Public Libraries as a Context for the Study of Learning and Development

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Abstract

Public libraries are ideal contexts for supporting child development and family involvement (Families and Work Institute, 2015; IMLS, 2013). Families with children often attend public libraries to participate in educational programming and experiences, yet university-based developmental scientists who study how people develop and adapt across the lifespan have not fully recognized them as a significant context for the study of learning and development. This reflective essay suggests that developmental scientists and public libraries can achieve mutual benefits through joint research and evaluation efforts within the library context. We illustrate this type of collaboration through a firsthand account of a university–library partnership developed to support family engagement in library settings that promotes optimal parenting and enhances children's school readiness.

Keywords: public library, early learning, community partnership

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Today's public libraries are built on a long history of providing free, equitable, and equal access to information for all people in the communities they serve (American Library Association, 2014). Despite adapting to social, historical, and technological changes over the decades, their core value remains the same: to serve as a community anchor that meets the local needs of individuals across all ages and stages of life, including children. In the early 2000s, many were writing about the demise of public libraries (Bruccoli, 2007). Shrinking budgets and a fear of decreasing interest in reading paper-based materials took a huge toll on this long-standing community institution. However, since that time, public libraries have adapted their service model to address a wider range of community needs. This expansion includes offering more experiences that encourage knowledge and skill building, often in the form of programming (Wiegand, 2015). For example, in 2012, there were 92.6 million attendees at the 4 million programs offered by U.S. public libraries (Swan et al., 2014). This represents an increase of 37.6% in attendance from 2004. Programs for families with children include storytimes, school readiness classes, hands-on activities (e.g., makerspaces, robotics), and parenting classes; libraries also provide enriching children's spaces with books and materials (e.g., puppets, puzzles) that encourage learning through play and hands-on exploration. These changes are supported by efforts from the American Library Association (ALA) campaign titled *Libraries Transform* designed to increase public awareness of the value, impact, and services provided by libraries. This campaign's key message states, "Libraries today are less about what they have for people and more about what they do for and with people" (ALA, 2016, "Key Messages").

Despite the demonstrated value of public libraries to families with children, and a focus on providing educational programming and experiences, there remains great untapped potential for university-based developmental scientists who study how people develop and adapt across the lifespan to recognize and engage with libraries as a significant context for the study of learning and development. Reflecting on our own experience developing a university–library partnership,

we argue that greater collaboration between developmental scientists and public libraries can produce mutual benefits through joint research and evaluation efforts within the library context. On the one hand, libraries can benefit by strategically developing and refining library-based programming that effectively promotes the well-being of families with children. On the other hand, developmental scientists can benefit by broadening their understanding of learning and other developmental processes within ecologically valid, informal learning settings that reach a broad segment of the population. In this reflective essay we will (a) discuss how the expanding and changing role of the public library in the 21st century positions it well for partnership with developmental scientists; (b) highlight the intersecting goals of developmental scientists and public libraries that support engaged scholarship; and (c) provide an example of a university–public library partnership conducting community-based research focused on improving the lives of families with young children.

Changing Role of Public Libraries in the 21st Century

Public libraries adapt and evolve according to the changing needs of their communities. This has been reflected in recent years by a shift from serving primarily as book-lending institutions to institutions that provide varied and innovative learning experiences, including programming targeting families with children (Gouzie, 2013; IMLS, 2013; Naidoo, 2014). Indeed, in recent years libraries have been increasingly recognized as ideal contexts for supporting the development of children (young children, youth, and teens) and family involvement (Families and Work Institute, 2015; IMLS, 2013).

With a long history of serving as community anchors, public libraries exist within nearly every U.S. community. For example, 17,219 library branches reach approximately 96.4% of the population (Swan et al., 2014), and over 90% of Americans age 16 and older report visiting a public library at some point in their lives (Zickuhr, Rainie, & Purcell, 2013). There is also agreement within communities that libraries are important; according to a recent survey, 65% of U.S. citizens 16 and older say that closing their library would have a major negative impact on their community, and about one third say that closing their library would have a major negative impact on them and their family (Horrigan, 2015). Libraries appear even more valued by patrons who identify as racial/ethnic minorities, female, parents of minor children, or low income (Horrigan, 2015). Moreover, libraries can play a significant role in fostering literacy, particularly among those segments of the population that need special assistance in developing literacy skills, such as young children (Celano & Neuman, 2001).

Public libraries have a long history of providing children with a rich set of literacy-focused experiences. In step with increased awareness of the science of early childhood development, which highlights the need for experiences that support the *whole* child (i.e., all domains of development are interrelated; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), public libraries are also increasingly offering programming that targets developmental domains beyond literacy (IMLS, 2013). For example, some libraries are offering experiences that encourage learning across many developmental domains, including social–emotional (e.g., self-regulation activities), physical (e.g., music and movement activities), and cognitive (e.g., science- and math-focused activities). However, although libraries are providing more stimulating materials and experiences that support children's learning and development (e.g., books, videos, technology, programs), research suggests that currently many of these efforts are subtle and thus not always effectively communicating to parents and caregivers the process of learning. For example, librarians often model literacy skills for parents during storytimes and provide learning materials and activities to support learning without explicitly explaining the important features to parents, describing why particular practices matter, or helping families develop skills they can use at home (Families and Work Institute, 2015).

Indeed, creating and providing high quality, developmentally appropriate experiences for families with children in informal community-based settings, like public libraries, which are distinct from other traditional learning contexts (e.g., home, school), is a challenging task. Increased recognition of the value of these community spaces as welcoming learning environments has led to increased attention from funding agencies, educators, policy makers, and developmen-

tal scientists, who see the great untapped potential of these spaces for promoting and understanding development in context (Bell, Lewenstein, Shouse, & Feder, 2009; Schauble, Leinhardt, & Martin, 1997). Thus, there is great potential for developmental scientists and public libraries to work together to bring about more explicit and intentional strategies to effectively support learning and development in these settings.

Taken together, public libraries' openness to adjusting service delivery to meet the needs of their communities, alongside a growing awareness of the need to understand and capitalize on experiences within these informal learning settings, means that great potential exists for collaborative efforts between developmental scientists and public libraries focused on improving community-based supports for families with children.

Capitalizing on Shared Goals

Building from a shared view of supporting life-long learning and a desire to improve human lives, developmental scientists and public libraries are well positioned to develop productive university–community partnerships that support effective library experiences for families. In addition to strengthening the effectiveness of library-based experiences for communities, such partnerships can also provide space for developmental scientists to move the field forward in terms of increasing understanding of how the processes that take place within relatively understudied ecological settings result in positive outcomes (Bornstein, 2015; Overton, 2015; Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). Another commonality between the goals of library institutions and developmental scientists is a shared focus on promoting well-being across many stages of the lifespan, ranging from infancy to late adulthood. Both fields also recognize the importance of intergenerational experiences in families and communities, and share a focus on the need to address issues of equity, particularly in terms of learning how to promote thriving for all individuals in a given community.

Successful university–community partnerships are developed over time (Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010) and characterized by trusting relationships (Christopher, Watts, McCormick, & Young, 2008), open dialogue (Weerts, 2005), and mutual goals that directly benefit the community (Fear, Creamer, Pirog, Block, & Redmond, 2004). Rather than hastily joining forces once funding has been awarded for a project, truly transformational partnerships include community partners from the beginning and view them as key decision makers and contributors through every step of the process. Although developing this type of partnership takes considerable time, it ensures a balance of power among all parties, providing the opportunity for all voices to be heard (Clayton et al., 2010).

Once successful partnerships are created, they provide a strong foundation and motivation for engaging in community-based research (CBR) projects. CBR provides a useful framework for collaboration between developmental scientists and public libraries, in which mutual benefits can result from research and evaluation performed with the shared goal of improving the lives of families with children. According to Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donohue (2003), "CBR is collaborative, change-oriented research that engages faculty members, students, and community members in projects that address a community-identified need" (p. 5). CBR can be understood in terms of three critical elements (Strand, 2000; Strand et al., 2003). First, CBR projects are collaborative. Similar to the relationship building necessary for maintaining university–community partnerships, CBR requires the joint investment and mutual effort of academics and community stakeholders. This collaboration should start early, ensuring community partners are involved in every step of the research process. Academics often bring content knowledge, research experience, and university resources, and community partners also have unique expertise. The focus of CBR should stem from this community expertise and aim to solve a "real world problem" identified by the community (Strand et al., 2003). Second, CBR recognizes and values the unique knowledge partners bring to the work, putting equal emphasis on the content-specific knowledge of faculty and the local experiential knowledge of community partners (Strand et al., 2003). In doing so, all partners are able to stretch their current understandings through a process of joint discovery and knowledge building to come up with innovative ways of solving real-world problems. Finally, CBR addresses community needs and reflects a commitment to social change (Strand et al.,

2003). Results of CBR projects may serve a multitude of purposes, including improving programming, identifying problems, and addressing needs. New discoveries can be used to make plans, refine practices, and implement new ways of doing. This requires the identification of long-term goals and engaging in a dynamic process of reflection and refinement over time.

In this reflective essay, we argue that the development of successful developmental scientist–public library partnerships creates an ideal context for this type of work. We have identified two areas of concern that are particularly suited for this type of collaboration: (a) efforts toward creating and improving programming in public libraries to understand what works in library contexts for promoting family involvement and supporting child development and (b) addressing issues of equity and inclusion in public libraries for diverse families with children.

Providing Effective Programming

One promising area for collaboration between developmental scientists and public libraries is improving the effectiveness of library-based learning experiences. One example of such a collaboration is *Learning Labs*, a national network of innovative spaces across 24 libraries and museums. In response to a 2010 presidential initiative to make STEM education a national priority, a public–private partnership between the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation supported the creation of Learning Labs. Learning Labs are spaces where adolescents, with assistance from knowledgeable mentors (such as community experts), can interact with peers to engage with a variety of digital media and other tools (Association of Science-Technology Centers, 2014). The design of these spaces was heavily influenced by ethnographic research conducted by Ito et al. (2009), who observed that when adolescents were engaging in interest-driven online learning, they were thinking and experimenting in new and innovative ways (e.g., experimenting with their roles) compared to behavior seen in product-driven learning (e.g., required assignments, graded work). Informed by this research evidence, Learning Labs were intentionally designed to promote *connected learning*, or learning that builds on an individual's socially relevant interests to develop knowledge and skills related to future educational and developmental goals (Association of Science-Technology Centers, 2014; Ito et al., 2013).

In addition to helping to build library-based experiences from the ground up, there is also room for developmental scientists to support the refinement of existing programs developed by library professionals. Public libraries are unique in their capacity to create individual programs tailored to local constituent needs. This has led to a variety of locally created library programs that widely differ by community. Developmental scientists offer expertise to assist with evaluating programming efforts to effectively gather and analyze the data needed to engage in systematic refinement of programs to ensure they are effectively benefiting families. Moreover, funders increasingly require evidence of programming effectiveness. Thus, by supporting developmental scientists in collecting, analyzing, and translating research-based evidence, libraries increase their capacity to secure funding from outside agencies and foundations.

An example of improving existing library programming is the Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) program, which builds on traditional storytime classes, a cornerstone of early childhood library programming. The development and evaluation of the ECRR program is a joint venture undertaken by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) and the Public Library Association (PLA) in collaboration with early childhood literacy experts in the developmental science field. Traditional public library storytime programs are typically directed exclusively to children (e.g., a librarian reading a book to a group of children sitting on a carpeted area). Library professionals and developmental scientists recognized the need to improve upon this existing model to further enhance the parent and caregiver learning potential by more explicitly addressing the adults in the room. Specifically, the ECRR program involves training library professionals to lead *enhanced* storytime sessions that involve the participation of both parents and children. In these sessions, parents are led through early-literacy activities with their children while being taught how to apply and expand on these learning strategies in their daily interactions with children once at home. A notable strength of the ECRR program is its

strong foundation in high-quality research. In 2000, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), one of the most prolific and rigorous entities of child research, published a report that provided a comprehensive synthesis of findings regarding the importance of early childhood experiences in the development of literacy and empirically driven recommendations for how best to support children in developing early literacy skills (National Reading Panel & NICHD, 2000). ECRR developers partnered with the NICHD, as well as individual early literacy developmental science experts, to inform each of the ECRR program components. The ECRR program draws heavily on high-quality research to teach parents and caregivers what types of early experiences are most important to their children's literacy development, as well as provide families with the tools they need to actively promote these skills outside the storytime room. In sum, ECRR is a strong example of how developmental scientists and public libraries can work together to enhance existing library-based programming.

Providing Equitable Opportunities

Public libraries provide affordable and accessible spaces and services for all community members. Indeed, the ALA (2015) states that—regardless of age, education, ethnicity, language, income, physical limitations, or geographic barriers—libraries must ensure that all citizens can access the information they need. However, libraries struggle to provide equal collections, programs, and services for diverse patrons (Naidoo, 2014). At a national level, for example, it appears that low-income and racial/ethnic minority families are less likely to view libraries as community anchors and White, educated women are more likely to use library services than any other population (Horrigan, 2016). This suggests that libraries must work not only to develop inclusive programming that meets the needs of diverse families and encourages repeated visits, but also toward getting families in the door.

Despite overall lower usage of library services among some populations, underrepresented families who do visit libraries view public libraries as important institutions. For example, families living in poverty are more likely to visit a library than other community spaces, such as a bookstore, museum, zoo, or theater (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). In addition, low-income families tend to use libraries for different reasons than their wealthier counterparts: They are more likely than advantaged families to report using the library for services such as training, job searches, and interactive learning opportunities (Celano & Neuman, 2015). Although public libraries play an important role in the lives of families who need them most, there is still a need for increased efforts to engage families and remove barriers to accessing library resources and services to counterbalance inequalities in learning experiences prevalent among low-income and otherwise underrepresented populations; this is another area where developmental scientist–public library collaboration would be fruitful.

Recent research has addressed how to better connect and engage diverse families with public libraries. For example, Sirinides, Fink, and DuBois (2016) investigated the availability and accessibility of early learning opportunities in libraries in under-resourced neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Study results highlighted perceived family barriers to attending libraries, such as a view of branch libraries as more out-of-date compared to further-away central libraries, concerns about staff's ability to work with children, and hours of operation that conflict with working-parent schedules (i.e., closed in the evenings). Further, current developmental scientist–public library partnership efforts appear to be effective in overcoming barriers to find ways to engage diverse families with library services. For example, the Colorado State Library Project, Supporting Parents in Early Literacy through Libraries (SPELL), used research to develop solutions for engaging low-income families in early literacy programs (Colorado State Library, 2015). After engaging in an extensive environmental scan to identify public library programs and practices that successfully engage hard-to-reach, low-income families, the SPELL project created a set of recommendations for public library practitioners, such as ending overdue fines for board books and picture books that deterred families from using their local library. In addition, recognizing that travel to library locations is often a challenge, SPELL recommends public libraries deliver library services beyond the walls of library spaces by partnering with organizations that already work with vulnerable families (e.g.,

neighborhood centers, Title I schools).

Developmental scientists can also support the public library workforce by increasing their child development and family processes knowledge and skills. A skilled library workforce is integral to the success of libraries to support families with children. Recent service model shifts have resulted in staff being increasingly called upon to facilitate learning opportunities. Consequently, the workforce needs greater support to skillfully facilitate the library experience (Gonzalez, 2010). Indeed, the ALA (2009) found that among libraries nationally, nearly 60% reported not having enough staff to help patrons, and roughly 50% reported their staff lacks the necessary skills to meet patron demand. This may be due, in part, to the uniquely interdisciplinary nature of librarianship that requires a wide range of skills and expertise. Adding to this complexity is the fact that libraries serve individuals across the full life span, each with unique developmental needs and interests. We believe that developmental scientists can play an important role in supporting library staff's interactions with diverse families with children by implementing, improving, and creating high-quality professional development focused on culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate practices.

Through various strategies addressed above, supporting the participation of diverse families in public libraries not only holds great potential to achieve public library goals, but stands to benefit developmental scientists as well. For example, there is great concern regarding the growing income-achievement gap and a desire to create feasible solutions to this problem. Public libraries are ideal settings to understand inequities in access to learning experiences at the community level and to test novel solutions to such problems, which may be generalizable to other informal community institutions. Moreover, developmental scientist–public library collaborations are well suited to advancing the field of child development, particularly addressing an important mesosystem, the intersection of home and community settings for diverse families. By engaging in research at the library, developmental scientists can gain insight into community-based strengths, identify barriers to engagement, and test new ways to support all families in a given community. For example, a library may test offering its programming at a popular local community center located in a largely Latino neighborhood, adding more Saturday and later afternoon classes, or changing policies so that low-income families do not have to pay late fines, which may be perceived as a barrier.

The Partnership for Family–Library Engagement: A Case Study

Developing a University–Community Partnership

The Partnership for Family–Library Engagement is a university–community partnership between university developmental scientists and public library professionals at Scottsdale Public Library aimed at supporting family engagement in library settings that promotes optimal parenting and enhances children's school readiness. The early learning coordinator at the public library reached out to the local university for guidance after receiving feedback from funders that all future investments were to be allocated to evidence-based programming. The library was looking for feedback and guidance regarding the quality of their programming and what it means to become "evidence-based." Over the course of a year, developmental scientists and library professionals built a strong partnership based upon mutually shared interests and clearly defined goals. Relationships were built and trust was established through a series of meetings where partners got to know one another and the individual interests and expertise that each possessed. Developmental scientists brought the infrastructure and resources from the university, research knowledge and skills, and educational expertise. The library staff brought knowledge of the local community and its needs, grant-writing experience and skills, and language and literacy content knowledge. Developmental scientists, along with several graduate students, spent considerable time in the library observing programming, learning about the supports and resources public libraries provide to the community, and gaining an understanding of the many roles of library staff. During meetings, developmental scientists and library staff spoke about program effectiveness and discussed strategies for understanding whether library programs are achieving their intended goals for families with children. Shared goals were quickly defined. The library had already identi-

fied a community need, providing quality early-learning experiences for families with children ages 0–5 years, and was looking for support with improving upon their existing efforts. The developmental scientists, who study how children learn and develop within context, possessed a common desire to provide families access to community-based programs and experiences that would support parents as their child's first and best teachers and enhance children's learning and development.

Providing Effective Programming Through CBR

Over the past 5 years, the Partnership for Family–Library Engagement has worked collaboratively to refine and evaluate several enhanced storytime programs designed to provide parent education and support children's emerging social–emotional, cognitive, and language/literacy skills. Program improvement efforts began with developmental scientists and public library professionals working closely together to clearly define the desired outcomes of enhanced storytime programming. Once program goals were identified, a theory of change, connecting key program components and processes to measurable outcomes, was created. Next, in an iterative process, this theory of change guided refinement of existing program components and practices to achieve the desired outcomes. Once all parties were confident the programming was high quality (i.e., based on research, using best practices, and aligned with clear measurable outcomes), partnership members were ready to begin documenting evidence of program effectiveness.

Working collaboratively, partnership members developed an internal library grant proposal to collect pilot data from families pre- and post-program participation using survey methodology. Collecting detailed personal information from families was a new endeavor for the library staff, and because of the unique nature of public libraries as open, accessible, nonthreatening community spaces, this task was undertaken with extreme caution and sensitivity. A developmental scientist and the public library early learning coordinator attended each program session, where they introduced the partnership and its shared goals and clearly explained the purpose of the research study. Families were invited to participate and could easily opt out without any pressure or stigma. Over the course of a single program year, data was collected on 276 families across six community locations (five public libraries, one neighborhood center). Findings from these efforts provide preliminary evidence of program effectiveness. Specifically, public library enhanced storytime programming was associated with positive change in parent knowledge, beliefs, and reported behavior (Taylor, Pratt, van Huisstede, & Gaias, 2016).

Building on this positive momentum, the partnership began working to secure funding for further research and evaluation efforts. This includes a currently in-progress 3-year randomized control trial funded by the Brady Education Foundation to examine the efficacy of a public library enhanced storytime program on linguistically diverse low-income families with children. This work has begun to explore the qualities of parent–child interactions within the public library context and how they are related to parenting and child outcomes. This type of research is critical for understanding how developmental and family processes within informal learning settings contribute to family and child well-being in underserved populations. These efforts are also important because library funding is highly variable across communities, with much funding for programming dependent upon small grants and foundation support that require programs to demonstrate evidence of effectiveness (Weigand, 2015). Partnering with developmental scientists can increase public libraries' capacity and potential for securing future funding, something our partnership has successfully accomplished.

Moreover, as university partners, we have benefited from gaining a better understanding of the needs and assets of library professionals and the communities they serve. For example, we have also improved our understanding of what effective programming involves within public libraries, which differ from home or formal preschool settings. Public libraries offer developmental scientists the opportunity to apply their expertise and skills to a broader range of authentic practical problems and everyday settings that expand our theories, assumptions, and methods. Specifically, public libraries vary from traditional educational settings in that attendance is fluid (i.e., public libraries are open accessible community spaces), children represent various

ages and stages (e.g., families often have multiple children), and parent participation is often required in some capacity. This type of research in public libraries is critical for understanding how developmental and family processes within informal learning settings contribute to family and child well-being over time and across contexts (e.g., Haden et al., 2014).

Providing Equitable Opportunities

Working together, the partnership has benefited from better understanding how public library programs operate by engaging in a systematic process of aligning program goals with measurable outcomes that impact the local community. This program refinement and evidence-building work has been particularly valuable to library programming efforts aimed at increasing diversity and inclusion. For example, findings from the preliminary evaluation revealed that families who participate in programming tend to be regular library users with little financial hardship (Taylor, Pratt, van Huisstede, & Gaias, 2016). This data has been integral for understanding whom the library is already reaching and provides support for additional efforts aimed at engaging underserved and hard-to-reach families, a new goal of our ongoing partnership.

In addition, we also recently completed a study of library youth staff's perceptions of programming for families with children. Findings revealed that because of new enhanced storytime programming, many library youth staff are viewing themselves as educators for the first time and would like increased support for interacting with diverse families and supporting child development (e.g., incorporating state early learning standards into their instruction; Taylor, 2017). In response to these findings, the partnership developed an interactive enhanced storytime training for staff and provided professional development focused on increasing the cultural competence of library youth staff across several local library systems.

Conclusion

Families tend to view libraries as part of their educational systems, as resources that promote literacy and school readiness, and as pathways to economic opportunity and community activism (Horrigan, 2015). Indeed, the majority of families that have ever used the public library view their experiences favorably (Zickuhr et al., 2013). We contend that, considering the positive view and accessibility of libraries across the United States, developmental scientist involvement is critical for libraries to realize their full potential as promoters of child development and family engagement. With the changing times, public libraries are developing ways to shift their service models to engage families with children by providing programming and experiences beyond traditional book lending. Considering that developmental science and public library fields share common goals, developmental scientists are well positioned to support this process, as well as learn from it to further the field of child development and family studies. We encourage a "call to action" for developmental scientists to partner with public libraries to support the new experiential types of learning occurring within libraries and engage in practices to effectively promote engaged scholarship and fuel an excitement for learning.

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