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The Public Library: What Can We Do For Your Students?

By Kori M. Gerbig

In these days of increased testing and continued failure of inner-city and poor rural schools to meet the grade, it is becoming more and more necessary to turn to the public library to help our students reach the ever-increasing goals being set for them. Face it – schools have limited access to students during crucial times in literacy development, specifically in the early years, when the level of development has been proven to play a major role in later student achievement. It seems somewhat unfair to hold our schools solely responsible for continued failure when the simple fact is that too many students arrive at school too late. To overcome this obstacle, those in the know are turning to their public libraries to support early and continued literacy experiences above and beyond what is already being accomplished in our schools. The public library, being the only free government-funded educational service available to children from birth through adolescence, remains an invaluable resource in the area of child literacy development (Armstrong, et al, 1997).

What the Research Tells Us

Emergent Literacy

Literacy has been defined as the mastery of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills which is achieved through communication and developed within a meaningful social and cultural context (Vygotsky 1978; Garton & Pratt 1989). This early definition of literacy was further expanded by Kupetz in 1993 to include the acquisition of attitudes, behaviors, expectations, and understandings that begin very early in a child's life. Current research supports this concept of emergent literacy, which places the onset of knowledge and skill acquisition at birth, long before the beginning of formal education. Sanders (1994) determined that children need to be immersed in oral literacy that is closely connected to their personal and social lives in order to benefit from later textual experiences. [i] Hart and Risley note that "virtually all children begin to acquire a vocabulary of words in the second year of life" and, as a result "a child's home and family provide the circumstances for the emergence of language and word meaning" (1995, xiii).

Pre-reading experiences

Research has shown that book experiences are of significant importance to infant, toddler and preschool children in the establishment of preliminary literacy skills and good reading habits (Kupetz, 1993). Studies have linked reading to about one third of a child's annual vocabulary growth which, in turn, leads to substantial and permanent learning and greater school achievement (Celano & Neuman, 2001). Reading to children helps them learn the difference between written and oral language, that printed words have sounds, and that print contains meaning. Various studies indicate that children who learn to read before elementary school and those who are successful in reading at school usually have been read to often at home (Cullinan, 1998). Ginneti (1989) found early reading activities with primary caregivers to be an important influence on child learning and development. The benefits of early reading experiences include the introduction and support of basic print concepts, object recognition, and sensory awareness. Pre-reading also enhances child emotional and intellectual development through the provision of physical closeness and social interaction (Kupetz, 1993).

The preschool years and school readiness

How children talk, listen, think, and learn, as well as how they interact with others, solve problems, and resolve conflicts are determined by the learning that takes place in the preschool years which, in turn, forms the foundation for all future learning. The National Education Goals Panel (1994) found early, regular reading to be one of the most important activities parents can do with their children to prepare for school, and Boyer (1991) noted that amongst readiness skills cited by teachers as lacking in students, deficiencies in language were considered the most serious problem. [ii] Research also

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shows that children who start out slowly in literacy skill testing often fail to catch up, and that this trajectory of early failure continues throughout childhood and into the adult years (Celano & Neuman, 2001). As such, exposing children to early language and literacy skills is crucial to the deterrent of an often pre-determined course of failure.

At Risk Students

The above research is just a small sampling of the work that has been done in the areas of emergent and preschool literacy. The basic results are all the same – children who are exposed to language and literacy in the infant, toddler, and preschool years are much better prepared to succeed in school, and those who are not suffer the consequences throughout their entire lives. As a result, the success of our future students depends significantly on the home experiences and social interactions during early childhood, which vary greatly from child to child (Herb & Willoughby-Herb, 2000). The results of a long-range study conducted by Hart & Risley strongly support this position. The researchers observed 42 families with infant children from various socioeconomic statuses (SES) for a period of 2-1/2 years. [iii] Grade 3 standardized test scores from 29 of the original children showed vocabulary growth at age 3 was strongly associated with test scores at age 9-10. Early vocabulary use was equally predictive of the level of language skills acquired in the elementary years. Perhaps even more important, Hart & Risley found that by the time children were 3 years old the amount of vocabulary growth was well established and, by age 4, patterns of growth were intractable. They also found an “increasing disparity” between the socioeconomic extremes.

Welfare parents talked less often to their children, they talked in less varied contexts about less varied aspects of the children's experience ... more of their talk contained prohibitions and simple directives. When parents did take the time to talk to their children, they provided their children with language proportionally as rich in quality features as the language provided by working class parents. They just took the time less often. -Hart & Risley, p178

The research done by Hart & Risley demonstrates the problem many elementary teachers are facing today. There are significant differences in the language experiences and skills acquired by children from different socioeconomic statuses when they begin formal schooling. Unfortunately, these children are already past the age of intervention, and additional support can not provide enough experiences to make up for the past. The enormity of this problem is expressed by the researchers' findings:

...to provide an average welfare child with an amount of weekly language experience equal to that of an average working class child would require 41 hours per week of out-of-home experience as rich in words addressed to the child as that in an average professional home. -Hart & Risley, p 201

The research of Hart and Risley stresses the importance of early literacy intervention, especially for those children living in low socioeconomic status who are at great risk for failure in school.

So What Can We Do?

What Have We Learned So Far?

Lipps and Yiptong-Avila found that children who participated in early educational and formal childcare programs performed better in both reading and writing in the early elementary years, regardless of parental education and income levels. They also noted a significant difference in kindergarten performance between children with exposure to books and who had been read to daily and than those who had not. [iv] These findings are supported by numerous studies, and these studies are encouraging. However it is important to note that it is those children who need early intervention the most, who have the least access to materials, and generally can not afford to take advantage of the various programs (daycare, nursery school, playgroups, etc.) available to them.

The Role of Public Libraries in Early Literacy Development

Armstrong, Denham, Elkin, Evans, Fenton, Heeks and Lonsdale remind us that public libraries are the only government-funded, educational and social service currently available to all children free of charge (1997). As such, public libraries are in an excellent position to offer significant assistance in the development of early childhood literacy. An evaluation report prepared for the Pennsylvania Dept of Education showed that public library preschool programs encouraged “children to spend a significant amount of time with books” and “parents to play greater roles in their children's literacy development,” both proven factors in later reading achievement (Celano & Neuman, 2001). Herb & Willoughby-Herb note that most public libraries are already working with preschool children and readily accept their role in early literacy development (1998). Public libraries provide



Young children with exposure to large quantities of books and numerous language opportunities. They are also important resources for caregivers, assembling and providing appropriate collections for this age group, assisting with book selection, and modeling read-aloud techniques.

Infant, Toddler and Preschool Story Times

Your local public library likely offers various programs for young children, but the best known and perhaps most important to the development of early literacy is the regular scheduling of infant, toddler and preschool story-times. Reading aloud to young children has been established by many as a powerful influence on later reading success. Wells (1986) determined that the best indicator of school achievement was a child's knowledge of literacy, specifically the number of stories read aloud. The 1985 study *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report to the Commission on Reading* determined that "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (Anderson et al. 1985). This early literacy activity is important to later development for many reasons. It functions to help children understand how narratives work, makes more difficult works accessible, encourages children to read independently, and provides "shared social-bonding" experiences (Sheldrick, et al. 2006). The shared experiences of library story times are especially important to disadvantage students, who benefit greatly from the emotional support provided during a typical session. These benefits include the development of a sense of social acceptance and belonging and improved self-esteem (Kupetz, 1993). Story time sessions provided in the public library also contain many factors determined to foster early reading in children. These factors include:

- Stories read aloud by a caring adult
- Opportunities to talk about reading
- A sense that reading is valuable
- Access to an enabling adult

But perhaps one of the most important aspects of public library story time programs is the support provided for caregivers. Participation in story time programs not only helps parents understand the value of reading aloud to children, it also provides them with the necessary support to continue this activity at home. Such support includes the demonstration of read aloud techniques, assistance with the selection of appropriate materials, and encouragement for parents to develop their own literacy (Kupetz, 1993).

The literacy support provided through public library story time programs, although available to all, is extremely important to children from poor and working-class families who are less likely to have books in the home, are read to less frequently at early ages, and have fewer opportunities to engage in imaginative storytelling and discuss books with an enabling adult (Hart & Risley, 1995). As such, these programs are in a position to play a major role in the early literacy development of young children and support later school achievement.

How Can You Help?

The obvious challenge for the public library is enticing the caregivers of young children, especially those most in need, to attend such programs. Marketing and outreach efforts are necessary for future success, and these efforts are most effective if/when they reach their targeted audience. As a result, your local public library is likely turning to those individuals, agencies, and institutes currently working with specific populations for assistance and direction. Public schools, having direct access to and specific knowledge of those most in need, are a crucial resource. Collaboration between public libraries and schools is necessary to support continued efforts in early child literacy development. Public schools are positioned not only to assist in targeting at-risk families, but also to distribute information concerning early literacy opportunities, and to encourage all families to attend these programs. Essentially, public librarians need the assistance of schools, and especially school librarians, to help others understand what we, as professionals in the area, already know. Early literacy experiences provided by caregivers in the home are a determining factor in a child's later success at school, and public libraries are perfectly positioned to assist in this area. Public librarians utilize their knowledge of current early childhood educational practices to develop collections, provide appropriate programs, and recruit and train staff to support early childhood literacy. They are committed to a common mission to freely serve all children, and are often the only agency poised to reach those most in need of early educational support (Herb & Willoughby-Herb, 2000).

So, please --- support your local public library!

We are ready, willing, and able to help!

Notes:

[i] As discussed in Herb & Willoughby-Herb, 1998.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Socioeconomic status (SES) was based on occupation. Thirteen of the 42 families were considered upper SES, 10 were middle SES, 13 were lower SES, and 6 families were on welfare.

[iv] As discussed in Sheldrick Ross, et al., 2006.

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Kori M. Gerbig is the Assistant Editor for *Educators' Spotlight Digest*. She has worked on countless information literacy programs such as [S.O.S. for Information Literacy](#), [Reach for the STARS](#) (Supporting At-Risk Students), and [E*LIT](#) (Enriching Literacy Through Information Technology). She was awarded a *We the People* book grant two years in a row. She is currently serving as Reference Librarian for Manlius Public Library.