas's youth unemployment rate was nearly 13 percent in 2019, while Boston's was 6 percent. There is also variation within this population—unemployment rates among Black and Hispanic youth remain higher than white youth (15 and 9 percent, respectively, compared to 8 percent).⁴
- **Youth involved with the justice system:** Many out-of-school youth become involved in the justice system at some point; one source estimates that 16 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 24 who do not complete high school are justice-involved (Johnson 2016). Youth who are incarcerated lack access to educational opportunities that could help them reconnect to traditional education pathways or the labor market upon release (Suits et al. 2014).
- **Youth involved with the child welfare system:** 46 percent of young people lack a high school diploma even four years after leaving foster care (Johnson 2016).
- **Young parents:** About 25 percent of young women who are disconnected from school and employment are mothers, compared with 6 percent of young women who are connected (Lewis 2020). Young parents face challenges that can interfere with education, training, economic stability, and the care of children (Sick et al. 2018).
- **Youth with limited English proficiency:** Nearly 7 percent of youth who are disconnected from school and work have limited English language proficiency versus 4 percent of connected youth (Lewis 2020).

Sources: See references.

Existing Strategies to Build Literacy and Numeracy Skills

Below, we summarize promising strategies that programs and interventions typically deploy to build literacy and numeracy skills among out-of-school youth and other similar populations, based on published research and program literature:

- **Integrating basic skills training with postsecondary occupational instruction** may improve skill levels for individuals with very low levels of literacy or numeracy (Couch et al. 2018). This approach aims to alleviate issues stemming from the traditional sequence of adult basic skills programs into postsecondary education. Teaching basic skills and occupational training in

tandem allows learners with low skill levels to take occupation-focused, college-level courses immediately, providing a structured pathway to college and employment (Eyster et al. 2018). It also allows for the academic content to be contextualized within occupational content, motivating learning.

- **Career pathways** help individuals who are not on traditional education or employment pathways get the skills and credentials they need to find and retain employment (Eyster and Gebrekristos 2018). The strategy includes postsecondary education and training that is outlined as a “series of manageable steps leading to successively higher credentials and employment opportunities in growing occupations”.⁵ The initial steps of career pathways programs involve education/training and earning credentials to become employed, and later steps involve reengaging in education/training to earn additional credentials and advance within an industry. Though evidence of longer-term impacts is limited, research shows that the initial steps of some career pathways programs improve education outcomes (Bragg et al. 2019). That said, many of the programs evaluated have sixth or ninth grade skill level entry requirements; there are few career pathway interventions for people coming in with lower skill levels.
- **Apprenticeships** are growing in popularity in the United States, with more federal funding devoted to their expansion. They allow participants to earn a wage from meaningful employment while receiving related training instruction, which often includes academic skills. However, they often require a baseline level of technical knowledge and can be inaccessible to those lacking basic literacy and/or numeracy skills. **Pre-apprenticeship** programs aim to bridge that gap, providing the instruction, preparation, and supports to individuals interested in advancing to apprenticeships (Jobs for the Future 2019). These programs can be delivered by a range of organizations including high schools, workforce agencies, and community-based organizations.
- Other **earn and learn** strategies such as **paid internships** or **summer youth employment programs** allow youth to get paid job experience while gaining skills and credentials. Earn and learn programs often include wraparound support services, including basic skills tutoring to close gaps that out-of-school youth may have. Pay is a crucial component of this strategy, allowing participants to meet necessary and immediate basic needs that are prerequisites to successful participation in any educational program.
- **Postsecondary bridging strategies** “bridge” the gap to further education and the labor market for out-of-school youth. Specific approaches include dual enrollment, mentorship and guidance

through the application process, and supported transitions to college. Bridging strategies are often accompanied by educational preparation like basic skills tutoring.

- **Collective impact approaches** build on existing community resources by coordinating organizations and agencies to fill gaps for a particular focus population, often in a defined geographic area (Anderson et al. 2019). They can implement any or all of the above strategies and may involve braiding or blending multiple funding streams. Collective impact approaches are useful for targeting populations that often fall through the cracks because they bring together relevant community actors to create a “theory of change” with accountability.⁶

There are also **in-school** strategies that may yield relevant insights about how to increase skill levels for youth who are out-of-school. **Career academies** “operate as schools within schools,” restructuring large high schools into smaller learning communities around academic themes with structured pathways to postsecondary education and the labor market (Visser et al. 2013). **Enhanced Reading Opportunities** offer supplemental literacy instruction to high school students with below-grade level literacy levels (Somers et al. 2010). A metastudy of adult basic education reading instruction research examined the appropriateness of applying K–12 reading research to adult reading instruction (Kruidenier 2002),⁷ with the following key findings:

- Assessments are a crucial first step—assessing each component of reading to create a profile of each participant’s ability is more effective than testing any one component.
- Phonemic awareness and teaching alphabets are equally important for adults as children.
- Fluency can be taught, and this leads to increased reading achievement—repeated reading of a text is found to be an effective technique for teaching fluency.

Key Elements of Successful Programs from the Literature

Beyond strategies, programs may have certain characteristics or elements that researchers have identified to make them relatively more successful serving out-of-school youth, though not much research has focused specifically on literacy and numeracy skill building.

- **Outreach/recruitment** is a key aspect to effectively serve the youth population. Disconnected older youth are often difficult to recruit because it is hard to predict where they will be. Meeting the youth where they are, and reaching out many times, a practice known as “relentless outreach,” has been shown to be effective (Bloom et al. 2010).⁸ Recruitment is also challenging because out-of-school youth may not trust an advertised social program, a valid

concern that is partially a function of historical racism and exploitation of members of communities where recruitment often occurs (Scharff et al. 2015). Thus, personal relationships are crucial to establishing trust, and these relationships require consistent personal interaction (Anderson et al. 2017).

- **Supportive services** are widely cited as crucial for out-of-school youth. These individuals often need basic necessities that should be identified and addressed before educational interventions. Ideally, an organization would offer a range of services, and participants would be involved in articulating what supports they need (Bloom et al. 2010). Serving youth living in high-poverty environments in particular may require more immediate support, such as a safe haven for those who are in danger (Bloom et al. 2010).
- For those who are justice-involved, **transitional jobs** offer excellent structured earn and learn opportunities, offering a paid job and services (Schultz 2014). Justice-involved older youth face considerable barriers to employment and education. Programming catering to those involved in or coming out of the justice system can help overcome obstacles, including often-arduous parole requirements (Hecker and Kuehn 2019).
- **Pay or stipends** are crucial, especially for older out-of-school youth (Anderson et al. 2017). This population may face unique financial responsibilities that younger and/or connected youth may not.
- Programs that offer **nonacademic skill building** like network building, cultural capital building, and other employment and education skill development can build confidence and improve young people's chances of successfully reconnecting (Anderson et al. 2017). Many of the programs mentioned in this review incorporate some level of nonacademic skill training.
- Research finds that duplicative service offerings are hard to navigate and inefficient. Embedding new interventions into existing programming to offer an **uninterrupted continuum of services** for out-of-school youth, perhaps by using a collective impact approach, is a key mechanism to increase retention and improve outcomes (Anderson et al. 2017).
- To provide effective supportive services, it is critical to **understand the needs** of older out-of-school youth with low levels of basic skills. Because programs targeting out-of-school youth tend to operate with goals like securing employment, an HSE, or enrollment in a postsecondary educational institution, they often lack data on more granular advancement in literacy and numeracy skills. Therefore, there is a lack of evidence around specific practices that effectively improve these skills; even when they are measured, it is hard to determine causality.

- Building a **data culture** to ensure real outcome information to inform programming, not just to meet reporting requirements, is crucial (Anderson et al. 2017). A well-thought-out and well-executed data plan allows service providers to measure success over time with different populations and to identify what practices are effective and should be scaled up (American Youth Policy Forum 2011).
- Finally, the education, psychology, and social sciences agree that **early intervention** is crucial for avoiding gaps in basic skills later in life (Focus 2017; Johnson 2016). While this report focuses on strategies for those who are past the age of early intervention, we must acknowledge that early intervention programs have the potential to sidestep the problem of youth disconnecting from supportive systems, or at least to considerably reduce their barriers.

Findings from Youth-Serving Organization Staff

The interviews with staff from youth-serving organizations provide insights about how their programs support literacy and numeracy skill building for out-of-school youth, especially young people who are no longer age-eligible for traditional K–12 services. The following sections summarize themes and lessons from our data collection across 12 organizations. Many of these echo the effective strategies and elements from the literature, but the interviews build on this list while providing nuanced illustrations of practice and highlighting opportunities and challenges.

The list of organizations that informed these lessons appear in To address the research questions, we first conducted a literature review to explore existing strategies and approaches aimed at building literacy and numeracy skills for youth and identify programs that use these strategies. We compiled literature from a scan of online resources and reports from major evaluation firms, government and nongovernment research clearinghouses, and research conference websites.

We also conducted interviews with staff at 12 organizations across the country that offer programs that help out-of-school youth ages 16 to 24 build literacy and numeracy skills. Through those interviews, we gathered practitioners' perspectives on promising strategies, approaches, and practices they use for serving their youth participants. We developed an initial list of programs by cataloging those that appeared in the literature review. The Casey Foundation also identified grantee organizations that fit within the study criteria. From the initial list of 29 programs, we sought to recruit a range of informants, based on their model/approach, the initial skill levels of youth served, subpopulation(s) of focus, and geographic location. We reached out to 16 programs using professional connections where possible or through “cold” outreach, and ultimately conducted interviews with 12 programs, which was our target sample size. Programs not interviewed did not respond to our outreach or were no longer in operation; none explicitly declined to speak with us. We interviewed a range of staff members, including deans, program managers, instructors, youth coordinators, and case managers. Table 1 lists each program interviewed and relevant details. The organizations' names are abbreviated in this discussion as follows:

- The Door – (no abbreviation)
- YouthBuild Philadelphia – YouthBuild
- Coalition for Responsible Community Development – CRCD

- Youth Development Institute – YDI
- Goodwill Excel Center – Goodwill
- Academy of Hope Adult Public Charter School – AoH
- JEVs E3 Center City – JEVs
- Roca – (no abbreviation)
- Project for Pride in Living – PPL
- I-BEST Skagit Valley College – Skagit
- Bellevue College Language Integration Program – LIP
- English Literacy for Career and Technical Education Academy – ELCATE

It Is Critical to Take an Individual-Oriented Approach

Just as the literature did not produce many concrete answers on *how* to deliver literacy and numeracy instruction to out-of-school youth, the interviews reaffirmed there is no single preferred strategy, approach, or practice that works best and for whom. Instead, the most salient theme is “one size does not fit all” when it comes to basic skills instruction for out-of-school youth. The staff we interviewed believe that nearly all elements of their interventions need to be tailored to the individual needs of each young person.

Programs Serve Individuals with a Range of Barriers and Unique Needs

A clear theme in the interviews is that each young person comes into programming with unique strengths, challenges, and baggage from unsuccessful or unpleasant past academic experiences. The need to individualize instruction was a recurrent theme in the interviews. Most respondents thought that smaller class sizes, or one-on-one instruction where possible, is the most effective mechanism for increasing literacy and/or numeracy. A respondent from CRCD stated that, “[If cost were not an issue] I would like to see our students literally paired with an individual teacher who works with them...on their needs and creates a learning plan specifically for them, and follows up on that plan and there is either a tutor or an aid or someone who is able to take the time to make up for those gaps...If you really think about it, that’s what affluent kids are getting. Someone is paying for them to get individualized education beyond the school system.”

Young people's challenges with literacy and numeracy may stem from risk factors that began early in their lives and that have compounded over time. For example, a respondent from CRCD mentioned that literacy is "definitely so much impacted by early childhood and the family structure, so I do think there is a correlation there between involvement in justice system and foster and homeless system too, if your family is experiencing homelessness...all those disruptions in education is going to impact your level of literacy and numeracy within those early formative years." Respondents indicated it is critical to understand each person's history in order to develop an effective instructional strategy.

The commitment to meeting students where they are and allowing their individual goals to inform program experiences was common throughout the interviews. Many programs develop a learning plan with each student to identify goals and necessary supports, which drives the structure and content of the learning process and helps the program meet young people's other basic needs. For example, AoH meets with students shortly after intake to hear what their goals are and work backwards to develop a plan, providing a realistic timeline and the small and large milestones needed to reach the goal. PPL develops student plans using the Japanese *Ikigai* concept as a guide to help students discover the intersecting space between their passion, mission, profession, and vocation.⁹

Respondents Noted Few Specific Approaches for Subpopulations

Though we inquired about strategies for specific subpopulations of interest outlined earlier, almost no respondents thought about their service delivery in terms of subpopulations. Programs serve youth in the specific subgroups of interest for this study, but when asked about strategies that are effective for a certain group, a respondent from Skagit—like all other respondents—indicated that the strategies employed "depend on the individual rather than the population."

Nonetheless, respondents described some approaches that may be effective or relevant for certain subgroups. A respondent from PPL noted that when teaching literacy, one could take a two-generation approach for young parents by encouraging them to read aloud to their children. Several respondents thought instruction is more effective if English-language instructors are from the same backgrounds as the student population. A respondent from Skagit also noted that it is helpful to focus on literacy and language acquisition before integrating numeracy and other skills into the curriculum for English language learners. When serving refugees, a respondent from ELCATE mentioned the importance of "[recognizing] and [being] aware of the challenges and barriers they have...survival and being able to provide immediate needs often overweigh the accessibility to education." ELCATE also adjusts their approach when working with individuals recently released from prison or jail to focus on reintegration

and coaching on employability skills, such as how to handle a job interview question about system involvement.

Respondents stressed the difficulty of increasing older out-of-school youth's literacy and numeracy levels given the myriad social, economic, political, and other structural barriers, and the fact that these populations have been poorly served by the public school system, often at no fault of their own. Given these circumstances, programs must not only teach curriculum, but reconnect young people with positive systems and prove that they are there to help, unlike institutions that have failed in the past. A respondent from PPL described, "a lot of our young people have had systems happened to them in really painful ways."

Motivating Youth to Build Literacy and Numeracy Skills Poses Challenges

Many programs face challenges getting youth engaged and motivated to build their literacy and numeracy skills. A respondent from YDI explained that while literacy and numeracy skill building may be a priority to program staff, youth do not typically enjoy academic learning. Another at CRCD explained, "The youth that we are working with typically didn't do well in their public school, so it doesn't mean that they don't have skills—it's just more of an engagement and alignment issue" (note that this is distinct from the personal challenges that might prevent even a motivated young person from engaging effectively in academic programming—that issue is discussed below). Respondents highlighted contextualization and other strategies to increase student motivation.

Contextualization Is Perceived as an Effective Motivation Strategy

Throughout our interviews, contextualization was highlighted as an effective strategy to keep youth engaged. Programs take a few approaches to contextualize learning:

- contextualization in current events or common interests (mostly in HSE or English-language programming)
- contextualization in a field
- contextualization through experiential learning, including work-based learning

Nearly all programs incorporate current events and/or interesting topics to keep youth engaged in literacy and numeracy learning. For example, JEVS instructors use articles on recent events in

Philadelphia for literacy exercises, and they help students budget for relevant grocery items as a numeracy exercise. At CRCD, activities such as poetry workshops help build literacy skills.

Contextualized learning within a field can be helpful in preparing students for specific occupations while building literacy and numeracy skills. The connection to a future career can often motivate students. The Door, ELCATE, CRCD, and YDI all contextualize academic content to career-oriented bridge programs (e.g., construction, information technology [IT], emergency medical technician [EMT], and nursing).

Several respondents noted that industry/employer partners can be helpful to contextualizing learning, and there are several possible approaches. At YDI and CRCD, the literacy and numeracy instructors team teach with industry partners in the same classroom. At The Door, an instructor went through an EMT program herself to master the technical skills needed to contextualize learning in her lesson plans.

Some described how contextualization through experiential learning outside of the classroom can be helpful in engaging students and building skills. A respondent from YDI said, “We’ve learned that it has to be a combination...of classroom, on-the-job training, fieldwork, group activities, and interaction with others...when you think of numeracy and literacy, everybody just thinks ‘classroom,’ but it has to be combination of both.” ELCATE works with local organizations and businesses to take youth on field trips that can help build real-world literacy and numeracy skills. For example, the program took youth to visit a grocery store, where they covered issues of health, business, and food, as well as literacy skills, by guiding students through the process of making a grocery list, buying items within a budget, and reading a recipe. Following the trip, the instructors asked the youth to present on their experiences and reflect on any learning. An ELCATE respondent recounted an important learning moment when a student did not realize that a bag of grapes was organic, and was surprised when they rang up as more expensive than expected.

Several respondents described increasing contextualization as a long-term goal. For example, YouthBuild is working towards formalizing contextualization via a professional learning community where instructors can share best practices. And a respondent from JEVS indicated that one of their next steps is securing resources to take youth to outside events that are relevant to their studies or can give them employment exposure.

Programs Use Numerous Strategies to Motivate Youth

Respondents highlighted that trusted mentors can help motivate youth to persist. Roca leverages youth workers to have motivating conversations with youth participants, given their deep and trusting relationships with program participants. ELCATE is exploring having student peer ambassadors to keep youth engaged and motivated.

Several respondents believed that relating what the students are learning to their future goals can be motivating. A Roca respondent expressed that they seek to communicate “the value of it...[getting them to realize] the end goal...Getting them to understand the value of putting in the work and what that end goal gets them—sometimes gets them to stick with it and sit through the class.” Similarly, a respondent from LIP explained that the curriculum needs to be relevant to the young person’s path and that instructors need to explain to students how the material will benefit them. Some respondents suggested that laying out a plan for youth that shows how success in a particular class will move them along toward their individual goals.

Finally, a few programs use incentives to motivate youth. The Door, CRCD, and YDI all provide financial incentives for meeting milestones.

Programs Various Instructional Strategies and Practices to Help Youth Advance

Respondents described a range of instructional strategies. Many programs focus on individual instruction and relationship building, which aligns with the recurring emphasis on individualized learning. Several respondents also highlighted good instructional practices, like scaffolding (which is described as treating learning like a set of “building blocks,” where instructors make sure students understand more fundamental concepts before moving to more advanced material). Some skeptical about acceleration as an effective strategy. Overall, there is substantial variation in program structures, and instructors often have a great deal of autonomy.

Instructors Differentiate by Students’ Learning Styles

Instructors use various strategies to differentiate between student learning styles and proficiency levels within the classroom. A respondent from JEVS noted, “I think that what most instructors do is differentiated instruction. So, you try to implement a lot of different ways of instructing that can hit

those different learning styles” A Roca instructor hands out worksheets that appear to be identical but are actually tailored to different students’ needs.

Several programs use tutors to give individual attention outside of the classroom. Respondents mentioned that tutoring is particularly helpful for those with low math skills—which was often described as the most challenging for students—and those who have plateaued in their learning. A respondent from YDI noted, “If we have a student who is testing basic skills, we implement a tutoring program because they have to increase their math and reading skills before we will move on into the next service with them (or they have to be doing them simultaneously), but we stress the importance of increased reading and math levels.”

Respondents emphasized that small class sizes and individualized attention are particularly important for those with lower skill levels. Some programs, such as JEVS and YouthBuild, keep classes for students with lower skill levels smaller than classes for students with higher-level skills to ensure students with lower skill levels get the attention they need.

Respondents Highlight a Few Instructional Best Practices

Scaffolding material emerged as a common pedagogical approach.¹⁰ Instructors use various assessments to ascertain a student’s skill level (discussed in more detail below), and then scaffold instruction to help students advance.

Most respondents noted that using interactive, inquiry-based, and project-based learning in the classroom can make learning fun and engaging for youth. These strategies can help students understand that their instructors are available to help them, and can help them break out of plateaus and gain momentum once they realize they enjoy learning. For example, a Goodwill math instructor makes pancakes with the class and does math along the way, and PPL uses “sneaky ways to practice writing,” like podcasting to “build literacy behind the scenes.” A Roca respondent described using “guided readings [with people] reading with me,” and reflected, “it’s so funny to watch them realize that they do like to read.”

Another strategy is to keep showing youth the progress they have made, and respond to where they are feeling frustrated or stuck. A respondent from Roca described, “along the way [I] remind them of how many moments of progress they’ve made...at the end of each class, we review what we’ve done and then we make a plan for next time, and then we spend a couple minutes reflecting...so then when we come in the next time I can say ‘last time...this is what we talked about wanting to do, does that make sense?’”

Respondents Have Mixed Views on Accelerated Learning

Several respondents expressed outright skepticism about accelerating the learning process. A respondent from CRCO noted “I don’t think you can accelerate [learning] that’s been neglected for 20 years... It is a question of time, resources, and individualized attention.” In other words, literacy and numeracy gaps are sown early in life and typically not remedied by the United States’ unequal educational system, particularly for these students. Respondents were skeptical that a program could redress such gaps in a short period of time. JEVs uses a curricular model that actually takes longer to complete, noting that longer program durations allow for more robust and sustained supportive services. A JEVs respondent said, “For a lot of our population...they have a lot of barriers and there are a lot of hits against them, not only justice involved but could also be parenting, and experiencing homelessness...being young person of color...we looked at the resources we had available and while [our program model] takes significantly longer for us to get kids through, we saw that with the additional supportive services... we are able to get a young person through to get a credential because we know that so many jobs are requiring...that diploma.”

Others, however, expressed more optimism about accelerated learning, particularly for students who are more stable and have higher skill levels at entry. The Door uses a “bootcamp” or “fast track” method for students who are already at least at a ninth grade level and are moving quickly through the HSE program. A respondent from PPL noted that accelerated learning is more effective if the participant’s passion and desire to learn is connected to the material and the goal. A respondent from Skagit mentioned using competency-based learning to speed up the learning process.

Program Structures Differ, Including Curriculum, Duration, and Class Sizes

The intensity and duration of instruction vary across programs. Instruction also usually varies across students within the same program, based on their level of skill upon entry and other nonacademic factors; only one program had a defined timeline (YouthBuild’s program is one year for everyone). Respondents said it typically takes a student two to three years to complete their HSE or other credential, at varying levels of intensity.

The curricular structure is inconsistent across programs and is sometimes influenced by state standards. Some programs organize around a core curriculum, requiring students to pass a predetermined set of classes and allowing specialized coursework outside of the core requirements. Others orient toward skills on a summative exam or assessment, like the HSE exam or a state

graduation exam. YouthBuild stands out for focusing primarily on developing a set of thinking skills for youth, with less focus on core academic requirements or a test-driven curriculum.

Some respondents expressed frustration over being forced to “teach to the test,” and others expressed support for policy changes that have given them more flexibility around test-based accountability. A respondent from Goodwill, for example, shared that following a state policy shift away from standardized testing, they can now “explore this whole new world of being able to do some career-based learning in math and some really cool projects...We’ve been allowed to reprioritize the importance of things like literacy and math.”

Instructors Have Significant Autonomy within Their Classes

Most programs allow substantial autonomy for instructors. For example, at Roca, instructors select their own assessments and curriculum for their students based on their expertise. Other programs have a common assessment structure but allow instructors to determine lesson plans and pedagogical approaches. A few programs have more explicit coordination across instructors, through formal or informal channels. For example, a respondent from JEVs noted, “as a department, we participate in some professional development series and trainings...to sharpen our skills...[because] there’s always different strategies out there...Being able to partner with not only outside agencies, but just within JEVs and other instructors...who work with [similar] populations [is valuable]. [We’re] just trying to determine what are some of those best practices that maybe we can incorporate into our center.”

In addition to developing best practices for teaching, several respondents indicated that instructors in these types of programs should examine how they personally perceive the young people served by reflecting on the instructor’s attitudes and biases. A respondent from Skagit illustrated this point:

I’ve seen my role as really working to support faculty and staff...I had this student who was just recently released out of jail...[and] came up short against a [homework] deadline...He asked [the instructor] for just a few more minutes and she said no and left the room, and he went to the homework pile and he grabbed his paper out and started finishing the work...[The instructor] felt like that was cheating, and wanted to get the student conduct officer in [to get it on his record]...and I [said], ‘or, we could look at it this way? This is a student that is desperate, and this is the student’s first time in college after being locked up. Is this what we want the experience to be, or do we want to take it as a learning opportunity, and talk to him about what this looks like?’...[We’re] providing a safe space where students can learn as they go.

Technology Is Evolving, but Barriers Remain

Many respondents use digital tools for instruction and student engagement with varying levels of effectiveness. Instructors reported leaning more heavily on these tools during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some suggested that digital tools were more effective for sustaining relationships than for content instruction.

Programs Are Modernizing and Persisting with Digital Tools during COVID-19

Many respondents thought that digital tools, particularly smartphone apps, are helpful in sustaining existing relationships with students during the pandemic. Programs are taking creative approaches to reaching students, especially leaning on the near-ubiquitous use of smartphones. For example, at YDI, instructors convened virtual groups, and “have done Zoom, the Houseparty [app], with our mentoring programs our mentors are still logging on, doing groups with their mentees, they’re watching movies together, playing games, we’re doing a lot of family engagement virtual activities where they’re cooking with the families. The one I logged onto the other day...they made tortillas as a group with their families.” A respondent from Goodwill underscored that less formal smartphone-based tools are serving essential purposes during the pandemic: “I don’t know that Zoom classes are great for our younger students...The technology that I’ve found helpful with younger students is using technology that doesn’t require them to be at a certain place at a certain time. There’s lots of really cool websites, things like FlipGrid, where I can ask a question and they can respond at any time, and I am still able to have a class discussion and get their feedback without trying to get everyone in the same place at the same time.” A Roca respondent said technology works well for existing relationships, but it is very hard to build new relationships remotely, especially with young people who are skeptical of academic learning.

Some respondents expressed that being forced to use technology during the pandemic has shown them the benefits of digital tools, and they are considering leaning more heavily on those tools after the pandemic ends. LIP noted, “we have heard from the case managers [that] students have been more readily available to meet with them through Zoom than they used to be coming into the office, I think as a matter of convenience for them more than anything...if they [went] to the office and that particular time their case manager wasn’t available, that was a wasted trip...now they can just get on their phone and...connect.”

Barriers to Technology Remain for Youth

While respondents noted the helpfulness of some digital tools, especially to sustain relationships during the pandemic, they also pointed out substantial barriers. Respondents described digital tools as sometimes effective for instruction, but limited access to computers is a serious impediment. They explained that many participants have access to smartphones but not to computers, and completing a full-length lesson via smartphone is difficult.

Further, instructors mentioned that some students simply are not suited to learning online. As a respondent from CRCO explained, “Some folks will take to [technology platform] and really benefit from it and be motivated to do it and then some folks are not going to thrive on that technological platform, they need a person...If you are not used to doing stuff online, it can be pretty difficult to shift to that...different approaches for different youth, and a big piece of it is what’s going on with that young person...how do they learn?” A YouthBuild instructor shared a similar perspective and a respondent from ELCATE pointed out that it is important to avoid allowing technology to become a “babysitting tool” in which students simply “click through and nothing really gets absorbed.” Respondents emphasized that technology use in or out of the class needs to be deliberate to effectively increase literacy and numeracy levels.

Digital literacy was cited often as a barrier for participants to engage with instructors through technology. Respondents from two programs also noted that instructors themselves may lack the digital familiarity to effectively engage with students, particularly if it requires creative use of new tools.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many programs or localities have dedicated resources to bridging the “digital divide” with learners—New York City has an initiative to provide necessary equipment to low-income learners during the pandemic, and PPL purchased laptops for its participants when it became clear the distance learning would be the norm for the foreseeable future. Other programs are tackling the digital literacy gap, both with instructors (ELCATE is doing technology-oriented professional development) and students (several respondents described ramping up digital literacy education during the pandemic).

Providing Supports for Basic Needs Helps Advance Literacy and Numeracy Skill Building

This study primarily focused on literacy and numeracy skill building, but respondents shared that programs must help students address a hierarchy of needs before students can engage in skill building. They also described the types of issues youth navigate, and strategies to address them.

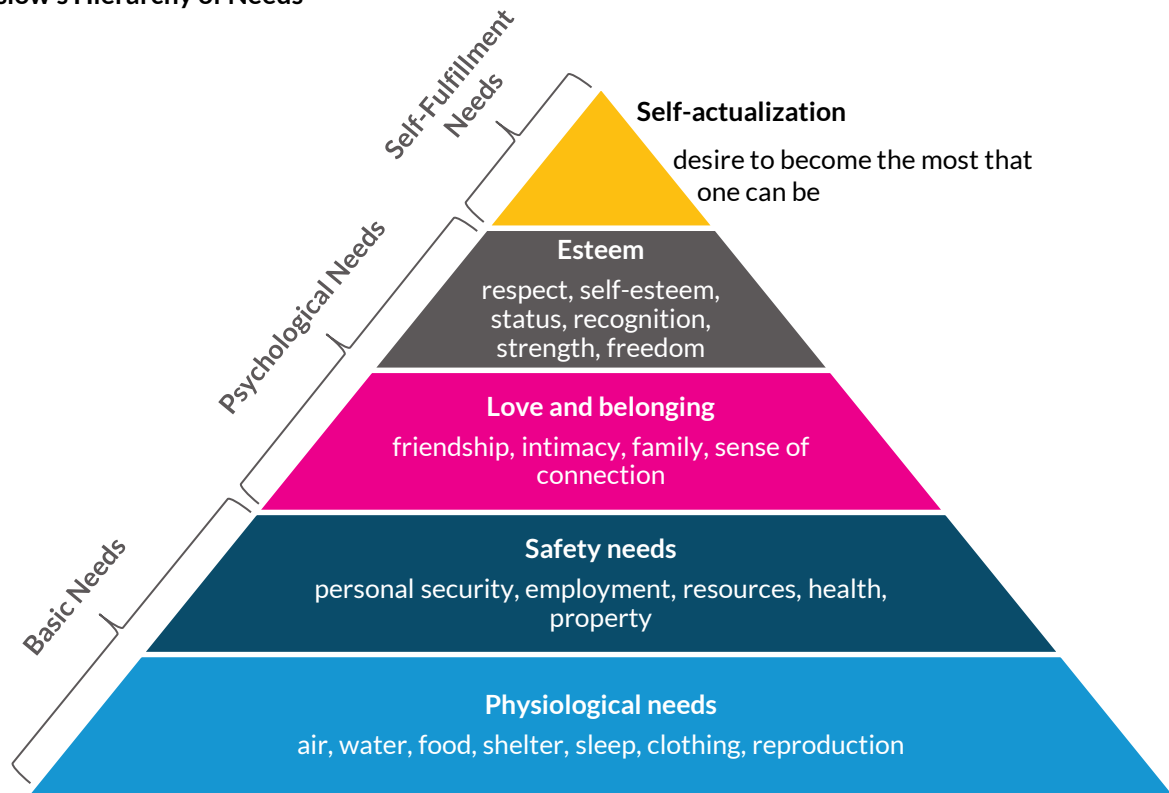
Respondents Believe They Need to Meet Basic Needs and Emotional Supports First

Respondents from all programs underscored the importance of wraparound supportive services that address youths' needs and barriers, noting that young people cannot engage effectively with literacy and numeracy skill building if their underlying issues are not resolved. Programs typically assess youth needs upon program entry. For example, at AoH, case managers assess students and assign them a crises level number based on their circumstance at intake, then work with them to address needs throughout the program. The Door conducts psychosocial assessments on supports and academic needs.

A respondent from AoH pointed out the importance of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is a useful structure to think about young people's needs that are fundamental to being able to focus on skill building, which is part of self-actualization at the top of the pyramid (see figure 1). But the respondent also said that meeting needs and skill building can be accomplished simultaneously: "I understand Maslow's hierarchy in that you need to wait to get some things in place before you can be educated or self-realized [sic], my only worry with that is what if you never get those things in place, then you put off self-actualization and is there a way to simultaneously do both."

FIGURE 1

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Source: Authors' depiction of a visual from McLeod (2020).¹¹

The COVID-19 pandemic made clear that out-of-school youth experience a range of daily challenges that often feel more pressing than education. A respondent from YDI noted, “it’s tough for people out there right now...most of our families [are] concentrated on [personal safety and economic security].” They said that many participants were requesting assistance with securing Unemployment Insurance benefits for their parents rather than focusing on their academic growth. Nearly all interviews highlighted similar sentiment; providers were unable to describe literacy and numeracy strategies without also mentioning the vital and pressing importance of meeting participants’ basic needs, even before the 2020 pandemic.

Youth Face Many Personal Challenges to Success

The needs described below (basic needs and psychological needs) map to Maslow’s hierarchy. Respondents described how they address each of these in various ways.

Basic Needs. Young people's basic needs include both *physiological needs* and *safety*. Nourishment was one of the main physiological needs discussed in interviews. Several programs have food pantries for students. A respondent from LIP noted that their food pantry is a critical support and makes it so that "students don't have to worry about [food], they can concentrate on school."

A few respondents described how they work to address youth housing and shelter needs. PPL has a strong relationship with Hennepin County and can lean on the county government for youth shelter, but a staff member noted that youth housing is a major issue in the area and that the need has far outstripped the capacity. YDI has a runaway shelter for program participants.

Respondents shared that transportation is a challenge for youth. A PPL respondent stated that driver's licenses are key, particularly for those in foster care, because "they don't have people to take them out driving, and that puts them further behind. And then now in the world of COVID-19, a driver's license is even more important for the entry level positions and so I do think support around drivers' education needs to be seen as a core support like English...Why are we disenfranchising young people from getting driver's licenses?" A respondent from YDI described how they educate youth on how to use public transportation and also have vans that transport them.

Childcare and other parenting needs were raised as barriers facing youth. A respondent from Goodwill shared that they have an onsite childcare center for any out-of-school youth with children between 6 weeks and 12 years old.

Programs also support safety needs, such as offering financial support and health care (which includes mental health). Respondents from YDI and Skagit both shared that they support students financially. The YDI staffer said, "a lot of our training programs require clinicals that are unpaid, so we pay for those under work experience because...they may have been working a part time job before, but once you go into training and clinicals, clinicals are usually full time obligations for them, so they have to stop their part time jobs in order to finish off their training so that's where we kick in the paid work experience for them."

Several programs offer mental health supports and counseling for their students. A respondent from LIP shared that some instructors are also trained and licensed mental health counselors. Mental health supports are critical especially for certain subpopulations. A respondent at Goodwill Excel Center shared that one of their "big goals for next year" is "really thinking about how we can do a better job at supporting our younger male students of color. We've had in our city in the last two weeks three young men of color shot by police...Our male students are coming to us with a lot of anxiety about a lot of things. We're making an effort both to acknowledge that and try to work them through that next year."

Programs also address other safety needs like justice system-involved supports and gang intervention. YDI, which serves a high population of youth involved in the justice system, has specific supports for those young people, as well as gang intervention supports.

Psychological Needs. Youths' psychological needs include *love and belonging* and *esteem*. Respondents indicated that relationships, trust building, and fostering a sense of community are important factors in meeting youth needs and their programs overall. A respondent from Skagit shared, "a lot of students come in 'armored up'" because they have been disappointed and hurt by programs in the past. At Goodwill, a respondent stated: "We are serving a group of students who have been failed by other institutions, so we almost have to take that approach and do things differently than other schools have. For many of our younger students, we provide lots of support. They have lots of opportunities for one-on-one help, but also giving them the freedom to make their missteps and letting it be their choice and supporting them on getting back on track is important. It all boils down to relationship building. I don't think any of this is possible without having relationships with them." Many respondents shared similar sentiments.

Programs take several approaches to building relationships and creating a sense of community. Many have mentors or counselors in place who work closely with students to build relationship and trust. At LIP, instructors play multiple roles, including as intake advisors and case managers. This allows youth to form connections with instructors at intake and gain a sense of familiarity and community. At Roca, one staff member emphasized the importance of the first meeting with learners stating, "I think it's very important...the first meeting with a participant. Usually the first meeting we don't do much class...we just talk. I just say, 'it's ok, you're here,' I always ask what are their expectations...say I'm here to help...it's ok [to] make mistakes...I create that relationship that it's ok to ask [questions]. Trust is a big deal. When they see me [as] just a normal person here to help, they start to talk and communicate."

Some respondents noted that relationships and a sense of belonging can be helpful in reengaging students who leave programs. A JEVS respondent shared, "a relationship is what's key in bringing a young person back" when they take breaks from the program.

Low self-esteem in learners can be a major barrier to motivation. Several respondents highlighted the need to build youth self-esteem in order for them to advance. A Roca respondent shared, "they really have low self-esteem, so you have to be fighting with that first and then start teaching. I don't have the problem of them not staying in class [because] they really want to stay in the class...I work with young moms." Another Roca respondent added: "It really is how you go about having that conversation and making them realize their value...[and] worth in a classroom setting because they're so used to having the exact opposite feeling in a classroom."

Programs Use Coaches, Case Managers, or Advisors to Support Youth Needs

Although all respondents agreed that staff members are critical in advising students and providing individualized support, there are differences in program approaches. Many respondents said that they have several different supportive touchpoints for students. For example, at The Door, youth have an instructor, career advancement coach, mental health support staff, and if they are systems-involved, they also have a justice coordinator. Similarly, at YDI, youth have more than one staff person they can reach out to for support. A YDI respondent described: “We’ve learned that our students like having two different case managers from the different programs ...I think one of them said, ‘I have two people watching me, which is better than one.’ They know that the support from two people is a lot better than just one. It really depends on their circumstance, what their needs are at the time.”

However, other respondents expressed that having one designated support staff member for youth works better. As a PPL respondent shared, “A lot of the services we provide is really just alignment to make peoples’ lives easier...What we work towards is that the young person never knows all of the different hands behind the scenes, so the young person has this feeling of, ‘I just have this one case coordinator’...We try to have it to feel seamless to the young person.” LIP has a similar structure.

In some cases, programs coordinate with partners to provide supports. YouthBuild and JEVS have partners that fulfill some or most support services, especially specialty supports such as legal issues and some mental health support. As a respondent from JEVS described, “We also refer them to agencies if they need help as far as their mental health to help them become more mentally stable to be able to go through the program and to reach their goals...The assistant director will even sometimes walk members down to the actual organization to get that help.” Some YouthBuild community partnerships have offices colocated in YouthBuild, which allow for easy referrals.

Programs Need to Be Understanding of Barriers While Having Clear Expectations

Both Roca and Goodwill respondents described being flexible with students arriving to class late and taking extra time to complete assignments. JEVS noted that being forgiving is critical because each individual’s situation is different and not being flexible could hinder their progress.

At LIP, one staff member expressed that they must be an advocate, but not an enabler. A Skagit staff member shared, “Not to say that we’re going to excuse bad behavior, but if you step back you can see where it could go sideways, so part of it is really understanding where our students are coming from and making space for that.”

Sometimes the Psychological and Other Basic Needs Can Divert Attention from Academics

Some respondents expressed that addressing both youth academic and other basic needs can be challenging. At YouthBuild, one respondent shared, it is a “real challenge balancing all of the tensions. My focus and my role is on academic development, but when there’s so much else happening it’s really hard to give that the attention that it needs...we know that the other supports are happening in other places, and we know that these challenges are existing and so let’s just give energy to this kind of central work [academic development], because in my role I often get sucked into how are we going to make sure all of our students are here.” Similarly, at YDI, respondents shared that youth are concerned about personal safety and economic security during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has made it difficult to focus on academics.

Tools for Measuring and Tracking Advancement and Academic Growth May Be Insufficient

While a good baseline assessment can be a valuable tool to plan instruction, standardized exams required by many funding streams may not be appropriate for out-of-school youth and may not accurately reflect their potential. Instructors often develop their own strategies to assess student skill levels to determine how best to work with them. Programs also use formative, or ongoing, assessments to track progress, as well as summative assessments to award HSEs or measure progress. Like baseline assessments, these are complex, and there are few standards across programs or even across instructors, except for certain tests mandated by outside entities, such as states or funders.

Baseline and Placement Tests Are Required and Can Be Useful

All programs have a standardized baseline or placement assessment, primarily because they are required for certain funding sources, such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and state grants (e.g., ELCATE needs them for Florida state grants). A respondent from Skagit shared that they collect standardized test scores so they can report back to school district partners. Programs typically use either the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) or the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) test, and several program respondents said they recently switched from the TABE to the CASAS. Because there are few assessments in Spanish, several Roca instructors use the TABE Locator, one of the few validated assessment options offered in Spanish.

Assessments have potential to be helpful with placement, ability grouping, and targeted instruction. Respondents at AoH, Goodwill, and JEVS said they offer tiered starting points for youth based on skill levels, which a JEVS respondent said allows for “more individual attention.” Even programs such as Roca that do more one-on-one instruction find that assessments help instructors know where to focus, so they can “craft, together with the young person, a course of study that is valuable, affirming, and doable.” One Roca respondent shared: “I think assessment, if it’s done well, is crucial, I can’t imagine being able to teach without a really fine-tuned assessment.” A PPL respondent said: “Assessments are valuable in that it lets you take the next instructional move and understand where young people need to be operating at to be professionally successful.”

Special education testing, a particular type of assessment, can help identify learning differences. Respondents from CRDC described how they are able to develop individualized education plans (IEPs) with students, which is particularly valuable for those with undiagnosed learning differences. IEPs allow the program to ensure instruction is tailored to each student’s needs. Roca respondents reflected that having diagnoses of learning disabilities can also make students feel better about their ability to learn because they understand the source of past learning challenges. But community-based organizations that are not technically schools, such as The Door, may not have access to special education assessments or tools.

Follow-up Assessments Help Track Progress, Unless the Instruments Change

Programs may retest students on placement exams periodically throughout programming to track progress and further tailor groupings and instructional strategies; respondents from YDI, JEVS, and The Door all discussed this. For adult basic education programs, the federal government requires programs to retest students after a certain number of hours of seat time to track progress. For adult education and WIOA programming, skill gains are a key performance indicator.

Learning how to take tests and getting regular practice can be useful for young people who will have to perform well on assessments for college. Skagit uses the Accuplacer to prepare students for college-level classes and testing conditions.

But retesting is not only for compliance or practice. Programs such as JEVS find it valuable to use the same (even flawed) assessment to track growth in their programming over time. Similarly, respondents from LIP and ELCATE explained that it can be hard for programs to track progress when assessments or standards change. An ELCATE respondent said, “If you were to ask me ‘how does [the] data look?’ Hard to say right now...[It’s] been moving constantly for us...New testing materials have

come out...so while it's the same CASAS, the rigor has increased. So, as the tool keeps changing, it becomes harder to say what's working [and] what's not. [The driver of that is] when the new TABE came out, many schools, districts...I assume across the country if they are using TABE, they've seen a drop in performance because it is more rigorous. All those changes make it difficult to measure true success."

Standardized Tests May Be Inaccurate, and Perpetuate Socially Oppressive Systems

Despite their potential, many respondents expressed a skepticism that standardized tests reflect students' true abilities, especially for those who have been out of school for a while. They reported that young people may not take the assessments seriously, might have a bad day, or find that standardized tests trigger negative feelings about past schooling experiences. And it is difficult for programs to incentivize students to take the baseline assessment seriously, especially before they have developed a meaningful relationship. A respondent from CRDC said: "In their mind, it may seem arbitrary. These are not youth that are on an ACT-SAT track to begin with. So, the standardized test is not a norm, it's not something that they want to do... [These are] young adults that didn't do well in traditional school and we're asking them to take the test when we already know they didn't do well on tests." Roca staff emphasized the need to establish trust before giving assessments.

Some respondents questioned the accuracy of assessments because youth may exhibit a quick initial jump in their ability levels as they refresh on academic material. YDI will often tell youth to read a newspaper and then retest if they do not initially score high enough to qualify for the program, a signal that light refreshment can affect placement scores. A respondent from YouthBuild described a similar phenomenon: "We have a number of students who just don't try [on the initial assessment], and then we have a number of students who show huge gains after the first 25 days, which I [think is due to] a lot of refreshing on skills that they had...We often see our biggest gains in the first session." A respondent from PPL described how standardized testing can perpetuate social inequity:

Why have an assessment if there is not going to be a restructuring of the world around [it]? Assessment[s]...reify this racist notion that kids of color can't do it. And I just don't see that there is any value in that because we're not actually changing the structure...I do believe that there is value in uncovering these equity questions...but we haven't come to the answer of how we are going to do that as a society, so now we're just perpetuating this experience that young people have of hearing "you didn't pass" over and over.

Many Instructors Use Multiple or Alternative Assessments, Often of Their Own Design

Respondents shared that there are other potentially valuable and valid measures besides standardized tests. CRDC uses transcripts as evidence of competency and growth, because passing classes may be a better measure of ability. A respondent from Goodwill discussed how they may allow students to sit for the final exam for a remedial class if they cannot place out of that level. A respondent from PPL explained, “I haven’t found any assessments that do that better than learning from student work.”

Several programs do multiple baseline assessments, or have informal assessments to determine student abilities and needs. For example, Skagit and PPL use a combination of basic skills assessments and Accuplacer because they measure different types of skills. A respondent from Skagit noted that students often do better on Accuplacer than the CASAS. In some programs, such as CRDC and Roca, instructors are free to determine their own assessment strategy. Roca respondents described their own alternative verbal assessment strategies. One Roca respondent shared their strategy:

I start off with a focused conversation with the students about their past learning...what they perceive as their strengths and weaknesses and the kinds of ways that they like to learn. And I do a fairly informal, but I think credible, screening for obvious learning disabilities...so the conversation is friendly and not humiliating and I hope valuable...and I explain why I’m asking the questions...If I see somebody is getting agitated...the conversation stops. Then I do a reading profile, I ask them about their feelings about reading...then do a short writing sample...nonthreatening, but in some cases, it’s too much and I stop immediately. After that, I have been doing a diagnostic assessment of reading...[This] can be spread out over how many ever sessions needed. By the end of that, I have a mastery level of reading and an instructional level. If a student asks me directly, I’ll share the grade level but unless it’s amazing, I try not to because I’m not interested in making them feel even less than. At the end...I thank them so much for this information they’ve given me, they might have already known this, but I didn’t know this and now together we can [create] a learning program that’s based on their mastery...I always remind them, I don’t want to spend any time going over things that they are already good at, and I don’t want to give them any material that is so hard that they [give up]. So, if we know their instructional level we can [put them] at a level where they can stretch a little bit, but not too much. I find it’s very empowering for the student because...it sends the message ‘[They] know who I am...[They are] respectful of me. [They are] not going to waste my time, and not going to ask me to do things I can’t do.’

Many programs, and instructors within these programs, develop their own ongoing, formative assessments:

- Goodwill uses debates and presentations to assess speaking and listening skills.
- AoH uses a portfolio approach.
- Skagit meets with students weekly to assess progress.

- The Door has classroom-based assessments.
- YouthBuild uses a triangle assessment model.

A YouthBuild respondent explained, “We’re thinking about assessment as a triangle: [which includes] the standardized test, in-class assessment, [and] a universal written reflection.”

Testing Can Drive Curriculum

Many programs are geared toward gatekeeping tests, such as HSE exams, state graduation exams, and college placement tests. These may drive curriculum and create pressure for programs to “teach to the test,” a common concern among education researchers in the K–12 space (Sparks 2011, Koretz 2017). To improve performance on summative assessments, programs may chunk out assessments to focus on one piece at a time. A respondent from YDI described that students take the HSE test in four parts, taking on each subject in turn. Math is usually the final subject, since it is often the most challenging for students.

Programs with other credential options, such as those that award diplomas rather than HSEs, may have more flexibility around summative assessment standards. For example, YouthBuild aims for a 1.5-grade-level gain over the one year of the program, but this is not a requirement to graduate. A respondent from YouthBuild explained, “We want to measure skills development in a way that feels meaningful. We don’t want to rely on a standardized test to do that, so we are building out a full assessment system...There are a number of students who don’t make the gain [required for the assessment, so] an alternative requirement is that you take the test three times, so at least you’ve made the effort...We’re thinking about the work that students are doing in classes and what they’re able to demonstrate there as the more important demonstration of skill growth than the test.” However, programs in states such as Washington, with statewide graduation exams, still have to comply with those standards.

Programs Help Youth Bridge to Next Steps, Based on Skill Levels and Life Circumstances

Bridging allows youth to find postsecondary options and succeed once they develop literacy and numeracy skills. There has been an increasing emphasis in recent years on programs moving away from treating the HSE or diploma as the end point, and instead creating navigable pathways to next steps: college, career, or some combination. Respondents reflected on the skills that young people need to

bridge successfully, which are multifaceted. They also described how they help young people understand the options available to them.

A Baseline Level of Literacy and Numeracy Is Important, but Necessary Levels Vary by Pathway

Respondents emphasized that adults need a basic functioning level of literacy and numeracy to get by in the job market and life. It was difficult to pin down a specific skill level that is necessary for success because respondents believe that varying levels of academic skill are necessary for different pathways. For example, Goodwill stresses a different level of rigor for students doing professional certification track versus those seeking college credit, such as holding them to a higher standard on classroom expectations. Since literacy is a holistic concept that includes reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and because of the issues with assessments previously discussed, respondents did not think it was possible to identify a minimum competency threshold.

Skills Needed to Bridge to the Next Level May Not Be Primarily Academic

Despite the professed importance of literacy and numeracy in longer-term success, some programs do not see a correlation between literacy and numeracy skills at program exit and postsecondary success. Three respondents mentioned this explicitly. They found that the measured literacy and numeracy levels of their alumni did not correlate strongly with their later success (though it was not always clear how rigorously this had been evaluated). These respondents believed that young people need to possess personal characteristics and be surrounded by certain environmental characteristics that foster success, such as a supportive learning environment. Personal characteristics include the ability to develop skills along the way (knowing how to learn); outgoingness; language capacity; and willingness to ask questions. A statement from a respondent from The Door reflects the findings from the literature review that nonacademic skills matter significantly for youth:

There are many young people who are at a 12th grade level or above in terms of literacy and numeracy skills who cannot do college level work. Then the debate is, are they actually at 12th grade level? ...Was it an issue where their school just said they were ready to graduate or that type of thing? So, I don't have an easy answer to that question. I don't think you absolutely need to be at a 12th grade reading level to be ready for the transition to a postsecondary environment...Yes, you need some type of baseline assessment as to whether or not people are academically ready but I just think that the reason people aren't successful more often than not has nothing to do with academics...If you have a type of learning environment that the appropriate level of supports for people, the academics come naturally.

Many respondents emphasized a balance between developing literacy and numeracy and fostering other characteristics or skills when preparing young people to bridge to the next step in their lives. These skills include respect, excellence, perseverance, reflectiveness, being able to articulate and translate what they learn, and being entrepreneurial. A YouthBuild respondent reflected, “In the past five or six years there’s been a shift...from concrete hard skill development into these other kinds of [soft] skills...[I think it’s a] healthy balance of those two which seems right.” Many programs also teach “employability skills,” such as business etiquette (YDI) or college experience skills such as navigating college systems like financial aid (Skagit). AoH has a “portrait of a graduate” that includes the ability to express oneself through writing and entrepreneurial skills that allow them to “compete and survive in the 21st century economy.”

A High School Diploma Does Not Guarantee a Certain Skill Level

Some respondents saw a high school diploma as more of a symbol than a meaningful certification of skills. It is not a guarantee that young people have sufficient basic skills, since several programs see people with a diploma come in with low tested skill levels. This was explicitly noted from a YDI respondent. YouthBuild awards alternative high school diplomas to students at different literacy and numeracy skill levels after ensuring they have a certain level of “thinking skills.”

Bridging Strategies May Include Helping Students Understand Their Postsecondary Options

Programs help young people understand the pathways available to them. Most programs want youth to leave with a plan for their next steps. College is one path, though it may take different forms. CRDC staff talk with students about career pathways that lead to family-sustaining wages, which might not come through the four-year college track. While respondents emphasized that they want to support youth in their goals, they try to guide youth toward trajectories that align with their literacy and numeracy skills, although there are exceptions. A respondent from AoH described a young woman with low skill levels who wanted to be a surgeon. She took small steps toward that goal and is now in a premed program.

Some programs offer dual enrollment or college exposure, which can include college or program tours, college fairs, and information about how to navigate college systems. Skagit program participants leave the program with college credit.

Respondents from other programs emphasized general wellbeing over specific academic milestones. A respondent from Goodwill highlighted how the value of college goes beyond employment: “You’re not going through my class without hearing me talk about how going to college isn’t just to get a job...We want you to be a person who critically questions things and continues to learn. I think they get a lot of that talk from a lot of us by the time they make that choice, particularly with their coaches.” In order to help young people develop a plan, LIP has an exploratory course in the first quarter designed to foster individual goals. A respondent from LIP said:

It’s not about getting a certificate or getting a diploma...it’s ‘Did we open up your mind to do better in society? ...Did you find yourself here?’...Some student I’ve seen in the program for five years and come out not even with a GED...but [with] the interactions and the networks they created, they are doing great...So, yes I like to see the numbers, yes I like to see people [get] AA [associate’s] degrees, but...I wouldn’t want a student to get an AA degree and still be lost. It’s about finding yourself, finding a direction, a path, a passion, what you want to do, how you fit into society, and where you want to go.

Programs Help Young People Change from a “Job” to a “Career” Mindset

Respondents reflected that often young people do not know what they want next except “a job,” so programs include career exposure. A respondent from YDI summed up the issue and how they try to inform young people’s thought processes:

Most of the students that come in haven’t thought that far—they’re mostly thinking, I just need a job...make some money—they either have kids or parents to support, and bills to pay, and so they’re not thinking long term...Our job is to help change their mindset...[We say,] ‘We can help you with the job, and we have...paid work experience to help get you some income in the meantime, but our job is to change your mindset from saying *I want a job*, to *I want a career*.’ It’s a big task, but some of the students just don’t have an idea of the career path that they want to take at that time.

JEVS holds a series of empowerment workshops with entrepreneurs to expose students to different careers. They also offer paid work experiences, such as pre-apprenticeship opportunities. Roca offers job shadowing.

Some programs help with job placement, while others are more focused on developing necessary skills. YDI offers a full pipeline: skill development, to training, to employment placement. LIP also does job placements. Others have vocational or dual enrollment programs, but vary on how hands-on they are in placement and follow-up services.

Bridging Is Often About the Intersection of Education and Employment

Many respondents said bridging is about finding the intersection of education and career aspirations. Programs help young people understand what education will be necessary for a certain career path. LIP explicitly maps with students the classes and skills they will need for particular careers or to work with certain employers. Some programs direct youth into pathways they see as likely to be most successful given their interests. A Roca respondent described:

I like encouraging guys to do more vocational things...Like we had a guy who graduated purely because he wanted to be an electrician...We let him know well you need your HSET, so we bunkered down and we did it...I think college is a bit too business-y, especially for our guys who a lot of the times view college with that mindset that 'college brings me to the next level'...[One person] got out of high school and went straight to college and got through two weeks...[got] finance bill for \$5,000...So we say maybe don't do that quite yet because everyone ends up with a bill...but for me, I steer people towards vocational because [the money is good].

Even with the best counseling, it may not be a straight path to the next step. A respondent from ELCATE explained that they often see young people take a quick job for money, then burn out at difficult, low-wage work and come back looking for more training for a career.

Role Models Can Help Young People Envision Their Future

Respondents believed that one of the more effective ways to help young people envision their future is to expose them to role models, such as program staff. A Roca respondent shared, "I always tell my students my story. I came to the United States 18 years ago, my English was zero...I'm 48 and still in school...they can see me, I did it, even though I was not very young. They see me and they say, 'She did it, so I can do it,' Sometimes that helps [motivate them]." At LIP, the program staff share how they themselves dropped out of high school and came back as adults, which builds a connection. In addition, program alumni can be role models, especially if programs hire them as tutors or mentors. LIP hired an alum as a tutor and reported an acceleration in HSE completion. ELCATE was looking to hire alumni as spokespeople in their orientations to tell success stories.

External Factors Can Facilitate and Hinder Organizations' Ability to Serve Out-of-School Youth

External factors such as funding, policy, and the COVID-19 pandemic affect how organizations in this study provide services to out-of-school youth. Some factors help programs increase their capacity to serve youth while others may hinder how they provide services.

Programs Rely on Multiple Funding Sources to Serve Youth

Nearly all of the programs have multiple sources of funding to support services for youth. Federally funded programs such as Title I and II under WIOA, funding through the K–12 system, YouthBuild grants, and foundation funding generally finance services to improve literacy and numeracy skills, as well as the broad array of services offered by these programs. Some respondents indicated that it takes multiple funding sources to support a program. A respondent from The Door said, “No one funding source actually fully pays for...any one [of the] programs.”

Respondents also highlighted that there is not enough funding for certain supports that out-of-school youth need to successfully participate in their programs, especially housing, child care, and transportation. One respondent from YouthBuild noted that they help youth navigate public systems to obtain these supports on their own rather than provide them directly. A respondent from Skagit wanted to build in more advising: “I’d love that every student in our department would have an advisor and equitable access to services.”

Some respondents also highlighted the tenuous nature of funding. A JEVS respondent noted that they operated a successful pilot bridge program that allowed youth to work toward a pathway from the HSE to college. However, the funding ran out, and they have not found a new source. A respondent from PPL noted that alternative schools receive less education funding for sending youth to early college programs. A Skagit respondent said that state Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program funding could not be used for youth. However, they were able to use revenue generated from another program to support youth participation in I-BEST.

Policy Tied to Funding May Constrain How Programs Serve Youth

Respondents highlighted some of the restrictions certain funding sources impose on service provision. Most commonly, respondents identified the requirement to use either CASAS or the TABE to assess youth literacy and numeracy levels for performance reporting as a major restriction. Respondents

claimed that these standardized tests are unable to truly measure an individual's skill level, so programs usually have to administer multiple forms of assessment to know how to serve them. One respondent from CRCD thought that using these tests at enrollment was especially challenging as youth may not take the test seriously at first: “[This is an issue] because the youth don’t necessarily have incentive to see it as important.”

Other policies, such as the treatment of criminal records, can affect skill building for out-of-school youth. A respondent from PPL noted, “In Minnesota, you do not have records automatically sealed at 18...and the research has shown that young people that have their records sealed [see] their wages go up 20 percent within a year.” They further explained that limiting career options because of criminal records can hurt a young person’s motivation and hope for the future.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Is Changing How Programs Deliver Services to Youth

Several of the respondents discussed how services had moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some, but not all, basic skills instruction could be done online. There have been multiple challenges in the transition to remote services.

Some respondents thought about how the COVID-19 pandemic could change services to youth in the long run. A respondent from YDI noted that their staff ramped up remote work and services very quickly and that they plan to keep some aspects in place when in-person instruction and services continue. A respondent from JEVS indicated that they were looking toward implementing a hybrid learning model to better reach youth for whom fully in-person programming is not as accessible or who might not be ready for online learning. A respondent from Goodwill highlighted the need to think ahead to next year: “All educators have a responsibility and obligation to help students navigate what they can carry from this [crisis] as a learning opportunity.”

Conclusions

The findings from the study reveal that there is substantial opportunity to research and establish best practices in literacy and numeracy development for out-of-school youth. Program staff interviewed are thoughtful in their work and committed to serving students as best they can to help them learn and excel. Though some programs have taken on similar characteristics, there are few established best practices or common structures beyond what is imposed by standardized assessments required for most state and federal funding. This concluding chapter summarizes the findings to align with the original research questions asked and then identifies potential opportunities for supporting learning and building the field for out-of-school youth.

Summary of Findings

Our review of the literature and interviews with leaders at youth-serving organizations addresses the research questions related to **acceleration, teaching practices, bridging, and interventions for student subpopulations**. Respondents diverged on their approaches in almost all of these areas.

Some respondents believed acceleration was possible, especially for higher-level or more stable students, while others were skeptical that acceleration could meaningfully advance out-of-school youth in light of their many concurrent challenges. Some expressed hesitation about acceleration because they were skeptical about the quality of assessments to measure basic skill levels, which makes it difficult to know the actual speed of learning gains. Some respondents noted boot camp or fast track models and competency-based assessments. The literature did not provide clarity about acceleration in skill level attainment, especially for those starting at low levels; most literature on acceleration has focused on faster entry into postsecondary education through dual enrollment and bridging programs, though many of these have relatively high minimum skill level requirements.

Instructors largely determine their instructional approach, often guided by the curriculum imposed by state or HSE exams (though some state policies have changed to relieve the emphasis on testing). Respondents generally agreed that scaffolding material, making learning relevant and engaging, and approaching students as individual learners are effective strategies. A well-constructed, informative assessment can help guide the approach, though few standards exist. And no respondents mentioned common tools, third-party curricula, or practice guides that would assist in basic skills instruction for out-of-school youth, nor were any apparent in the literature. Therefore, every instructor has to invent their own strategy, often for each learner.

Respondents reflected that students advance academically when they can work with program supports to manage the pressures that threaten their most basic needs. But it often takes years for them to reach a credential, and many go through multiple stops and starts, or do not complete. Youth who stick with the work can plan next steps with program staff, and some programs offer direct pathways into careers or postsecondary education. But these pathways are not universally available, and they may not be appropriate for all students' goals or financial, social, and family situations.

Finally, a recurring theme in our interviews was the importance of focusing on the individual learner. Even for subgroups of students with potentially similar histories of system involvement and associated learning challenges, there are few instructional efficiencies or best practices. No themes emerged with regard to approaching the subpopulations of interest. Though it is possible that group-based differentiation would lead to better outcomes, additional research and experimentation in the field is needed.

Building the Field

We offer several suggestions based on this study to improve literacy and numeracy instruction for young adults. First, technological or pedagogical tools, young adult literacy and numeracy curricula, and/or practice guides may serve as valuable resources to instructors. Such resources exist in abundance in the K–12 space, especially through publishers and other third-party sources, and to a lesser extent in the adult education space. There is a niche in young adult basic skill instruction that does not appear to be filled, seemingly leaving programs and instructors to fend for themselves.

If such tools or resources were developed, it may be useful to establish a learning hub, perhaps connected to a professional learning community, to help instructors access and use them effectively, share insights, work through issues, and establish best practices. An intermediary would need to lead the learning hub to coordinate engagement and field-building activities.

Even if new tools and resources do not emerge immediately, increased communication and more standards of practice for youth literacy and numeracy development programs would likely be beneficial. A professional learning community could mediate peer learning. This could be virtual, through technology, or in-person, though the respondents emphasized the value of in-person interactions for relationship- and trust-building. Once again, professional learning communities are common among K–12 educators, but like out-of-school youth themselves, the educators who serve them appear to operate outside of supportive systems.

Finally, more research on these topics—including what approaches work for which learners, useful and tailored technology-based and pedagogical tools, and effective youth engagement and instructional strategies would be valuable to inform future practice. In particular, research-practitioner partnerships would be helpful for developing knowledge of promising practices at a faster pace than longer-term effectiveness evaluations of strategies.

Notes

- ¹ For more information, see <https://opportunitynation.org/disconnected-youth/>.
- ² It is important to note that skills are typically assessed using standardized tests, both for basic skills and college preparedness. Youth may also be tested for English language proficiency. However, achieving high enough scores on these tests is often a major hurdle for out-of-school youth for several reasons. First, youth may not remember enough learning from school so they can successfully answer test questions. They may have had difficult experiences with testing in their previous schooling. And they may also not take the tests seriously when first provided to them, not understanding the stakes of the test for enrollment into a program of interest.
- ³ Kililo Kijakazi, “50 Years after Martin Luther King’s Death, Structural Racism Still Drives the Racial Wealth Gap.” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, April 6, 2018, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/50-years-after-martin-luther-kings-death-structural-racism-still-drives-racial-wealth-gap>.
- ⁴ Hande Inanc, “Helping Connect Youth to Jobs, Apprenticeships, and Internships with More Timely and Detailed Data,” *Mathematica* (blog), December 4, 2019, <https://www.mathematica.org/commentary/helping-connect-youth-to-jobs-apprenticeships-and-internships-with-more-timely-and-detailed-data>.
- ⁵ “About Career Pathways | Career Pathways,” Abt Associates, accessed July 31, 2020. <https://career-pathways.org/about-career-pathways/>.
- ⁶ A theory of change is comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. For more information, see <https://www.theoryofchange.org/>.
- ⁷ One reason that we, and the study mentioned, leverage existing research on K–12 reading instruction, is that there is less research on adult reading instruction than K–12. Of course, older youth and young adults, particular those that are disconnected from school and employment, face adult-oriented issues that children do not.
- ⁸ Coined by the Roca program, relentless outreach can involve maintaining an active street presence, or partnering with organizations that do so, sending teams to areas where homeless youth are known to stay, or dispatching outreach teams to emergency rooms after incidents of gang violence.
- ⁹ Thomas Oppong, “Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life Might Just Help You Live a More Fulfilling Life,” *Thrive Global* (blog), January 10, 2018, <https://medium.com/thrive-global/ikigai-the-japanese-secret-to-a-long-and-happy-life-might-just-help-you-live-a-more-fulfilling-9871d01992b7>.
- ¹⁰ Scaffolding is described as treating learning like a set of “building blocks,” where instructors make sure students understand more fundamental concepts before moving to more advanced material.
- ¹¹ Saul McLeod, “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.” *SimplyPsychology*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

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