Christchurch City Libraries 'Ready for Reading': librarians and teachers working together to strengthen literacy opportunities for a group of marginalised preschoolers.

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Abstract

This paper reports on the experiences of the Evaluation Team, comprised of experienced librarians from the Christchurch City Libraries and primary teacher educators (from Canterbury University) as they planned and implemented interventions working with the children of teen mothers (one marginalised cohort within a wider study). In particular it focuses on the Christchurch City Libraries' (CCL) use of the Ready for Reading kit (R4R) to provide an intervention for a group of non-library users. It explores the diversity of strengths within the Research Evaluation Team and describes the challenges faced, and resilience required as they focused on motivating non-library using parents to support their children's literacy development.

Strengths of a multidisciplinary team are explored and how the ingredients of community connections and passion for literacy, together with clear knowledge of the reading process, were needed to develop interventions that would meet the needs of the target groups by supporting children's transition into school.

Introduction

A commitment to lifelong learning

The Christchurch City Council Long Term Council Community Plan (2009-19) identifies nine community outcomes. One of these is Lifelong Learning with the outcome of "Our learning opportunities help us to participate in the community and the economy. Quality education is available for people of all ages" (2009, p54). As a city, Christchurch will know we are achieving this when everybody receives a good basic education, people are skilled and a broad range of learning opportunities is available. One of the headline indicators of progress is identified as literacy and numeracy performance.

The Christchurch City Libraries (CCL), a unit of the Christchurch City Council, contribute towards the development of strong communities, and to this end all public programmes have an emphasis on lifelong learning through a focus on literacy and learning. This philosophy is also consistent with the perceived role of public libraries, "Public Libraries engage, inspire and inform citizens and help build strong communities. Kia āwhina te hunga ora, ki te hāngaia o rātou ake āo" (Local Government New Zealand, LIANZA, & National Library of New Zealand, 2006, p1).

Similarly the development of literacy skills is a cornerstone priority within New Zealand education (Ministry of Education, 2009). However, international studies (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007; Chamberlain, 2007) highlight that while New Zealand provides effective literacy instruction practices that meet the needs of most children, there are particular cohorts of children who make slower progress than others. This underachieving *tail* has disproportionate representation of children from marginalised lower socio-economic groups (Crooks and Flockton, 2005; McNaughton, 2002). Enhancing outcomes for those New Zealand children within the *tail* is therefore an educational imperative which clearly aligns with the CCL focus of promoting literacy as a vehicle for strengthening communities through the promotion of lifelong learning.

The Ready for Reading project

R4R is a pilot programme of early reading intervention developed by CCL and builds on the well established CCL 'Books for Babies' project. The Books for Babies Project was launched in 1990 as part of The International Year of the Child and delivers a board book and library information to all newborn babies within the Canterbury region. In 2002 development work began on the R4R resource. R4R's particular focus is on building a platform of skills that support the development of print literacy after school entry.

Opportunities in the 1990's and 2007 for CCL staff to visit Birmingham Public Library enabled CCL to consider the research and processes used in the internationally acclaimed Bookstart project which was initially trialled in Birmingham, UK in 1992, (Booktrust 1992; 2009; Moore & Wade, 2003). It aims to strengthen family based literacy practices with the view to improving literacy achievement levels.

The effectiveness of Bookstart to increase the literacy levels of children and to increase their use of the public library (Moore and Wade, 1998) encouraged CCL staff to develop a programme of their own based upon an in-house produced package 'Ready for Reading'. This included a book to read to preschool children, a puzzle/game to play with them and a pamphlet intended to inform parents about specific practices to foster literacy. The package is gifted to the parents of preschoolers (on their fourth birthday) in the Christchurch City region.

The resource was developed in-house through the Children's Services unit. A cross-unit collaboration of distribution and follow up interventions was implemented with the Families and Pre-School Outreach Team and Centre for the Child Team Leader. The Families and Pre-School Outreach Team has, over many years, developed strong community connections across a range of institutions, community organisations, hard to reach families and non-traditional library users. The team's community connections and roles combined with the individual staff attributes of strong inter-personal skills, customer focus and personal resilience, together with an overt *passion* for children and a love of reading made them an ideal choice to be involved in the R4R project.

The Evaluation Project: forming the team
The R4R Evaluation project arose towards the end of the resource development phase when discussion focused on measures of success. While descriptive data would be easily obtained from the distribution processes, it was also important to attempt to gain a perspective on the effects of the intervention, including qualitative data. In particular what effect, if any, would the availability of this pack and associated preschool programmes/intervention contribute to children and parent-reader engagement? The CCL goal was to discover 'If what we are doing is making a difference and how would we know?'

As discussion progressed it became clear an independent and creditable research process was desirable to sit alongside the rollout of the resource. A collaborative partnership with the University of Canterbury researchers was established. Both researchers work in pre-service teacher education with one lecturing in literacy.

The Evaluation Team met on several occasions to discuss and design the evaluation method. In contrast to the Bookstart Project which measured the effectiveness of the Bookstart pack with global teacher judgements of children at school entry, it was believed that commonly used school entry assessments routinely carried out by all schools would provide a more objective, independent and robust measure of intervention impact. As in the Birmingham study school entry scores of participating children would be compared with the scores of a control child. The CCL team was clear that whilst the resource had been developed for all families, the particular focus was on children of families who did not have an on-going connection with Christchurch City Libraries. The term *hard to reach* holds meaning in this context. Discussion related to hard to reach families was strongly influenced by an outreach-librarian who worked with several organisations that supported teenage mothers. It was felt that this subset of hard to reach families would be an ideal focus for the evaluation process. Whilst the R4R kit contained useful information and resources, it was felt that without some explanation and instruction it was unlikely to make an impact alone. For this reason the intervention was extended to include two workshops to explain and elaborate on the contents of the kit.

Ongoing dialogue and the resulting mutual trust, respect and shared commitment for literacy development enabled honest conversations between all parties. Through this process the library staff also benefited in terms of their understanding of research and the need to be very focused about how and why attempts were being made to promote and engage families with reading. The process itself provided an educative journey for the library teams involved, challenging assumptions and helping staff ask bigger questions around CCL community engagement.

Challenges arising from action
Recruitment
Once the evaluation design was outlined and mapped on a timeline, library staff undertook to recruit teen mothers and their preschoolers. This was not seen as problematic as library outreach staff already had contact with groups of teen mothers who were supported by programmes offered by a range of community providers. Two patterns quickly emerged. The response from the staff of organisations responsible for working with and supporting teen mothers was unanimously and strongly positive. Their comments supported both the need for and the value of a package that aimed to assist the literacy development of a particularly vulnerable group of children.

> I emailed (Diana), she was so enthusiastic her team, her staff are very into that, anything that that will encourage their mums. They have several young mums. I met with Diana, she thought that the project was such a fabulous idea. (Outreach-Librarian)

As a result it was not difficult to gain access to groups of teen mothers through existing support group organisations. However the invitation to participate was not seen in the same way by the teen mothers themselves. Meetings with the teen mothers were characterised by what the Evaluation Team perceived as a negative response. Questions raised by teen mothers tended to target the issue of 'What is in it for me?' In outlining what would be required library staff suggested that the teen mothers would read to their preschooler each night. Whilst this would have been a *hoped for* outcome of successful workshop experiences, it had not been discussed as a requirement during the planning phase of the project. Teen mothers clearly saw this expectation as a huge commitment. Subsequent interviews with outreach staff revealed that reading tended to be regarded as difficult rather than pleasurable by the teen mothers, and in addition that reading books written for preschoolers was seen as especially uninteresting.

> At the Salvation Army – Norma who helped me facilitate, she was really good because she was quite encouraging as well, and the teenage mums said 'oh she doesn't sound very interesting' as if …'it was BORING and books are BORING and children's books… YUCK'
> (Outreach-Librarian)

As a result of being unable to recruit teen mothers from among social support organisations, library staff approached Kimihia (an outpost of Linwood College in Christchurch). The staff of Kimihia work with teenage mothers who wish to return to their secondary school studies after having a baby. Kimihia staff members were very supportive of the R4R programme and even decided to plan their own teaching programme (for English) around the literacy development of the teen mothers' children. Library staff found it easy to organise R4R workshops with Kimihia staff as part of the centres programme. The young mothers themselves were a much more easily reached target group.

A group of young mothers who have decided to return to education are similar to, but not identical to, other teen mothers. Educationally these young women are more likely to have been successful at school, and were also more likely to be keen readers themselves. In addition they were part of a programme that valued and promoted reading, books, and literacy generally. Nevertheless this group remain positioned within a hard to reach cohort and while present these young mothers displayed behaviours consistent with their age. On reflection an unstated assumption held by the Evaluation Team was that, as mothers, these teens would be focused on the needs of their child/ren and would have therefore moved beyond the *self-interest* which is commonly thought to characterise teenage development.

Locating New Zealand's four year olds
Locating 3 ½ - 4 year old children from hard to reach families has always been difficult, as early childhood education in New Zealand is non-compulsory and tends to be a priority for higher socio-economic groups. Recently introduced government policy (twenty hours free for over 3's) has improved the potential of reaching this group. To overcome the barriers to early childhood education the government currently subsidises all children over the age of three so that they can attend an early childhood education centre. This

is one of the very few untargeted benefits provided by the state in New Zealand. The introduction of the twenty hours free policy has led to rapid and sweeping changes in the early childhood sector in particular to the nature and operation of kindergartens as they now compete for business with early learning centres and crèches run by private providers. The impact of the policy has been to increase the proportion of the population of preschoolers who receive some form of organised early childhood education. In future it may be possible to work with children from *hard to reach* families within preschool settings.

The opportunity to work with the Kimihia group of teenage mothers provided the Evaluation Team with a glimpse at the target group. It was soon apparent that most teenage mothers actually have children who are younger than those being sought for the evaluation project. 3 ½ to 4 year old children were targeted so that within no more than 1 ½ years, access to school entry data would be available. By the time their children are in the target range, the teenage mothers themselves are likely to be nineteen or twenty years of age. Unfortunately the Kimihia programme tended not to be catering for this age group and this was recognised immediately on sighting the group. While in hindsight this seems obvious the initial suggestion had been uncritically received by a range of community groups and educators during the planning phase.

The intervention
The opportunity to work with the Kimihia group provided a number of new challenges with the associated insights that experience provides.

The library group took ownership of the planning (and implementation) of the initial intervention at Kimihia. Four library staff worked with the teen mums (and their toddlers) across a forty-five minute timeframe. The presentation was largely conducted using a transmission model of interaction directly aimed at the teen mums present, however two presenters worked directly with the children modelling, and demonstrating positive literacy based interactions. These drew on established programmes that the CCL offered, Baby Times (an oral language experience for babies), and Story Times (an oral based literacy experience for 2 and 3 year olds). Four themes characterised these aspects of the workshop, song, rhyme, hooking the children's interest, and having fun with children. These were skilful demonstrations of engaging children, and proved to be a powerful experience (several teen mums were enthusiastic during interviews conducted six months later.)

The workshop drew on the wider intent of the information card provided within the R4R Kit, focusing on excellent modelling of several of the oral based activities suggested. There was however a gap regarding a clear outline/description of how to share a book with a preschooler.

An underlying goal of the R4R kit was to strengthen parents understanding of three key types of information that a child needs to exhibit in readiness for the acquisition of print literacy skills. These include print awareness, alphabet awareness and phonemic awareness all of which contribute toward being *ready for reading*.

The exploration of print is a significant part in reading readiness. How and when to share text with a specific focus on discussing text features relevant to an emerging reader needed to be the cornerstone of an intervention. Knowledge of the process of reading acquisition underpins the ability to plan and implement a strategy that models, describes, and discusses the key features of print acquisition. The challenge was therefore to provide a workshop that could capture, inform and motivate an easily disengaged audience.

Implications
The R4R Evaluation project's initial focus on teen mothers was a joint decision. There was an emotive hook associated with teen mothers that saw unconditional buy-in from all members of the Evaluation Team. This arose partly from a shared desire to make a difference, but was probably inflated by the enthusiasm of the outreach-librarian who drew on prior experience of working with teens. Passion for books and the importance of quality preschool literacy experiences were other joint beliefs.

Observing the library staff work working with teen mums and their children at Kimihia was a richly rewarding experience. It is uncertain whether all the lessons learned would generalise to other groups but it is believed that many of them may.

As the Kimihia project unfolded, the shared beliefs about the project needed to translate into a shared goal. Upon reflection it was this point that the Evaluation Team needed to articulate a shared vision. Was the intervention to focus on providing a literacy experience for either the teen mothers, or their children? Or was it to raise awareness of skills underpinning the transition into the acquisition of print literacy? Differing perspectives only became apparent during the initial Kimihia intervention. Library staff demonstrated strength in performance with text using books as a springboard into rich oral language opportunities (e.g. through the use of props such as puppets, blowing bubbles, songs etc.) This contrasted with the teacher educator's desire for children to develop practical print skills (e.g. an ability to predict story development, using picture information, awareness of print directionality).

Kimihia teen mothers presented as a diverse and unstructured collection of individuals. When library staff attempted to engage with the teens directly with ideas and content related to the R4R pamphlet, attention was clearly divided. The presence of the teens' children at this session (rare within the Kimihia programme itself) was obviously one source of distraction. One or two teenage mums were reading books of their own, others chatted with each other intermittently, so that, in general, the content messages were communicated within a fragmented and slightly chaotic atmosphere. This contrasted strongly with the components of the workshop that were delivered directly to the children. The sight of a skilled librarian engaging with the children had a magnetic effect on the attention of everyone, including the teen mums. These parts of the workshop were a powerful source of motivation for the teen mothers interviewed six months later. There was a paradox in this *performance* aspect. The skills and content being modelled by library staff were those necessary for engaging and holding the attention of large groups of children. Beyond the very real motivational value of engaging with the children, the value of these components of the workshop were limited because the skills that are necessary for reading one on one with your own child were not able to be modelled.

The lessons taken from observing the Kimihia session are:

- It is very powerful to begin a session with children present to engage parents through first engaging with their children. The love of books and positive experiences associated with reading to children and the spontaneous reaction of the children powerfully sets the scene for some knowledge and skills to follow. However, this is likely to model reading as *performance* rather than focusing on prerequisites underpinning a child's readiness for reading.

- If a workshop includes content for parents (which it will need if it is to develop parent's skills) then this should follow once the children have been withdrawn (perhaps for some more supervised *entertainment* elsewhere).

- The less than focused response of the teen mothers to workshop content communicated through explanation demonstrated that it is important not to rely on verbal explanations alone. Instead the skills and strategies being developed need to be modelled in some way (the relational nature of parent/child reading makes this very difficult to model with a child in person). The use of video is probably the most realistic way to unpack the content being developed. A visual model and some conversation around that would provide a much more powerful platform for skill and knowledge development.

- Not only does the person fronting the intervention need a strong understanding of the stages of acquiring print literacy, there is also a need to capture and engage the target audience. In the current context the Evaluation Team required a front person who communicated ease and confidence working with teen mothers. Social indicators (such as language use, age and dress)

need to demonstrate connectedness with the audience and seek to build a platform for establishing partnership.

While this paper reflects on the lessons learned from an initial intervention process used with one marginalised group, the Kimihia project has been valuable as a pilot. It has allowed the opportunity for the Evaluation Team to focus on the underlying purpose of the R4R kit and opened dialogue around the role of specifically supporting preschool print literacy development. This has resulted in the exploration of those personal attributes and professional skills needed to promote print literacy which differ from CCL's established oral rich programmes of 'Baby Times' and 'Story Times' (which focus on a younger age group; 0-3 years). It also serves as a reminder that motivation and engagement issues are central when attempting to work with any group, especially so in this case.

This first step in intervention planning and implementation has required tenacity on the part of the Evaluation Team. It clearly highlights the interconnectedness of barriers when attempting to reach marginalised cohorts of the community and contributes to the literature surrounding engaging these groups.

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