

## The National Library for Children and Young Adults, 8<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Library Services for Children and Young Adults.

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### The 'pathway of opportunity' - the role of the librarian in supporting the development of communication, language and literacy in young children and their families.

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### Introduction

I would like to start by thanking the National Library for Children and Young Adults for the opportunity to speak at your annual international symposium. It is an honour to be here and I am very pleased to have the opportunity to talk about the importance of library services for the very young and I look forward to sharing my experiences and research findings with you. I am aware that Korea already has a range of well developed library and reading promotion policies and programs and that you are monitoring the increasing number of visits to libraries. I have read with interest the conference paper on the national strategy presented at IFLA 2011 by Sook Hyeun Lee, Director General of the National Library for Children and Young Adults.

I believe that encouraging young children and their families to access a library with all its resources can provide a great foundation for developing early literacy, communication and language skills. The focus of this paper is to consider library services for the early years from birth to five years old, and I hope this will be of interest in developing your provision for this age group.

To help to set the context for this paper I'd like to use a quote from the International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) guidelines on library services to babies and toddlers -

*By possessing a wide range of materials and activities, public libraries provide an opportunity for babies and toddlers, along with their carers, to find an area where they are welcome, an area rich in learning resources suited just for them, and the chance to experience the joy of rhymes, songs and board and tactile books perfect for their age group. (IFLA, 2007:4)*

Before beginning the discussion I would like to share some information about myself so that you are aware of my background and what has helped to shape my views on the subject of this paper. I should let you know that I am not a children's librarian, and in fact I am rather scared of small children! However, I am a qualified Chartered Librarian and a member of the professional body in the United Kingdom. I have worked in a variety of libraries and information services and have also been a library educator at Leeds Metropolitan University where I was course leader for postgraduate students undertaking library and information science qualifications.

I am currently a Visiting Fellow at Leeds Metropolitan University and would describe myself now as a qualitative researcher. I am passionate about encouraging librarians

to continue with their own professional development. The IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers encourages us to strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our knowledge and skills (IFLA, 2012) and the Korean Library Association Code of Ethics for Librarians emphasises self-growth, professionalism and co-operation as key responsibilities. I hope that this discussion will contribute to enhancing your knowledge, but also encourage you to consider new and different ways of working in partnership to deliver library services to the very youngest members of the community.

### **The pathways of opportunity - start with the child**

I have used the phrase 'pathways of opportunity' in the title of this paper to reflect how the public library and librarians offer opportunities across the whole spectrum of age groups, from the youngest baby all the way along the life course to the grandparents and family elders. I believe that this intervention, or direct involvement, provides pathways of opportunity for young children and their families if they take advantage of the library services and resources. I am using the term 'intervention' here to mean becoming directly involved in something in order to have an influence on what happens. In early years library sessions where children (and their families) are encouraged to participate the learning is interactive, experiential and social.

As a qualitative researcher I have undertaken 'fieldwork' in a range of libraries. An initial research interest in the partnership work of early years librarians in Sure Start Children's Centres provided an ideal opportunity to observe interactions between the professional librarians and the young children and their families who came to these settings (Rankin *et al*, 2007). I would like to share a research experience and tell the story of a baby called Ella; this story or 'vignette', is a way of reporting my research findings. I will then use this to provide a more in-depth analysis of the importance of the social interactions in the library setting.

Here is the story -

#### ***A reading milestone for baby Ella***

*One bright spring morning I watched from a distance as baby Ella, aged just 9 months old, came with her mother, grandmother and aunt to the new Bookworms Library in Wakefield. The baby was excited and looked around with wide eyes as she sat with her mother on the soft carpet. Ella bobbed her head in happiness and blew bubbles back at mother. Grandmother and aunt sat on adult-sized chairs and looked on with pleasure, glancing around the brightly coloured library and seeing all the toys, books and other playthings on display. This was an important day for the family, as they had come to celebrate with Ella. As one of the youngest members of the new Bookworms Library, the baby had reached the first of many milestones as a reader: she had achieved her first Bookstart Book Crawl certificate. Carol, the early years librarian, also came and sat on the carpet and presented Ella with her award. Mum smiled, grandmother and aunty laughed and clapped their hands, Ella showed her delight by immediately sucking the edge of her certificate. We took a photograph. This was a snapshot moment in time – hopefully a lifetime of literacy ahead for baby Ella. (Adapted from Rankin and Brock, 2008: 138)*

The family visit to the library described in this vignette or story will be familiar to many of you, and actually this type of interaction between the young child, the librarian and the parent is repeated in many countries all over the world. I would like to discuss the significance of this scenario from a number of different perspectives or view points. Firstly the baby or young child, the central focus for the library services. Secondly the intervention provided by the librarian and thirdly the partnerships involved.

### **Babies– the vital early years**

It is important for professionals who work with young children to have a theoretical underpinning and build their knowledge on a critical understanding of how children perceive the world; how they think, learn and develop. In the research vignette baby Ella has been brought to the library by her family – even though she is only 9 months old she has already borrowed books and taken these home to ‘read’ and share with an enabling adult or older sibling. Ella is developing her communication, language and literacy through this and also by taking part in the ‘Rhyme Time’ fun singing sessions organised by the early years librarian.

Until recently, literacy was seen primarily as reading and writing, and children were not thought to be ready to learn to read or write before the ages of 6 or 7. However, the principles behind the concept of ‘emergent literacy’, a term first used by the New Zealand researcher Marie Clay in 1966, are that literacy begins at birth and is a social process (Makin, 2007). Studies on the development of the brain suggest that the early years are very important as the learning that takes place at this time contributes to brain development and functioning (Clay, 1991).

The early interactions that occur between young children and their parents and carers are important for personal, social, cultural, emotional and linguistic development. From an "emergent" perspective, literacy is now recognised as beginning from birth and shared book reading in families is strongly linked with successful school literacy and thus with identity, belonging and participation in literate societies.

Because of the growing awareness of the importance of the first years of life for intellectual, social and emotional development, early childhood is now high on the political agenda in many countries of the world. Policy makers are concerned about educational attainment and future employment prospects for their citizens. It is recognised that competency in literacy is essential for life in contemporary society and it dramatically contributes to emotional wellbeing, mental health and economic success.

In the UK the development of early language has been highlighted as a national issue. Every Child a Talker (ECaT) is a national project to develop the language and communication of children from birth to four years of age. The project was set up after concerns about the high levels of language impoverishment in the UK, and how this affects children’s progress in school and chances in life. Many librarians in the UK are involved in helping to deliver this project. Another initiative is the ‘Talk To Your Baby’ campaign run by the National Literacy Trust to encourage parents and carers to communicate more with children from birth. A key message is:

*'Talking and listening to children from the moment they're born helps them develop good language and communication skills. This enables them to listen and express themselves well. It also helps them to learn and develop good relationships'*

## **The librarian – and the role of the library**

The International Federation of Library Associations guidelines (IFLA, 2003) says that effective and professionally run children's libraries require trained and committed staff. The desired skills include, enthusiasm, strong communication, interpersonal, team working and problem solving skills, the ability to network and co-operate, the ability to initiate, be flexible and be open to change, the ability to analyse user needs, plan manage and evaluate services and programmes, eagerness to learn new skills and develop professionally. As well as all these you have to be great storytellers!

Librarians have always been interested in supporting the 'reading child', those who are already enjoying books. However, as knowledge about child development and emergent literacy has highlighted the needs of babies and toddlers, this knowledge can be incorporated into providing appropriate services for very young children and their families. The professional intervention provided by the librarian in supporting the development of communication, language and literacy is much more than simply the 'telling of stories' and the provision of books which is perhaps how this work is sometimes perceived by others. In fact you can play a critical role in providing access to a range of resources that encourage emergent literacy - as library practitioners you are at the forefront of promoting children's rights and helping to give the best start in life. In order to become competent and active readers, children need a multitude of experiences of oral language, of talking, listening, storytelling, rhyming, reading and singing as these are the building blocks of literacy (Brock and Rankin, 2008; Brock and Rankin, 2011).

An important aspect of public library policy is of course to encourage family reading, but also provide collaborative activities such as storytelling events, toy libraries, family literacy activities, craft activities, puppet shows and opportunities for imaginative play. Popular additions are interactive library sessions using rhyme, rhythm, songs and music. This is an important element of early language development as 'rhyme time' interactive sessions provide a wonderful opportunity for singing songs and rhymes together in an informal and supportive setting. These musical activities are enjoyed in children's libraries around the globe.

Having this underpinning knowledge can enable you to deliver appropriate and welcoming services, but also to be an effective advocate for the value and impact of your services and programs. This advocacy is particularly powerful when you are promoting the value and impact of your library services to senior managers, politicians and other financial decision makers.

## **Partnerships with parents – sharing reading experiences**

The small child cannot visit the library by themselves and it is important to think about the parents and other family members who will bring the child to the library. This is an important partnership between the librarian and the families who use the services. There are a number of great 'selling points' when encouraging parents and

carers to bring their children to the library as they provide free access to books and other resources.

Research studies have documented the complex and powerful influences that home and community have on young children's educational and social achievement and there is an increasing expectation that library practitioners will work in partnership with parents. Parents after all are in the best position to introduce their children to the world of words. In a study for the National Literacy Trust in the UK, Jama and Dugdale (2010) say that parents are the most important reading role models for their children and young people. Librarians can help to encourage parents to share reading experiences.

Dorothy Butler describes how the early interactions that occur between young children and their parents and carers are important for personal, social, cultural, emotional and linguistic development. In discussing the work of those who bring children and books together, she reminds us that '*we cannot produce child readers without adults*' (1992:8). Reading together and sharing books encourages talking which helps to develop speaking and listening skills. We know that fluent readers are more likely to do well in school, and reading and literacy skills will stand them in good stead for life in the twenty-first century. The benefits of sharing books last longer than a lifetime, and children who are brought up to value reading are likely to pass their love of reading (and their good literacy skills) on to the next generation (Rankin, 2011: 185).

I am a parent and although my two daughters are grown up now, I can still remember the lovely feeling of sitting with them when they were babies and toddlers and looking at books. I did this instinctively and we had a particular favourite *The Baby's Catalogue* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg. This board book has lovely, simple illustrations of everyday things and just a few descriptive words. Our youngest daughter Chloe loved the page showing *Accidents* and would laugh and clap her hands when we reached this part! I still give a copy of *The Baby's Catalogue* to the new babies of family and friends.

### **Partnerships with other professionals**

I am interested in the power of partnerships and have researched how the librarian provides positive interventions by engaging in partnerships. Recent UK government policy has required a focus on working across professional and organisational boundaries as there is the potential to help complex societal problem such as social inclusion and the lifelong learning agenda. Working with community partners expands the reach of the library to connect with new audiences and to create new and improved services. Partnership working brings benefits for both the individual practitioner and the organisations they work for. Evaluative research undertaken on the legacy of the UK's National Year of Reading in 2008 has shown that librarians work very effectively in partnerships with other professionals and practitioners (Rankin, 2013).

Early year's librarians will liaise with others who work in 'partner' organisations, such as health visitors, speech and language therapists, nursery teachers and staff from various children's projects. In the UK many are actively involved in delivering the Bookstart scheme which relies on partnerships between practitioners. The development of the Children's Centre networks in the UK presented the opportunity

for many librarians to become an integral part of the multi-agency services helping parents to support their children's early language and literacy, as well as communicating important messages about emotional and social development and health issues (Rankin *et al*, 2007, Rankin and Brock, 2008).

### **Bookstart – a great partnership**

I am aware that there was a Symposium presentation last year on the UK national charity Booktrust. It is worth repeating some details in order to emphasise the Bookstart early intervention and cultural access programme run by Booktrust. Many early years librarians in the UK provide an essential link with Bookstart, the first national baby book-gifting programme in the world which encourages all parents and carers to enjoy books with their children from as early an age as possible. Bookstart for babies 0–12 months aims to provide a canvas bag to every new baby born in the UK containing baby books, a booklet for parents setting out information and advice on sharing stories with young children, a Children's Centres leaflet and a booklist and invitation to join the local library. These packs are distributed through health visitors, libraries and early year's settings. Libraries welcome the very youngest members of their communities by the Bookstart Book Crawl. This encourages children under five to join the library and to borrow books by rewarding them with stickers and certificates, and earlier I described how baby Ella started out on the pathway of opportunity at her local library.

### **Partnerships in the IFLA Sister Libraries network**

In furthering a research interest in professional partnerships, I am evaluating the progress of the IFLA Sister Libraries programme as it develops an international network (Rankin, 2013). This partnership programme embodies the spirit of IFLA and links to key IFLA initiatives which aim to influence and apply expertise to position libraries as a force for change and secure equitable access to knowledge, cultural heritage, and information for the library user community in the rapidly changing and competitive environment for information resources.

The idea for the IFLA Sister Libraries programme was in response to challenges faced by many children's librarians all over the world which include insufficient training, professional isolation, inadequate book collections, and lack of information and advice. I would like to encourage Korean children's librarians to join the Sister Libraries international network to share ideas and experiences – please do look at the information on the IFLA website. Korea is already participating in the IFLA *World Through Picture Books* project by choosing your favourite children's books and it would be wonderful to see more involvement in the Sister Libraries.

### **Picture books**

Picture books are the core of an early year's library collection and are important as they enable us to explore the world around us. Picture books help infants and toddlers to begin to understand symbols and babies begin to understand the representative meaning of pictures as they touch, look at and share feelings about the picture with an adult (Bus and de Jong, 2006: 125).

Picture books provide opportunities for multi-cultural content and will help to reflect the cultural heritage of families in the local area as well as a view of the wider world.

Board books with easy to see pictures are excellent for a baby as they are easy to handle for tiny fingers and the pages will not tear. We know that babies will explore books with their eyes, hands, mouth and feet! Even young babies - like baby Ella - soon develop their love of books and stories before they are able to understand the words or see the pictures clearly. The early years library collection should also include resources for babies, infants and toddlers and provide materials in a variety of formats to encourage play, creativity and development – the emphasis is on having fun.

### **Babies love Treasure Baskets**

With babies and very young children increasingly being involved in early years library settings, it is essential for librarians to be responsive to ensure that these young children's needs are met in an appropriate way. The early year's library can expand the range of resources to provide multi-sensory sources and the Treasure Basket is the perfect educational "toy" for babies who are not yet able to crawl but are able to sit, propped up with cushions. The treasure basket itself is a basket ideally made from a natural material such as wicker. It is filled with natural and inexpensive objects from the real world and found around the home. The objects are natural and everyday items that provide babies with sensory stimulation, help develop hand-eye coordination and make choices and develop preferences.

The idea of the Treasure Basket was developed by the child psychologist Elinor Goldshmid from observing children and the way they gained knowledge of the world around them. A treasure basket is full of interesting objects that babies want to investigate and they can play with little or no adult help. In contrast to the shared activity of reading books together, playing with a treasure basket is very much a baby-only activity. The adult role is to provide security by having an attentive but not active presence (Hughes, 2010; Goldschmid and Jackson, 2004). Librarians can encourage parents to sit and watch their babies enjoying the treasure basket without interfering and to resist the temptation to choose objects that they think their baby would like. Babies are socialising when sharing a treasure basket and need a safe quiet space in the library to enjoy this experience (Rankin and Brock, 2008).

### **Toys and play activities**

The constructive use of toys and play can help a child's development. Librarians can support parents by letting them know that playing with toys can stimulate language skills and help to develop hand/eye coordination. Toys that are part of the library collection have to be really sturdy, very safe, and cleanable. They also need to demonstrate equalities and represent all sections of the community.

### **Story Sacks**

Another very popular resource provided by the library is the Story Sack or sometimes called story bag. This is a large cloth bag which contains a children's book with supporting materials to help stimulate reading activities and to help create a memorable and enjoyable experience. The sack can include soft toys of the book's main characters, and other props and scenery that parents and other adults can use with children to bring a book to life, even if the adult's reading skills are limited. Story Sacks are a popular, non-threatening way of encouraging parents and carers to start

sharing stories with their children, especially those parents with little positive experience of books.

### **The library as a community space – a welcoming place for families**

Policy makers have been focusing on the importance of social capital, deprivation and cohesion over the last few years, and the evidence suggests that we should also be paying attention to the very structure and nature of the places we are creating. It has been suggested that libraries can help to build social capital by providing a safe place to meet, socialize and relax. A theme in my research publications has shown the role of the library building as a community place in providing a space for intergenerational encounters. The presence of a public library can have a positive impact, enhancing a neighbourhood and providing a welcoming 'neutral' space for community engagement.

The urban sociologist Oldenburg (1999) writes about the importance of informal public gathering places and why these are essential to community and public life. He identifies third places, or great good places, as the public domains on neutral ground, where people can gather and interact. The library can, perhaps, be regarded as a 'third place' for children and their families, as it is a welcoming space for intergenerational encounters and where they can socialise and access resources.

The creation of welcoming, but functional, space is critical for encouraging and maintaining visits to the library as families have other places they can choose to spend their leisure time. Library space for the very young needs to be well designed in order to meet the present and future needs of those who use it, and to continue to attract family users. In addition to space for books and resources you will need to provide places to safely park buggies and space for changing nappies and feeding babies.

### **Monitoring and evaluation – gather and use the evidence**

As a former information practitioner I have a deep rooted interest in the concept of evaluation and impact and outcomes studies. Evaluation as a form of research can be used to assess the value or effectiveness of social interventions or programmes. As Powell (2006:106) notes it is relatively straightforward to measure the inputs or resources of a library, more difficult to measure true performance and even more challenging to measure impact/outcomes or how the use of library services actually affects users.

It is important to monitor early years services and gather responses – ask families what they think about the activities. I agree with Professor Susan Neuman when she says that '*Without research, however, we have no evidence – and without evidence, it's difficult to claim victory.*' (2009: 133). You can use evidence to show the value of your services and also to share good practice with other librarians.

### **The Future**

But what of the future of library provision for children? Elkin (2011) speculates on the many and varied future needs of the child. Reading still has a transformational power and for the older generation this largely means reading in printed form, particularly for leisure reading. The privileged younger generation have been



described by Prensky (2001) as the 'digital natives', born into a new digital landscape. They have spent all of their lives surrounded by computers, mobile phones, video games, the Internet and all the other digital wonders that increasingly define their world. This constant exposure to digital media has changed the way these digital natives process, interact and use information and presents particular challenges and opportunities for those providing library resources and services.

## Conclusion

A significant aspect of my research activity into early years library provision has been collaborative, strengthened by a combination of practitioner, professional and international perspectives. Our preconceived ideas and assumptions are challenged by interaction with others from different backgrounds and I am grateful to colleagues who have encouraged me to see things in a different way. I hope this paper will encourage you to review the library services on offer to babies, very young children and their families.

Around the world there are many examples of programmes and initiatives to encourage emergent literacy. Access to library services offers educational and cultural enrichment for the young. Communication, language and literacy permeate all aspects of daily living and these skills are essential for life. This paper has discussed the 'pathway of opportunity' and the role of the librarian in supporting the development of emergent literacy in young children. The successful early years library is a treasure house providing access to wonderful picture books and fun activities to encourage early reading experiences and the best start for active citizenship.

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