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Outcome-based evaluation can be used to substantiate the claims that storytimes in public libraries have positive impacts on young children related to early literacy and school readiness. This phenomenological study describes the experiences and perceptions of youth public librarians regarding outcome-based evaluation. Through a qualitative analysis of the data collected from virtual semi-structured interviews, it seeks to better understand the benefits of and challenges to implementing outcome-based evaluation for preschool storytimes in public libraries located in the Southeastern United States. The findings will increase the field's understanding of what evaluative efforts look like in this context, with the greater purpose of using that knowledge to improve practice.

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OUTCOME-BASED EVALUATION OF PRESCHOOL STORYTIMES:
UNDERSTANDING YOUTH PUBLIC LIBRARIAN PERCEPTIONS

by
Lauren E. Wise

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Brian Sturm

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Introduction

Early childhood experiences are known to have a lifelong effect on a person's learning and health (Phillips et al., 2017). For many preschoolers, these experiences include participating in storytimes at their local public library. Preschool storytimes are believed to help cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically prepare young children for school. Many specifically focus on developing the early literacy skills needed to be ready to read and write. It is important for youth public librarians to articulate their storytimes' goals and understand whether or not they are being achieved, considering their enduring impact. According to Campana et al. (2016):

Research indicates that major disparities in literacy and language abilities at kindergarten entry generally persist into the elementary school grades. Children who develop strong reading skills continue to become better readers while children with poor skills continue to fall behind (Stanovich 1986), a phenomenon often referred to as 'the Matthew Effects in reading'. (p. 370)

Public libraries are under increasing pressure from their stakeholders to demonstrate the impact they are having on their youngest patrons' lives. LIS researchers are beginning to explore this area and practitioners are assessing their programs, but it is often informal and focused more on outputs (Mills et al., 2015). By leveraging outcome-based evaluation models and resources, youth public librarians can gain a better understanding of the beneficial changes they are having on their patron's skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

The following phenomenological study describes the experiences and perceptions of youth public librarians regarding outcome-based evaluation. Through a qualitative

analysis of the data collected from virtual semi-structured interviews, it seeks to better understand the benefits of and challenges to implementing outcome-based evaluation for preschool storytimes in public libraries located in the Southeastern United States. My hope is for the findings to increase the field's understanding of what evaluative efforts look like in this context, with the greater purpose of using that knowledge to improve practice.

Literature Review

An Overview of Preschool Storytimes in Public Libraries

Children's services in public libraries were established in the early 1900s on the presumed benefits of reading books during childhood (Walter, 2000). Story hours, now commonly referred to as "storytimes," were initially created to expose children to good books and foster their love for reading (Campana et al., 2016a). However, these programs were generally viewed as recreation or fun opportunities for socialization rather than for learning (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009). During the mid-1900s, as educational research and psychological theories on child development emerged, the purpose of storytimes evolved to supporting literacy for preschool-aged children (Albright et al., 2009). This resulted in changes in storytime content (e.g. more intentionality behind book selections) and in format (e.g. more interactivity with the stories and with parents/caregivers) (Albright et al., 2009; Celano & Neuman, 2001). Modern storytimes underscore developmentally appropriate practice in addition to being entertaining.

Public libraries were also affected by societal and political events, as interest in early literacy grew and became part of the research agenda and public agenda. Federal bills, such as the Reading Excellence Act of 1998 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, put greater focus on children's literacy (Yilmaz, 2009). Many public libraries initiated storytimes and other programs to support and complement what formal school systems offered, garnering their reputation as an early literacy player.

Of the array of children's services public libraries currently offer, storytimes are the most prevalent and popular (Campana et al., 2016a). According to Fasick and Holt (2008), "surveys of library services consistently indicate that the old-fashioned storyhour is still the program most people know and care about in libraries" (p. 190). Storytimes have held their value over time for their perceived benefits to literacy development, now using research to improve traditional techniques. Although there is no singular model for preschool storytimes because they are designed to meet the specific needs of their participants, there are some commonalities in activities, content, structure, and goals.

Activities

Storytimes are well known for providing access to books and encouragement of reading (de Groot & Branch, 2009). But the days of quiet, still listening to an adult read have been replaced by interactive "dialogic reading" or asking questions about the story (Albright et al., 2009, p. 16). Research has shown the importance of talking, reading, singing, playing, and writing—the five practices of Every Child Ready to Read 2—for supporting early literacy (Campana et al., 2016b). Noise and movement are introduced through additional storytime activities such as songs, finger plays, arts and crafts, and individual and group play (Campana et al., 2016a). Having a variety of developmentally appropriate activities supports the diverse learning styles and needs of preschool-aged participants. Regardless of the activity, its design should be intentional, interactive, creative, and flexible (Campana et al., 2016b).

Content

Storytime activities expose preschoolers to a wide range of topics, which are commonly organized by theme, to support their growing interests. Knowledge of child

development can help youth public librarians select appropriate content and recognize the developing skills demonstrated during the activities (Herb, 2001). According to the Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) model that many public libraries follow, these skills include print motivation, phonological awareness, vocabulary, narrative skills, print awareness, and letter knowledge (Campana et al., 2016b). These pre-reading skills are reinforced by storytime materials that emphasize rhyme, rhythm, and repetition (Albright et al., 2009). Another influence on content are the state's learning standards for what kindergarteners are expected to know when starting public school. This could include things like executive function and self-regulation skills or introducing them to the latest technology (Jacobson, 2017).

Structure

The format of a storytime differs across public libraries depending on their community membership and resource availability, but some general observations follow. Children's programs are usually divided by age group to account for their developmental milestones. A preschool storytime typically lasts 30-40 minutes owing to the shorter attention spans of 3-5 year olds. They are often held in spaces that are separate from the adult area of the library, specifically designed to be welcoming to young children and accommodate groups of various sizes. Preschool storytimes can be larger than baby or toddler lapsits because this age requires less personnel time (Fasick & Holt, 2008). However, adult caregivers are generally expected to accompany their children during the program. This is for both the safety of the children and the education of the caregivers. Many preschool storytimes have been reworked as family engagement programs (Celano & Neuman, 2001). Youth public librarians act as literacy coaches by modeling behaviors and techniques for caregivers to try outside of the library (Albright, 2009; Diamant-

Cohen, 2007). It is not uncommon for caregivers to leave storytimes with educational materials to use at home (Jacobson, 2017).

Goals

While preschool storytimes at public libraries fill a variety of purposes for different stakeholders, this literature review focuses on the ones for children ages 3-5 years old. These programs generally express a commitment to advancing whole child development and well-being in order to create successful 21st century learners. According to McKenzie & Stooke (2012), preschool storytimes help children learn about the library, interact with peers and adults, and bond with their caregivers (p. 48-49). They also “offer positive literacy environments and nurturing settings that prepare preschool children for more structured learning situations” (Diamant-Cohen, 2007, p. 41).

The central objective of most preschool storytimes relates to early literacy for school readiness. Diamant-Cohen (2007) defined school readiness as “a combination of the different skills leading to success in school—positive early literacy language experiences combined with physical and mental health, social skills of self-regulating and, yes, playing well with others, basic cognitive skills, and curiosity and enthusiasm about learning” (p. 40). This broad definition encompasses the major domains of early childhood development. Storytimes prepare preschoolers for a formal education setting by helping them learn how to focus and concentrate, follow directions, have patience, take turns, understand social cues, express emotion, coordinate action with music and rhythm, develop relationships and a love for learning (Diamant-Cohen, 2007, p. 43-44).

McKenzie and Stooke’s (2012) research shows that “what happens in storytime for the youngest children is connected to those children’s future worlds of school and work and to educational policies that have no official authority over library

programming” (p. 47). Not having to follow a prescribed curriculum gives youth public librarians the freedom to plan and adapt their storytimes; however, this flexibility makes it all the more important to have a clear understanding of programmatic goals in order to remain focused and to be able to articulate the differences they will make.

So, how do public libraries know if their preschool storytimes are actually making a difference? Public libraries need to be able to demonstrate impact, especially of preschool storytimes that may look like frivolous play to some, for sustainability purposes. As McKenzie and Stooke (2012) pointed out, it may be “impossible to isolate the incremental contributions of a single community-based early learning program to an individual child’s development” (p. 51). However, LIS research is beginning to explore the role of public libraries’ children’s services.

Practitioners and patrons assume that preschool storytimes promote early literacy, but there is little empirical research measuring their impact on the children (Celano & Neuman, 2001, p. 11). This is likely due to the methodological challenges presented by this young, vulnerable population. Their age and privacy concerns make standard methods like interviews, surveys, and focus groups inappropriate (Diamant & Goldsmith, 2016). McKechnie (2000) claimed ethnographic observation is a better way to reflect the perspective of preschool children in the public library. The Valuable Initiatives in Early Learning that Work Successfully (VIEWS) study used data from ethnographic observation to code the early literacy content of storytimes and of children’s early literacy behavior in public library storytimes (Campana et al., 2016a, p.378). It was “the first large-scale study that effectively assesses [storytime] impact on early literacy in

a comprehensive, systematic, valid, and reliable way” (Campana et al., 2016a, p. 384).

Campana et al. (2016a) found that:

(1) storytime providers are incorporating many types of early literacy content into their storytime programs; (2) children are exhibiting many types of early literacy behaviors when attending library storytimes; (3) there was a positive correlation between early literacy content delivered by storytime providers and children’s early literacy behaviors; and (4) the tools used in this study could be used to evaluate the early literacy outcomes of public library storytimes. (p. 384)

While research is exploring this area, practitioners are conducting their own assessments of their storytimes via self-reflection, peer mentoring or coaching, parent feedback, and administrative feedback (Mills et al., 2015). Mills et al. (2015) found that “assessment is still a largely emergent and unregulated process, with the most fruitful interactions taking place during informal conversations and interactions among storytime providers” (p. 1). There is a need for a systematic way to determine if actual changes in skills, behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes are occurring.

An Overview of Outcome-based Evaluation in Public Libraries

Evaluation of public library services advanced due to financial concerns from funding sources and policymakers. Recessions and budgetary shortfalls pressured libraries and other public agencies to demonstrate their return on investment (Walter, 2000 & 2003). Initially, they focused on documenting outputs to show their productivity and accountability. Outputs are measures of product volume or evidence of service delivery, such as number of participants (Rubin, 2004). However, they are a limited form of evaluation because they do not show *how* the services or products *benefit* patrons. For that, funders asked for outcome measures. These are designed to understand the human experience (Gross, Mediavilla & Walter, 2016). According to Rudd (2000), outcomes can be a powerful tool for:

...communicating program and service benefits to the community; demonstrating accountability and justifying funding needs to funders and resource allocators; building partnerships and promoting community collaborations; determining which programs and services should be expanded or replicated; and singling out exemplary programs and services for recognition. (p. 20)

Some funders, such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), now require outcome information as a condition of funding. The IMLS website defines outcome-based evaluation as “the measurement of results. It identifies observations that can credibly demonstrate change or desirable conditions. It systematically collects information about these indicators and uses that information to show the extent to which a program achieved its goals.” Counting on Results is an example of IMLS-funded research that developed and tested new tools for outcome-based evaluation, but of adult services in public libraries (Steffen & Lance, 2002, p. 271). Another, the Children’s Access to and Use of Technology Evaluation (CATE) Project, developed and tested an outcome-based evaluation model to guide youth’s use of resources and services in the public library. This is one of the only examples of an outcome-based evaluative methodology applied to library services for children (Dresang, Gross, & Holt, 2003).

The Public Library Association (PLA) is also dedicated to advancing outcome-based evaluation. The PLA’s Project Outcome is “a free toolkit offering libraries access to training, data analytics, and standardized surveys that measure outcomes in key library service areas,” including early childhood literacy (Project Outcome, n.d.). Plano Public Library used Project Outcome’s Early Childhood Literacy survey to identify gaps in their programming and, as a result, created two new storytimes (Sensory Storytime and Storytime Around the World) to meet the needs expressed by their diverse community (Project Outcome Case Studies, 2017).

Historically, evaluation efforts in public libraries have focused more on adult services than children's. Prior to the 1980s, children's services were mainly evaluated informally via casual observation and professional judgement (Dresang et al., 2003). These methods were preferred for their unobtrusive nature, as children's privacy was closely protected. Any formal evaluations relied mostly on measures like how many books were in a collection or how many storytimes were held (Dresang et al., 2003). Now input and output measures are ideally used in conjunction with outcome measures.

A Call for Outcome-based Evaluation of Preschool Storytimes in Public Libraries

This literature review supports McKend's (2010) observation that "the impact of public library storytimes on the development of early literacy skills in preschoolers aged three to five years of age remains inadequately explored in the literature about literacy" (p. 3). We lack data about preschool storytimes in public libraries despite their growing popularity and perceived benefits related to healthy development. If we do not understand what differences these programs make in children's lives, then we cannot develop best practices to improve them. There is a need for a way to collect data that can help to advance the knowledge base and enable longitudinal impact studies.

Outcome-based evaluation, with its focus on users, is useful for indicating when changes are needed, providing evidence that intended goals are being achieved, and demonstrating the library's contribution to improving the lives of its patrons (Rubin, 2004). Although the benefits of outcome-based evaluation are well-known and numerous resources and models exist, there is not much evidence of its application in public libraries, especially for preschool storytimes. Outcome-based evaluation should be

possible for these programs because they are designed in response to a demonstrated need, contribute to a larger community goal and to the library's mission, aim to impact people, and have distinct beginning and end (Rubin, 2004). Yet it appears many youth public librarians do not implement it for their programs. Why is this so? Do they evaluate their storytimes? How so? This is the basis for this research study.

Research Questions and Key Terms

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the opinions and experiences of youth public librarians regarding outcome-based evaluation. Specifically, it seeks to better understand their challenges to implementing outcome-based evaluation for pre-school storytimes in public libraries located in the Southeastern United States. The central question of this research is as follows: What are youth public librarian perceptions of outcome-based evaluation? This study is guided by the following sub-questions: (a) What are their perceptions of the challenges involved in implementing outcome-based evaluation of preschool storytime? (b) What do they perceive as the potential benefits?

The concept central to this study is “outcome-based evaluation.” I am adopting the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences’ definition, which is: “the measurement of results. It identifies observations that can credibly demonstrate change or desirable conditions. It systematically collects information about these indicators and uses that information to show the extent to which a program achieved its goals” (OBE Basics, 2018). Other key terms explained using a previously published definition include:

- Early literacy: “What children know about communication, language (verbal and nonverbal), reading, and writing before they can actually read and write. It encompasses all of a child’s experiences with conversation, stories (oral and written), books, and print. Early literacy is not the teaching of reading. It refers to

laying a strong foundation so that when children are taught to read, they are ready” (Campana et al., 2016b, p. 5).

- Assessment: “The process of gathering and analyzing data”; Evaluation: “The process by which we determine the overall value of an outcome based on the assessment data” (Dold & Hanson, 2017, p. 444).

Other key definitions created by the researcher for the purpose of this study are:

- “Youth public librarian”: A librarian (may or may not have an MSLS) who works in a public library serving children and/or youth and is involved in instructional programming.
- “Preschool storytime”: An instructional program that delivers early literacy content to children ages 3-5 years old.

Methodology

This study seeks to discern how outcome-based evaluation is understood by youth public librarians and experienced for their preschool storytimes. Since I am interested in understanding this phenomenon in detail and in context, focusing on perceptions and processes, this indicates qualitative methods and data. A phenomenological approach with naturalistic elements produces data that reflect real, lived experiences. This is appropriate because the resulting rich descriptions provide a deeper understanding of how youth public librarians are engaging in this work.

Researcher Role and Positionality

As the sole researcher, I was responsible for the full life cycle of this study: recruiting participants, developing the interview guide, conducting the interviews, transcribing the interviews, and analyzing the data. I recognize that the quality of this study hinged on my ability to perform these actions.

My overall motivation for this study comes from my desire to improve practice in the library profession. When outcome-based evaluation is used as a planning tool, it can inform decision-making around program improvement, leading to more benefits for patrons. While I do not have much expertise in outcome-based evaluation, I am interested in learning more and I believe in its importance. I will strive to implement it in my future career.

Regarding my relationship with the research participants, I recruited from public library systems and interviewed people in the position I desire for employment. This could result in connections in places where I am looking to work in the future. Any impression I make could have effects on my hiring, but I hope my desire to make a good one only strengthens the quality of this study. I do not believe that my positionality poses any ethical concerns or conflicts of interest.

Research Participants and Sampling

Participants for this study were all youth librarians practicing in public libraries in the Southeastern United States. I relied on convenience sampling, recruiting participants due to their accessibility and who met the following inclusion criteria:

- 1) Participants must be a “youth public librarian,” meaning they are a librarian—may or may not have an MSLS—who serves children in a public library.
- 2) Participants must be involved in some capacity (i.e. plans, conducts, etc.) with a “preschool storytime,” defined as an instructional program that delivers early literacy content to children ages 3-5 years old.

I acknowledge that this non-probability sampling technique is not representative of the population, so my findings are not generalizable. I believe this is justified given that the purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand, not to generalize.

I identified a pool of potential participants by reviewing public library websites and directories. I contacted each individually via email with a request for participation. Some declined due to time constraints while some forwarded my information to others within their system. Although I was aiming to have a total of eight participants, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on library operations, and I am grateful

to those who volunteered their time to speak with me. The resulting participant group included five youth librarians from five different public library systems in the Southeastern United States. It is a small sample size, but it is appropriate for this type of study because each person was interviewed in greater depth. It yielded the rich data needed to fully understand the phenomenon and address the research questions. It is sufficient enough to be illustrative as well as feasible given the study's constraints in time and resources under the current climate.

Data Collection Methods

Virtual interviews were conducted one-on-one via telephone with the youth public librarians to better understand their perceptions of and experiences with outcome-based evaluation. The interviews were semi-structured to account for the participants' unknown (and likely varying) levels of familiarity with the phenomenon. Guiding questions (see Appendix A for the Interview Guide) were predetermined, but their sequencing and wording were adjusted depending on the circumstances, and clarifying questions were added as needed. This style of interview was selected because it is organized and systematic, yet flexible and probing (Wildemuth, 2017, p. 249).

A benefit of using interviews for this study was their ability to produce the rich data needed to understand the phenomenon. Asking open-ended questions required the participants to be reflective. They were able to respond more fully and qualify their answers. However, this data collection method had limitations. There was the possibility of introducing bias in multiple ways, such as through the wording of questions and in my verbal reactions. I needed to support participants' revelations, not shape them. It was also more difficult and time-consuming to process and analyze the responses.

All of the virtual interviews occurred in August 2020. They were conducted via telephone due to COVID-19 restrictions. The questions were not provided to participants in advance in order to capture their candid responses, but their recruitment email contained an overview of the study. An Informed Consent form, which also contained additional details about the research, benefits and risks, confidentiality, etc., was reviewed and signed before each interview began. In doing this, participants gave their permission for the conversation to be audio recorded. The audio recordings were used to manually type out transcripts. The transcript, which contained no identifying information and was password-protected, was then provided back to the participant for them to review and correct or confirm the accuracy. Upon confirmation, the audio recording file was deleted. Both by recording the interview to prevent loss of data and by asking participants to verify the information, I am confident in the quality of the data.

Another measure taken to maximize the quality of the data was an adherence to the Interview Guide for consistency across interviews. I asked a mix of opinion and attitude and behavior questions, starting broadly with the topic of outcome-based evaluation and moving to specific experiences with preschool storytimes. After conducting the first few interviews, I realized I should have re-phrased some of the questions to elicit clearer answers, but I did not want to change them mid-data collection and have inconsistency across the participants' responses.

Data Analysis Method

The audio recordings of the interviews were converted into written text in order to effectively analyze them. Rather than using a service, I listened and typed out clean verbatim transcriptions of the dialogue, removing things like filler words, non-speech

sounds, false starts, etc. I also anonymized the information, removing identifiers such as name or location. These transcripts, after being verified by the participants, were the sole source of data for my qualitative analysis.

To analyze the qualitative data, I used an iterative coding process that combined inductive and deductive approaches. For my initial pass-through, I started with a set of predetermined codes based on my research questions. I coded type of evaluation, benefits, challenges, and barriers. Then I grouped together the similar codes. For my second pass-through, I derived the codes from the data, which allowed different themes to emerge because there was a lot of additional data to unpack. Then I grouped together the excerpts with the same underlying idea. Lastly, I looked at the questions horizontally across all the transcripts to get another angle of the perspectives.

This data analysis method is appropriate for this study because it helped me make sense of the phenomenon by identifying patterns and revealing features, such as the challenges and benefits of outcome-based evaluation, to answer the research questions. I chose to combine the types of coding because, with the large amount of data, it kept me focused on answering my research questions while still allowing for exploration of new insights.

Ethical Considerations

As with any research that involves human subjects, there are ethical issues to consider around their rights and welfare. Namely, their informed and voluntary consent and their privacy and confidentiality. The following steps were taken to address these issues:

- 1) An Informed Consent Form was reviewed and signed by each participant prior to participation. It provided an explanation of the study's procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality safeguards, and voluntary participation. Although this study posed no physical, social, or economic risks to participants, if they felt uncomfortable, embarrassed and/or inconvenienced during the interview, they could withdraw at any time.
- 2) To assure the participants' anonymity, each was assigned an ID code, a random number, that was used on all research notes and documents. The master key codes were known only by the researcher and stored separately from the interview data. All electronic files were password-protected and properly destroyed at the end of the study. The IRB conducted a limited review and determined that there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of data.

Furthermore, I do not have any financial support or conflicts of interest to disclose. I do not have any prior relationships with the participants.

Findings

Results from the interviews are reported below and grouped by theme to reflect the semi-structured nature of the conversations. Although the questions may have been asked in different ways and at different times, they funneled from general to specific.

Perceptions of Outcome-Based Evaluation

We began by talking broadly about the topic of outcome-based evaluation. This was purposeful because I did not know in advance how familiar the participants were with this key concept of the research. The participants shared their understandings of it by providing their own definitions, noting any positive or negative connotations, and describing the contexts where they first encountered it.

Their responses showed a range of familiarity with outcome-based evaluation. One participant did not know what it is, two participants had a mixed understanding—conflating outputs and outcomes—while the other two had a good grasp of it and its associated tools like logic models. Still, all of the participants had positive connotations with the term, although admittedly it was “a little shocking” or “a little confusing.” There was also variety in the places where people first learned about the concept, though library school was notably absent. It appears it was not covered under the curriculum, except for one participant and even then, it was imprecise:

“When we were talking about outcome evaluation, we—in our class—mainly talked about results as far as circ stats and programming stats as a whole. We, I guess, used different terminology when it came to figuring out the developmental stages and how we are meeting those stages in storytime.”

Rather, participants attended conferences, workshops, online courses, and webinars, either on their own time or as part of professional development. One participant recalled, “I specifically remember one summer learning summit that was facilitated by the State Library of North Carolina. They had their stats person come and do a presentation on outcome-based evaluation.”

Participants were asked their opinion on whether or not public libraries (in general) should do outcome-based evaluation. Their responses were overwhelmingly favorable, and many went on to elaborate why. For example:

“Yes! I think it would just be really helpful, it would inform our programming much more if we knew how people were responding to—you know, did they learn new skills, did they want to come to the library more, did they show a better interest in reading as a result of attending storytime. That helps us plan more intentionally for what we will be doing.”

“Oh, definitely! If they don’t do outcome-based evaluation, how do they know their storytimes are being effective? If you’re not looking at the developmental areas, the stats, how it’s impacting your community, then how do you know if what you’re doing is effective? How do you know if what you are doing is even worth it? So, yeah, definitely they should!”

This led to discussion of the perceived benefits of outcome-based evaluation. These are described in greater detail below, since it is one of the research sub-questions guiding this study.

Experiences with Preschool Storytime Evaluation

Conversation then shifted to specifics around their personal experiences with evaluation of preschool storytimes. To provide context, they started by explaining the preschool storytimes at their public libraries and their role with them. Across the five participants, their preschool storytimes shared the common activities, structure, and content noted in the literature review. It was clear there was purposeful design behind the

different elements. Participants mentioned using backgrounds in early childhood education, knowledge of child development, research, and best practices to inform their design. Some of the reasons behind their preschool storytimes included building listening skills, fine and gross motor skills, early literacy skills (there was mention of following ECRR), communication skills as well as socialization; what preschoolers need for healthy development and to be kindergarten ready.

Library programs that are established to benefit patrons, like preschool storytimes, have inherent learning goals that can be evaluated. Outcomes must be articulated if they are to be assessed; depending what they are, it can change the approach. From these interviews, it was evident the participants had goals for their preschool storytimes, although I did not explicitly ask them what they were or if outcomes are identified in their planning process. But it segued nicely into a conversation about how they know if they are achieving them. This is where outcome-based evaluation would come in. However, it appears that the participants do not structure their evaluations around those goals, at least in a formal way. It may be how the interview questions were worded, but I do not believe any of the participants used evaluation techniques to gather evidence to specifically illustrate the desired changes related to their goals.

As for the participants' roles, whether they were the only staff member responsible for youth services at their library or part of a team, they were personally responsible for both the planning and presenting of the preschool storytimes. As such, it would fall to them to do the evaluation as well. This role is key to their evaluation efforts as many of them relied on direct observation as a method.

Evaluation Techniques

The following techniques were used by the participants to evaluate their preschool storytimes:

Observation

Although not always directly labeling it as an evaluation method, all of the participants mentioned observation as a way to see changes in attendees' behaviors, skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Many found this a rewarding part of their job: "I can see them growing and learning and it's a little proud bit of my heart." One participant explained,

"I pay attention to how well the children are remembering what we do from week to week. Occasionally, especially with the ASL or Spanish word, we will go over what we did last week to see if they can remember it. So that is one way to test if they are learning."

However, this requires repeat attendees. They went on to say, "So, most of our evaluation is based on those consistent families because they are there every week." This makes sense given that change is most observable over time; there are short-term and long-term outcomes. It can be difficult to evaluate outcomes in children who attend storytime once or sporadically. This is something that public libraries will always face as informal places of learning, unlike schools which require attendance, and has implications for doing outcome-based evaluation. How *do* you go about measuring the impact of a single touch?

Surveys

Four of the five participants used surveys as a way to gather feedback. Without seeing the content of those surveys, which is beyond the scope of this study, it is hard to

know if they elicit evidence of outcomes. Although most were doing surveys in some capacity, they seemed to have challenges that led to doubts of the effectiveness. Many participants had problems with getting the surveys back:

“I did my first [formal survey] and I got one response back. That was it! Which was great because the feedback was awesome, but I was like, that is just one person.”

“I see them stick them in the diaper bags or the child is coloring on it or after play time I find them in the corners or in the trash because juice was spilt on it.”

In addition to low response rates, there were instances of misunderstanding and conflicting results:

“...we only had four responses and half of them said that they ‘strongly disagreed’ that storytime was beneficial to them. That is why I said I hope they misinterpreted it. I was like, ‘Really?!’ And I left a little thing for additional comments and everybody was like, ‘Thank you for doing this! It is so wonderful! We really love it!’ So, I was like, then why did you say you are not getting anything good out of it?”

Another challenge was survey fatigue. One participant noted, “Parents will do it one time...but then they get tired of filling out the paper survey.” This raises issues of 1) effectiveness of the method (Is this the best way to gather information from busy parents/caregivers? Or just the easy way?), and 2) frequency and timing of evaluation (How often should it occur to be useful?). This is especially relevant for preschool storytimes, as the children quickly age out of this program, so it can be done at a rate that captures impacts on a cohort of kids.

Statistics

All of the participants track program outputs, which indicates the value placed on them. As one participant stated, “Obviously, the actual numbers as far as number of programs, number of attendees, circ stats, all that, is incredibly important and we definitely keep those stats.” This should not come as a surprise given the history of

public library evaluation as covered in the Literature Review. Specifically, participants mentioned counting the number of attendees at their preschool storytimes. It seems this is mainly for reporting up to Library Boards. Little is done in terms of analysis; rather, it is assumed that high numbers are good and low numbers are bad. Some participants inferred that a well-attended storytime is a successful storytime, but this does not tell us if or how attendees are benefiting. This was brought up by one participant:

“Because I can have 20 kids who come to storytime, but they could all leave crying and hate the library—thankfully, that hasn’t happened yet. Whereas I could have 3 kids come to storytime and they love it, but then that leads to the question of, if they love it, how can I get more children to attend?”

Another participant mentioned this limitation of relying too heavily on statistics:

“Sometimes numbers can be misleading.” They went on to explain how attendance can fluctuate due to external circumstances, like weather, holidays, and vacations, which have nothing to do with their abilities or programming skills.

Anecdotes

The main way participants evaluated their preschool storytimes is through informal conversations with the children and their parents/caregivers. It is about establishing lines for communication, forming trust, and building relationships:

“...when we are doing the craft, I like to sit with the kids and talk to the caregivers who are assisting them as well, so I get to know who comes to the storytime and connect on a different level, that I am not the performer of storytime. Develop that rapport with the kids and the caregivers. I think that is a good way. And they tell me, oh, I really like this part.”

“I usually talk to the parents. I have a steady number of children who come every week to storytime and so there is a point where I get to know the parents on a more personal level and so I am able to talk to them. I make it known to the parents that they are more than welcome to suggest things to me, and I have some who do. The suggest things they would like to see, different things I can do.”

“The mom is like, she has been singing that song since storytime let out. So, it is having that kind of communication and a relationship of sorts with the people that

come to storytime...A lot of it is evaluating based on experience, not a formal evaluation but informal.”

Through developing a rapport with attendees, the participants were able to better understand who they are serving and how best to do it. One participant discussed this advantage:

“...I feel like I get to know my community really well, especially from the families that come every week. I know my children well. So that is an advantage because I can continue making programs that I know my community will enjoy simply because I know them.”

If participants rely on this evaluation method, then it is important for them to take the time to build the trust needed to make attendees feel comfortable enough to give them their honest feedback. As one participant said, “And sometimes, if [storytime] wasn’t a success, I hear about that too. So, building a rapport with the caregivers is important for getting that feedback.” If you are not approachable, this would limit the kind of feedback received as well as who gives it.

Many of the participants used a combination of evaluation techniques to triangulate their findings. They expressed a need for multiple ways of collecting data in order to accurately capture the impacts of the program. Overall, participants felt like their current evaluation methods did this, but that outcome-based evaluation is still something to strive for:

“...what I have done in the past is pretty good. I know I have read a lot, too, on how libraries need to change how we evaluate things. It can’t just be likes and shares, but have to get at the heart of why we do what we do and why we are different than schools...I think for right now that type of evaluation is great, but I would always like to add on to it, for sure.”

“I think it is a useful tool and moving forward, if we ever go back to normal in-person programming, I definitely want to, maybe once or twice a year, just get peoples thoughts on what their child is getting out of attending storytime.”

“I think we need to do it. I think we need to setup a regular feedback loop with our patrons who come to storytime.”

And to conclude the interviews, I asked about what they wish could change, in hopes of better understanding how to eliminate some barriers. One participant had a very fun answer:

“If I had a scanner at the door built it, like, when the parents pass through on their way out, it scans them and gives me a read out to my computer – this parent and child enjoyed the storytime, yadada, they felt this way...A machine like that at the door that just scans the whole thought process, emotions, everything.”

This imaginative response removes the labor that comes with gathering and analyzing data. It suggests that figuring out what patrons are feeling is a mystery that requires a magic machine to answer. However, I believe it can be done with outcome-based evaluation. This is discussed in greater detail under the Recommendations section.

Discussion

The following section discusses the participants' perceptions of the benefits to doing outcome-based evaluation as well as the barriers. These answer the research sub-questions guiding this study.

Benefits

The participants identified several benefits to doing outcome-based evaluation of preschool storytimes:

Accountability to the Community

Some of the participants mentioned outcome-based evaluation as a way to be accountable to the people they are serving. Because public libraries are funded by taxes, there is a need to show the community the return on investment, which is the positive impacts (direct and indirect) on their lives. As one participant explained, "...since libraries are basically funded by taxpayer dollars, we would like to reflect programs that are satisfying the community and feel they are getting what they need from the library and their children are utilizing the library."

Since this study is focused on children's services, we must acknowledge the specific responsibility we have to them and their families. Understanding the outcomes of preschoolers is so important because of the impacts on development and later academic achievement. One participant summarized:

“I think it is even more important because preschoolers, when you have that age between 1-5 years old, they are learning so much. Their brains are literally growing. They are learning all the basics of language, of the letters, and their worldview. As a public librarian, my goal is to positively impact my community. Where I am, literacy rates are not necessarily where they should be and making sure that this age group of those that come to storytime have that basis of language, that is so important when they get to school and are actually learning how to read, how to socialize.”

Only by understanding the outcomes of our storytimes will we be able “to tell the community, like, this is why we do storytime...” It increases our credibility as early literacy providers if we can show a positive change in attendees’ skills. It boosts patrons’ confidence in our programming and abilities as professionals. And it provides evidence that “we are here for a reason and we are making a difference.” Other participants had similar thoughts on the justification to patrons:

“I think it is a really great tool to show the importance of programming in the libraries.”

“To show the library is not going anywhere and is a great utility for the community.”

Justification for Decisions

Another benefit to have data on outcomes is it can be used to inform or justify decision-making by library staff and management. Showing the positive impacts of a program can help you gain more support for it, like resource allocation. As one participant noted:

“It is important in being able to justify if—like I said this many people think it is great and want more of it, well who is going to be doing that? Is this the right time to ask for another Youth Services Assistant to help expand programming? So, it is helpful to have that data in our arsenal of justifications, especially when we want to ask for funding or staffing increase.”

Outcome data can also be used to support programming decisions, like making modifications to existing programs or adding a new one. As one participant pointed out:

“Whenever I am discussing with my supervisor about how programs are going or new ideas I have, I usually base my opinions off the other informal stuff I see: how children are enjoying it, what parents are telling me, different comments I hear in the room.”

Related to this is outcome-based evaluation for the purpose of program improvement, which is discussed in its own section because of the emphasis participants placed on it.

Program Improvement

If outcome-based evaluation is tied back to planning, it can lead to the benefit of program improvement for attendees. Multiple participants noted this use:

“...it would inform our programming much more if we knew how people were responding to—you know, did they learn new skills, did they want to come to the library more, did they show a better interest in reading as a result of attending storytime. That helps us plan more intentionally for what we will be doing.”

“...I think it is useful to have the information to tailor our programming and plan more intentionally.”

“So, taking my evaluations and digging deep to see if I need to do my preschool storytime more interactive or do more teaching or more songs, puppets.”

When evaluation is used to inform design, it can increase the efficacy of library programming for patron learning. Changes to storytime activities, structure, and content can be made based on what is experienced rather than assumed. This should result in better outcomes for attendees.

When using it to make enhancements to an existing program, staff are also improving their skills as programming librarians. Analyzing outcome data can reveal much about one’s abilities, both strengths and weaknesses, as well as biases. Whether this is done for formal personal evaluation (“feedback I can give to my manager”) or as self-reflection, it is an important part of professional growth.

Knowing Your Community

Lastly, many participants believed outcome-based evaluation can help them better know their communities. Implementing a survey or collecting impact stories from patrons creates opportunities to engage with them on a deeper level. In turn, this enables the tailoring of programs to meet specific needs, which hopefully results in positive outcomes for attendees. As one participant explained, “I feel like I get to know my community really well...I can continue making programs that I know my community will enjoy simply because I know them.”

While the participants were able to enumerate the benefits of doing outcome-based evaluation, few of them do it in practice. To get a better understanding of why that is, we discussed some barriers.

Barriers

As mentioned in the Findings, the participants had different levels of familiarity with outcome-based evaluation. The variability in understanding may be partly due to the lack of learning opportunities. Only one of the participants said their studies in library school touched on the topic. Outcome-based evaluation appears to be a recent phenomenon in the library world, so this may be explained by when they graduated, which was not asked during the interview. Hopefully, outcome-based evaluation is included in current curriculum, but that is a subject for a different study.

The majority of participants did not have a clear understanding of what it is. Often, they conflated outputs and outcomes, using numbers to make inferences about impact: if attendance is high, then people must like it and be benefiting from it in some way. As one participant said, “In a way, the outcome measurement is implied in both our

input and output stats.” Their evaluation stopped at, the program was a success if people came and enjoyed it, rather than understanding the impact it had on their lives.

However, even those who knew of outcome-based evaluation, whether it was through professional development or personal research, identified other barriers to its implementation:

Low Staff Capacity

One barrier identified by participants is a lack of time: “I don’t think anyone has enough time or staffing.” Youth public librarians are busy and have many tasks competing for their time. If evaluation is not integrated into practice or made a priority, it can be hard to fit into the workday with all the other duties. As one participant noted, “...off-desk time during regular opening hours is really hard to come by...there is no time to focus on analyzing the data and results...” And for new staff, this can be even more of a challenge as they are learning the ropes and feel they do not have the capacity (or decision power) to take on an evaluation project:

“I have only been at my library location for three years, so the first couple years have been kind of getting an understanding of what things are...I haven’t really had the opportunity to dive into more of the outcome-based evaluation...”

Again, this hints at evaluation taking the back seat to other responsibilities.

Related to staff feeling like they do not have enough time is the perception that outcome-based evaluation is labor-intensive. As one participant states,

“It is kind of more like putting on the research hat and trying to really figure out how the program is effective or what I can do to make it better for the individuals participating in the program, not just myself. It is really easy to throw together a quick little storytime, but what are the participants actually gaining from it? So, it is a little bit more than just being reflective of, oh, it went well, the kids enjoyed the book, they liked the song. I think it is more work...”

Low Stakeholder Buy-in

Another barrier identified by participants relates to stakeholder engagement. For this discussion, the “stakeholders” are library management, leadership, and Board members. These are the people that youth public librarians report up to and have influence over decision-making. One part of the problem can be their low level of engagement. As one participant commented, “I don’t think we have ever done or even been asked to do a formal survey.” In reply to why they thought that was, they said “I have no idea! Probably the same reason that nobody has come to observe my storytime.” This indicates if directives come from the top-down and if evaluation is not called for by leadership, then it may not happen on librarians’ own initiative, whether it is due to resource constraints, lack of interest, or they might not have the power to make that decision on their own. If leadership buys into the importance of outcome-based evaluation, then it may be easier to implement in the library.

Related to this is the perception by the participants that leadership does not care about outcomes. When talking about the positive feedback they received, one participant commented, “I know that it doesn’t necessarily get you funding. I think they mostly look at numbers for that, for funding.” Instead, leadership is more concerned with numbers. As one participant noted, “I think sometimes stakeholders in library systems get stuck on the metrics and it is just not, you want to be like, no, listen, these kids are picking up books now, checking them out, and telling me about their favorite stories.” They went on further to say “...the Board only really cared about the numbers and not the overall outcomes. It would be something that I would have to work with my Director and also with the Board...” This calls for a shift in focus. All of the participants in this study collected the number of attendees for their preschool storytimes, which get reported on a

regular basis to their leadership. This is telling of what is valued by leadership. While these kinds of statistics are important, they are only part of the narrative; a more powerful story can be told when they are used in conjunction with outcome data. Leadership may need to be shown this to shift their focus from outputs and buy into the importance of outcome-based evaluation. Because when they ask for something, it gets done.

Library Culture

The absence of outcome-based evaluation in public libraries, especially for children's services, presents a barrier because it is not something that is integrated into normal practice. It is considered a special project or research effort instead of something integral to the programming cycle of planning and implementation. And with storytimes in particular, because they have been around such a long time and are considered a cornerstone to children's services, their success has not been challenged. It is something that has worked in the past, so it is assumed it will continue working in the present and future.

As the following quotes from participants show, outcome-based evaluation is not part of the current culture in their libraries:

“I don't think we have ever done or been asked to do a formal survey.”

“I think it was never really a thought. It was just never something that was done at any level of programming in the system.”

“I think that it might be something about, I don't want to say generational, but it is like the old mind of thought for public libraries. I think that is kind of what it is. Everyone is just stuck thinking about counting people that come to programs and go, yay, it was successful, we are doing a great job!”

A change from the status quo requires a cultural shift among the staff and management. As one participant said, “...we just need some new kids to say, look at how

great this is, it works really well.” But even if you have a champion, it can be difficult to disrupt the norms within a system:

“...getting people on board and to see things through a different lens is a challenge.”

“...you realize how negative some librarians are about change...”

There may be push-back:

“I will say, my direct supervisor is always like, ‘Why do you want to do that?’ She has a lot of questions for me like why do I want to do evaluations and why do I want to find out what I am trying to find out? To, I don’t know, make sure—probably if I screw up that she doesn’t get in trouble.”

So, there is some element of risk in trying something new. Also, it is important to reflect on whether or not you are prepared to make changes if the findings call for it. You may find out something that surprises you and challenges your assumptions; evaluation results may not show what you want them to. What will you do if they do not, but also, what will you do if they do? As one participant questioned, “Like if people are saying they hate storytime, you know, would I stop doing storytime? Where would we go from there? And if it is all glowing reviews, what do we do? Do we change what we are doing?” So, while designing an evaluation, it is important to first ask why you are collecting the information and how it will be used.

When having a conversation about the existing state of public libraries, we must discuss how COVID-19 is currently impacting operations. It has caused major disruptions and changes in how public libraries are offering services, like storytimes. Some are using new technology or taking a new approach, and there is a need to understand if and how they are meeting the needs of patrons. This may be a good opportunity to do outcome-based evaluation, which is what one participant did: “...before COVID we didn’t really

do any type of evaluation.” But they did “put out a brief call for responses to, like, an outcome-based evaluation form online...” for their virtual storytime. This is a place to start and, hopefully upon finding some success, build a case for expanding evaluation efforts once public libraries reopen.

Recommendations

As the findings show, participants perceived multiple benefits to outcome-based evaluation, but they also perceived multiple barriers to its implementation. Identifying these barriers is the first step to changing them. Here I am providing some suggestions for how they may be addressed. My desire is to give the participants, as well as other practitioners, something back. I hope they can use these as a springboard with their management and leadership to get buy-in for outcome-based evaluation and show them what it will take to implement it effectively. This could lead to cultural shifts within the institutions to prioritize these efforts.

First, is the need to increase library staff's comfort with outcome-based evaluation and expertise in its methods. Fortunately, the topic is gaining traction at the national- and state-level, and there are many conference sessions, workshops, webinars, online tutorials, and publications available on it. There are many free resources and existing tools available to help staff learn—either on their own time or hopefully as professional development hours. Please see Appendix B for an introductory Resource List. It may also be helpful to look at how other fields, like Education and Business (non-profits, in particular), have been progressing with assessment.

Next, if staff capacity is an issue, try to work with management to build an internal structure for support. It could be as simple as a scheduling adjustment. For example, storytimes are typically scheduled for 30-45 minutes, but if you (internally)

treat storytime as an hour in duration, this protects your time afterward for attendee interaction (data collection), personal reflection, and evaluation. Make it integral to the storytime itself. Part of this is identifying outcomes and their indicators while planning the storytime and then building in measures for them into the activities. If it is embedded, it is a way to get continuous feedback from attendees.

Lastly, outcome-based evaluation can feel laborious and overwhelming, so start small and scale up. As one participant noted:

“And you can do an easy, quick survey, if you bring out technology like on an iPad and ask the kids, did you like storytime? You can do something quick like that and you could have some results from how it went. There are ways around it. It is not just this long, drawn out quiz or something like that, a double-sided form. No one has time for that anymore.”

By starting small, almost like a pilot with a one program and a smaller target audience, it is more manageable. You can test out different evaluation methods to see what works best with patrons. You will have data to share out and discuss with stakeholders. You may be able to show leadership what a successful project looks like to gain their support for future, larger efforts. Or learn from mistakes and revise. But starting small can build momentum with stakeholders by showing success early.

Impact and Conclusion

This study describes the perceptions of and experiences by youth public librarians with the phenomenon of outcome-based evaluation. Through a qualitative analysis of the data collected from semi-structured interviews, I sought to better understand the benefits of and challenges to implementing outcome-based evaluation for preschool storytimes in public libraries located in the Southeastern United States. The benefits participants identified include better understanding the community, improving programming, justifying decision-making, and being accountable. Although the benefits were clearly expressed, none of the participants formally engaged in outcome-based evaluation of their preschool storytimes. This was due to barriers including low staff capacity, low stakeholder buy-in, and cultural friction. Instead, their evaluations relied more on attendance numbers, surveys about enjoyment rather than impacts, and anecdotes that were not captured or shared out. While these things are important to know, more can be done to ascertain the changes in attendees' skills, knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes.

My hope is that this study's findings will benefit multiple groups of people. The primary stakeholders are the participants themselves. The interviews required them to be reflective of their current evaluative practices and how they can be enhanced. This way of thinking can lead to tangible program improvement, which contributes to the greater purpose of improving outcomes for children participating in the preschool storytimes—the higher-level stakeholders.

Other practitioners could benefit from the findings as well, possibly relating their own experiences to those of the participants. They may learn best practices for addressing some of their own challenges. And if more libraries start moving the needle toward outcome-based evaluation, then it could have broader implications for the professional field and change the type of data available for future research. This descriptive study could lead to further explanatory research to account for a lack of outcome-based evaluation in practice. It would be interesting to see a future quantitative study on how many public libraries are using outcome-based evaluation for their children's programming. Or a case study on a public library that analyzes its evaluation tool design and use. Or a longitudinal project that evaluates the outcomes of preschool storytime attendees. In general, conducting more research on outcome-based evaluation of children's programming in public libraries is needed so we can achieve the ultimate goal of providing effective services for children in order to better their lives.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

The following questions served to guide the semi-structured interviews, which had free flowing conversation. They were not necessarily followed in this order or asked in this exact wording.

- 1) What does the term “outcome-based evaluation” mean to you?
- 2) Does it have any positive or negative connotations for you?
- 3) where or under what context(s), like at library school or in PD training or your own research or in practice, have you heard this term?
- 4) In general, do you feel public libraries should do outcome-based evaluation? [*In other words – what do you perceive as the benefits?*]
- 5) Do you feel that focusing on outcomes, rather than traditional evaluation measures like inputs and outputs, is a priority at your library or within your library system? If not, do you think it should be?
- 6) Could you please tell me more about the preschool storytimes (pre-COVID) at your library and your role with them?
- 7) How do you know if you are achieving your goals? That is, do you currently evaluate your preschool storytime?

<p>If so:</p> <p>1. Please describe the process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When does evaluation occur? - Who conducts it? - How is data collected? (e.g. analyzing outputs, surveys, interviews, administering tests and observation) (<i>triangulate results?</i>) - What do you do with the collected data? - What capacity does your library have to analyze the data? - Do you share your findings with others? <p>2. Do you feel this does a good job? Please share about the advantages as well as challenges to this evaluation technique.</p>	<p>If only uses outputs, like program attendance, or informal observation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you feel this evaluation technique accurately captures the impacts of the program? 2. Please share about the advantages as well as challenges to this evaluation technique. 	<p>If not:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why is that? 2. What are some of the challenges of implementing OBE? 3. Do you feel this is something that should be done? What do you perceive as the benefits?
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- 8) Do you wish anything could be done differently?
- 9) Please share any additional thoughts that were not covered in the prior questions.

Appendix B: Outcome-based Evaluation Resource List

- PLA's Project Outcome:
<http://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/performance measurement>
- IMLS' Outcome-Based Evaluation Basics webpage:
<https://www.imls.gov/grants/outcome-based-evaluation/basics>
- InfoPeople's webinar on "Measure Your Impact: Getting Started with Outcome-Based Evaluation":
<https://infopeople.org/civicrm/event/info%3Fid%3D632%26reset%3D1>
- The State Library of North Carolina's LibGuide on Youth Services: Outcome-based Planning & Evaluation:
<https://statelibrary.ncdcr.libguides.com/youthservices/OBPE>
- Web Junction's "Supercharged Storytimes Training Toolkit - Module Four – Storytime Assessment":
<https://www.webjunction.org/documents/webjunction/supercharged-storytimes-training-module-four.html>
- Web Junction's webinar on "Supercharge Your Storytime Assessment: Using Data to Tell Your Story":
<https://www.webjunction.org/events/webjunction/supercharge-your-storytime-assessment.html>
- ALA Editions' book: [Five Steps of Outcome-Based Planning and Evaluation for Public Libraries](#)