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Availability of Literature:

The Free Little Library

Bethany A. Hamilton

University of Arkansas

Children who do not have easy access to literature cannot improve their reading skills. Studies have shown the environment a child lives in shapes their developmental behavior and the behavior in this case is their literacy ability (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Focusing on the relationship between the knowledge that is constructed at home before formal education begins versus knowledge received in formal education is an important concern to educators (Purcell-Gates, 1996). For knowledge to be constructed in the home, convenient literacy building opportunities need to be provided to these children.

There is a reading gap between children from economically advantaged backgrounds and children from low socioeconomic status (SES) background, which refers to the difference in the reading achievement of these children. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), low socioeconomic (SES) children in grade four reading scored about three-fourths of a standard deviation lower than the average children from middle-income families (Kim & Quinn, 2013). While we know children from low SES homes have fewer literature materials available to them (Neuman & Celano, 2001), we do not know if they would participate in more literacy activities if opportunities were provided. This study will focus on the use of literacy materials provided to children from low SES backgrounds. It is hypothesized that children from low SES homes will benefit from literacy resources provided in their community (Allington, 2010). The reading gaps seen between children from middle class families and children from low SES background is substantial in the schools, and with the right opportunities this reading gap may be diminished.

Literature is writing where expression and form are characteristics that are essential features (dictionary.com, retrieved on 4/1/13). There are many components that are important to consider when a child is reading. Professionals that work with children, such as teachers or

speech-language pathologists, must recognize if the child actually understands the words on the page or if they are simply memorizing words with no understanding of their meaning. With more literature opportunities, children may be able to improve their knowledge and understanding of writings. In order for the opportunities to increase, action must be taken to provide free literature to these children. More free print accessibility will allow more reading opportunities, which will hopefully increase a child's knowledge in literacy. When discussing where to make these prints available, it is important to consider factors such as demographics, popular reading materials, and location.

Summer Reading Setback

When school breaks for summer, many children leave all their learning opportunities at school and do not resume that learning until school starts back. A summer setback is when the knowledge and material learned from the previous school year is diminished and a child has actually lost knowledge when they return the school (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 2003). Children from lower SES homes have limited exposure to reading in the summer and few opportunities for utilizing literature material. When children from low SES homes are not provided with books or other forms of literature, it causes their reading growth to come to a halt or sometimes decrease.

In 2010, Allington and McGill-Franzen “focused on improving book access for children from low-income families during the summer months” (p. 415). In order to improve the condition of children in low-income families not having literature resources, the researchers sent books out to children over a five-year span starting in the year 1997 and tested them before and after. The overall results showed that when children have easy access to books they find interesting during the summer months, the reading setback is reduced.

Print Accessibility

Print accessibility is a prime factor in developing language skills in children. Without books, children are not exposed to basic ideas needed to easily understand reading material. Books may not be available due to vacations off from school, insufficient funds to purchase books, or location of home is too far from local libraries. Literacy skills have shown to be learned more readily by children from homes in which printed books were used a great deal (Purcell-Gates, 1996). A family in a low SES environment may not be able to drive to a public library just to rent a book, because that simply costs money and requires transportation. In order for children from low-income homes to have accessibility to books, the books can be brought to them in a way that is accessible. Something beneficial to them must involve free books coming to them, rather than the parents having a costly expense.

To understand the importance of making books easily accessible it is important to look at the literacy experience low SES children are obtaining in the home. Genisio, Bruneau, and Casbergue (1998) state “the value of everyday home literacy-experiences” expands a child’s emerging literacy (p. 514). What is learned in the home is important to consider because it creates the base line for things such as concepts about print and phonological awareness, which increase literacy knowledge.

Literacy Skills

Children must learn oral language skills before they can learn written language. When reading, a child learns that print represents language, while also learning about the nature, characteristics, and forms of the written language they experience (Purcell-Gates, 1996). The more a child is exposed to printed language the more it becomes a natural learning process to begin to understand things such as particular forms in a language. Purcell-Gates (1996) states

“children learn ways in which print, as a language signifier, maps on to speech” (p. 409). All languages have a map, as Purcell-Gates says, that is full of numerous rules that require time to learn. With increased print accessibility to children, they will be able to learn these rules, where as they would not if they did not have the resources. Literacy is learned in the schools, but it also starts to develop in the home. Because learning in the home is so significant, it is important to have books supplied to children in low socioeconomic (SES) communities.

Summer reading programs, such as in public libraries offer a great opportunity for children to participate in in order to better their reading achievement. A study conducted by Peterson (2012) supports that reading programs in public libraries have benefited children in areas such as phonological awareness. These literacy programs were directed toward preschool aged children. Her study focused on how literacy programs in Ontario public libraries greatly benefited children in their early literacy development and school readiness. Children ages 3 to 5 years old participated in 30-minute sessions for their choice of a 5, 6, 7, or 8-week literacy program (Peterson, 2012). Every program in the library lasted 30 minutes and was observed by two people on the research team. The research team obtained goals from the parents of the children and from the librarians in order to set standards for their research. The sessions were observed by research members and analyzed in order to determine the school readiness and early literacy skills of children. Once data was collected from these observations the research team analyzed and interpreted the results. The overall results of this study showed that the children had an increase in interest of books in the home. The parents also explained the children showed more knowledge in words and letters. These library programs also prepared children for school and allowed them to progress rather than regress. Another language aspect the children benefited

from was they “demonstrated phonological awareness through repeating sounds, repeating rhyming words, and singing along...” (p. 12).

Further supporting the argument that children benefit from contributed books, Hill and Diamond (2013) conducted a study on literacy programs that involved parents. They reported on families from low SES communities and the results of their participation in these programs. As stated before, families in low socioeconomic conditions need appropriate opportunities to be able to provide literacy experiences for their children. Hill and Diamond’s research “confirmed that the parents in low socioeconomic areas held positive aspirations for their children’s literacy development and later success in school” (p. 53). When children are presented with the right conditions with literacy opportunities they most likely will benefit if they use these opportunities to their advantage. Literacy intervention provided in home, as well as the classroom, did have a positive impact on composite measures of reading achievement (Kim & Quinn, 2013). With support from the family, children can increase things like school readiness and literacy.

Little Free Libraries

Little Free Libraries, also referred to as Book Trading Posts or Pop-Up Libraries (Gollner, Webster, & Nathan, 2013) are open to all the public and do not require anyone to have a library card. The Little Library system is based on a trust factor in that when a book is taken it will be replaced with the one previously taken. The Little Libraries are easily accessible because one can simply walk up and take a book without going through a formal check out process. These libraries provide a good setting for parents to be able to interact with their children in order to help their literacy growth. The type and amount of literature and language activities that the parents and children engage in are directly related to a child’s developing literacy (Zeece & Wallace, 2009), thus making little libraries beneficial to these communities. The libraries are

placed in highly populated areas and provide great opportunities for communities to come together and explore literature for free.

When children are presented with the right resources, they are able to participate in the literacy activities in their communities. It is important for the community to have opportunities for the children to participate in with little or no cost. With Little Libraries children will be able to have books available to them when and where they have easy access. It is hypothesized that Little Libraries will truly benefit the children from low SES homes by providing accessible literacy materials in their immediate proximity.

Methodology

Setting

The location of the Little Library was placed at Yvonne Richardson Community Center, which is a facility geared towards children from low SES backgrounds. This is a facility that offers after school care for these children by providing help with schoolwork and a chance to be involved in recreational activities. This was decided as a location for the library because the children can simply walk up and get a book when leaving the facility. Convenience was a supporting factor in the experience by placing it at the Yvonne Richardson Community Center. Appealing to the children's interest when choosing books for the library was important because it encourages them to read out of their own will. The location chosen for the library was heavily influenced by the fact that it is a low SES community that will hopefully utilize the Little Library because of its easy accessibility, low cost, and fun atmosphere it provides.

Participants

The participants of the Little Libraries were the children who voluntarily use the libraries. The target age range for the libraries included children from third to eighth grade, making the

ages generally between 9 to 14 years. These participants were most likely children that attended the Yvonne Richardson Community Center.

Method and Timeline

In order to obtain the data needed to make interpretations there was a blank survey in each Little Library. To ensure this project was permissible to perform it was submitted and approved by the IRB committee in May. Once approval was granted, the library was purchased in late May. When the library was bought, it was constructed by the end of May. In order to raise awareness for the Little Library, the goal was to hold community book drives for people to donate and to hang flyers in highly populated areas in order to raise awareness. Once the library was placed, it was be stocked with a wide range of books suitable for children ages 9 to 14 years old. Because the library was focused on children, the books were geared towards a child's entertainment. During the months, August to December, the books in the library were maintained and continuously checked in order to ensure there were plenty of books for children to check out. The books were monitored in the middle of each week on Wednesdays. Every Wednesday, the books were counted and stocked to have approximately 20 available books. Data of the books was also collected each week based on how many books were checked out, how many were donated, and how many were returned. With taking this data, it allowed one to see how often the library was used over the span of five months.

Since children were the main focus, the questions on the survey were made simple and easy to fill out. The survey gave three questions that included: age, how often they used the library, and the title of the book they took (see appendix).

The age and title questions were fill-in-the-blank and the consistency of the use of the library was a circle question. The survey was picked up from the library once a week in order to

see the success. This process continued through out the fall semester. In December of 2013, the results were analyzed to see how often the library was used and to determine the impact of the Little Libraries in low SES society.

Results

The questions of this project included: if a library was placed in walking distance of a low SES community would it be used, and if so how often would it be used? Table 1 provides the weekly data over the course of the research project, including the week, number of books checked out, number of surveys completed, if any books were added or donated, number of books that were returned, and the total number of books that remained in the library each week. With the exception of four weeks, a minimum of one book was checked out each week. There were no surveys returned over the span of fifteen weeks. Two out of the fifteen weeks members of the community donated books to the library. If there was less than ten books in the library each week it was documented and more books were added to have approximately twelve books in the library at all times. On the week of September 4, six books were taken out because the library was too full, but these books were later added. Unfortunately, no books were returned to the library over the course of fifteen weeks. As the weeks progressed more books were checked out, leaving few in the library and creating a need to replenish.

Table 1. The Little Library Data

<i>Week</i>	<i>Books Checked Out</i>	<i>Surveys?</i>	<i>Books Added by Data Collector?</i>	<i>Donations by Community?</i>	<i>Books Returned</i>	<i>Total Books Remaining</i>
Week 1	N/A	N/A	18	N/A	N/A	18
Week 2	2	0	0	0	0	16
Week 3	3	0	0	10	0	17
Week 4	1	0	2	0	0	18
Week 5	4	0	0	0	0	14
Week 6	0	0	3	0	0	17
Week 7	5	0	0	0	0	12
Week 8	0	0	2	0	0	14
Week 9	3	0	0	0	0	11
Week 10	1	0	0	0	0	10
Week 11	0	0	0	0	0	10
Week 12	1	0	3	0	0	12
Week 13	5	0	3	0	0	10
Week 14	0	0	0	0	0	10
Week 15	4	0	1	2	0	9

Discussion

This study was conducted to observe and see if literacy materials would be used if made readily available to children in low SES communities, and if they were used how often. It was hypothesized that students would utilize the library on a weekly basis.

The Little Library took place over the Fall 2013 semester; it was opened August 20, 2013. The last data recorded was collected on December 4, 2013. There was a blank survey provided in each book and a small mailbox to turn that survey in when a child brought them back. There was a goal to maintain at least twelve books in the library at all times, and for the majority of the time this was accomplished. Initially the goal was to keep twenty books in the library, but this was hard to accomplish because books were never returned. Books were added on an average of every other week, to ensure the library was full on a consistent basis.

Results from this study showed that the library was used within the community. Participants showed a pattern of checking out books on a weekly basis, but unfortunately they were never returned. Also, the independent surveys that were placed in each book were not filled out and returned. Because of this, surveys were taken to a Christmas social event at the Yvonne Richardson Center and the children filled them out with help from adults. The goal in obtaining completed surveys was learning the children's interest and what they wanted to see done with the Little Library. The surveys that were filled out provided good insight to what could be done different to make the library even more successful. These surveys provided an overall conclusion that most children did use the library and they felt the books provided were interesting. The most helpful insight of these surveys was the type of books the children wanted to see placed in the Little Library. These books included fiction chapter books such as, "How to Train a Dragon" and fairytales such as "Snow White."

Every few weeks, conversation took place with a representative in The Yvonne Richardson Center and feedback was given on what the participants were saying about the library. The director of the center said the children kept asking when more books were going to be added to the library. Even though there were several books still in the library, more contemporary books needed to be added that were targeted towards the younger generation. The director also commented how much the kids enjoyed going to the library and finding what new books could be found.

The ideal goal in this research project was to have the books returned to the library so other participants could enjoy different books, but this was not the case. There were no books returned over the course of fifteen weeks, which could be caused by several factors. Short and simple directions were posted on the library explaining how it worked, but the instructions were

not in depth. It is a good possibility that books would have been returned if the instructions were clearer, or if a slip of paper explaining specific instructions would have been put in each book.

Another reason the books might not have been returned is because the participant never came back to that specific library. For example, someone could have just been visiting The Yvonne Richardson Center for a one-time visit, grabbed a book, and did not come back to the area. There are little libraries scattered through out Fayetteville and the participant could have returned a book to another library, which is great, but interferes with data collection. This also goes back to the detail in the instructions; we could have asked the books be returned to that specific library rather than another one.

Limitations

When collecting data on this project, there were several limitations that held us back from obtaining the optimal results. The general area was chosen because it was near a children's facility and a neighborhood, but it was out past the parking lot on the sidewalk corner. If the library would have actually been placed inside the Yvonne Richardson Center, there might have been more books checked out and returned, as well as completion of independent surveys. Several factors could have played out that affected the children walking over to the library, such as rain and cold. If the library would have been inside the center the children would have most likely walked past it every day when arriving and leaving. Posters and signs could have been made to draw the children's attention, persuading them to check out the library.

Another major limitation in this project was the fact that there was no way to keep up with who was actually checking out books in the library. For example, people who were out for a daily walk could have come by the library and checked out a book, making the age range unknown. The goal in avoiding this was putting the surveys in each book and having the

participant put their age, but no surveys were returned. A question of the study was to see what books were checked out most frequently, but this question was left unanswered because no books were returned. Although books were not returned, data was collected on the types of books that were checked out most often. These books included chapter books such as “The Hunger Games” and “The Diary of a Wimpy Kid.”

The Little Library was checked once a week, which created another limitation. Based off the weekly data taken there were no books returned; however, books might have been returned more than what was reported. If the library was checked on a daily basis, books might have been returned more than what was found. For example, a book could have been checked out on a Monday, returned on a Tuesday and checked back out on a Wednesday morning. In this case, the library was not checked soon enough to see there was a book returned. In order to avoid this, surveys were put in each individual book, but unfortunately no surveys were filled out.

Conclusion

Overall, community members responded positively to the Little Library. To further enhance community involvement, events such as book drives and hanging flyers in highly populated areas could bring about awareness of the library and allow people to understand instructions better in returning books and filling out the surveys. It was demonstrated that the library was used by the community. Now that it has been shown the library will be utilized when available, it is important to take advantage of this opportunity. Further research should be conducted to see if increasing the availability of literacy materials through means such as the Little Library could potentially increase the literacy skills of children from low SES homes.

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Appendix

Survey-

Age:
How often do you use the Little Library? a. first time b. weekly c. monthly
Title of the book you checked out?

Book List-

Aunt Flossie's Hets	A Series of Unfortunate Events Book1
Fairway Phenom	A Series of Unfortunate Events Book2
Barak Obama our 44th President	A Series of Unfortunate Events Book3
A Strong Right Arm	Fire on the Snow
Encyclopedia Brown	Bereford's Bride
A show of Hands	Friday Night Lights
Barak Obama	Roughnecks
Who is Barak Obama	December
Black Beauty	Because of Winn-Dixie
Satch and Me	Charolette's Web
Turtles	Hatchet
How the chipmunk Got his Stripes	The Wimpy Kid Movie Diary
Mandela	Coming Home
I Love My Hair	Ruby Bridges
How Many Stars in the Sky	Charlie Bone Series Book1
Getting Through Thursday	Charlie Bone Series Book2

IRB Approval-

July 24, 2013

MEMORANDUM

TO: Bethany Hamilton
Lisa Bowers

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 13-06-766

Protocol Title: *Little Libraries*

Review Type: EXEMPT EXPEDITED FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 07/24/2013...Expiration Date: 07/23/2014

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 120 participants. If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.