The Public Library as Facilitator of Emergent Literacy:

An Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction and Scope

The following bibliography covers role and future role of public libraries in encouraging the development of emergent literacy skills in children. The articles deal with the topics of low-socioeconomic-status children and their emergent literacy skills and the role of parents encouraging the development of emergent literacy skills. Several articles describe how libraries can design programs to help target populations, including setting up non-work-hour storytimes and bringing emergent literacy programs into the community to serve populations that don’t use the library. Two articles are included that provide examples of library partnerships with other public institutions, including public schools and hospitals. The articles were published from 1998 to 2010, with current articles stressed to reflect recent research. Most of the articles were published in the United States, and all are about American libraries.

Description

Emergent literacy, also called early literacy and early childhood literacy, “is the idea that literacy, or the use of written and oral language, is a developing process that begins at birth.” (Kars, 1997) There are many emergent literacy skills children demonstrate, including: “print motivation: A child's interest in and enjoyment of books; phonological awareness: the ability to hear and play with the smaller sounds in words; vocabulary: knowing the names of things; narrative skills: the ability to describe things and events and to tell stories; print awareness: noticing print, knowing how to handle a book, and understanding how to follow the written words on a page; [and] letter knowledge: knowing that letters are different from each other, that the same letter can look different, and that each letter has a name and is related to sounds.” (Albright, 2010) Emergent literacy ends when a child can independently read chapter books, around 7-9 years of age. (Baker, 1999) The low socioeconomic status of a child can negatively affect how rapidly his/her emergent literary skills develop in comparison with children of higher socioeconomic status. (Baker, 1999; Martinez, 2008; McKechie, 2006; Neuman 2006 & 2001)

Summary of Findings

Despite the importance of emerging literacy skills in developing later literacy, there are few academic research papers that address the role of public libraries in developing emergent
literacy skills. Much research is focused on the relationship between parents and children in developing these skills, and much research is also focused on school libraries and school classrooms. Baker’s 1999 article shows that public libraries have been providing emergent literacy programs for at least 100 years. Even if the librarians were not aware of the preponderance of evidence we have now that shows emergent literacy skills are extremely important in developing people’s overall literacy and scholastic skills, they were aware that reading was important, and used common emergent literacy techniques, such as using rhyming and repetitive books to reinforce learning.

Public libraries have been shown to positively affect emergent literacy development in children. The frequency of visits preschoolers make to the library strongly predicts word recognition in grades 1-3. (Baker, 1999, page 7)

The socioeconomic level of children can drastically affect their emergent literacy skills. Kars (1999) reported that only 50% of all parents in the United States read to their child daily, and the rate is even lower for those of low income. Access to books is crucial to the development of emergent literacy skills. (de Groot, 2009) The number of children who visit public libraries is declining. (Fehrenbach, 1998) Neuman found that there are differences in the time that low- and middle-income children spend at libraries, with middle-income children spending more time at libraries. (2006) More significantly, the quality of the activities that middle-income children accomplish in the library is much higher than children of low socioeconomic status, and this difference increased when the libraries studied added new computers and other technology. (Neuman, 2006, pg 193) Low income children also don’t see literacy valued by parents and older role models in their communities. (Baker, 1999 & Neuman, 2001)

The involvement of parents in their child’s emergent literacy activities greatly affected the development of emergent literacy skills. The results from Baker’s study show that when parents performed shared reading with their children, the children had increased emergent literacy skills. (1999) The encouragement of parents and other authority figures in emergent literacy skills is crucial for the development of those skills. (de Groot, 2009) Lower income children are much less likely to have parents who are very involved with their emergent literacy, and this negatively affects the development of their emergent literacy skills. (Neuman, 2001)
Many libraries studied used innovative programs to develop the emergent literacy skills of underserved children. Hughes-Hassell’s article shows that libraries are addressing the problem of low attendance with work-hour storytimes, by having emergent literacy websites for children on their websites, and with Dial-a-Story phone lines, where children can hear recordings of adults reading children’s books aloud on the phone. (2007) Fehrenbach describes an emergent literacy skill program that was implemented at a daycare center which showed that significant gains in emergent literacy skills were made by the group involved in the program versus a control group. (1998) Many libraries would like to do more outreach programs, but their number one constraint is lack of money for the program, then lack of staff members. (Martinez, 2008; de Groot, 2009) Kars described the Ready to Read program in Kalamazoo, MI, which used a number of community partners and their Friends of the Library group to secure enough funding to put on an ambitious project. (1999)

Bibliography

Entry 1:


Abstract: N/A

Annotation: Provides a history of story times from the 1940’s-today, including changing best practices. Includes timely information on newer techniques in storytelling. A good background article, though not action-oriented.

Search Strategy: I chose the ERIC database because of its strong focus on education, which is a discipline that also researches emergent literacy. I was not getting many results with my term “public()librar?”, so I chose to broaden the search term to include all libraries. Since I’d already looked at the results from the search string including “(public()librar?)”, I decided to take the results from that string out of my final results. I got more results by expanding my term, and I winnowed out any concerning elementary school libraries.

Database: ERIC (Dialog)

Method of Searching: Controlled vocabulary

Search String:
? s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy) AND (public()librar?)
Entry 2:


Abstract: “This report details a 5-year study comparing family literacy practices of families from preschool to Grade 3 with recommendations from the position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the International Reading Association (NAEYC-IRA). Participating were African- and European-American families of children attending Baltimore public schools. At the end of 5 years, the sample totaled about 54 families. Data were collected through yearly parent interviews regarding literacy-related beliefs and practices, periodic observations of parent-child literacy interactions, a week-long parent diary detailing their child's everyday experiences, and yearly testing of children on literacy tasks. Recommendations for parental practices and emerging literacy include: (1) engage in shared book reading; (2) provide frequent and varied oral language experiences; (3) encourage self-initiated print interactions; (4) visit the library regularly; (5) demonstrate the value of literacy in everyday life; (6) promote reading motivation; (7) foster pride and self-efficacy in reading; and (8) communicate with teachers and be involved in school. The report concludes that there is evidence that parents from diverse sociocultural backgrounds do follow the NAEYC-IRA guidelines. However, the report also notes that the guidelines do not give advice for what parents ought not do, for example, using drill and practice to develop reading abilities. Appendices include 9 tables that detail family practices recommended in the NAEYC/IRA Position Statement. (Contains 14 references.)”

Annotation: This paper reports the results of a 5 year longitudinal study comparing the reading practices of 54 families, using the recommendations of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the International Reading Association. The recommendations were evaluated. The results found that how frequently preschoolers visited the library strongly predicted word recognition in grades 1-3.

Search Strategy: I found this result using the same search strategy as Entry 1.

Database: ERIC (Dialog)

Method of Searching: Controlled vocabulary

Search String:
Entry 3:


Abstract: “This article will first look at the important role that school and public libraries play in children’s development by providing crucial encouragement, critical access, and key time for reading and literacy. Then we will explore the importance of school and public library collaboration for children’s literacy and academic success. We will examine the ways in which research has demonstrated that public libraries and school libraries can work together when facilities are closed, access is limited, and budgets are cut, and will conclude with the implications for library and information science (LIS) researchers in fields beyond school libraries and youth services.”

Annotation: A literature review and good overview on the articles on the role of public libraries in the development of children, from early childhood literacy development to high school. Provides suggestions for how libraries and schools can work together to stretch budgets in tough times.

Search Strategy: I thought Neuman’s article had interesting conclusions, and I wanted to see what other research had been done on a similar topic.

Database: Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) (ISI Web of Knowledge)

Method of Searching: (Forward) citation searching

Search String:
Cited Author=(Neuman S*) AND Cited Work=(READ RES QUART) AND Document Type=(Article) AND Language=(English)
Refined by: Topic=(literacy) AND Topic=(librar*)
Timespan=All Years. Databases=SSCI.

Entry 4:

Abstract: “A study examined the impact of a library outreach program designed to promote emerging literacy behaviors in preschoolers. Participants were 29 children from three preschool classrooms in a city in the Midwest. Two groups of participants underwent literacy training, and one group served as a control group. Findings showed that participants in the literacy training groups demonstrated an increased number of emergent literacy behaviors and prereading skills and read significantly more words correctly after training than did children in the control group. The implications of this study for librarians and similar increases in emergent literacy behaviors found in other studies are discussed.”

Annotation: A library outreach literacy training program was tested with a group of 29 preschoolers, with two classrooms as test subjects and one as a control. The study had a very small number of participants, but the robust results indicate that the group that had the training increased in emergent literacy skills by a large amount, while the control group’s literacy skills barely changed. This paper is also important for its discussion of the large amount of children under the age of five that don’t ever go to public libraries, and how libraries can put on programs outside of libraries to facilitate emergent literacy skills.

Search Strategy: I used Library Literature & Information Science database because of its strong focus on library research. I added the “emergent literacy” term after finding it in the ERIC thesaurus (see Entry 7). I had already searched the Library Literature & Information Science database for the first two search strings, so I eliminated those results from my final results.

Database: Library Literature & Information Science (Dialog)

Method of Searching: Controlled vocabulary

Search String:
? s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy) AND (public()librar?)
? s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy) AND (librar?)
? s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy OR emergent()literacy) AND (librar?)
? s s3 NOT (s1 OR s2)

Entry 5:


Abstract: N/A

Annotation: The top 50 libraries from Hennen's *American Public Library Ratings 2005* were
studied. Each library’s website was studied for the number of storytimes during non-work hours and for emerging literacy-builders for children and emerging literacy information for parents. Ten libraries that offered a high percentage of non-work hour storytimes were chosen for children’s librarian interviews, to determine successes and failures of the programs. It would have been advantageous for the researchers to interview librarians at libraries with more traditional storytimes, to understand why they were not providing as many non-traditional storytimes.

Search Strategy: I thought Delecki’s 2010 article offered good information about how libraries can support children in developing emergent literacy skills.

Database: N/A

Method of Searching: Footnote chasing

Search String: Referenced in:

**Entry 6:**


Abstract: “In 1997, Kalamazoo Public Library and Bronson Methodist Hospital along with several other community organizations collaborated to create an emergent literacy program. The program provides volunteer readers at community sites, pediatricians’ prescription of reading aloud for healthy child development and giving books to children at well-baby visits, providing a cloth book for every child born in Kalamazoo County, offering workshops on reading and book sharing skills for parent groups and providing book collections and volunteer readers to child care centers. This program is unique in its widespread collaboration of twenty community service organizations to provide county-wide services.”

Annotation: A description of a Kalamazoo County, Michigan, countywide project focused on emergent literacy. Parents were encouraged to read to their children each day through many methods. An example of a library (Kalamazoo Public Library) collaborating with other community organizations to further emerging literacy goals.

Search Strategy: I used the same search strategy as Entry 4.

Database: Library Literature & Information Science (Dialog)

Method of Searching: Controlled vocabulary
Search String:
??s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy) AND (public()librar?)
??s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy) AND (librar?)
??s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy OR emergent()literacy) AND (librar?)
??s s3 NOT (s1 OR s2)

Entry 7:


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.”

Annotation: A case study of the emergent literacy outreach programs of 26 libraries from 4 counties in Maryland. A criticism is that no ethnicity factors are mentioned in the study, only where the counties fall on the scales of rural-urban and low-high socioeconomic levels, leaving the reader to assume that Prince George’s County (the urban/suburban county) is the most ethnically diverse and the rural counties are mostly white. The study concludes that libraries were all doing outreach to their neediest community members, but that many libraries wanted to do more outreach but didn’t have the staff and monetary resources to do so, and many libraries didn’t have evaluation measures for their programs.

Search Strategy: I had already tried the ERIC database using the terms “early literacy” and “early childhood literacy”, but when I searched the ERIC thesaurus I found a new term, “emergent literacy”. I used this thesaurus descriptor in a new search with “libraries” and “library” as keywords.

Database: ERIC

Method of Searching: Controlled vocabulary and Keywords

Search String:
((Thesaurus Descriptors:"Emergent Literacy") and (Keywords:library OR Keywords:libraries)) and Peer Reviewed

Entry 8:

Abstract: “Participant observation, unlike the more traditional approach of querying adults about children’s experiences, is identified as an appropriate and effective method for studying babies and toddlers in public library settings in order to explore these experiences from the children’s own perspectives. In an observation study of eleven, thirty-minute baby story times conducted at two branches of a large public library system, the naturally occurring behavior of the children captured through observation field notes and audio-recording and transcription of the program successfully revealed numerous incidents of emergent literacy activities and social interaction. This article discusses the practicalities of implementing participant observation in story time programs for very young children. Special requirements related to informed consent, the need to protect baby and toddler participants, and the challenge of gaining and maintaining access is addressed. Included is an appendix of recommended observation, child development, and research methods texts.”

Annotation: An exploratory participant observation study, in which researchers observed & audio recorded 11 thirty-minute storytime programs at two branches of a large public library system, and individual and focus group interviews were conducted with adult participants. The paper concludes that participant observation is a useful tool to use to study children in libraries; guidelines are given for future research, including the importance of getting informed consent and not disrupting activities that are being observed. This paper is useful because there are not many articles on how to do research on emergent literacy acquirement.

Search Strategy: I chose the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts database because of its wealth of information about libraries. I searched the thesaurus for similar emergent literacy terms as I had used previously, but no specific terms for emergent literacy were in the thesaurus, so I used “literacy” and “literacy programs” as descriptors with my other terms as keywords. I chose to narrow down the results by peer reviewed journal and by article; it made sifting through the results quicker.

Database: Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)

Method of Searching: Controlled vocabulary and keyword searching

Search String:
DE ("LITERACY" OR "LITERACY programs") AND ("early childhood literacy" OR "early literacy" OR "emergent literacy") AND (librar?)

Entry 9:

Abstract: “This study examines children's uses of reading resources in neighborhood public libraries that have been transformed to "level the playing field." Through Foundation funding (US$20 million), the public library system of Philadelphia converted neighborhood branch libraries into a technologized modern urban library system, hoping to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and their families by closing the achievement gap. Using a mosaic of ethnographic methodologies, four studies examined children's uses of library, resources in low-income and middle-income neighborhood libraries, prior to renovations and technology, right after, and once the novelty had worn off a year later, for preschoolers, elementary, and teens. Results indicated that despite heavy library use across low-income and middle-income children, quality differentials in the way resources were used appeared at all age levels, prior to, immediately, after, and stronger still following technology renovations. Taken together, these studies suggest equal resources to economically unequal groups did not level the playing field. Instead, it appeared to widen the knowledge gap between low-income and middle-income children.”

Annotation: An ethnographic study using many methodologies and four studies to determine if improvements in branch libraries in the Philadelphia Public Library System. The study of preschooler’s behavior, of interest to this bibliography, was done by observation of preschoolers in the library setting when the libraries had just been remodeled and one year later. The results show that libraries were heavily used by preschoolers, but that the quality of the activities was much less in children of lower socioeconomic status, and this quality gap actually increased when the libraries were updated with new technology.

Search Strategy: I really liked Teale’s 1999 article (see Teale, entry 11). Since he also had a paper cited by Yilmaz (Entry 11), I thought he might be an authoritative source about early childhood literacy. I searched for papers that cited any of his past works. I found a number of authors named Teale, so I refined the results by topic and subject area.

Database: Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) (ISI Web of Knowledge)

Method of Searching: (Forward) citation searching

Search String:
Cited Author=(Teale w*) AND Document Type=(Article) AND Language=(English)
Refined by: Topic=(literacy) AND Subject Areas=( EDUCATION & EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH OR LINGUISTICS OR PSYCHOLOGY OR PSYCHOLOGY, EDUCATIONAL OR PSYCHOLOGY, EXPERIMENTAL OR PSYCHOLOGY, MULTIDISCIPLINARY OR SOCIAL ISSUES OR EDUCATION, SPECIAL OR SOCIAL WORK OR PSYCHOLOGY, DEVELOPMENTAL OR URBAN STUDIES )
Timespan=All Years. Databases=SSCI.
Entry 10:


Abstract: “Building on a growing body of ecological research, this study examines access to print in two low-income and two middle-income neighborhood communities in a large industrial city. It documents the availability of print in these communities, focusing on resources considered to be influential in a child's beginning development as a writer and reader. It describes the likelihood that children will find books and other resources, see signs, labels, and logos, public places (spaces) conducive to reading, books in local preschools, school libraries, and public library branches. Results of the year-long analysis indicated striking differences between neighborhoods of differing income in access to print at all levels of analyses, with middle-income children having a large variety of resources to choose from, while low-income children having to rely on public institutions which provide unequal resources across communities. Such differences in access to print resources may have important implications for children's early literacy development.”

Annotation: A three year study of four neighborhoods in Philadelphia, two lower-socioeconomic and two middle-socioeconomic neighborhoods were studied to determine the impact of geography and therefore income level on the literacy development of children. Many ways of studying were used, including studying the signage in the neighborhoods, the number and quality of institutions where children could read, a survey of reading materials accessible to children in general and at child care centers, and surveys of school and public library materials. The study found that lower income children have much less access to print and libraries than middle income children, and concludes that focusing programs on lower income children would have a great improvement on their emergent literacy skills.

Search Strategy: I used the same search strategy as Entry 4.

Database: ERIC (Dialog)

Method of Searching: Controlled vocabulary

Search String:
? s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy) AND (public()librar?)
? s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy) AND (librar?)
? s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy OR emergent()literacy) AND (librar?)
? s s3 NOT (s1 OR s2)

Entry 11:

Abstract: “An adaptation of a talk given as part of the session “The Literate Preschooler: Public Libraries and Emergent Readers” at the 1998 American Library Association Annual Conference is presented. Some ideas from current research and early childhood programs on how libraries can promote early literacy learning are discussed.”

Annotation: A review of how librarians can promote emergent literacy behaviors. Suggestions include using dialogic reading, storytimes, spaces that encourage children to read, the availability of different types of texts including poetry and informational books, and encouraging emergent literacy activities in children’s play.

Search Strategy: The Knowledge Quest article I found by Kissinger was non-academic, but it was tightly focused on my topic. I thought the articles it cited might also be relevant.

Database: N/A

Method of Searching: Footnote chasing

Search String: Referenced in:


Search string to find Knowledge Quest article:

? s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy) AND (librar?)
? s (early()childhood()literacy OR early()literacy) AND (public()librar?)
? s s1 NOT s2

**Entry 12:**


Abstract: “In the USA, last decade witnessed a huge interest in children's early literacy development. All public agencies, as a part of public support to education, started to align their visions and missions to contribute to this sort of interest along with the support of the federal government. The Federal Government supported this growing interest with several acts and hence, all public agencies including ALA and other library associations revised their mission...”
Public libraries, with their special feature of the equal and free access to the public they serve, were considered to be one of the most appropriate places to support children's early literacy development. In that context, a public library was chosen in terms of its staffs’ perceptions of early literacy and their services to the clientele. The study results revealed that the library staff believe in the importance of children's early literacy development, and prepare programs to support it, although they have some constraints such as shortage of funds and difficulties in reaching all the people in the community.”

Annotation: A qualitative study done by interviewing one staff member each at two Midwestern libraries about their programs to support early literacy in children and observations of the two libraries by the researcher. A very small study group was used, but a small group is adequate for qualitative studies; future researchers can focus on quantitative data. The study found that the librarians thought they were central to developing emergent literacy skills, that the libraries were becoming more diverse ethnically and linguistically, and that librarians feel they are most constrained by their budget and the number of staff members. The study also found, significantly, that low-income parents are very concerned about the cost of library fines and replacement costs for damaged books, and that this limits their use of the library.

Search Strategy: I chose the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts database for its abundance of information on library science topics. Because the thesaurus did not have any emergent literacy-type terms, I used the terms as keywords in my search string instead.

Database: Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)

Method of Searching: Controlled vocabulary and keywords

Search String:
DE ("LITERACY" OR "LITERACY programs") AND ("early childhood literacy" OR "early literacy" OR "emergent literacy") AND (librar?)

“Apply related words” checked, “scholarly (peer reviewed) journals” checked, Publication type: Academic journal, Document type: article

CONCLUSION & PERSONAL STATEMENT

There are many opportunities for public libraries to positively affect the emergent literacy skills of children, and many opportunities for research on this topic. Public libraries are a unique institution in that they are free to use for all families. Programs supporting emergent literacy skills can be as adding a training section for parents in reading techniques to the storytimes that a library already puts on or adding a weekend story time for working parents, or as complicated as a summer camp for low income children. Since the research shows that emergent literacy skills
are so important for all future learning, and that low income children need extra help in developing their emergent literacy skills, a focus on low income children is a natural pathway for emergent literacy programs to follow. Neuman’s 2006 study leads one to believe that differences in emergent literacy levels due to income levels should not be dealt with by throwing money at the problem – adding new computers – but in adding more well-trained staff and quality books. Advertising for the library to draw in those who don’t normally visit the library could also be very beneficial. Such advertising could simply be visits by the children’s librarian to local school classrooms or community events, or as complicated and expensive as the billboard, print, and radio campaign the Kalamazoo Ready to Read program did. (Kars, 1999)

I think new research should be focused on why low income children don’t visit public libraries in larger numbers, and how to encourage them to do so. Studies on immigrant non-English-speaking communities in relation to emergent literacy were also conspicuously absent from the research.

If I had to do this project again, I would allow myself more time to research. I got so intimidated by the thought of using Dialog that I put off researching until the last weeks before this bibliography was due, and it shows. I also would have paid more attention to thesaurus and descriptor terms – I came across more terms, “prereading skills” and “pre literacy skills”, but didn’t have enough time to add it to my searches. I hope that with my limited time I still put together a bibliography that might be useful to someone wanting to learn about emergent literacy skills in relation to public libraries. I know that I learned a lot, and am more interested than ever in the topic.