

School Library eBook Providers and Linguistic Equity: An Analysis of eBook Collections Available to School Libraries

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Abstract

If school library collections must meet the needs of the communities they serve, the native languages of the student population must be an important consideration when making purchasing decisions about eBooks. Many professionals in the library community believe that materials in electronic format have the potential to enrich library collections with linguistic diversity. To ensure that school library collections reflect the linguistic diversity of the community, as school library professionals we need to gain a better understanding of what resources are available for our students in digital format. Recent studies indicate that eBooks available from vendors to schools libraries do not meet the linguistic needs of children whose native language is not English. Several international organizations have recognized this issue and are developing initiatives to resolve the growing digital and linguistic divide.

Keywords: eBooks, multicultural, equity, publishers

Linguistic Equity in eBooks

School library collections must meet the needs of the communities they serve. Therefore, the native languages of the student population must be an important consideration when making purchasing decisions about eBooks. Many professionals in the library community believe that materials in electronic format have the potential to enrich library collections with linguistic diversity because the Internet knows no national boundaries (IFLA, 2009; RUSA, 2007). To ensure that school library collections reflect the linguistic diversity of the community, as school library professionals we need to gain a better understanding of what resources are available for our students in digital format.

In the United States, the issue of linguistic diversity is most acute with the growing population of Spanish speakers in public schools. Many of these students are native Spanish speakers and often bilingual in English and Spanish. Even with restrictions on immigration and the depressed economic climate, many areas of the United States continue to experience growth in their Spanish speaking communities (Flores and Pachon, 2008; Naidoo, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Reading experts believe that providing culturally sensitive reading materials in children's native languages is an important way to promote reading as a leisure-time activity and develop reading appreciation. According to multicultural education advocate Isabel Schon (2006) encouraging children to read—in any language—is one of the best ways to enrich their lives as individual human beings, to develop insights into and understandings of their own lives ... to become aware of the greatness of their cultural heritage, and to deepen their interest in reading as a leisure-time activity” (p. 48).

Whenever there exists a multi-language community, with one dominant and several minority languages, ensuring linguistic equity relative to library resources becomes a significant issue for schools. One way in which this can be addressed is through the use of the school library, which has a long-standing reputation for serving as a resource for high-quality, culturally rich range of materials in different formats. We know that when libraries have diverse collections there is an impact on achievement scores. Providing materials in different languages is part of this successful strategy (Scholastic, 2008). National and international standards for school libraries assert the importance of developing collections in alignment with the cultural and linguistic needs of the school community. The IFLA/UNESCO *School Library Manifesto* (2006) states that it is essential to support “all students in learning and practicing skills for evaluating and using information, regardless of form, format, or medium, including sensitivity to the modes of communication within the community” (p. 2). National and international standards for library collections state libraries should provide resources and services aligned with the cultural and linguistic heritages of their communities (ALA, 1990; IFLA, 2009). According to the ALA statement on diversity in collection development: “Collection development responsibilities include selecting materials in the languages in common use in the community the library serves” (1990, para. 3).

Ebook Providers and Language Equity

The major international vendors of school library materials make a wide variety of print and electronic materials available in different languages and provide service and support for the automated systems through which these materials are managed. In addition to commercial vendors of library materials, online digital libraries, such as the International Children’s Digital Library provide thousands of children’s titles in as many languages at no cost to users. However, it is not known if these providers are offering eBooks at a level that will meet the needs of a multi-lingual student population. In other words, we know that providing equitable library resources is an important factor in academic achievement, but can equity be achieved in the digital domain with the current offerings of eBooks by the major vendors and digital libraries?

According to a recent study published by *School Library Journal*, the availability of eBooks in U.S. school libraries is on the rise (2011). In 2011, 44 percent of school libraries in the United States offered eBooks, up from 33 percent in 2010, and averaged 397 titles per school, most of which were in the non-fiction category. High schools had the most eBook titles, while middle schools were second; elementary schools had the lowest number of titles. According to the study, children are most likely to access eBooks on a dedicated reader such as a Kindle rather than through a networked computer.

Although there is an increased use of eBooks in school libraries, currently the eBook landscape is full of confusion. Access to eBook titles range from a licensing arrangement, to files in the public domain, to outright purchase of eBooks with limitations on the number of times the books can circulate (Lonsdale and Armstrong, 2008; Pappas, 2009). Because of this confusion, many school library media specialists are turning to their long-standing relationships with print vendors such as Follett to aid in their eBook selection process. These vendors provide large collections of eBooks from a range of publishers using a single software interface and are a major source for eBooks in libraries (Pappas, 2009; School Library Journal, 2011). Because the collections eBook providers offer school libraries is changing constantly, it is difficult to get a clear picture of what resources are available to schools at any given time. When considering the offerings of eBooks available in languages other than English, the picture becomes even dimmer.

A recent study by the authors published in *School Libraries Worldwide* (Paganelli & Houston, 2013) reports that compared with the other vendors, Follett offers the largest quantity and range of eBook titles, with over 120,000 titles in its collection. Follett also offers the largest

number of Spanish eBooks, with over 4,000 titles in its collection. This is not a surprising finding, considering the fact that according to *School Library Journal* (2011) Follett enjoys 69 percent of the school library eBook market. The Follett eBook collection offers a wide variety of fiction and non-fiction titles, with a majority of titles in the easy fiction category. The table below shows that the percentage of the overall collection available in Spanish is small, comprising only 3.4 percent of the total number of titles. When looking at other world languages such as Japanese, French, or Arabic, the number of titles offered becomes negligible. When looking at the offerings from smaller providers it appears that eBooks available in Spanish as well as other world languages is also very small (Paganelli & Houston, 2013)

Table 1: Totals and Percentages of eBooks by Vendor and Language

Vendor	eBooks by Language			
	Total	English	Spanish	Other Languages
Follett	123688	119484 (96.6%)	4204 (3.4%)	723 (0%)
Gale/Cengage	942	924 (98%)	18 (2.0%)	0%
Permabound	15348	15137 (98.6%)	211 (1.4%)	0%
Mackin	34198	33814 (98.8%)	384 (1.2%)	0%

Since the publication of research in *School Libraries Worldwide*, the authors have examined the collection of eBooks offered by Overdrive, a company that has recently begun to market digital collections to school libraries. Overdrive states on its website that the current catalog contains over 350,000 titles. The table below provides a breakdown of eBook titles in the Overdrive collection for Juvenile Fiction and Non Fiction in languages other than English.

Table 2: Overdrive Titles in Languages Other Than English in Juvenile Fiction and Non Fiction categories

Language	Juvenile Fiction	Juvenile Non Fiction
Spanish	627	309
French	612	146
Swedish	122	2
Italian	107	9
Russian	14	80
All other non-English languages	397	182

Information on how the numbers of eBooks in languages other than English compare with the numbers of books in English as a percentage of the total collection is not currently available from the publishers. However, with a collection size of over 350,000 we can surmise that similar to other eBook providers, titles in languages other than English represent a negligible part of Overdrive's total collection.

Ebook Offerings and Student Population Worldwide

Demographic analysis in the collection development process compares the percentages of population in a given language group with the percent of resources available in that language. This method has been used in the United States to evaluate the collections in public and school libraries to determine if the collection meets the linguistic diversity needs of the patrons (Boule, 2005; Etchison, 2008; Hoffert, 2008). To determine if there is linguistic equity in eBook titles available internationally the authors compared the population of children under the age of 15 worldwide with the availability of eBooks in different languages. As the data in the table below show, the percentage of eBook titles in the Follett collection--one of the largest international providers of eBooks to schools--does not mirror population demographics of school-age children worldwide. In the geographic regions with the largest

percentages of the population under the age of 15, such as Africa, Latin America, Asia and Oceania, the percentages of eBooks available in languages of those regions is negligible.

Table 3: Children Under the Age of 15 by Geographic Area Compared with eBooks in Follett Collection

Population percentage under 15 years of age by Geographic Region		Follett Spanish eBooks	Follett Languages other than Spanish or English
Africa	41%	3.4%	723 (0)%
Latin America/Caribbean	28%		
Asia	25%		
Oceania	24%		
North America	19%		
Europe	16%		

Population Reference Bureau (2012)

Narrowing the Linguistic Divide in eBooks

Efforts to stem the growing digital divide in developing countries international educational associations are involved in initiatives to increase the diversity in eBooks and other digital resources for children who speak languages other than English. According to the UNESCO panel on Multilingualism for Cultural Diversity and Participation of All in Cyberspace: “the creation, dissemination and preservation of content in diverse languages and formats must be accorded high priority in building an inclusive Information Society” (2005, p. 12).

A well-known initiative to bring digital resources to children is the International Children’s Digital Library, which provides thousands of eBooks in hundreds of languages free of charge. However, an analysis of this collection indicates that there is also a linguistic divide in the library collection. Over 70 percent of the ICDL collection is comprised of titles in English; titles in Persian (10 %) Mongolian (5.2%) and Spanish (3.8%) comprise the largest percentages of titles in languages other than English. Furthermore, these titles cannot be downloaded onto computers or mobile devices for reading at a later time, which makes it difficult for schools and community centers without reliable Internet service to make these titles fully accessible.

An international project to provide digital resources to students in the developing world on mobile devices is the Affordable Access initiative funded by the International Association for Digital Publications and the Worldbank (IADP, 2009). This initiative seeks to provide eBooks and portable computers to the primary, secondary, and post-secondary education community on a pro-bono basis, with the ultimate goal of providing a large volume of eBook titles at a deeply discounted rate. The IADP now has tested low-cost ereaders and is populating its ebookstore with a growing number of titles.

The non-profit organization Worldreader.org founded by former Amazon.com senior vice-president David Risher has the mission to provide eBooks to children in developing countries on mobile devices (“Our mission” 2013). As of May 2013, the organization has distributed 1,100 Kindles and 180,000 e-books to kids and teachers in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. Recent studies indicate primary-school students who got Kindles increased their

performance on standardized reading tests from about 13% to 16% and have increased access to African literature (Fowler & Bariyo, 2012).

This analysis of linguistic equity in eBooks from providers of resources to school libraries indicates they are not providing eBooks in multiple languages in the range or proportions needed to help school libraries worldwide achieve equity in their collections. When analyzing the contents of these eBook collections in the context of the world demographics, it becomes clear that there is a linguistic divide in the digital domain, which will impact the ability of children in the developing world to compete with digital natives in developed countries. Currently, several non-profit organizations are spearheading initiatives to narrow the divide with positive results, but with a majority of children living in countries speaking languages other than English, making steady progress in building a bridge for linguistic equity will be a daunting task.

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