

Public Libraries – Community Organizations Making Outreach Efforts to Help Young Children Succeed in School

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Abstract

Librarians have been working with families for years within and outside of libraries, providing access to print, motivating young children to read, and making connections with schools. Through interviews, observations, and an analysis of outreach documents from libraries in urban, suburban, and rural counties, this study sought to investigate what practices librarians were exercising to support children in preparing for school and once in school. The focus of this article is on librarians' outreach efforts to assist young children in school.

Key words: librarians, storytimes, home-school-community connections, reading, writing, community partnerships, library outreach, early literacy

The Role of Communities in Student Learning

Family, school, and community partnerships create environments to help students succeed in school. Teachers in these partnerships help families and community members feel welcome in school, understand school expectations, stay informed about student progress, and provide the support necessary for the academic success of students. Moreover, families and community members invested in these partnerships assist by providing academic support to children while they are not in school. Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence explains the role that school, family, and community partnerships play in

helping students feel supported and motivated to succeed in school (Epstein, 1995).

Effective collaboration between the spheres promotes student achievement. In 1996, Henderson and Berla reviewed 66 studies, reports, and books to identify the importance of family influence on student success. They found that families and communities can make a significant difference in student achievement from preschool through high school. Parental and community involvement that extends into the school results in higher grades and lower dropout rates. In 2003, Henderson and Mapp reviewed 51 more recent studies and found similar results (cited in Averett & Rodriguez, 2003).

Joyce Epstein has studied school-family-community involvement for more than 20 years. Through her research, she has documented six types of involvement that are essential to assist student learning and progress. They are:

- parenting – helping all families establish home environments that support children as students;
- communicating – designing and conducting effective forms of communication about school programs and children’s progress;
- volunteering – recruiting and organizing help and support for school functions and activities;
- learning at home – providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with school work and related activities;
- decision making – including parents in school decisions; and
- collaborating with the community – identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students, and their families (Epstein, 1995, p. 12).

The sixth type of involvement highlights the important role community organizations play in educating students. Heath and McLaughlin (1987) studied the impact of community organizations on schools and noted that organizations such as libraries can contribute to student success and are becoming increasingly necessary due to the changes occurring in family structures. For example, most have both parents in the workforce, and the rate of single-parent households is increasing (Waddock, 1995). This means that parents have less time to prepare their children for school. Thus, most parents can use support in their efforts to assist student learning (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

Sharing literacy experiences, such as having conversations, reading together, and modeling writing with children in the home has proven to be more helpful in preparing children for school than even a higher socioeconomic status. These types of activities, in other words, can compensate for socioeconomic differences (Epstein & Sanders, 2002). Families are more likely to engage in these activities if they are guided in these practices. Schools and community

organizations, such as libraries, can serve to support families, as well as provide direct literacy experiences to children and youth that complement family practices (Epstein & Sanders). Libraries can collaborate with schools and other community organizations to ensure children's successful language and literacy development and to help bridge the gap between home and school often experienced by culturally diverse students and families (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Sanders, 2001).

"Maryland's Plan for Family, School, and Community Involvement: Recommendations for Reaching Academic Success for All Students through Family, School, and Community Partnerships" is the Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE) policy on home-school-community partnerships, which is based on Epstein's six types of involvement. MSDE's goals are:

- (1) to communicate often about academic opportunities, school performance, student progress, and school-family partnerships;
- (2) to work together to support families' parenting skills and developmental activities that prepare young children for school and promote ongoing achievement;
- (3) to support academic achievement at home by reading with children, helping them with homework, and engaging them in educational activities;
- (4) to have parents and community members volunteer to improve schools and support students;
- (5) to collaborate on educational decisions that affect children, families, and school improvement; and
- (6) to have MSDE, local school systems, community organizations, agencies, and businesses collaborate effectively and efficiently (MSDE, 2003).

Furthermore, public libraries are specifically cited in goals one, two, three and six as important resources in achieving success for students by providing summer reading programs, read-a-thons, family read-ins, early literacy promotions, hosting educational events, and sharing resources and information (MSDE, 2003). Additionally, librarians can provide assistance through the implementation of literacy projects to help parents succeed in being their child's first teacher (MSDE, 2002), which leads us to this study.

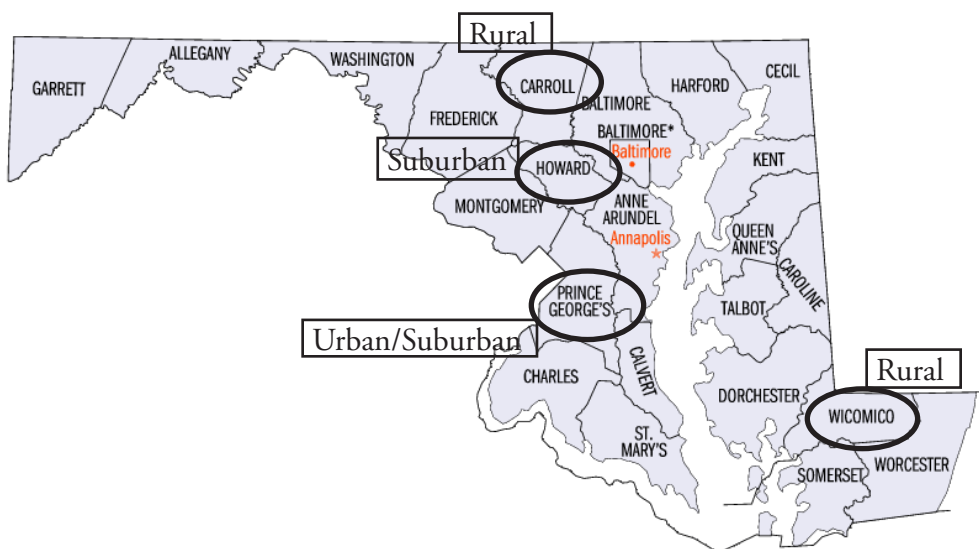
Methods

The primary purpose of this multiple case study was to describe how Maryland public librarians provide early literacy opportunities to their community members. To bring this to light, librarians from different demographic and socioeconomic areas were interviewed to better understand how early literacy is being supported through their outreach activities.

Participants and Setting

A total of 26 librarians from four counties in Maryland participated in this study. Within each county, the libraries were located in low, middle, and high socioeconomic areas (SEA). There were three libraries from Carroll County, a rural county; three libraries from Howard County, a suburban county; three libraries from Prince George’s County, an urban/suburban county; and one library from Wicomico County, a rural county/low SEA and Eastern shore representative in this study (Wicomico County has only one library); totaling 10 libraries. See Figure 1 for the locations of these counties.

Figure 1. Maryland Counties in this Research Project



Note. From United States Census Bureau. (2000). *State and county quick facts*. Retrieved October 16, 2006, from http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/maps/maryland_map.html

Data Collection and Analysis

Case studies are used when research in a specific area requires answers to “how” and “why” type questions. In addition, case studies are ideal when the researcher cannot manipulate or control an event or when the event takes place in the field. A case study’s distinctive potency is its capacity to disclose an array of evidence, including documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations (Yin, 1994). A collective case study is an instrumental case study extended to several cases. It allows the researcher to examine a number of “representative” cases, which supplies the researcher with data to demonstrate similarities or

differences that may exist between cases, and as a result, to gain deeper understanding of a given phenomenon (Stake, 2000).

The current study is a collective case study. Multiple librarians were interviewed to better understand how early literacy is being supported through storytimes and outreach activities. In addition, the researcher (a reading specialist from Towson University) wanted to investigate how libraries were assisting students, community members, and schools by examining various cases in different demographic (urban, suburban, rural) and socioeconomic (low, middle, high) areas.

A primary concern when conducting case studies is researcher bias, showing preference to one outcome versus another because the researcher would like to see certain results. All researchers are confronted with this ethical issue; to address this concern, researchers must report evidence fairly by ensuring that the data reported are accurate and transparent. Having participants and colleagues review the data for inaccuracies is one way to verify the validity of the information. Multiple viewpoints can aid in ensuring an accurate explanation of the data. Additionally, if the data does not pose any risks to the reviewers, they are more likely to provide sincere feedback (Janesick, 2000). Librarians in this study were asked to review the data for these purposes. The data they reviewed involved their existing outreach practices, which did not entail negative information or threaten their current standing; therefore, their reviews can be considered valid.

The process of relying on numerous sources of data helps the researcher generate more valid and robust cases. Therefore, outreach documents were reviewed as well. As noted by Janesick, "Validity in qualitative research has to do with description and explanation and whether or not the explanation fits the description" (2000, p. 393). Also, in the final write-up, the researcher should aim for a "thick description" of the data. That is, the researcher should "describe the cases in sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers can vicariously experience these happenings and draw conclusions (which may differ from those of the researchers)" (Stake, 1995, p. 439). In the findings section of this paper, the outreach provided by librarians is described using many examples from the various data sources, to present a thick description of their work.

Furthermore, Yin (1994) recommends the development of a case study protocol. A case study protocol is a carefully constructed outline of the steps involved in a case study. This protocol contains the rationale, research questions, target audience, conceptual/theoretical background, procedure, areas of interest, analysis plan, consent form, schedule of site visits, and interview questions. It is created and closely followed by the researcher in order to provide structure and to enable other researchers to repeat the same procedures and

yield similar results. To ensure the study’s rigor and minimize researcher bias, the researcher attended to the strategies described above, beginning with developing and following the case study protocol. Data were obtained through multiple sources: interviews of supervisors and staff, observations, and review of outreach documents and materials. After the interviews were transcribed, participants were sent drafts of the results to verify the information.

The following describes the data analysis step by step:

Step one. All interviews were done in person, one-on-one, took from 30-45 minutes each, and were tape recorded and transcribed. Transcribing interviews is highly recommended (Seidman, 1998) to ensure that relevant information acquired through the interview process is captured. Through a process of reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews, which totaled 129 pages, the researcher coded key phrases that librarians used, which showed they were incorporating information from their training and were providing outreach. Coded phrases included: methods, places, and activities (see Table 1).

Table 1. Outreach Provided by 26 Maryland Public Librarians

Methods	Places	Activities
Telephone	Schools	Storytimes
Newsletters	Childcare Centers	Crafts
Flyers	Churches	Computer Instruction
Online	Community Centers	Homework Help
Newspapers	Nursing Homes	Classes
Letters	Malls	Book Clubs
Bookmobile	Satellite Libraries	Parent-Child Mother Goose Programs
Van	Rehabilitations Centers	Early Literacy Kits
	Hospitals	Library Card Drives
	Pediatricians’ Offices	Book Talks

Step two. Key phrases were then compared to identify commonalities/differences among the librarians interviewed. These comparisons were not made to quantify differences in the occurrences of such phrases, but to identify similarities and differences in the context in which they were used (Flick, 2002).

Step three. Outreach documents were also collected to confirm and extend information obtained during the interviews (Dilley, 2000). Last, the interviews and outreach documents were compared within each library, between libraries in each county, and between libraries in different counties. The central themes that emerged through this process are described in the next section (note: all librarians’ names used are pseudonyms).

Findings: Librarians' Early Literacy Outreach Efforts

Rural Wicomico County

The public library in Wicomico County provides outreach in various ways, and disseminates information in written form about its storytimes and other programs. Flyers are sent to childcare facilities, and programming information is printed in the local newspaper and is posted online.

The library creates and disseminates a quarterly newsletter entitled, "The Early Years," for parents and caregivers, which includes important information about how to teach children from birth to age four. This newsletter is disseminated throughout the state to other libraries and community organizations. The newsletter describes educational activities that parents and caregivers can do with children, such as leaf rubbing and painting pumpkins. It summarizes developmentally appropriate books and the purposes for reading to young children. For example, *Goodnight Moon*, by Margaret Wise Brown is described as a classic bedtime story that introduces rhyming words to babies. Then, the newsletter suggests to parents: "Go around the room and say goodnight to everything. Start your own little bedtime ritual as a way to calm down at the end of the day." The newsletter also describes community support centers that assist with preschool through high school education, health, early intervention services, disabilities, job training, and adult education.

Wicomico County librarians also engage in outreach by participating in mall events, working at satellite libraries, and visiting public schools and community organizations. Information about the library's offerings is distributed at the "Chamber Fest," an event at the local mall. At three locations (the West Side Community Center, the Willards Lions Community Center, and the Centre of Salisbury Mall) librarians have Wicomico Information and Learning Library (WILL) sites or satellite libraries. The satellite libraries do not have books available; however, information about the library's services is made available to customers and storytimes with crafts are provided. In addition, the satellite libraries have computers for librarians to teach customers how to conduct basic research and develop word processing skills.

Another example of outreach is their participation in public schools' Family Fun Nights. Jana explained:

There are two Family Fun Nights held at schools in our area. Fruitland Elementary holds one in the fall on a Friday night. We set up a table with information on storytimes, homework help, sample materials from the library, and a really fun craft. In the corner, we place a blanket and some books in case anyone wants to take a break and read because there are a lot of activities going on at the same time. East Salisbury Elementary

holds a Family Fun Night in the spring. We set up our information on tables down a hallway and, of course, include a really fun craft. This fair is followed by the teacher-parent basketball game. In both cases, all families are encouraged to attend.

Librarians also use the bookmobile to travel six days a week visiting local schools, community centers, nursing homes, malls, childcare centers, churches, rehabilitation centers, and their own WILL sites. Librarians also use the bookmobile to conduct monthly visits to their local Head Start, Even Start, and Judith P. Hoyer Centers to provide storytimes, professional development, and books. Head Start, Even Start, and Judith P. Hoyer Centers all provide services to young children from low-income families.

Rural Carroll County

Carroll County Public Libraries produce and distribute a flyer entitled, "What's Happening at CCPL," which lists programs and classes for adults, storytimes for young children and their families, adult book clubs, and classes for homeschooled children. They also have other one-page flyers to advertise specific interests to specialized audiences, for example, storytimes for ages birth to 24 months, a sign language class, and a "Let's Take a Trip to France" class. In addition, they have book lists prepared specifically for young children that include different types of books including board books, participation stories (e.g., pull tabs, pop-ups, lift the flap), rhyming books, concept books, and story books. The flyers are distributed in schools and community organizations; the library also has programming information online.

These libraries have a bookmobile that visits places such as daycares, schools, senior centers, and the Head Start center, as well as two vans that visit home daycare centers. During librarians' visits, they distribute books, provide book talks, have library card campaigns, and present storytimes.

In addition, librarians created kits that included bookmarks, pens, paperback books, information about the purpose of reading aloud to young children, tips for reading aloud to young children, songs, rhymes, activities for different age children, storytime information, library card applications, specific information about children's language and literacy development, and "reading and library card prescriptions." These kits were distributed to local pediatricians, who personally gave them to parents with infants and young children.

Suburban Howard County

Library news and events are printed in "Great Expectations," a quarterly publication of the Howard County library system. The layout is similar to a

local newspaper but is printed in color. The first page features a message from the director of Howard County libraries, followed by announcements about author presentations (at different library locations), adult education opportunities, and book clubs. Each library branch has its own page to highlight storytime programs and programs for older children. Each library also has programming information available online. According to one librarian:

Howard County was ranked third in the nation, according to *Hennen's American Public Library Ratings – 2004*, for its electronic uses, which include but are not limited to the online catalog, online indexes, Internet, and software.

Librarians in Howard County visit schools to facilitate library card drives during parent-teacher nights (2-3 times a year for each school). They also provide book talks and discussions to motivate students to read, and present after-school storytimes once a week as part of their "A+ Partnership" with public schools. "The A+ Partnership has doubled or tripled the amount of outreach we used to do," said Maria.

Howard County librarians also visit their local Head Start center, private schools, preschools, nursery schools, and daycares to provide storytimes. At the Head Start center, they have trained teachers in the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program. The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program is a group experience for parents, caregivers, and their children, which focuses on the use of rhymes, songs, and stories. The goals of the program are many, including strengthening the parent-child bond and structuring a supportive group for parents. One of the most significant goals is helping families to provide their children with frequent language experiences. The program also helps parents and caregivers become familiar with a wide range of reading materials and activities. These experiences provide children with the essential basis for later print literacy, and also serve to involve adults in literacy activities. Spanish translators are provided as needed (Parent-Child Mother Goose, 2004).

Librarians receive calls from parents or other community members with requests that the libraries try to address. A librarian said all her efforts are worth it when, for example, "some children come back when they are in college and say they remember my storytimes."

In addition, librarians bring English books to high school English as a Second Language classes. They also offer tutoring, resources, and referrals for adults who are learning English. Debbie explained:

It's very exciting to work in a fairly new branch with a growing and diverse community. More and more people are becoming aware of our library and the services we offer. We are hoping that by increasing our

offerings, we can offer more to the public and make library visits more of a habit.

Librarians from each library also visit new mothers at hospitals once a month to provide library cards and information about baby storytime programs. Charlotte explained, “The new director is very outreach oriented, and we are doing a lot of outreach as a part of a trend with this director.” Ana added, “We’ve always got somebody somewhere doing outreach.”

Urban Prince George’s County

The Prince George’s County libraries distribute a “Current News and Events” newspaper that outlines upcoming events, such as music performances and author presentations held at different library locations, summer reading programs for adults and children, book discussions, poetry groups, babysitting workshops, storytimes, puppet shows, and other educational programs for children and adults. They also have programming information available online and in local newspapers. In addition, librarians call and mail letters to local preschools and elementary schools each year to make positive connections and schedule outreach visits. Librarians commented that they were more successful scheduling outreach through phone calls than through letters.

Librarians provide book talks to schools two times a month. They also provide storytimes to daycares, preschools, and the local Judith P. Hoyer Center. If a librarian is unable to provide services at an outreach event due to illness, a substitute librarian is found to ensure continuity of all regularly scheduled connections.

Summary and Recommendations

Librarians were providing outreach to community organizations, schools, daycare centers, hospitals, and other sites where children and parents or childcare providers were present (see Table 1). While acknowledging the quality and importance of their outreach, librarians wanted to build their capacity to provide more services to their neediest populations. To accomplish this, they believed they needed more hours and needed to hire additional librarians.

While each county was working on reaching their neediest populations through various outreach practices, the effects of librarians’ outreach efforts were not being systematically evaluated. As a result, librarians showed an interest in incorporating an evaluation component into their outreach practices. Conducting parent interviews to determine the effectiveness of outreach programs could potentially provide this information.

Stephanie Shauck from the Maryland State Department of Education-Division of Library Development and Services (MSDE-DLDS) identified sites for potential outreach that other librarians in Maryland provide to targeted populations. Collaborations with health service providers, social services, juvenile justice systems, prisons, work/employee training programs, and churches are taking place in other counties and have been successful.

Conclusion

This study investigated how 26 Maryland public librarians were providing early literacy opportunities to young children and their families through their outreach services. Many similarities between librarians' practices existed. All librarians knew the importance of forming home, school, and community partnerships and were working collaboratively among these spheres to help children succeed in school. Librarians were providing storytimes and literacy rich activities in schools, daycares, hospitals, community centers, and malls. They were using bookmobiles to provide access to print materials to families, caregivers, pediatricians, and teachers. These efforts were in place to address the needs of communities and reach their neediest populations, who might not ordinarily visit the public library. Through their outreach, librarians hope to inform families and community members not only of the types of activities that can promote education, but also to encourage more people to visit the library and utilize the vast resources that cannot be provided solely through outreach. In addition, librarians were willing to extend their efforts further to continue to work toward the ultimate goal of helping children thrive in school.

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