



# putting our questions at the center

## Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowships

by Sara L. Hill, Susan Matloff-Nieves, and Lena O. Townsend

*“My experience in the Research Fellowship made me feel like a knowledge maker.” —RBF Fellow*

Once a motley mix of afterschool, before-school, summer, and weekend programs, the out-of-school-time (OST) field is fast consolidating. As in other emerging fields, efforts to professionalize are gaining momentum; the field now boasts several professional certificates as well as degree programs<sup>1</sup>. Strong emphasis has been placed on in-service professional development<sup>2</sup>, and a wide range of models for both content

and service delivery have emerged. Yet these models have not necessarily capitalized on the best of teacher inquiry methods, nor have they reaped the benefit of studies of teacher development and teacher education. In addition, OST staff, who come from a range of backgrounds and have varying expertise, are often viewed from a deficit perspective, being seen as unprofessional and unknowledgeable even when they have advanced degrees in their fields.

Particularly at this critical moment in its development, the OST field must be shaped by a range of actors—not only university researchers, government

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officials, policymakers, and funders, but also practitioners who work directly with children and youth. We should acknowledge the expertise of OST practitioners, recognizing that they are not merely passive receivers of research and policy but also actors who engage in making sense of their experiences. In order to advance in their field, professionals must assume the stance of knowledge makers, rather than just consumers of knowledge generated by others. Practitioner research or inquiry—an approach with a long history in in-school professional development that is less well known in the OST world—is one way to give the insiders who work in OST programs the opportunity to help shape and define their field. The Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship encourages and supports such practitioner research. Born of a fellowship program based in New York City, the model now being expanded to a national presence has shown early promise in its effects on OST staff members and their programs.

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### Democratizing Research

The Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship is modeled on a successful program developed by the Robert Bowne Foundation in New York City. The fellowship is part of the Afterschool Matters Initiative, a research and dissemination project that includes a national research grant as well as this publication, *Afterschool Matters*. The fellowship aims to democratize research and the research process and to contribute to the OST knowledge base in order to improve practice and inform policy.

The goals of the practitioner fellowship are to:

- **Support a community of practitioners** to study effective practices and to investigate the structures in which effective practice happens—at the level of the program, the activity, the curriculum, and the individual. The end result is the creation of sustainable networks, such as ongoing groups of practitioner-researchers.
- **Disseminate and share** program improvement strategies through such products as briefing papers, events, curricula, and articles for professional journals. Venues for dissemination may include presentations for parents, presentations at professional meetings (including electronic conferences), or articles in newsletters and newspapers.

- **Create opportunities for in-service training and project development** that can then be brought back to OST programs.

The Robert Bowne Foundation's practitioner fellowship program became the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship under the aegis of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at Wellesley College. Working in partnership with the National Writing Project (NWP), NIOST has expanded the fellowship to Berkeley, California, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with plans to expand annually to two additional cities in which NWP has a presence.

The fact that NIOST and NWP share the same philosophy about long-term practitioner inquiry was a critical element in matching the two organizations. Both also have long histories of working in professional development, with schoolteachers in the case of NWP and with OST practitioners in the case of NIOST. Both organizations understand the importance of sustaining connections between research and practice. These common elements provide a basis for success for the practitioner fellowship.

### Program Context

Because the National Writing Project is locally based at universities—in this case the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP) and the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP)—it can provide space as well as personnel and other resources. Locating the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship at universities provides an additional benefit: the option of providing course credit or integrating with a professional certificate program.

Another piece of the overall strategy is to fit the fellowship into existing networks of youth-serving programs and intermediary organizations that provide resources and professional development to the OST field. These organizations serve the critical purpose of recruiting potential fellows, as well as providing venues for fellowship events. For example, in Philadelphia, PhilWP is working with the Out-of-School Time Resource Center, which is helping to create an evaluation of the fellowship as well as providing critical information regarding the state of OST in Philadelphia.

## Program Design

The fellowship, a year-long project, works with 10–15 OST practitioners selected through an application process. These fellows come from a variety of nonprofit organizations, including community-based and school-based agencies and weekend, afterschool, and summer programs. The programs provide a range of OST services to children and youth, including community and civic involvement, arts and media, casework and social work, academic support, and sports and recreation.

Participants in the fellowship come from a variety of backgrounds: community organizing, the arts, literacy, social work, and recreation, to name a few. Once they submit an application, potential fellows are interviewed over the telephone by the national fellowship coordinator. This interview provides an opportunity to clarify the major commitment involved in the fellowship and to verify that fellows will be able to fit the work into their busy schedules. Once selected, the fellows meet twice a month, usually in the morning. They receive a small stipend for their attendance.

During the fellowship sessions, participants discuss assigned readings: professional articles and chapters from books on practitioner inquiry. A strong experiential emphasis means that fellows practice inquiry methods, such as observation and interviewing techniques, at their own programs. They generate questions based on their practice, design a research project, and begin to gather data at their programs. Throughout the fellowship year, participants write reflective essays as well as more formal research pieces. During the summer, fellows attend a writing retreat. The culminating event is a research roundtable at which fellows present their work to an audience of youth agency staff, funders, and researchers.

Fellows have initiated a wide range of research projects that were intimately connected to their own practice, addressing the essential and troubling questions that arise in any OST program. Some of these studies and their findings are also applicable to in-school programs. Research topics have included:

- The challenges and benefits of hiring youth as staff at OST programs
- Children's need for play during out-of-school time versus an academic agenda
- How the arts can support youth development as well as school achievement and literacy
- Gender-based OST programming

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## Facilitators

National Writing Project facilitators are highly experienced in creating inquiry opportunities for in-school teachers and in promoting sustainable impact in the quality of teaching and learning. However, in the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship, they have had a fairly steep learning curve to understand the somewhat different reality of OST practitioners. One approach to mitigate this gap has been to tap the experience of previous Robert Bowne Foundation (RBF) fellows who had fortuitously relocated to the expansion cities. In the Bay Area, a past RBF fellow was hired as a co-facilitator. In PhilWP, an RBF fellow met with PhilWP facilitators to help inform the planning process. This practice of using past fellows fits the NWP model, in which outstanding participants

from previous NWP teacher inquiry institutes serve as co-facilitators. Recruiting practitioner fellows from the first cohort in the expansion cities as co-facilitators is thus likely to be a natural part of the hiring practice for future rounds of the fellowship.

## Making a Difference for OST Staff and Programs

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time and the National Writing Project are collaborating to expand the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship because its approach has proven to make a difference in the practice of participating OST staff. Participants in the New York City fellowship have identified significant areas of growth, and one OST program studied the benefits of having several staff members participate in the fellowship.

## Staff Impact

A formative assessment of the New York City fellowship on which the national program is modeled studied the effect of the fellowship on participants' attitudes and practice. Structured telephone interviews with 31 fellows from three cohort-years asked for their views on their professional advancement and career change, any change in their view of themselves as researchers, and their understanding of the role of research in their own practice. Fellows were also asked whether their participation in the fellowship had changed their own practice and whether the fellowship had an effect on their organizations.

**Professional advancement.** Fully 97 percent of past fellows attributed positive change in their professional lives to their participation in the fellowship. Some

had been accepted into doctoral programs or had an article published in a professional journal; others had gotten a new job or been promoted.

**Program improvement.** Over half of the fellows indicated that, as a result of their participation, they were able to improve the design of their OST programs. One-third said they were able to change or improve staff development.

**Transformation.** Over half of the fellows stated that their participation in the fellowship led them to think of themselves as researchers. Others said that they deepened their understanding of research and became more critical consumers of research.

**Social networking.** The majority of the fellows found that the face-to-face monthly meetings broke down their professional isolation, enabling them to become a network of support for one another. They also said that the group meetings introduced them to new materials and new ideas.

**Writing improvement.** The writing retreat held at the end of the fellowship year was overwhelmingly viewed as a critical experience, with 71 percent of respondents ranking it as “extremely important.” The retreat affirmed that what they were doing was “valued” and “taken seriously.” Several fellows said that the retreat helped them overcome challenges they had previously experienced with writing.

### **Program Impact**

One New York City OST program studied the effect of having sent four staff members, including the assistant executive director of its Youth Services department, to the practitioner fellowship that was the precursor to the national program. The Queens Community House (QCH, formerly Forest Hills Community Center) is a multi-service organization serving Queens, New York. Founded in the tradition of settlement houses, the organization works to strengthen local communities as well as to provide services to individuals and families. QCH has a strong youth development approach and a commitment to developing staff, many of whom are neighborhood residents.

Susan Matloff-Nieves, the assistant executive director who participated in the first year of the fellowship, conducted interviews and staff observations to assess the outcomes of staff participation in the fellowship.

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**Staff transformation.** Staff who participated in the fellowship came to see themselves as researchers. The fellowship’s emphasis on writing helped them hone their skills. Staff members said that they became more comfortable as consumers of research and more critical of research when they read it; they felt they were better able to evaluate the quality of studies and were more critical of how data is reported and interpreted.

**Staff advancement.** The fellowship affected participating staff members both as professionals and as people. One of the fellows went on to finish her long-incomplete master’s thesis. Another enrolled in and completed a second master’s program and then won an award to further her research. Two staff members had papers accepted for publication in peer-reviewed professional journals.

**Job satisfaction.** The fact that QCH encouraged staff to apply for the fellowship made the staff members feel valued. They felt nurtured by the opportunity even though the week-to-week experience was often stressful and demanding. They also enjoyed the opportunity to connect with other OST professionals and well-known national researchers in the research roundtable.

The research also revealed outcomes for the Youth Services department as a whole. The staff now regularly gather data. Their understanding of what constitutes data has been broadened and refined. They also engage youth in gathering and analyzing data. In another example of increased staff capacity, a fellow designed a survey to measure the quality of her program and analyzes the data for use in continuous program improvement. At least one staff member has used the data collection methods learned in the fellowship to strengthen testimony to city officials, confidently using multiple sources of data, both quantitative and qualitative. Another staff member who prepares reports for a federal demonstration project quickly assembles and analyzes multiple sources of data to create comprehensive and informative reports.

Another influence of the fellowship is on staff development. The fellowship’s seminar format has served as a model for small-group staff development sessions. As in the fellowship, Youth Services staff now read professional articles as launching points for discussions on key issues in the field.

## Taking the Next Step

Expanding the practitioner fellowship into a national program—sponsored by two seasoned professional development organizations, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time at Wellesley College and the National Writing Project—will strengthen the OST field and support individuals who carry out the complex work of youth development. The predecessor fellowship has had a positive impact on the majority of participants, helping them advance both professionally and academically.

The Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship is particularly advantageous to mid-career professionals with a lot of training who need to advance to the next level by becoming practitioner-researchers who write about and disseminate their work. The fellowship incorporates the elements needed to enable seasoned practitioners to grow and move into new roles:

- A trusted network of like-minded professionals
- Intensive, long-term professional development
- A focus on the necessary concrete skills of writing and data collection
- The challenge of adding the role of researcher to practitioners' identities

For more information about the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship, contact Sara Hill, [sara@sarahill.net](mailto:sara@sarahill.net).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the work of the City University of New York Youth Studies Certificate program (currently the Department of Youth and Community Development [DYCD] Scholars), Center for Afterschool Excellence, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time at Wellesley College, and the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the large in-service offerings of The After School Corporation (TASC) in New York City.