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Building Employability Skills in Family Literacy Programs: Lessons from the Toyota Family Learning Program

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The recent enactment of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is prompting adult basic education and family literacy programs to more intentionally focus on supporting adult learners to transition to family sustaining employment. This change directly affects family literacy practitioners who primarily work with under-skilled or undereducated adults living below the poverty line. Furthermore, many of the parents enrolled in family literacy programs are immigrants and mothers who may have missed formal education opportunities and lack mainstream employment experience. To enter postsecondary education or training programs that result in industry recognized certification or degrees required for family sustaining wage jobs, a majority of parents enrolled in family literacy programs will first need to further develop basic employability and academic skills. Growth in unskilled jobs appears to be keeping pace with the increase in middle skilled jobs. Family literacy programs that include an adult basic education component are critically important because they can provide opportunities for parents to pursue additional training or education needed for skilled employment. To be competitive for skilled employment, many family literacy participants need guidance and intentional instruction in basic skills, English language development (in the case of immigrant students), and employability skills. In addition, family literacy practitioners can provide vital transition support to help participants find employment in an industry with a career path, postsecondary opportunities, or further training. This brief draws on lessons learned from an ongoing formative evaluation of the National

Center for Families Learning (NCFL) Toyota Family Learning program. The evaluation seeks to identify promising practices for integrating employability skills development into programming that supports parent and child literacy and family learning—core principles of family literacy programming.

A Brief Overview of Toyota Family Learning

Toyota Family Learning (TFL) uses an intergenerational approach to educational programming for low-income families in diverse settings. Seventeen programs across the U.S. have been engaged in both rolling out the TFL programming and the Goodling-led evaluation. These 17 programs are run by libraries, K-12 school districts, and community based organizations. Each provider designs the program to fit the needs of the families they serve and the structure of their local organization. TFL uses traditional family literacy components, Parent and Child Together Time® (PACT) and Parent Time, with two new innovative components: Family Service Learning and Family Mentoring. Early childhood education and adult education are incorporated at each site as appropriate. Some organizations partner with other entities to offer full services; for example the Las Vegas based Public Education Foundation partners with

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the local school district and community college. PACT involves parents and children learning together with children taking the lead on activities. Parent Time focuses on parenting skills, life skills, navigating schooling, and community involvement (National Center for Families Learning, 2003). Family Mentoring pairs family units to create an intentional one-on-one relationship, wherein families can work on school

Changing Policy

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was reauthorized in 2014. Title II, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), portion of this act intends to support adult's employability, self-sufficiency, and the educational development of all members of families (Department of Education, 2015). WIOA has a focus on employability in all programs, not merely programs related to career development, professional or vocational training, in order to increase family educational outcomes.

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—the reauthorized No Child Left Behind Act—requires 1% Title I district set aside to fund family engagement strategies, inclusive of consulting parents when planning parent engagement activities.

activities, serve as advisory resources, and extend school relationships beyond the classroom. Family service-learning projects are based in the service-learning research literature, are student-driven, and designed to build leadership skills, social capital, and a sense of belonging (Cramer & Toso, 2015). NCFL provides tools and technical assistance for programs on a six-step process: Investigation, Planning & Preparation, Action, Reflection, Demonstration of Results & Celebration, and Sustainability (Cramer & Toso, 2015). Family Service Learning uses community engagement methods to help families participate in locally-based organized projects that are integrated into learning outcomes in TFL programs (Cramer & Toso 2015). We focus most of our attention on this component as the Goodling Institute evaluation of TFL has found family

service-learning in particular provides opportunities to engage parents in developing employability skills while tackling parent-identified community issues.

The Formative Evaluation

NCFL selected the Goodling Institute to conduct a formative evaluation focused on the implementation of the TFL program. Over the course of this evaluation (initiated in 2013 and to end in 2018) Goodling staff has collected qualitative and quantitative data using online surveys, site visits, interviews with administrators and staff, and focus groups with enrolled parents.

The demographics of the enrolled TFL parents make it an excellent setting to consider how employability is, and could be better, integrated into family literacy programs. WIOA requires that a priority population for services are those with the highest barriers to employment. The majority (67%) of the 2014-2015 TFL participants reported living below the 2015 poverty threshold, \$24,447 for a family of four (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Sixty-six percent of participants responded that they were employed; however only 47% of those worked more than 20 hours per week. Fifty-seven percent responded having not completed a high school degree; and 3% indicated no formal schooling. Similarly, 57.5% of participants reported speaking primarily a language other than English in the home. Any one of these factors can impede finding full-time stable family-sustaining wage work.

Initially the evaluation did not highlight employability skill outcomes; however, when coding Family Service Learning Reflection Logs, employability skills emerged as an incidental finding. Goodling Institute researchers then used the [Employability Skills Framework](#) developed by the Perkins Collaborative Resource Network in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education to further analyze and identify employability skill development in TFL programs. This framework emphasizes applied knowledge, building effective relationships, and workplace skills. In year two of the evaluation, Goodling Institute

Researchers coded and identified skills gained in each of these sectors, with an emphasis on transferable skills, such as soft skills, computer skills, critical thinking, and confidence (Lurette, Russell, Dugas, Chartier, & Mazuhelli, 2013). TFL participants reported gaining or developing organization and planning skills, teamwork skills, self-confidence, self-efficacy, sense of pride and worth, content knowledge, and leadership skills. These are rated as key employability skills by employers (Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, 2015) and are essential skills that support participants' in achieving their aspirations.

Employability Skills Framework

The Employability Skills Framework is a product of an OCTAE-funded project that culled educational and employment-driven skill lists to distill a standardized set of skills defined as “general skills that are necessary for success in the labor market at all employment levels and in all sectors.”ⁱ A consortium of businesses, adult and career and technical educators, and relevant non-profits informed this framework. The framework is organized around three general categories of skills: Applied Knowledge, Effective Relationships, and Workplace Skills. These are broken into nine key skills (e.g. critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills) that are comprised of skill subsets. For example, interpersonal skills includes understands teamwork and works with others; responds to customer needs; exercises leadership, negotiates to resolve conflict; respects individual differences. Figure 1 illustrates the three general skill categories and the nine key skill areas within those categories.

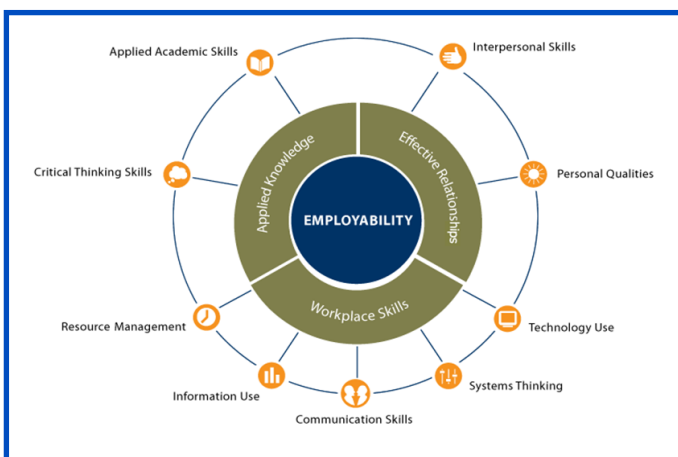


Figure 1: Employability Skills Framework. (Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, 2015)

Employability Skills Development in Context

Across the three years of the evaluation, a number of service-learning projects exemplified how employability skills can be developed without a work-based curriculum. Projects have addressed a variety of topics and goals, such as, breast cancer awareness, Internet safety awareness, beach and neighborhood cleanup, bullying awareness, local resource awareness, and healthy living campaigns. Regardless of topic—deciding on, planning, or carrying out these projects—participants have been required to develop and practice many skills that fall under the employability skill categories. In coding the qualitative data, we found that 29 of the 42 components were addressed in the service-learning process. Following are some examples from the crosswalk of the activities logged in the reflection and observation forms to the Employability Skills Framework’s Workplace Skills Category:

- **Resource Management:** Managing time, money, resources, and personnel. Family service-learning activities led by parents required participants to respect timelines, complete tasks within allotted time, manage resources to carry out activities (e.g., food, equipment, etc.) and determine how to collect, use, or allocate funds from activities (e.g., food drive, garage sale profits, raising funds, and buying supplies).
- **Information Use:** Locating, organizing, using, analyzing, and communicating information. Families engaged in planning, developing, organizing, researching, explaining, and presenting content and solutions for service-learning projects and home learning activities. Utilizing analytical skills, parents assessed information to determine steps needed to carry out their projects.
- **Communication Skills:** Communicating verbally, listening actively, comprehending written materials, conveying information in writing, and observing carefully. Participants engaged in discussion and presented information to other students, families, community members, and public officers about service-learning projects. They also needed to be aware of others’ intentions, feelings, and verbal and non-verbal communication. They also explored and

studied content-relevant resources (e.g., newspapers, websites) to inform their planning.

- **Systems Thinking:** Understanding and using systems, monitoring systems, and improving systems. Participants were coached and required to participate in a variety of roles as they carried out activities. These roles required participants to understand how each person fit into the completion of tasks. Participants continually assessed and evaluated the proper course of action to achieve targeted outcomes. They revised plans to ensure that the groups functioned efficiently. Furthermore, they not only needed to understand the dynamics of their group but also had to learn how local systems functioned in order to properly carry out community functions or draw on local resources.
- **Technology Use:** Understanding and using technology. Technology use is a vital employability skill. Participants in TFL were encouraged to use technological devices in the program and at home as learning tools and to research family mentoring and service-learning activities. Using the computer parents developed flyers, power point presentations, and wrote letters to request funds or to engage and inform others about their work. Parents also reported learning how to use office equipment and social media through project activities.

Employability Skills Development in Context: Learning Examples

The online participant reflection logs, observations, parent focus groups, staff interviews, and artefacts (e.g., PPTs, pictures, videos, documents) provided us with a robust view of the family service-learning projects allowing us to document the employability skills being developed through program projects. In order to better highlight how employability skills are embedded in this program, we draw on three family service-learning projects, the activities, and the employability skills that were identified as outcomes. The call-out boxes note key skills and competencies that were addressed in the seven-step service-learning process. Each program is used to illustrate one general category; this does not indicate that other skills and competencies were not practiced or

developed during the project.

Eastside House: Mott Haven Community Walk. Over the course of two years, parents investigated, planned, and carried out a neighborhood community drug awareness walk. This project required surveying community members for relevant local concerns, partnering with the local police force, problem-solving how to best present this collaborative project to local community members who were suspicious of law enforcement activities, developing and distributing informational materials, and organizing the event. Parents were required to be creative, educate themselves and others, access community resources, and determine a course of action.

Mott Haven Community Walk:

Applied Knowledge

- Uses reading & writing skills
- Uses scientific principles & procedures
- Thinks creatively
- Thinks critically
- Makes sound decisions
- Solves problems
- Reasons
- Plans/organizes

Change for Change: Lincoln Public Schools.

One Lincoln elementary school now has a walking track, in part, due to the Toyota Family Learning parents' service-learning project. Parents came up with the Change for Change student-based fundraising strategy and worked with the school to implement it. These parents took responsibility for the ongoing advertising campaign (posters and announcements), money collection, accounting, and reward system. Parents practiced workplace communication skills as they routinely talked to school staff and numeracy skills when they counted and recorded the daily donations, as well as, reconciled the bank deposit records with their records. These parents demonstrated persistence as they planned and carried out this project over two years, until the walking track was funded. Parents came to see themselves as an integral part of the school community, developing a sense of pride and self-worth

through their work and contribution to the school's infrastructure.

Lincoln Public Schools Change for Change:
Effective Relationships

- Understands teamwork and works with others
- Responds to customer needs
- Exercises leadership
- Demonstrates responsibility and self-discipline
- Works independently
- Demonstrates a willingness to learn
- Demonstrates integrity & professionalism
- Takes initiative
- Displays positive attitude and sense of self-worth

Metropolitan State University-Denver: Urban Gardening, Growing and Sharing.

This project focused on working with parents to learn about urban gardening practices, such as germination and growing season in the mountain west, nutritional benefits of gardening, vermiculture composting with worms, and aquaponics growing systems to increase their and other community members' participation in community and backyard gardens. As families became invested in the gardening activities they decided to share their experiences beyond the family literacy families. They helped with seedling sorting and distribution for families across school sites. As parents saw how the skills and knowledge they had gained translated into supporting other families to become invested in gardening and nutrition, they added a third phase to their service-learning project—teaching skills to others. With the help of their teachers, parents contacted a local elementary school and made arrangements to teach basic gardening skills to two elementary classes. This teaching experience moved beyond the traditional role of parent as helper, rather it was a bona fide guest teaching experience. For this teaching experience parents created and delivered a PowerPoint presentation bilingually. They coordinated collection and transportation of all materials and worked with all the classroom

children. Working through the seven steps of the service learning process as they carried out and extended their service learning project, parents needed to apply principles of teamwork and understand the systems and their role within systems (e.g., school system), take initiative, demonstrate professionalism, solve problems, and exercise leadership.

MSU Urban Gardening, Growing, and Sharing: **Workplace Skills**

- Manages time & resources
- Locates, analyzes, organizes & uses information
- Communicates information
- Communicates verbally
- Listens actively
- Comprehends written material
- Conveys information in writing
- Observes carefully
- Understands, uses, and improves systems
- Understands and uses technology

Conclusion

Family service-learning activities aim to build social capital and networks, particularly of ESL participants and recent immigrants. As participants became more informed about the issues and needs in their communities, they integrated into local institutions and gained job-seeking skills (Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy, 2015). Family service-learning activities involve teamwork, collaboration, self-monitoring, participation, problem solving, acceptance of others' ideas, leadership, and public presentations. Parents are required to negotiate and make collective decisions, as well as run meetings and carry out activities on a time schedule. This requires self- and team-management as well as consensus building. They explored sharing and supporting other parents in learning more about resources and negotiating systems, such as schools or local city institutions. While the evaluation did not measure to what extent an individual acquired or developed employability competencies; it is evident that participants were provided with guided and

autonomous opportunities to develop and practice them. To that end, we recommend that when learning or using employability skills, practitioners make explicit how the skills translate to the workplace. This will help learners identify transferable skills and enable them to talk about their skills. Identifying and describing one's work skills is often a key part of a job interview.

While TFL programming follows specified components—Family Service Learning, Family Mentoring, Parent Time, PACT Time®, and Home Learning Activities—, there are valuable lessons that practitioners and programs can use related to what is working in programs. Most importantly, it is possible to develop employability skills without neglecting the development of academic learning, particularly reading, writing, math, and scientific principles, in family literacy and family learning programs. Meanwhile, as participants in family literacy and family learning programs experience increases in confidence, self-efficacy, and negotiation skills as they navigate educational contexts with their children and family members, they are also gaining valuable employability skills. In emphasizing and connecting these “soft skills” directly to learners’ career goals, family literacy programs can help support learners’ access to employment opportunities while contributing to family cohesion, social development, and well-being.

Implementation Recommendations

The Goodling Institute researchers analyzed the preliminary findings of TFL programs and offer several recommendations to practitioners:

- Practice a gradual release model or supported planning process, wherein practitioners may initially structure the planning and activities of a service-learning project then gradually turn over planning, decision-making, and implementation activities to learners;
- Provide enough support and structure for learners to be able to make informed and independent decisions;
- Emphasize technology in family literacy and learning programs, including the use of office equipment, computers, and other devices;
- Meet parents and adult learners where they are,

particularly around timing and flexibility in project ideas;

- Intentionally incorporate literacy development into service-learning activities;
- Provide opportunities for learners to engage and make presentations to community leaders;
- Ensure that participants explore and learn relevant content;
- Offer structured opportunities that develop research skills, independent learning, and application of learning experiences;
- Make explicit links between learning activities, skill development, and employability so that learners can identify how skills built in family literacy are transferrable to workplace settings;
- Help parents build networks of employers, community organizations, schools, colleges, and parents or adult learners to enhance and expand professional connections and interactions.

Resources

Few resources exist that explicitly address family service-learning or building employability skills in the family literacy context. Below are few resources to help inform and guide programs wanting to embed employability skills in their programming.

- NCFL has developed resources that inform and support programs as they design and implement the service-learning component, such as *Family Service Learning: Background Knowledge and the Family Service Learning: Facilitator’s Guide* accessible at: <http://www.familieslearning.org/toyota/tfl-implementation-docs.html>
- Family Service Learning Brief <https://ed.psu.edu/goodling-institute/research/family-literacy-service-learning-brief>
- Parent Engagement and Leadership Opportunities: The benefits for parents, children, and educators <https://ed.psu.edu/goodling-institute/professional-development/practitioners-guide-6>
- NCFL Adult Educator Resources <http://familieslearning.org/our-solutions/educator-resources-adult-learners.html>
- LINC Family Literacy Resources http://literacy.kent.edu/Midwest/FamilyLit/familit_pract.html
- CAELA Family Literacy Resources http://www.cal.org/caela/tools/instructional/family_literacy.html
- Employability Skills Framework <http://cte.ed.gov/employabilityskills/>

Resources Continued

Project-based learning is similar to service-learning projects. Following are some resources that are useful for understanding and planning service-learning projects:

- <http://ncsall.net/index.php?id=384.html>
- http://www.bie.org/about/what_pbl

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ⁱ Skills for Career and College Readiness, Para 2 <http://cte.ed.gov/employabilityskills/>