

Public Library Play-based Early Literacy Programs: What is the Parental Experience?

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Abstract

Many public libraries offer early literacy storytime programs to child patrons and their parents. Based on current research and best-practice periodicals, more children's librarians are incorporating and modelling play-based activities in their storytime programs at the public library to emphasize the importance of parent-child interaction in guiding early literacy learning. Play as a method of learning is often underutilised and misunderstood by parents. This literature review aims to investigate the role of public libraries (and librarians) in informal early literacy education, the shift towards play-based practices in early literacy programs at the public library, the importance and significance of quality parent-child interaction in early literacy experiences, and the documentation of the experiences and perceptions of parents attending early literacy programs at the public library with their children. As previous studies correlate the benefits of parent-child interaction in play-based activities with early literacy learning, it is evident that further qualitative research into the actual experiences of parents attending play-based early literacy public library programs is needed in order to identify more areas for improvement of public library services and storytime programs for child patrons and their parents.

Keywords: parental experiences, early literacy, play-based activities, public library

Early literacy storytime programs at public libraries provide opportunities for child patrons and their parents to engage with age-appropriate literature in an informal learning environment using targeted activities to enhance and support the development of early literacy skills (Byrne et al., 2003; Campana et al., 2016; Clark, 2017; Graham &

Gagnon, 2013; McKend, 2010; Mills et al., 2018; Neuman et al., 2017; Stagg Peterson et al., 2012). As play practices gain traction in storytime programs, more focus is placed on the importance of parent-child interaction for guiding early literacy learning. In this literature review, the themes are (1) the role of public libraries (and librarians) in informal early literacy education, (2) the shift towards play in early literacy programs at the library, (3) the importance and significance of quality parent-child interaction in early literacy experiences, and (4) the experiences of parents in early literacy programs at the public library. Finally, considering previous studies have correlated the benefits of parent-child interaction in play activities with early literacy learning, further qualitative research into the actual experiences of parents attending play-based early literacy public library programs is needed.

Public Libraries Take Up the Early Literacy Mantle

Storytime programs at public libraries have been a staple component of providing children's services (Campana et al., 2016). Children's librarians hosting storytime traditionally saw these programs as an opportunity to inculcate a love of reading and an appreciation for the library in their child patrons (Neuman et al., 2017, p. 8). However, burgeoning research in the area of early literacy alerted many public librarians to the necessity of providing literacy opportunities not only for child patrons but also for *their parents* in an effort to support and to develop early literacy skills in pre-school-aged children (Graham & Gagnon, 2013; Hume et al., 2015; Neuman, 2000; Sonnenschein et al., 2000). In response, two American associations, the Public Library Association (PLA) and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), created a parent education initiative called Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) in 2004 which focused on critical early literacy skills and the parent's role in supporting their child's literacy development (Neuman et al., 2017, p. 2).

There is a general consensus amongst researchers that early literacy proficiency consists of the following six skills: (1) print motivation, (2) phonological awareness, (3) vocabulary development, (4) print awareness, (5) narrative awareness, and (6) letter knowledge (Campana et al., 2016; Clark, 2017; Graham & Gagnon, 2013; Stagg Peterson et al., 2012; McKend, 2010; Neuman et al., 2017; Roskos & Christie, 2011). After a few years of the implementation of ECRR, a second version (ECRR2) was

released in 2010 with a shift in focus away from the jargon-laden critical early literacy skills to five simple practices (talking, singing, playing, reading, and writing) which parents could use with their children to support literacy development (Neuman et al., 2017, p. 2). Of significant note, McKend (2010) examined the state of early literacy storytime programs in Canadian public libraries using a survey methodology and structured interviews with children's librarians. McKend found a vast majority of library systems (including 346 out of 400 branches queried) in Canada had either formally or informally adopted the tenets of the American ECRR program.

While there is generally an implicit understanding that young children attending storytime programs at the public library develop skills and behaviours which help in later literacy development, Campana et al. (2016) sought to establish a baseline of correlation between attendance at early literacy programs at the public library and children's early literacy skills by making quantifiable measurements through systematic investigation. Using a quasi-experimental methodology and mixed methods to look at 40 early literacy storytime programs provided by public libraries, Campana et al. administered a questionnaire survey to children's librarians (regarding their education, work history, and training) and observed 120 storytime programs, excluding any crafting or playtime segments. The results were as expected: children in attendance demonstrated a multitude of early literacy skills and behaviours when early literacy providers included early literacy content in their storytime programs (Campana et al., 2016). Comparably, in a Canadian study on a smaller scale of 10 Ontario public libraries, Stagg Peterson et al. (2012) found that children exhibited an increase in school readiness behaviours; more engagement with and motivation towards books and stories; and heightened interest in print, words, letters, and phonics as a result of attending early literacy storytime programs at the public library.

Mills et al. (2018) build upon the study of Campana et al. (2016) and examine the impact of an early literacy training intervention for children's librarians and its effect on the provision of early literacy skills within library storytime programs. The same 40 libraries from Campana et al. (2016) were evenly divided into experimental and control groups, with only the experimental group receiving the training intervention (Mill et al.,

2018). The intervention resulted in more early literacy content in storytime programs and consequently, more early literacy behaviours exhibited by children in attendance (Mills et al., 2018). Phonological awareness was the only early literacy skill that did not show change in either domain, even with intervention (Mills et al., 2018).

McKend (2010) recommended to the Provincial and Territorial Public Library Council (PTPLC), which commissioned her evaluative research, that Canadian library systems officially adopt the ECRR program which encompasses many training tools and resources for children's librarians providing early literacy programs at the library. If adopted, this initiative could enable libraries to start making these necessary connections to parents and caregivers and work in concert to support children's literacy development. Kipfer (2019), the Manager of Community Engagement and Children's Services at Waterloo Public Library (WPL), illustrates how successful their children's programming became after basing their own Explore, Play, Learn (EPL) early literacy strategy on ECRR2. WPL transformed their children's services spaces into multi-generational play-based centres with discovery materials at hand and created a new EPL collection within their catalogue with recommended books linked to each specific early literacy practice (Talk, Sing, Play, Read, and Write) (Kipfer, 2019). Furthermore, by separately shelving the EPL collection and enabling searching via 'practice' in the catalogue, WPL supports parents in selecting reading materials to target particular early literacy practices (Kipfer, 2019). One measure of the great impact of their EPL strategy can be seen in the circulation numbers. Kipfer reports more than double circulation statistics of the EPL collection compared to other books in the broader children's collection. Kipfer's article demonstrates that parents look to the library for direction in order to make educational early literacy selections for their children. Through embracing ECRR2's five practices (especially play), public libraries—as nimble, innovative spaces and organizations—are well-positioned to guide parents in their children's early literacy development.

Injection of Play into Early Literacy Library Programs

As one of the five practices for supporting early literacy, 'play' often gets overlooked by parents as a medium for developing early literacy skills (Byrne et al., 2003; Kane, 2016; Neuman et al., 2017). What can be defined as 'play' changes as

children mature (Byrne et al., 2003). Ralli and Payne (2016) identify ‘exploratory play,’ encompassing sensory observation and object manipulation, as the starting point for children’s play-development, followed by symbolic play (i.e. abstracting objects) and dramatic play (i.e. pretend/role play). The social interaction side of ‘play’ also progresses through joint activities, parallel play, and cooperative play (Ralli & Payne, 2016).

Mills et al. (2018) assert a commonly held viewpoint that playtime and crafting are supplementary storytime elements which are not consistently offered at all libraries and thus, have not been regularly researched (or implemented in practice) as often as the other four practices (p. 173). While not focused on play-based literacy programming in a library context, both Campbell’s (2021) examination of parental beliefs about early literacy phonics instruction in early learning centres in Australia, and Kane’s (2016) US study of parental perceptions of play in formal preschool education environments, found positive parental support for play-based literacy activities, with the exception that overt phonics instruction accompanied play-based activities in its perceived value (Campbell, 2021) and that parents paradoxically continue to distinguish ‘play’ and ‘learning’ as distinct and separate entities (Kane, 2016). However, there has been considerable effort to illuminate the connections between play and early literacy learning (Campbell, 2021; Kane, 2016; Neuman, 2000; Ralli & Payne, 2016; Roskos & Christie, 2011) in order to strengthen the dialogue for further acceptance and inclusion of play in literacy development experiences.

Byrne et al. (2003) frame the importance of play as a tool for early literacy learning through the established work of psychologists Piaget and Vygotsky (p. 42). As children’s librarians and an assistant library director, Byrne et al. suggest that parents disregard play as a helpful tool since it is often juxtaposed with the concept of ‘work;’ however, their speculation of parents’ perceptions of play is not supported by actual parental testimony or research. Using a Venn diagram with three overlapping circles, Roskos and Christie (2011) coin the term ‘play-literacy nexus’ to illustrate the point at which play, language, and early literacy intersect (p. 208). Studies have repeatedly found that the intentionality of the play as well as the social interaction (both vocabulary

learning and connection) with an adult (discussed later) are factors which elevate 'play' from a childhood pastime to an informal educational early literacy tool (Neuman, 2000; Ralli & Payne, 2016; Roskos & Christie, 2011).

Employing an intervention approach with young adolescent mothers and their children, Neuman's (2000) study on guided participation in play found that more transcendence (i.e. connecting to background knowledge and future experience) and transference (i.e. taking on responsibility) occurred when children engaged in guided play activities with their parents. Thus, Neuman's findings support the importance of intentional guided play in strengthening children's confidence and competence, both of which are needed for early literacy learning.

While not all public libraries have injected play into their early literacy storytime programs, many have taken on the challenge. Ralli and Payne's (2016) survey research reveals that many librarians are promoting play practices by modelling responsive, child-led play interactions with young patrons within view of parents and caregivers and by providing access to toys or play experiences which can be replicated at home. Furthermore, Neuman et al. (2017) spent three years (2013-2016) evaluating the impact of the second iteration of the ECRR initiative (which included play as one of the five practices) on early literacy programs at public libraries. The research team visited 60 libraries in 10 library systems across the USA and used multiple methods to collect data: ethnographic observation of spaces and storytime programs, interviews with over 100 librarians, a standardized questionnaire for caregivers, and photographic content analysis (Neuman et al., 2017, p. 11). Neuman et al. found that the public libraries who had adopted ECRR2 are creating new family friendly spaces for parents and children to interact, read, and play together. Additionally, they found that the roles of librarians are expanding to encompass those of childhood/parent educators and community workers, that early literacy programs include more non-traditional elements overall such as playtime, and that libraries are making age-appropriate technology available to parents and children (Neuman et al., 2017).

Similarly, Byrne et al. (2003) also identify space as a component for encouraging play at the library and fostering the acceptance of play as a learning tool by parents (p. 43). Play can be noisy! Byrne et al. imply that parents' comfort level with 'play'

heightens when library spaces are correspondingly play-friendly. Clearly, public libraries are in a position to highlight and validate the importance and relevance of play for parents and to encourage parents to accept and to celebrate their role as their children's 'first playmates' (Ralli & Payne, 2016, p. 61).

Quality Parent-Child Interaction Matters

Parental engagement (especially in the play processes of their children) is essential for providing the rich language interaction necessary for later literacy development (Byrne et al., 2003; Neuman, 2000; Ralli & Payne, 2016). Neuman (2000) studied this parent-child interaction phenomenon from a behavioural standpoint through observations of parent-child interaction in guided participation in a natural childcare setting. In contrast, from a neural perspective and completed in a laboratory setting, Wass et al. (2018) examined how social interaction between infant-parent pairs during play affects attention of the infant. Using an experimental methodology, Wass et al. correlated observed behavioural data with neuroimaging data and found that parents showed neural responsivity to changes in their infant's attention during joint play. While infants exhibited more neural control over attention during solo play overall, they did demonstrate increased attentiveness when engaged in joint play with a neural-responsive parent (Wass et al., 2018, p.10). Thus, from both scientific and social scientific perspectives, researchers are noting the importance and significance of quality parent-child interactions through play.

Moreover, the understandings gained from Neuman's (2000) study led her to frame the parent-child dynamic as paramount in the transfer of educational beliefs and behaviours to children and as more impactful even than the school readiness activities typically embedded within early literacy programs (p. 167). Sonnenschein et al. (2000) look specifically at the effect of parental beliefs about literacy on their children's literacy development and self-identification as readers (termed 'appropriation') (p. 108). Parents with an entertainment approach to literacy (as opposed to a skills-based approach) provided activities in line with this belief and as a result, their children's engagement and motivation towards participation in authentic, self-initiated literacy activities were higher (Sonnenschein et al., 2000). Thus, Sonnenschein et al. establish a positive

correlation between parental beliefs about literacy and their children's literacy development.

Children's interest in literacy is also impacted by the parent-child interaction dynamic (Hume et al., 2015). Using survey methodology, Hume et al. (2015) examined children's literacy interest and its relation to parental literacy practices (i.e. both literacy exposure and literacy teaching). Hume et al. found a positive correlation between children's reading interest and parental literacy exposure but not parental literacy teaching, revealing the two to be very different constructs. Therefore, the research of Hume et al. offers more support towards the significance of playful parent-child interactions in early literacy learning situations.

Both the variety and frequency of parent-child joint activities impact the development of children's early literacy (Wood, 2002) and thus, are contributing factors to the overall quality of the parent-child interaction. Wood's (2002) initial investigation of parent-child pre-school activities at home arrived at this finding through a formal assessment of children's phonological awareness and a self-reported open-ended parental questionnaire. Public libraries have a unique opportunity to foster these special and varied parent-child interactions through modelling positive communication behaviours during early literacy storytime programs, creating opportunities for interactive play, and providing parent education (Neuman et al., 2017; Ralli & Payne, 2016).

Parental Experience in Early Literacy Library Programs

The parental education focus of the ECRR initiative spurred research into the impact of this informal adult education embedded within early literacy storytime programs on parental literacy behaviours and literacy practices with their children at home (Graham & Gagnon, 2013; Neuman et al., 2017; Stagg Peterson et al., 2012). Of the few studies which consulted parents about their experiences in or perceptions of early literacy library programs, many used a closed-question, standardized-response questionnaire research method (Clark, 2017; Graham & Gagnon, 2013; Neuman et al., 2017). Clark's (2017) study found that caregivers' perceptions of emergent literacy programs at the library are in agreement with the guidelines for learning and learning environments set by the National Research Council. To collect data on parental

perceptions, Clark employed a self-administered questionnaire which included mostly Likert-type scale responses (i.e. strongly agree to strongly disagree) and two open-ended questions. While parents and caregivers were the participants completing the survey, Clark's questionnaire mainly focused on the children attending the literacy program as seen through their parents'/caregivers' perspective. So, whether Clark's study can truly be considered research regarding parental experience in early literacy library programs is debatable.

Graham and Gagnon (2013) applied a quasi-experimental methodology to examine the influence of an early literacy program at the Regina Public Library on the frequency of parents'/caregivers' engagement in literacy activities or skills with their children in everyday life. Graham and Gagnon collected data using pre- and post-program self-administered questionnaires as well as follow-up interviews (which consisted of closed, standardized questions) with a random selection of participants. The quantitative data analysis of the study did not reveal a significant change in parents' engagement levels in early literacy activities (which were already high in the pre-study questionnaire), but there was a noticeable increase in library attendance after participation in the library program (Graham & Gagnon, 2013). As identified in the follow-up interview four to six months after participation in the early literacy library program, overall, parents reported feeling confident with their skills to support their children's early literacy activities, especially at home (Graham & Gagnon, 2013).

While the three-year study by Neuman et al. (2017) involved multiple methods of data collection, they did conduct a caregiver survey (e.g. closed-question, standardized format, including some Likert-type scale responses). Although basic and simple to read and complete quickly, this quantitative data collection tool does not allow for parents/caregivers to expand upon or introduce unique experiences from their attendance in the early literacy programs at their public libraries. Thus, the research of Stagg Peterson et al. (2012) is unique in providing all open-ended questions in their (short but targeted) parent survey questionnaire which enabled parents and caregivers to respond in personal ways. Stagg Peterson et al. inductively coded common themes presented in the survey data and found that parents/caregivers attending early literacy

storytime programs in Ontario public libraries demonstrated growth regarding their confidence and skills supporting their children's early literacy needs.

In a rather specific context, Prendergast (2016) conducted a qualitative case study regarding the experiences of both children's librarians and parents of children with disabilities with respect to delivery of and access to early literacy initiatives at the public library. Prendergast collected data by interviewing both librarians and parents using semi-structured interviews. As it turns out, neither parents nor librarians made consistent efforts to reach out to each other to connect or to collaborate regarding accommodations for children with disabilities in early literacy library programs (Prendergast, 2016). This move away from the self-administered questionnaire is a positive step in the right direction as much new and unexpected information can be collected when unbiased by the researcher's knowledgeable background framing the suggested answers.

A facilitator in Hill and Diamond's (2013) analysis of three family literacy programs in differing contexts (including a public library outreach program) observed parents talking amongst themselves during the Lap-Sit early literacy program and put forth the assumption that this action implied that parents saw the class as entertainment for their children rather than an opportunity for a quality parent-child educational interaction (p. 51). However, this revelation did not come from the parents themselves and thus, Hill and Diamond's article demonstrates the veritable need for actual parents to describe their own experiences, preferably in their own words.

Several studies (Campbell, 2021; Kane, 2016) in other non-library early literacy contexts set a precedent for soliciting parental perspectives using open-ended questionnaires, amongst other data collection methods, in order to examine the experience of parents in the development of their children's early literacy. Many researchers cite a need for more studies on parental experiences in early literacy library programs (Campbell, 2021; Clark, 2017; Graham & Gagnon, 2013; Hill & Diamond, 2013; McKend, 2010; Mills et al., 2018; Neuman et al., 2017) and especially, studies using qualitative research to examine the experience of parents attending early literacy library programs are still few and far between. Significantly, the experience of parents

attending play-based early literacy programs at the public library is missing in the research.

Conclusion

Public libraries play an important role in supporting early literacy learning for child patrons and in providing informal education to parents about assisting their children's learning. More and more libraries are recognizing the advantages of play-based activities to strengthen early literacy skills and are offering these opportunities to parents in storytime programs in order to encourage quality interactions between parent and child. Although some studies examine the experience of parents in early literacy programs at the library, more research is needed in the aspect of parental experience in attending play-based library programs.

Several studies cautiously report their findings and indicate possible limitations of their research with regards to internal validity. Specifically, there is hesitancy in confirming causal relationships between attendance at public library early literacy programs and changes in literacy-related behaviours in parents and children since programs take place over an extended period of time and outside factors in the participants' lives are unknown (e.g. other early literacy activities or programs attended by participants outside of the library or influential people in the participants' everyday lives) (Campana et al., 2016; Graham & Gagnon, 2013; Mills et al., 2018; Stagg Peterson et al., 2012; Wood, 2002). Furthermore, Wood (2002) also identifies a possible validity issue with parental self-reporting and suggests that self-reported data should be coordinated and corroborated through additional or multiple data collection methods (e.g. observation, etc.) (p. 256). By conducting semi-structured interviews with parents regarding their experiences in attending play-based early literacy programs at the public library and using open-ended questions, a future qualitative study could offer some credibility to this frequently feared limitation by addressing the greater literacy environment surrounding parents and their children. Delving deeper into parental experiences in play-based early literacy library programs enables future research to guide children's librarians and public libraries to improve and to adapt their early literacy strategies and programs to meet the needs of young patrons and their parents.

Conflict of Interest Statement

None declared.

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