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Services for Preschool Children in School Libraries: A Call to Action

Introduction

The quality of learning environments and interactions in the first years of life set the stage for school success and have lasting impacts on mental and physical health and wellbeing across the lifespan, and even life expectancy (Wong, Odom, Hume, Cox, Fettig, et al, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2011). Libraries are positioned to provide rich learning opportunities for young children and their caregivers (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2013, 2015; Urban Libraries Council, 2007). Library programs for young children, offered in nearly all public libraries in the United States support school readiness and educate parents about meaningful ways to interact with their children (Becker, 2012; Burger & Landerholm, 1991; Cahill, Joo, & Campana, 2019; Campana et al., 2016; de Vries, 2008; McKechnie, 2006; Mills et al., 2018; Smardo, 1984; Williams, 1998), but it is unclear what, if any, programs are offered for young children and their families through school libraries.

Keywords: children with disabilities, school libraries, school librarians

Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) mandates a free public education to all children in the United States (U.S.) ages birth to 21 years who have one or more disabilities. Infants and toddlers receive early intervention services (Part C), while those ages 3 through 21 receive special education and related services (Part B). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (US Department of Education, 2019), 13.7% of the total school aged population in the U.S. receives disability services through Part B.

Statement of the Research Problem

Section 619 of IDEA describes funding for state and local programs, and state-level administration and activities to support children with disabilities ages three through five. Nearly 7% of the total population of children 3-5 years of age in the United States receives disability services through IDEA, Part B, section 619 (United States Department of Education, 2019), and approximately 60% of those receiving services attend an early childhood program or other school. Yet, it is unclear what, if any, library programs and services these children or any other children in publicly funded preschool and early childhood education programs receive.

Literature Review

Little empirical information exists regarding school library service for preschool children. When school library services are offered, preschool children learn important skills and tend to enjoy the experience (Cahill, 2004); however, the one study that examined access to school libraries for children enrolled in public school prekindergarten programs found that the majority receive no services at all (Tullio, 2006).

The professional literature addressing programming and services for young children with disabilities and/or development delays in school libraries is even sparser. A recent investigation of public librarians' practices with preschool children with special needs (Cahill, Joo, & Howard, 2019), conducted as part of a larger investigation of public library storytime programs, found that some public libraries offer outreach programs to early childhood classrooms that serve children with disabilities and developmental delays. The bulk of literature addressing programming and services for school age children with disabilities promotes inclusion as a general ideal (e.g. Adams, 2009; Downing, 2006; Jurkowski, 2006; Neal & Ehlert, 2006) or simply describes programs or services that have been implemented for children who qualify for special education. No empirical investigations of school library services for children with disabilities (Allen & Hughes-Hassel, 2010; Cox & Lynch, 2006; Heeks & Kinnell, 1997; Markey & Miller, 2015; Murray, 2002; Perrault, 2011a; Small, Snyder, Parker, 2009) have been focused on preschool children (ages 3-5) who qualify for special education services through IDEA. Thus, while school librarians should play a role in the education and social and emotional support of young children with disabilities and developmental delays who qualify for preschool services (Jurkowski, 2006), it is unclear if they do. Further, school librarians admit a lack of appropriate resources and professional knowledge to serve children with disabilities well (Allen & Hughes-Hassell, 2010; Cox & Lynch, 2006; Perrault, 2011b; Small, Snyder, & Parker, 2009).

Discussion

That lack of access to library services and programs for young children with special needs is particularly concerning given that the home literacy environments of children with disabilities are significantly less supportive than those of their typically developing peers (Boudreau, 2005; van der Schuit, Peeters, Segers, van Balkom, & Verhoeven, 2009). Specifically, some studies report that children with disabilities have less access to books and other literacy materials than their typically developing peers (Light & Kelford Smith, 1993; Marvin, 1994; Marvin & Miranda, 1993), and access to books and other literacy materials tends to decline in relation to the severity of a disability (Carlson, Bitterman, & Jenkins, 2012). Given the existing inadequacy of the home literacy environments of many young children with disabilities, library programs and services have the potential to be even more important for this segment of the population. As Downing (2006) contends, children with disabilities should not only have access to library

services and programs equal to that of their normally developing peers, they should ideally have more.

Three decades ago, a public library children's services consultant regretfully declared, "libraries and librarians have been overlooked and underutilized as resources for children with learning differences" (Rovenger, 1987, p. 428). Yet, health professionals who provide early intervention services for young children with disabilities and developmental delays recognize the beneficial nature of libraries as supportive community resources (Ordonez-Jasis & Myck-Wayne, 2012). Promisingly, library communities internationally recognize inclusion of people with disabilities as a challenge area and are taking measures to discuss and overcome it (Djonov, Torr, & Stenglin, 2018). School library scholars and school library leaders should consider following the lead of the larger library community and begin championing school library services and programs for young children with special needs. Additional research investigating library services and programs available for young children is necessary to support these efforts.

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