

Creating Lifelong Readers: Early Literacy in the Public Library

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Long gone are the days of the “hush-hush” library environment. Modern libraries have developed into community centers that feature food cafes, maker spaces, study rooms, meeting rooms, and play spaces for young children. Libraries’ children’s departments have become purposefully dedicated areas for children to explore, learn, and play. Storytime programming has evolved, as well. Librarians invite children and parents to actively engage in storytime through singing, rhymes, flannel boards, and interactive picture books. What has caused libraries to change in this way? An analysis of modern storytimes and early literacy practices reveals that public librarians are taking up the role of literacy coaches for parents and caregivers. Children can build their early literacy skills and then apply them when it is developmentally appropriate for them to start learning how to read.

The authors of *“The Evolution of Early Literacy”* detailed that the concepts of early literacy skills and storytelling techniques originated in the 1940s (Albright, 2009). It was during this time period that practices like dialogic reading first became widely used and provided the basis for modern early literacy techniques. Through the 1940s and early 50s, storytime was developed as a means of cultivating “reading readiness” in young children. Reading readiness was the theory that children needed to be mentally prepared for reading by being exposed to books (Albright, 2009). The main objectives of these storytimes were to help young children learn how to socialize with their peers, cultivate a love of books, and prepare children for the school environment. Librarians instinctively understood the importance of using engaging books with rhymes and repetition to help build a child’s early literacy skills. To the public eye, however, “story hour” was nothing more than a fun diversion. There was no research to support or advocate for what librarians were accomplishing with children during these story hours. Libraries simply operated under the belief that they would do what was best for children. Once research became available, libraries were able to support and improve upon what they have been doing all along.

The year 2000 saw a wave of research on early brain development. A report from the National Reading Panel provided data that reinforced the work libraries had been doing in storytime since the 1940s. The use of rhymes, oversized books, and dramatizations in library programming supported the early development of phonological awareness, print awareness, and narrative skills, respectively, in children (Albright, 2009). It also introduced some new information on the importance of early childhood experiences that promote literacy development (Ash, 2009). By the fall of 2001, the Public Library Association (PLA) and the Association for Library Science to Children (ALSC) had begun partnering together to research and implement an

early literacy program that could easily be utilized at libraries all over the country. Four years later, the Every Child Ready to Read program was born.

Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) aims to promote early literacy with parents and caregivers through library activities and storytimes. Previously, storytime was meant only for children or the storytime was provided in such a way that it was meant to teach children early literacy skills. ECRR, however, acknowledges that it is equally important to involve caregivers and parents in the storytime learning. During storytime, parents and caregivers are encouraged to interact with their children using the early literacy skills that ECRR has identified as being instrumental to a child's literacy development: vocabulary, print motivation, narrative skills, print awareness, letter knowledge, and phonological awareness. Librarians model the early literacy skills during storytimes and offer suggestions for duplicating the activities at home (Celano, 2015). One particular challenge for librarians is finding ways of making these suggestions practical and meaningful rather than purely dogmatic. Balancing the needs of the children with the needs of their caregivers during a storytime session can truly be an art in of itself. While ECRR has brought together parents and children in a wide range of communities, a strong need remains to more effectively reach low-income and at-risk families.

In 2000, The American Library Association (ALA) partnered with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to design a Preschool Literacy Initiative (PLI). The purpose of this initiative was to act on the new research about early literacy that was being published. Like ECRR, the PLI focuses on six essential skills that children should have developed by the time they enter Kindergarten: vocabulary, print motivation, print awareness, narrative skills, letter knowledge, and phonological sensitivity (Arnold, 2003). This initiative recognized the importance of reaching parents and caregivers since they are a child's first teachers. Three library programs for teaching these skills were developed: Bonding with Baby, Hear and Say, and Sound Awareness for preschoolers. In addition to their regular programming, libraries offered workshops that specifically taught parents and caregivers how to work on the six essential skills. In 2003, a second year evaluation analysis of this program was done by Sara Laughlin and Associates. The evaluation concluded that "parents of every age, educational background, income level, and ethnicity who participated significantly increased their literacy behaviors (Arnold, 2017)." The evaluation also found that parents and caregivers developed a stronger rapport with the librarians who showed them how to work on emerging literacy skills.

The state of Wisconsin has enjoyed recent success with a program that focuses on early literacy outreach. Play & Read was designed as a family focused early literacy program. AmeriCorps, a civil service organization supported by the federal government, provides volunteers who work with public library staff to offer programming in counties with high poverty rates. The goal of the program is to empower parents, promote early literacy, and engage more low income families with their local library (Parrish, 2017). The AmeriCorps volunteers serve as “library ambassadors” by going out into the community, promoting the library on local media outlets and by posting on social media. In addition to providing programming at community events, Women, Infant, and Child (WIC) meetings, and at the local YMCAs, the library and volunteers work together to schedule regular storytimes for children at daycare centers. As a result, libraries have begun to see significant vast improvement in their relationships with daycare providers and increased circulation of library materials. The keys to success for Play & Read so far have been “committing staff time to training volunteers, identifying non-user populations, and distributing resources to community outreach (Parish, 2017).”

Early literacy programs have gained similar traction outside of the United States. Australia, for example, has implemented a program called Better Beginnings. The State Library of Western Australia (SLWA) created Better Beginnings as a family literacy program in which parents and caregivers read to infants to foster essential pre-literacy skills (Allen, 2009). SLWA partnered with the Western Australia Department for Community Development to identify communities of need. Public libraries have become “community hubs” where families can learn about early literacy strategies in storytime programming, attend literacy workshops, and check out story kits that contain books and puppets (Allen, 2009). Another noteworthy program is the Toronto Public Library’s Let’s Get Ready for Reading Program (LGRRP). LGRRP is directly modeled after Every Child Ready to Read. LGRRP shares the latest in brain and literacy development research to teach parents and caregivers the importance of building early literacy skills. The overall goals of the program are to promote literacy and school readiness (Toronto Public Library, 2017).

Another movement in early literacy has been to incorporate the state learning standards into programming. The Dayton Ohio Metro Library, for example, has structured their storytimes to align with the state of Ohio’s standardized learning outcomes (Albright, 2009). Relying on the state standards can be problematic in a number of ways and should not necessarily be considered a best practice for early literacy instruction at the library. Programs like ECRR are based on thorough research, while state standards often do not take that research into

consideration. State standards are often written without the consultation of community stakeholders or knowledgeable experts in the field of study. The result is that classroom teachers, parents, and students are left out of the process as a developmentally inappropriate set of educational guidelines are implemented. Crafting programming around an inadequately researched, unvetted, and politically motivated set of guidelines will not produce the desired outcome.

With any early literacy best practice, staff need to be adequately trained to effectively deliver those practices to their patrons. Staff members who do not come from a teaching or education background might even require additional training in order to dissect the jargon-filled standards and improve their own understanding before coaching parents and caregivers. Public libraries operate under strict budgetary guidelines and have to weigh what specific training to provide their staff using their limited available funding. It is troubling that some libraries, like the Dayton Ohio Metro Library, have opted to utilize their resources for a standards-based curriculum rather than more developmentally appropriate programs like Every Child Ready to Read, Play & Read, or the Preschool Learning Initiative.

Early literacy coaching and programming in the public library is certainly here to stay. While programs will inevitably adapt or change over time, the intent will remain the same. All of these early literacy initiatives share a common thread in that they seek to partner local libraries with community organizations, parents, and caregivers to effectively build children's early literacy skills. The programs with the most impact are also the most innovative, leaving the comforts of the library itself to bring their services to those in the community who need them the most. Delivering high-quality, engaging early literacy programming has also become a viable advocacy approach for libraries. Providing programming which utilizes the best practices in literacy will enable libraries to boost the number of card holders, program attendance, and will foster a love of the library.

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