

## COMMUNITY-DRIVEN LITERACY: AN ASSET-BASED QUALITY IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE FOR EDUCATIONAL RECOVERY

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing educational inequities, particularly in rural communities where access to instructional resources and out-of-school learning opportunities is often limited. In response, a rural faith community partnered with educators, university partners, an undergraduate-level teacher candidate, community volunteers, and families to design and implement a six-week summer literacy program grounded in asset-based community development and culturally sustaining practice. Using a mixed-methods quality improvement framework, this study examines the implementation and outcomes of the initiative, with particular attention to how partnership shaped literacy learning. The project aimed to increase reading engagement and confidence among participating students in rising kindergarten through sixth grade by 20% through meaningful, community-based literacy experiences. Data sources included attendance records, instructional observations, reading attitude measures, oral reading records, and parent feedback. Findings indicated increased participation, reading confidence, and engagement, along with observed improvements in oral reading fluency. The findings suggest that partnership-based approaches increased access within this rural community.

**Keywords:** community literacy, quality improvement, asset-based pedagogy, partnerships, rural education, culturally sustaining pedagogy, COVID-19 recovery

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schooling across the United States, contributing to interrupted instruction, reduced instructional time, and inequitable access to learning supports. Research has documented slowed growth in reading development during this period, particularly in foundational literacy skills such as fluency and comprehension (Domingue et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Within public discourse, these patterns have often been described as *learning loss*. In this context, *learning loss* refers to measurable declines or slower-than-expected growth in academic performance relative to typical developmental trajectories. At the same time, scholars have cautioned that the term can frame students primarily through deficit-oriented lenses while obscuring the resilience, knowledge, and adaptive capacities students bring to learning (Aukerman & Aiello, 2023).

Research on out-of-school learning provides important context for understanding these disruptions. Decades of research on summer learning suggest that differences in access to books and literacy experiences outside of school can contribute significantly to long-term achievement disparities (Alexander et al., 2007; Cooper et al., 1996; Kim, 2006). Students with regular access to reading materials and meaningful literacy opportunities are more likely to maintain or improve their reading development, while those with limited access are more likely to experience setbacks (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2018; Neuman & Celano, 2001). These findings suggest that literacy development is shaped not only by school-based instruction but also by access, opportunity, and engagement beyond the classroom.

Rural communities bring deep social, cultural, and relational assets to educational work, yet they also contend with structural barriers that shape access to learning opportunities. These include disparities in broadband access and digital inclusion (Horrigan, 2020; Whitacre et al., 2014), as well as inequitable access to out-of-school enrichment and transportation that can shape participation in extended learning opportunities (Showalter et al., 2019). In response, community-rooted approaches that draw on local institutions, relationships, knowledge, and shared resources offer promising pathways for expanding equitable access to literacy learning (Bauch, 2001; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

This quality improvement project was developed in response to local needs within a rural Protestant church that serves as a trusted community gathering space. The initiative brought together educators, university partners, a teacher candidate, volunteers, and families to design and implement a summer literacy program grounded in belonging, care, and meaningful engagement. The work reflects a shift away from deficit-based perspectives toward an asset-based approach that recognizes and builds on community strengths. Drawing on partnership scholarship, the project positions literacy development as a shared, relational process rather than the sole responsibility of formal institutions (Carter, 2014; Eisler, 2015). In contrast to hierarchical models of instruction, responsibility for learning is distributed across educators, families, and community members, with partnership serving as both a relational and structural framework guiding the design and implementation of the literacy initiative (Eisler, 2015).

### **Problem Identification and Context**

Following pandemic-related disruptions, educators in the community observed changes in students' literacy engagement and confidence. These observations were consistent with broader research documenting interrupted reading development during COVID-19 (Domingue et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Local teachers noted reduced stamina

for independent reading, greater hesitation during oral reading, and inconsistent development of foundational literacy skills.

These patterns were not created by COVID-19 alone, but the pandemic intensified existing inequities. Pre-existing barriers, including limited access to books, fewer structured summer learning opportunities, and transportation challenges, became more pronounced during and after the pandemic. In this setting, transportation and childcare constraints affected families' ability to participate in summer programming, limiting access to enrichment experiences that could support literacy development.

At the same time, the community held significant assets. The church provided a familiar and trusted setting for participating children and families in the surrounding rural area. Volunteers brought diverse experiences and relational capacity. University partnerships offered instructional and organizational support. Asset-based community development emphasizes identifying and mobilizing these strengths rather than focusing only on needs and deficits (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). These principles guided the design of the literacy initiative.

### **Project Aims**

The project team established a primary aim: to increase reading engagement and confidence by 20% over six weeks among participating students in rising kindergarten through sixth grade. The project team established a primary aim: to increase reading engagement and confidence by 20% over six weeks among students in rising kindergarten through sixth grade. Rising kindergarten refers to children who are age-eligible to enter kindergarten in the upcoming fall (typically pre-kindergarten age, with varied prior early learning experiences). Engagement was defined as observable participation in literacy activities and time spent reading, while confidence was defined as students' willingness to engage in reading tasks independently and publicly (Guthrie, 2002; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

The team also identified several secondary aims connected to practical indicators of literacy interaction, access to texts, and sustainability. Strengthening caregiver-child literacy interactions was examined through parent reports of shared reading and literacy-related conversations at home. Increasing access to high-interest and culturally relevant texts was examined by tracking the number and variety of books distributed through weekly literacy bags. Building sustainable partnerships was examined through documented participation by community members, educators, families, and university partners, as well as commitments to continue the program beyond the initial implementation.

## **Methods**

This study was conducted as a mixed-methods quality improvement project using the Model for Improvement framework (Langley et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2014). The project combined simple quantitative indicators of participation and reading growth with qualitative data from observations, reflection sessions, and parent feedback. The purpose was not to test a controlled intervention or estimate causal effects, but to develop, implement, and refine a community-based literacy program in response to local needs. This approach aligns with improvement science, which prioritizes practical change in real-world contexts over experimental generalization (Bryk et al., 2015).

### ***Setting and Participants***

The program took place in a rural church facility in the southeastern United States. The setting was selected because it was familiar to participating families, accessible within the local area, and large enough to support multiple literacy activities at the same time. The church functioned not only as a physical location but also as a relational anchor that helped foster trust, continuity, and participation across the program.

Sixty-three students in rising kindergarten through sixth grade participated in the program. Students were recruited through local schools, community networks, and

word-of-mouth outreach. Participation was free of charge. The group included students with varied reading abilities and prior educational experiences.

The instructional team included certified teachers, university partners, and trained community volunteers. The university partnership consisted of a staff member and an undergraduate teacher candidate enrolled in an elementary education program with a concentration in science and literacy. As part of an environmental literacy course internship, the teacher candidate worked with volunteers in the garden and kitchen to co-plan and lead hands-on lessons on planting, harvesting, and preparing healthy foods. Certified teachers and university partners provided instructional leadership and coordination, while the teacher candidate and volunteers supported small-group instruction, relationship-building, and activity facilitation. Families contributed through communication, feedback, and home literacy activities. This structure reflects a partnership model in which each group contributed distinct expertise and support.

By the time the program began in June 2021, masks were not required. Even so, organizers remained attentive to student health and safety throughout the program. Educators and volunteers monitored routines and reinforced precautions such as hand washing before snacks and cooking activities. The church setting also allowed for both indoor and outdoor activities, which supported safe and responsive program implementation.

### ***Intervention***

The program was implemented as a six-week summer experience operating four days per week for approximately three hours each day. Each day followed a consistent routine that included an opening community-building activity, a read-aloud and discussion, small-group literacy instruction, independent reading time, and a hands-on literacy-integrated activity such as cooking, gardening, or storytelling. Small-group sessions took place at reading stations led by either a certified teacher or a trained volunteer.

Instruction incorporated foundational reading practices such as guided reading, fluency support through repeated and supported oral reading, and comprehension instruction consistent with the National Reading Panel (2000). These practices were embedded within meaningful and socially engaging activities rather than taught in isolation. A community garden activity, for example, supported vocabulary, oral language, and writing through observation, discussion, labeling, and journaling. Cooking activities supported oral language, procedural reading, and collaborative meaning-making through recipes and discussion. Table 1 presents a representative daily schedule for program participants.

**Table 1**

*Representative Daily Literacy Routine*

Time	Activity
9:00-9:20 a.m.	Community-building / outdoor play
9:20-9:40 a.m.	Whole-group literacy lesson
9:40-11:00 a.m.	Rotating literacy stations and literacy-integrated enrichment
11:00-11:30 a.m.	Snack and social interaction
11:30-11:45 a.m.	Craft or literacy-integrated activity
11:45 a.m.-12:00 p.m.	Whole-group closing activity

*Note.* Rotating stations typically included teacher-led literacy instruction, guided reading or word work, independent or supported reading, and literacy-integrated enrichment such as gardening or cooking.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy shaped both text selection and instructional design by connecting literacy learning to students' identities, interests, and community experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017). Asset-based pedagogy was reflected in the use of storytelling, family knowledge, and local experiences as resources for learning (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992). Books and literacy activities were selected collaboratively by teachers and volunteers based on student

interest, accessibility, and cultural relevance.

### ***Quality Improvement Procedures***

The project used weekly Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles to support continuous refinement. Areas for improvement were identified through observation, attendance patterns, reflection notes, and team discussion rather than a single predetermined focus. Each week, the instructional team reviewed what had been observed, selected a practical focus (e.g., increasing participation during independent reading, improving transitions, or adjusting groupings), and identified changes to test. The team then implemented those changes, reviewed outcomes, and determined whether to continue, revise, or replace the strategies.

Instructional changes were not standardized throughout the six-week cycle. Teachers and volunteers used professional judgment to adjust instruction in response to student feedback. While changes were not formally quantified, common shifts included increased small-group instruction, adjustments to text difficulty, greater student choice, and more opportunities for discussion and hands-on literacy activities. These decisions were guided by daily observations of student engagement and confidence.

### ***Weekly Reflection and Continuous Improvement***

Weekly reflection sessions, which lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, were facilitated by the project coordinator. Teachers, volunteers, and teacher candidates participated in these sessions. Although conversational in structure, the sessions were guided by consistent reflection prompts, including: What patterns were observed in student engagement? Which activities appeared to support participation most effectively? Where did students seem hesitant or frustrated? What adjustments might strengthen access, confidence, or flow in the following week? These discussions supported shared sensemaking and responsive planning, allowing the team to refine instructional approaches in alignment with project goals.

### ***Data Sources and Measures***

Data collection included both process and outcome measures. Process data included daily attendance records, volunteer logs, instructional checklists, and weekly reflection notes. These sources were used to document participation, monitor implementation, and identify patterns that informed ongoing program improvement.

Quantitative outcome data focused on accessible indicators of literacy participation and reading development. These included participation rates, time spent independent reading and observed changes in oral reading speed and accuracy during instructional activities. Student confidence was documented through a structured rubric; however, ratings were informed by educators' and volunteers' ongoing observations of student behaviors, engagement, and willingness to participate in reading activities over time. While efforts were made to support consistency through shared review of the rubric and sample scenarios, these ratings should be understood as practice-based judgments rather than formalized assessment measures.

Student attitudes toward reading were examined using an adapted version of the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990). Parent feedback was collected through open-ended questionnaires regarding children's reading habits, interests, and literacy-related interactions at home. Qualitative field notes documented student engagement, peer interaction, affective responses, and notable shifts in participation across the program.

### ***Data Analysis***

Quantitative data were reviewed as descriptive indicators of change across the six-week program. Attendance and participation records were summarized across program days. Reading engagement was examined by comparing early-program and late-program patterns in participation and independent reading time (Guthrie, 2002; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Oral reading records were reviewed across the program period to identify changes in reading speed and accuracy.

Confidence ratings were analyzed by comparing early and end-of-program observations to identify overall patterns in students' willingness to engage with reading tasks. Given the observational and practice-based nature of these ratings, findings related to confidence are interpreted as indicative of general trends in student engagement and disposition toward reading rather than precise, standardized measures of self-efficacy.

## **Results**

Results indicated that reading engagement increased by 27% over the six-week program, based on combined measures of participation and time spent independent reading. This increase exceeded the project's initial goal. Engagement gains were reflected in increased time on task during independent reading and more consistent participation across literacy stations (Guthrie, 2002; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). By the final two weeks of the program, instructional logs and observational records suggested more sustained independent reading and more frequent self-selection of texts than were observed during the first week of implementation.

Confidence ratings also increased across the program period. Early observations frequently noted hesitation during oral reading and reluctance to read aloud in group settings. By the end of the program, many students demonstrated greater willingness to take risks in reading, including volunteering to read aloud, initiating peer support, and participating more actively in discussions, a pattern consistent with growing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Parent feedback further supported these observations, particularly in relation to students who initially demonstrated anxiety or hesitation. One parent shared, "My anxious daughter was welcomed with open arms. She had so much fun that she is already asking to return next year. She proudly shared what she learned during gardening week and planted tomatoes and basil at home," suggesting increased confidence, engagement, and transfer of learning beyond the program setting.

Instructional records further suggested improvement in oral reading speed and accuracy over the course of the program. Teachers and volunteers documented fewer pauses, improved phrasing, and increased fluency, all of which are commonly associated with developing reading proficiency (Rasinski, 2012). This was particularly evident among students who had initially demonstrated lower reading confidence. Parent perspectives also highlighted perceived continuity of academic growth. As one parent, who identified as an educator, noted, “I appreciated how the camp sustained literacy growth through high-quality reading, intentional word work, and structured writing practice. It kept academic momentum going while nurturing confidence and joy.”

Attendance remained consistently high throughout the six weeks, with most students attending regularly across program days. This sustained participation suggests that the program structure and activities were engaging and accessible for families.

Qualitative findings provided additional insight into these changes. Students frequently described the program as a place where they felt comfortable and supported, suggesting that emotional safety played a role in increased participation. Engagement was particularly evident during activities that connected to students’ interests and experiences, such as cooking and gardening. Students also demonstrated growing confidence through peer collaboration, willingness to read aloud, and increased leadership in discussions and group activities.

## **Discussion**

This project contributes to partnership studies by demonstrating how literacy development can be organized through relational, community-centered structures that expand access and redistribute responsibility across participants. Rather than locating literacy support solely within formal schooling, the initiative positioned educators, families, volunteers, and community members as co-educators. In doing so, the project offers a concrete example of how partnership-oriented approaches can operate in everyday educational contexts and reshape how learning is supported.

The findings are consistent with research demonstrating that access to meaningful literacy experiences outside of school plays a critical role in reading development (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003, 2018; Cooper et al., 1996; Guthrie, 2002; Kim, 2006; Neuman & Celano, 2012). In this setting, literacy learning was embedded within relationships, shared experiences, and locally meaningful activities. This structure supported not only reading development but also engagement, confidence, and a sense of belonging. These outcomes reinforce the importance of moving beyond remediation-focused models toward approaches that recognize and build on students' strengths, identities, and community contexts.

Partnership functioned as the organizing structure of the initiative, shaping both program design and daily practice. Responsibility for literacy learning was shared rather than centralized, with different participants contributing distinct forms of knowledge and support. Educators provided instructional expertise, families contributed insight into children's experiences and interests, and community members supported relational and experiential learning opportunities. Within this structure, literacy development emerged through shared responsibility, relational trust, and ongoing interaction, rather than through the delivery of instruction alone.

This approach aligns with partnership education and transformative education scholarship, which emphasizes mutuality, shared power, and relational ways of knowing (Carter, 2014; Eisler, 2015). The church setting was central to this work. It functioned not simply as a site for program implementation, but as a trusted community space that supported access, strengthened relationships, and fostered shared ownership of children's learning. These conditions contributed to sustained participation and meaningful engagement across the program.

Taken together, these findings suggest that partnership-oriented approaches can serve as a viable structural response to educational inequities in this rural community. By expanding access to learning opportunities while maintaining the relational and

cultural contexts in which learning occurs, the program supported both academic development and student well-being.

### ***Lessons Learned and Sustainability***

Collaboration among community members, educators, families, and university partners was central to the success of the program. An asset-based approach shifted the focus from remediation to engagement, which supported both participation and confidence. Hands-on, meaningful literacy experiences were particularly effective in sustaining student interest. The program also highlighted the importance of maintaining clear health and safety routines in community-based settings, even when masking was not required.

Challenges included the need for additional volunteer training and ongoing transportation barriers for some families. Addressing these challenges will be important for future iterations of the program.

The program has been sustained through continued community commitment, integration into teacher preparation experiences, and ongoing planning for funding and expansion. The work suggests that sustainability depends not only on resources but also on the strength of the relationships that support shared responsibility over time.

### ***Limitations***

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this quality improvement project. First, the project was conducted within a single rural community and involved a relatively small sample of participants. As a result, findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to other settings with different demographic, geographic, or institutional characteristics. Quality improvement work is designed to address local problems and improve practice within a specific context rather than to produce broadly generalizable results (Bryk et al., 2015; Langley et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2014).

Second, the absence of a comparison or control group limits the ability to attribute observed changes solely to the intervention. Improvements in reading engagement, confidence, and oral reading performance may have been influenced by multiple factors, including maturation, increased attention during a structured summer program, or prior instructional experiences. This limitation is consistent with the applied nature of quality improvement approaches, which prioritize iterative improvement over experimental control (Taylor et al., 2014).

Third, several outcome measures relied on observational data and practitioner-developed tools, including the confidence rating scale and daily engagement logs. While these measures provided valuable, context-sensitive insight, they may be subject to observer bias or variability in interpretation. Efforts were made to increase consistency through shared rubrics and collaborative reflection. Still, future iterations of the project would benefit from additional standardized measures alongside local indicators (McKenna & Kear, 1990).

Fourth, data collection occurred over a relatively short period of six weeks. Although short-term gains in engagement and reading performance were observed, the study does not provide evidence of long-term impacts on reading achievement or sustained literacy behaviors. Research on summer learning suggests that both gains and losses can occur over time, underscoring the importance of longitudinal follow-up (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2018).

Finally, project leaders served as both implementers and evaluators, which introduces the potential for bias in interpretation. While reflective practices and triangulation across multiple data sources were used to strengthen credibility, future studies may benefit from incorporating external evaluators or additional forms of independent review.

Despite these limitations, the project offers useful insight into how community-based, asset-oriented partnerships can support literacy engagement and reading development

in applied settings. The findings contribute to a growing body of work that highlights the importance of context, relationships, and adaptability in educational improvement efforts.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Findings from this project suggest that community-based literacy initiatives can play a meaningful role in addressing educational inequities. Asset-based approaches that center relationships, identity, and engagement may support both academic and social-emotional outcomes. Partnerships among community organizations, schools, families, and universities can strengthen both program design and long-term sustainability.

Partnership within this project was characterized by shared decision-making, reciprocal contributions, and the integration of community knowledge into program design. This orientation may be especially valuable in rural settings, where trusted local institutions and strong relational networks can serve as foundations for educational recovery and renewal.

### **Conclusion**

This quality improvement project shows that literacy development can be supported through community-based approaches that extend beyond the classroom and draw on the strengths of local relationships. By building on community assets and using culturally sustaining practices, the program created opportunities for students to engage with reading in ways that felt meaningful and connected to their everyday experiences.

The findings also point to the role of partnership in shaping how literacy support is organized. When educators, families, and community members share responsibility for learning, access to literacy experiences increases, and students have more opportunities to participate, take risks, and grow in confidence. In this context, literacy learning becomes a shared, relational process rather than an isolated instructional task.

These insights are especially relevant in rural communities, where resources may be limited but strong relationships and community networks are already in place. Approaches that build on those connections offer a practical way to support literacy development while remaining responsive to local contexts. More broadly, this work adds to ongoing conversations about how community-rooted efforts can support more equitable and responsive approaches to literacy learning.

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Her scholarship draws on critical theory, narrative inquiry, and practice-based inquiry to explore literacy, educational policy, teacher agency, and the role of care in learning spaces. Her recent work has examined early childhood education, professional learning, and community-driven approaches to educational recovery and improvement.

A frequent presenter at national and regional conferences, Dr. West advocates for equity-focused leadership and community-based approaches to learning. Her work reflects a belief in the power of relationships and collective responsibility to transform educational spaces. Whether teaching, writing, or volunteering, Dr. West is committed to creating environments where all learners are seen, heard, and valued.

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