THE CHILDREN'S INTEREST ON LIBRARIES AND TEACHERS' ROLE

BONTHA BHAGYA JYOTHI **M. L. I. Sc**

degalaratnaraju@gmail.com

Abstract:

The libraries in Pennsylvania play a major role in helping children to read. Previous evaluations of libraries, however, have often bypassed the part libraries play in improving children's literacy skills, focusing instead on the number of books circulated or patrons registered. This evaluation examines a crucial facet of libraries' services and teachers role: children's summer reading and preschool programs. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, this evaluation examines how children's preschool and summer reading programs contribute to their reading skills.

INTRODUCTION

Although often taken for granted, the libraries in Pennsylvania play a major role in helping children to read. Parents and teachers alike have long asserted that regular use of the local library improves children's reading dramatically.

Previous evaluations of libraries, however, have tended to bypass the part libraries play in improving children's literacy skills. Instead, most studies have concentrated on how well the institution itself runs, with emphasis placed on the number of books circulated or patrons registered.

This evaluation examines crucial, although often overlooked, library services: children's summer reading and preschool programs. These programs attract children who might not otherwise come to the library. As preschoolers, they visit the library for story hour with their parents or day-care center. As elementary and middle-school students, they are brought to the library by parents, camp counselors, or babysitters to participate in summer reading programs. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, this evaluation examines how library preschool and summer reading programs contribute to children's reading skills. A fullscale literature review illustrates recent research on how U.S. library programs impact children's literacy. A survey of Pennsylvania libraries offers insights into the scope and nature of children's reading programs. Observations and interviews in libraries in rural, suburban, and urban areas illustrate the formats and teaching methods used in such programs and the ways such programs contribute to reading achievement. An experimental study examines the difference in reading skills between those children who attend library summer reading programs and those who participate in no formal reading program. Taken together, the various components of this evaluation paint a rich and colorful picture of libraries contributing to the educational success of Pennsylvania's children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A survey of recent literature on libraries reveals that libraries are more than just repositories for books. They have historically helped many segments of the population develop literacy skills. For example, librarians at the turn of the century helped the large influx of immigrants acclimate to their new life in the United States. These early librarians were "pioneers of literacy training" (Marcum and Stone, 1991), called upon to "Americanize" both adults and children

The Goal: Promoting Literacy

According to Lyman (1977), libraries have always seen literacy for all people as a major objective. Libraries throughout the country have worked over the decades to "direct educational resources, human and material, in the libraries of the country toward helping every child, young person, and adult to learn to speak, read, write and compute—in brief, to learn how to learn… to develop a community-wide literacy system."

To achieve this legacy of literacy training, libraries have had several tasks:

- to provide services, materials, and opportunities for those who need them to develop literacy skills;
- to become part of the educational system;
- to extend traditional library functions (support and resources) to patrons with developing literacy skills;
- to try nontraditional ways of serving newly literate populations;
- to interpret resources;
- to be proactive in education, dissemination of information, and promotion of resource use; and
- to collaborate with other agencies in literacy programming

Weibel (1992) looked at the role of the library in promoting literacy. Libraries provide access to information about culture, society, economy, and history. The librarian serves as a "reader advisor" by suggesting and interpreting resources in the library. In addition, the library offers learning facilities and materials and promotes discussion through the resources in their collections.

Libraries have been particularly involved in promoting literacy in recent years as research has highlighted the growing problem of illiteracy in America (Lora, 1990). A growing awareness of a workforce unable to read well enough to perform jobs in a highly technological society has spurred many libraries to link with schools, businesses, and local volunteer groups to provide materials, referrals, and professional expertise on literacy.

The Populations Targeted

In their efforts to promote literacy throughout the country, libraries have focused on helping three segments of the population that need assistance in developing literacy skills: preschool and elementary school children, adults with poor reading skills, and people for whom English is a second language.

Preschool and Elementary School Children.

Research shows that it is particularly crucial to develop literacy skills during the early childhood and elementary school years. Reading probably accounts for about one third of a child's annual vocabulary growth (Anderson, 1995; Nagy & Herman, 1987). This in turn leads to substantial and permanent learning and greater school achievement.

Children from environments lacking in rich language experiences such as reading have shown gradual and linear declines in tests of preschool educational development (Burchinal, Lee, & Ramey, 1989). Once in place, these patterns have shown unwavering resistance to change (Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986). Children who start out slowly in tests of literacy skills often fail to catch up, thus falling further behind in school achievement. Exposing children to language and early literacy learning is critical to change the trajectory of academic failure that begins in early childhood and continues to spiral downward throughout later childhood and adulthood (Neuman, 1996).

libraries are well-positioned to expose children to great quantities of print and meaningful language opportunities during the crucial preschool and elementary school years. Research shows that children need exposure to a wide variety of high-quality books of various topics, genres, and perspectives in order to acquire literacy skills. They also need books that reflect the diverse and multicultural nature of our society—books in which they can see themselves and others like them (Neuman, 2000).

A growing body of research examines the widening gap between children who have access to reading materials and those who do not. "Access" has been given as a potential reason for differences among children's interactions, behaviors, and ultimately, achievement in school and life. Much research into parental involvement in children's reading achievement, for example, has focused on the individual parents' attributes (i.e., children of low-income households, single parents, and poorly educated mothers essentially add up to large risks for reading, and ultimately, school failure; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986). Studies suggest that, despite similar goals for their children, parents in low- and middle-class communities differ widely in the skills and resources they have at their disposal for upgrading their children's school performance (Lareau, 1989). Furthermore, Entwistle and her colleagues (1997) have suggested that children's achievement differences may be due in part to seasonal variations in educational opportunity. Children in needy areas, for example, do not have the resources they need to continue developing their literacy skills outside of school, especially in the summer.

Adults with poor literacy skills. Libraries' extend emergent literacy techniques in their work with adults who lack literacy skills. There are many adult literacy programs available today at libraries (Johnson & Cole, 1997; Lora, 1990; Seager, 1993; Thomas, 1993; Weibel, 1992; Zapata, 1994). Many programs focus on illiteracy, low-literacy, and reluctant adult readers; others have included discussions on "family literacy" (Fisher, 1999; McConnell & Rabe, 1999), stressing the importance of parental involvement if their children are to become fully literate. Programs such as Even Start, a family-centered education program administered by the Department of Education through local school districts, pair the library with other social agencies to deliver literacy training for parents of children ages one to seven (Padak, Rasinski, & Fike, 1997). Another program, "Creating Readers: Collaboration for Reading and Educational Success Through Libraries," brings libraries, families, schools, and local businesses together. The project asks families to sign one-year contracts with the library stating that they will foster literacy activities in the home and participate in library-sponsored activities and services (Russ, 1999). All of these programs inadvertently impact children's literacy learning by maintaining that parents are the first significant source of learning for their children (MacFarlane, 1994; McConnell & Rabe, 1999; Nespeca, 1996; Otto & Johnson, 1996).

English Language Learners. Library programs aimed at English language learners are also common. Many immigrant families use libraries to find reading/media materials in their native languages. They also use libraries (in conjunction with English as a Second Language programs) as resources for learning English and becoming proficient in reading and writing English (Marcum & Stone, 1991; Thomas, 1993; Zapata, 1994).

The Challenges Facing Libraries libraries' mission to ensure the literacy of our nation's children is a mighty task. Several researchers believe the success of this mission depends on libraries' willingness to collaborate with other community agencies (Lyman, 1977; Weibel, 1992). Working with outside agencies such as universities doing research on children's literacy or outreach programs with day-care centers or preschools coincides with the emergent literacy approach that many libraries have undertaken. (Dowd, 1997; Fehrenbach, Hurford, & Fehrenbach, 1998; Gorman, 1995). For older children, libraries need to coordinate services with local school librarians. Callison (1997) notes that libraries are increasingly called upon to meet educational demands, while information-use instruction. This change is reflected in the nature of children's programs. If anything, our need for libraries has increased in recent years. Weibel (1993) describes a "widening gap between the poorly educated populace and a society based on technology and quick and easy access to information." He argues for a collaboration between libraries and literacy programs, tutors, and the community. In the same vein, libraries are addressing the issue of "informational literacy," which includes knowing not only how to read and write but how to find information and use or evaluate it (Harada & Tepe, 1998; Salter & Salter, 1991).

Some critics, however, question how libraries see their role in literacy learning. According to Gorman (1995), librarians have been too narrowly focused on "the transition from

being unable to being able to read." By this definition, literacy is "a hurdle to be jumped, one that divides all humans into literate and illiterate." In truth, literacy is a life-long process that begins in early childhood and continues throughout a lifetime. Since libraries work with people of all ages, from infancy through adulthood, they would do well to adopt this perspective

OBSERVATIONS

In an effort to better understand the impact that preschool and summer reading programs have on children's developing literacy skills, we made on-site visits to libraries in different parts of the state. We selected 25 libraries throughout the state, using data gathered from the survey to focus on the most popular teaching methods and program formats. Our sample included rural libraries in Lancaster County, suburban libraries in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh areas, and urban locations in the Philadelphia and Scranton areas

The goal was to select libraries that reflect the diversity of Pennsylvania's population, ranging from the small to the large, the grand to the unassuming. We visited the stately Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood, frequented by families of professors from the surrounding prestigious universities; a small trailer in Quarryville, where children of Amish farmers come each week by horse and buggy to select their books; and the Bushrod Branch in northeast Philadelphia, a central meeting place for the many children of immigrant families who reside there. In all locations, we found preschool and summer reading programs offering children the best that Pennsylvania libraries has to offer: the chance to explore, dream, and discover through the world of books.

Methodology

In each library visited, we observed preschool and summer reading program sessions. We analyzed them for particular teaching methods and formats used and observed how children responded to such instruction. We also interviewed librarians and collected relevant materials (e.g., story extension materials, summer reading folders), which aided in our analysis. Finally, we interviewed scores of parents throughout the state. These interviews centered on how their children responded to preschool and summer reading programs, how many books the children read, and how they felt the programs affected their children's reading skills.

Challenges

We found that library programs do more than encourage a "love of reading." They offer priceless opportunities for children to develop literacy skills. These opportunities, we discovered, were sometimes planned and obvious, and sometimes subtle and unplanned.

1. Programs encourage children to spend time with books. A common theme among parents of children attending preschool and summer reading programs was that their children spend an

increased amount of time with books. These children not only read books; they browse in the stacks, listen to stories read by parents and librarians, and participate in activities surrounding book topics.

It is difficult to quantify the amount of time children spend with books; however, our observations and interviews revealed that children participating in summer reading and preschool programs spend a substantial amount of time reading.

- Children in the Mount Lebanon Library in Allegheny County compiled a paper chain of 3,500 links that wrapped around the entire children's section. Each link held the title of a book a child had read that summer.
- In Scranton, parent interviews revealed that elementary school children in the summer reading program read an average of 22.4 books. Preschoolers averaged over a hundred picture books in the summer months.
- In rural Quarryville, where reading is often the only diversion for Amish farm families, parental reports of children reading 10 books per week were very common.

As these findings suggest, summer reading clubs encourage children to read, and to read often. Research has shown that the amount of time children spend with books is crucial to reading achievement, and ultimately, to school achievement in general. Parents, children, and librarians report that the goals and structure of the summer reading program are very conducive to promoting reading. Nearly all of the parents said the incentives offered by the summer reading program are very attractive to children. A simple coupon for ice cream can often encourage the most reluctant child to read. As one parent of a seven-year-old boy said, "After reading eight books, he got a McDonald's coupon, pencils, and stickers. After 10 books, he got a certificate to a coal mine tour. He was thrilled! 'And all I had to do was read books,' he said."

2. Events get people into the library.

Not only do preschool and summer reading programs encourage children to spend more time with books, they also entice children and their caregivers into the library. As part of the summer reading programs, many libraries offer special events throughout the summer. Our visits to various libraries showed a diverse array of events, only limited by librarians' imaginations: arts and crafts sessions, balloon sculpting, picnics, magic shows, singers, animal visits, fire safety demonstrations, and games. These special summer events combine with the many preschool story hours and other regular yearly programming to encourage children and their families to visit the library.

Merely visiting the library encourages children to spend more time in a literacyenriched atmosphere, thus setting up the opportunity for them to browse and check out books and other materials. These events, however, often take what children learn through the books and extend it into a richer literacy experience. Our visits reveal these examples of how special events extended a child's reading experience:

- In the Mount Lebanon Library, more than 50 children attended a presentation by a representative from the Pennsylvania Trolley Museum. The speaker brought pictures depicting early days of the trolleys in Pittsburgh, as well as artifacts such as a real trolley bell and collector's token belt. She talked about the history of the trolley, let the children take turns ringing the trolley bell, and gave each a real trolley token. Afterwards, she pointed out some posters and other literature to read about trolleys and led the children in coloring their own paper trolley.
- In the Free Library of Philadelphia's Bushrod Branch, a favorite game played each week is "Human Tic Tac Toe." Questions center on popular children's books (Q: In the book "Molly's Pilgrim," who is Molly's Pilgrim? A: Her mom). Children are divided into Team X or Team O and take their places on the "board" after a correct answer
- In Leola, singer Bill Frye led almost 100 children in songs that explored the world of numbers. With an enthusiastic delivery and simple stories and songs, he encouraged children to find numbers in the world around them, encouraging children and parents to explore numbers through books in the library.

Activities extend the reading experience.

Preschool and summer reading programs encourage children to read books themselves and hear books read aloud. In addition, many programs offer activities that enrich the child's reading experience. These activities are often the same exercises found in elementary school reading classes and in preschools throughout the country. In some libraries, for example, children are required not only to read a book but also to write a short paragraph summarizing the book's main points. Other libraries require at least one art project, such as a diorama, painting, or sculpture, that illustrates a book the child read. These types of literacy-related activities have been shown to enhance a child's reading experience by giving greater meaning to the written word and extending a child's understanding of the story.

The typical preschool story hour also offers valuable literacy experiences. By reading books, telling stories, and reciting rhymes, librarians offer children a "leg up" in developing emergent reading skills, as we saw in this story hour at the Oakland branch of the Pittsburgh library.

Patty Kelly, a children's librarian with 20 years of experience, is leading the assembled toddlers in "The More We Read Together." Sticking with the summer reading program's theme (math), she picks several counting books ("Mouse Count" and "One Crow"). She then takes a poetry break ("Keep a poem in your pocket") and a final book ("Martha Counts Her Kittens"). "Let's see if we can count the kittens in the book," she asks the audience, who count along as one child lifts the flaps and finds the kittens around the house.

4. Programs encourage parents to become involved in children's reading.

A less obvious though immensely important way that preschool and summer reading programs impact children's literacy is by helping caregivers get involved in children's reading

habits. This theme was articulated in interviews with parents, grandparents, camp leaders, and nannies; parents especially said that they spend more time reading to their younger children as a result of their participation in the summer reading program. In addition, many report that they spend time having their older children read to them.

Other responses indicate that parents involved in library programs are quietly, yet strongly, engaged in their children's achievement. "I see what they are reading and sometimes try to read it first to see what it is about." Other responses, such as "I help them read tough words," suggest that parents are offering valuable assistance to their children in decoding words as they read. Another common refrain was "I help them pick out books." Guiding children in selecting books is an invaluable aid in their early efforts to read.

Finally, it appears that summer reading and preschool programs help parents by displacing other activities in which children might engage. When asked what children might be doing were they not involved in library programs, parents were quick to say the library offered more than the alternatives: "video games," "television," "hanging around the house," "fighting," and, last but not least, "driving me crazy!"

Conclusion

For many children, parents, and caregivers, preschool and summer reading programs offer pleasant, structured activities to engage children when they are not in school or preschool. Many parents also appreciate the library's efforts at encouraging their children to read. However, preschool and summer reading programs offer more than just a way to fill time. Our visits to libraries throughout the state show that these programs help develop strong reading skills in Pennsylvania's children. The programs encourage children to enjoy reading and give them opportunities to spend lots of time with books—a first step toward developing strong reading skills. Children also benefit from the rich literacy experiences afforded by the many special events and organized programs the library offers. Finally, parents of children engaged in preschool and summer reading programs appear to be strongly invested in their children's reading achievement. For thousands of children throughout Pennsylvania, preschool and summer reading programs offer a strong step up in their climb toward reading achievement, and ultimately, success in school.

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