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MaryKay Dahlgreen
Oregon State Library

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Better Libraries Through Research: Using Research to Inform Library Practice

MaryKay Dahlgreen
Youth Services Consultant,
Oregon State Library

If I could wave a magic wand and say, based on research, here is a fact that will impress all the public officials, from mayor and council to local principal, to fund this service that will break the cycle of illiteracy in the United States of America, I would do it. But research itself is not magic: it is a tool. It is the people who wave the wand who provide the magic.” (Kimmel, 1991, p. 95.)

While taking the time to read and use research to improve our practice may seem like substantially more work than waving a wand, it is an important component of what we do as children’s librarians. Policy makers and administrators are no longer satisfied with, “we have always done it this way” or “everyone loves us.” The following literature review is designed to provide librarians with an overview of some of the current research.

Margaret Mary Kimmel (Kimmel, 1992) and Shirley Fitzgibbons (Fitzgibbons, 1990) have both provided excellent background on the implications of research for practice. The basis for this review has been reading done in the course of working on an analysis of the Ready to Read Grant Program. The focus

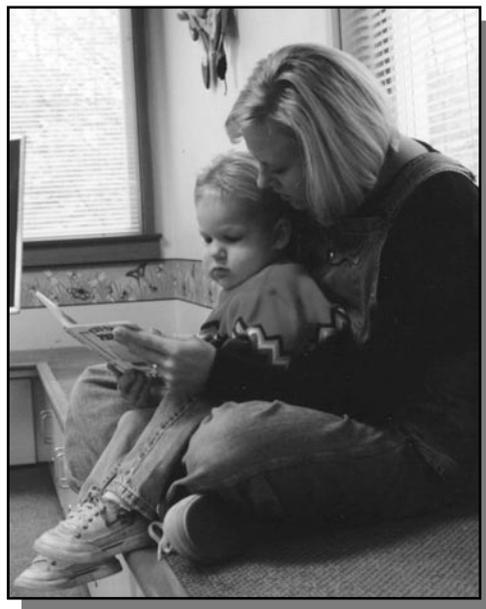
is on public library service to children. The main sources were the bibliography of a study done by Keith Curry Lance and his associates about the importance of school libraries in student achievement in Oregon (Lance et al, 2001), and the bibliography of a report commissioned by the Pennsylvania Library Association to evaluate the role of public libraries in Pennsylvania in children’s literacy development (Celano and Neuman, 2001). As is often the case, the list was expanded as other resources were discovered in the course of the reading.

This review will cover several issues of concern to children’s librarians in developing and justifying library services. We will begin with early brain development and early cognitive development literature as a basis for our examination of library research. Research relating directly to library service for children and families will follow. Next will be an examination of research on how children learn to read, followed by a look at the focused area of research that examines the importance of access to reading materials and free reading time. Finally, we will look at libraries and educational reform.

The past five years have seen a great deal of early brain research and cognitive development research by the National Research Council, an organization commissioned by Congress to study specific policy questions. Brain development research and the impact on policy development are examined in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Other books that analyze early learning research include *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers* (Bowman et al, 2000) and *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Bransford et al, 2001).

First Lady Laura Bush held a White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development in July 2001. A most germane article from that Summit was presented by Patricia Kuhl, a linguist whose work involves children and how they learn language (Kuhl, 2001).

While the research literature of chil-



Parents reading to their children have a tremendous positive influence on their child’s cognitive development.



dren’s librarianship is not as rich as some other disciplines, there are a variety of studies available that can be used to inform the development of programs and services. Two early, small studies (Razzano, 1985 and Perry, 1980) confirm that the use of the library by children has a positive effect on their library use as adults. Several studies have examined what works and what doesn’t work for a variety of services from preschool storytimes to summer reading programs. The Pennsylvania Library Association commissioned a study (Celano and Neuman, 2001) to examine preschool programs and summer reading programs in public libraries in Pennsylvania. An early research study (Smardo, 1983) examined the effectiveness of “live,” filmed books, and videotaped storytimes. In the process, the research confirmed that storytimes are effective in increasing receptive language skills of preschoolers. The Los Angeles County Public Library (Evaluation, 2001) evaluated the impact of their Summer Reading Program, and a large-scale study was undertaken in England (Elkin and Kinnell, 2000) to determine the impact of children’s library services and define “good practice.”

We can also learn from library research coming out of other disciplines. Using the child development theory of Lev Vygotsky, “action creates thought, development results from dialectical processes, and development occurs in historical and cultural contexts” (McKechnie, 1997, p. 66) to study children in public library settings, McKechnie discovered that “libraries provided many learning opportunities, particularly for learning how libraries work and for acquiring emergent literacy skills.” (McKechnie, 1997, p. 67.) A process for developing toddler storytimes based on child development principles has been outlined in the literature (Dowd and Dixon, 1996). Researchers from other disciplines have discussed using library outreach to develop emergent literacy skills (Fehrenbach et al, 1998). They have also provided informa-



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Interactive computer games contribute to cognitive development.

tion about a variety of library programs that encourage emergent and family literacy (Birckmayer, 2000/01) and supplied a variety of suggestions about how libraries can promote early literacy learning (Teale, 1999).

Parental involvement in children's early literacy is crucial. Studies have examined the role of parental involvement in a Head Start program (Nespeca, 1995), Even Start (Padak et al, 1997), a teen parent program (Neuman, 1995) and a study designed around parental reading proficiency (Neuman, 1996). Each of these studies can give librarians insight into collaborating with these programs and working with parents.

There is a very large body of research (and controversy) related to methods for teaching children to read. Librarians can gain insight into a variety of issues by examining this research. Marilyn Miller (Miller, 1993) provides a very cogent argument for

becoming familiar with reading research. Recent research is showing that the early years, birth to age five, are absolutely crucial in the process of learning to read and write. William Teale provides an excellent overview of the history and current trends in early literacy (Teale, 1995). There are a variety of factors that promote early literacy development (McConnell and Rabe, 1999). There are also a number of professional organizations that have issued positions on early literacy learning (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998).

The past several years have seen numerous analyses of research about reading instruction. One of the most comprehensive, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al, 1998) has a companion volume, *Starting Out Right* (Burns et al, 1999), designed for parents and teachers, with specific suggestions on early literacy and beginning reading. A report issued in 2000 by the National Reading Panel (National Reading Panel, 2000) provided the information for two documents, one for parents, *Put Reading First: Helping your Child Learn to Read* and one for educators, *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*, that provide an over-



A philosophical article posits,
 "If educators invested a fraction of the energy they now spend trying to transmit information in trying to stimulate the students' enjoyment of learning, we could achieve much better results."



view of evidence-based reading research.

Research from the teaching profession addresses some areas of concern for children's librarians including reading motivation and loss of learning over the summer. The results of a study by an education professor and a classroom teacher recommend the following to increase motivation, reading comprehension, and rate and accuracy of oral reading:

"Read aloud to students daily; provide a daily sustained silent reading; model personal reading enjoyment each day; provide for formal and informal book sharing; regularly provide students with a collection of reading materials from the school or community library; arrange for effective use of community volunteers to encourage recreational reading." (Moser and Morrison, 1998, p. 245.)

A philosophical article posits, "If educators invested a fraction of the energy they now spend trying to transmit information in trying to stimulate the students' enjoyment of learning, we could achieve much better results." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 115.) A study on the effects of summer vacation on test scores showed, in a review of 39 previous studies, that:

"... Achievement test scores decline over summer vacation. The loss equals about one month on a grade-level equivalent scale. ... There was evidence of] greater negative effects on the reading skills of lower-income students. ... The income differences also may be related to differences in opportunities to practice and learn (with more books and reading opportunities available to middle class students)." (Cooper et al, 1996, p. 264)

Chilling evidence that poor neighborhoods have less access to print materials has been documented in several studies. Courtney Smith and his colleagues discovered that children in Beverly Hills had an average of 498 books in their home as compared to one book for children in Watts. Comparing these same two communities the ratio of books in the classroom was 7.3 to 1, in school librar-

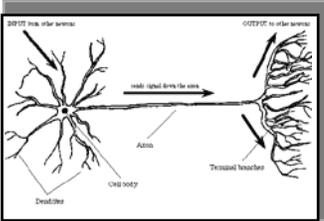


The availability of current research provides opportunities for children's librarians to persuade administrators and policy makers that the programs and services we plan and present are of benefit to our children and our communities.

ies 2.6 to 1, and in the public library 2.4 to 1. (Smith et al, 1997.) Another California study which examined the disparity of public libraries showed that the Beverly Hills Public Library, with a service population twice as large as the poor community of Santa Fe Springs, had four times as many books and programs as the Santa Fe Springs Library. Beverly Hills Public Library had 14 youth services librarians while Santa Fe Springs Library had no personnel assigned to youth services (Di Loreto and Tse, 1999). Susan Neuman has devoted much research to the issue of access to print resources and the impact on literacy. One study is the outcome of a project to provide books and literacy training to child care facilities in Philadelphia (Neuman, 1999), another is a comparison of the print environment of two low-income and two middle-income communities in Philadelphia (Neuman and Celano, 2001).

As a corollary to the research that suggests poor neighborhoods have less access to print other research shows that more access to print increases reading ability and test scores. Krashen shows that the number of books per student in the school library and average circulation at the public library were significant predictors of performance





Neurons are the basis for all brain development.

on the NAEP reading comprehension test (Krashen, 1995). Greater access to the public library and materials in the public library showed an increase in interest in reading and the library (Ramos and Krashen, 1998). Two books (McQuillan, 1998 and Krashen, 1993) survey the research and argue very persuasively that access to print materials and time for free reading can have a significant impact on reading achievement. A very creative doctor, Robert Needlman, created Reach Out and Read, which provides books to families during their children's well-baby visits. The pilot study (Needlman, 1991) showed an increase in the literacy orientation of the parents who were given the books during visits.

Libraries are an important part of the educational system of the United States. During the period from 1998–2000 the U.S. Department of Education commissioned a study called "Assessment of the Role of School and Public Libraries in Support of Educational Reform." The purpose of the study was to find out "how school and public libraries were performing as education providers and how well they were responding to the country's urgent demands for school improvement." (Michie and Chaney, 2000, p. 3.) The study included national surveys of school and public libraries, case studies, and commissioned papers on selected topics. One paper examines the strong connection between public library services and young children and their families (Herb and Willoughby-Herb, 2000). Another paper relates to independent (free) reading and its affect on school achievement (Cullinan, 2000). The relationship of school and public libraries is another area of interest and concern. A third paper of the Assessment examines school and public library relationships, including cooperation and combined facilities (Fitzgibbons, 2000). The Library Research Service at the Colorado State Library has also researched the link between public libraries, school libraries, and student achievement. (Library Research Service, 1998a, 1998b.)

The availability of current research provides opportunities for children's librarians to persuade administrators and policy makers that the programs and services we plan and present are of benefit to our children and our communities. The research presented here demonstrates that:

- The early years of a child's life are crucial for building a basis for school success and lifelong learning.
- Access to reading materials, both at home and in public and school libraries, can have an impact on a child's ability and motivation to read.
- Public libraries are particularly well suited to provide early literacy experiences for children and to provide assistance to parents and caregivers in nurturing reading and writing. 

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