
Library Services for the Early Years: Policy, Practice, and the Politics of the Age

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ABSTRACT

Children's services have a high profile today, as policymakers are concerned about effective education and the level of reading skills. Political policies influence and shape what is offered to our communities, and it is important for practitioners to be effective in developing and delivering a range of services to meet local needs. The political dimension relating to issues around the child and the family is complex, and this paper discusses, often with reference to the UK, some of the challenges associated with the provision of public library services for the early years and young children. Librarians have a valuable contribution to make to the early years by providing activities that support the development of language, communication, and literacy skills. Working as partners with other agencies enables proactive library services to develop and customize services specifically for their local communities, and librarians are successfully building partnerships based on bookgifting and early intervention literacy programs. The library has a role to play in helping to generate social capital at the individual level by providing support for families and parenting activities. Funding, sustainability, and accountability are at the center of most initiatives and programs, but many practitioners may not be aware of the complex political landscape in which library services for the early years are delivered.

THE CHILD AND CHILDHOOD

Early childhood is high on the political agenda globally (Brock & Rankin, 2011). There is a growing awareness of the significance of the first five years of life for intellectual, social, and emotional development, and an increasing interest in the early years from the disciplines of psychology, education, social policy, social care, and neuropsychology. The focus on policy

has been stimulated by studies highlighting that the nurturing, care, and education received from parents and carers are vital for optimal brain development, emotional intelligence, learning, and educational achievement. There is growing evidence that the period of early childhood is crucial in establishing a child's self-identity, learning, and achievement (Gammage, 2006).

A child's life chances are most heavily predicated on their development in the first five years of life: "The period from birth to age 5 is one of opportunity and vulnerability for healthy physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development" (Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005, p. xv). Children's early experiences have significant effects on early cognitive development and affect literacy outcomes. 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.

Early literacy education is a prerequisite for any kind of skill acquisition, and it is important to recognize that early literacy is much more than learning the alphabet (Stiftung Lesen, 2013). In terms of cognitive-skills development, this paper will argue that librarians have a valuable contribution to make to the early years by providing activities that support the development of language, communication, and literacy skills. In the postindustrial age, communication, language, and literacy permeate all aspects of daily living, and consequently these skills are essential for life. If children are not proficient communicators, they are vulnerable to significant disruptions to their learning and development (Marsh, 2011). Reading to babies and young children is one of the most effective ways of enhancing language development in a child (Brock & Rankin, 2008; Greene, 1991; Walter, 2009).

PRACTICE: THE LIBRARIAN AND THE PATHWAYS OF OPPORTUNITY

Encouraging young children and their families to access a library, with a variety of resources, provides a good foundation for developing early reading skills (Anderson, 2006; Rankin, 2011). It has been argued that the public library has a role to play in supporting issues of social justice and the provision of needs-based services (Pateman & Vincent, 2010), *social justice* being defined as "a set of normative approaches concerned with the fair and equitable distribution of things that people care about such as work, wealth, food and housing, plus less tangible phenomena such as systems of power and pathways of opportunity" (Hubbard, Kitchin, & Valentine, 2004, p. 351). The phrase "pathways of opportunity" is used in this discussion to reflect the roles of the public library and library practitioners in offering opportunities to all ages and throughout the life course, from "cradle to grave" or "cot to plot."

Librarians are able to provide the human contact and the professional intervention that can offer the “less tangible” pathways of opportunity for young children and their families. An early introduction to literacy through a breadth of experiences of rhymes, stories, pictures, and books supports the development of literacy and communication skills. There is a problem, however, in the extent to which the professional intervention by the librarian receives political recognition and support.

The Child in Context and the Librarian as Enabler

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989), a cofounder of the U.S. Head Start program, defined the importance of context to a child’s well-being and suggested that behavior and development are influenced by the interactions with the social system around them. Bronfenbrenner’s model of the universal child places the child at the center of concentric circles of influence: the family, the immediate context, and the wider cultural context, and so indicates the influences that affect young children’s life experiences. To provide a framework for the discussion in this paper, I use an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s model of the universal child (see fig. 1). This shows the individual child, the potential recipient of services and resources, as the focal point. This adapted model, “A Child’s World—a Social-Ecological Perspective of Professional Intervention,” which I developed in conjunction with Avril Brock (Brock, 2011, p. 11), shows complex interprofessional relationships that are often taken for granted.

This adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s model indicates how universal and targeted services have an impact and are developed around the child. The role of the early years librarian is shaped by both professional and political discourses, and the librarian is shown as a key professional in providing access to one of society’s universal services—offering the pathways of opportunity. The skills of the early years librarian go far beyond storytelling and provide professional intervention at the microlevel that reflect Bronfenbrenner’s model of concentric circles of influence for the child and the family. The librarian provides positive interventions through an offer of universal services, and by engaging in partnerships with both families and other practitioners.

This intervention, or direct involvement, provides pathways of opportunity for young children and their families if they can take advantage of the library services and resources. The term *intervention* is used 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; through engaging in meaningful experiences in the real world, including interactions with caring adults, children build skills and knowledge onto what they already know (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin, & Almon, 2015). When early years librarians explicitly model early literacy

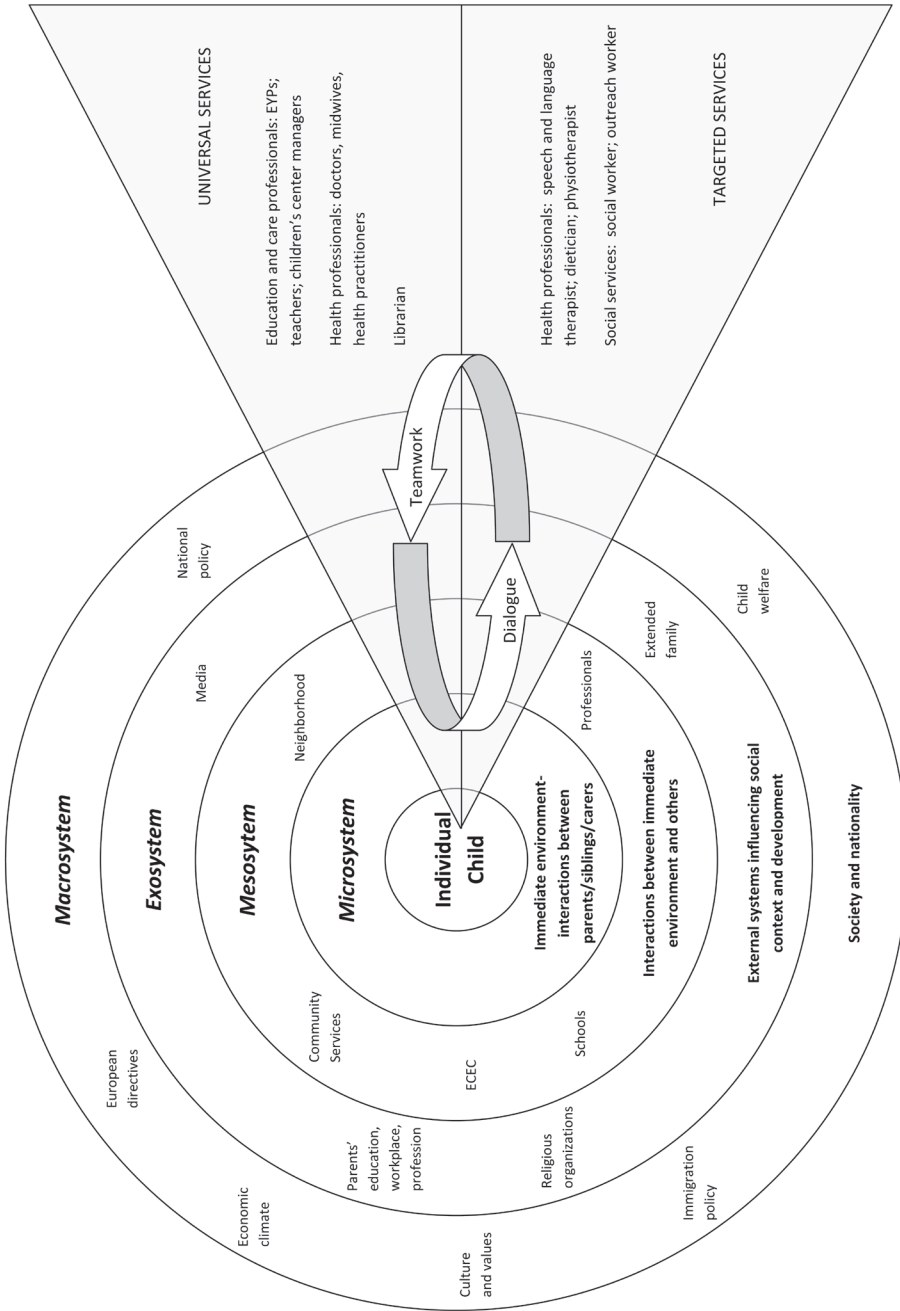


Figure 1. Adapted model of the universal child, "A Child's World—a Social-Ecological Perspective of Professional Intervention."

behaviors and activities to parents and caregivers during rhyme-time and story sessions, they are acting as enablers to help the adults see the connections between what they do and what their children learn.

Context is important to well-being and development, and babies and young children are influenced by the interactions with the social system around them. Other factors, such as family background, ethnic identity, national and cultural heritages, and parents' health and educational level, will have influence. For example, Dex and Joshi (2005) describe the babies in the Millennium Cohort Study as growing up within a series of concentric circles: their immediate family, the wider family, the local area, the country and its institutions and policies, and so on. At the heart of this set of concentric circles is a set of intergenerational relationships. This resonates with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1985) model of the universal child discussed earlier, and Brock's model showing the librarian as one of the key professions in providing access to universal service (see fig. 1). Kropp (2013) strongly advocates that early literacy programs need to be regarded as "essential," especially if we want children's librarian jobs to be considered necessary community services. She makes the case that "in providing these services, we become more than children's librarians: We're early learning experts. . . . We show parents how to build the early literacy foundation that kids need to enter school ready to learn. We take that first step in creating lifelong library users" (p. 18).

Community-based early years libraries are uniquely placed to support families and young children because they offer accessible learning opportunities for intergenerational groups. It can be argued that conditions essential for creating a reader are early experiences of a print-filled environment (and adults reading these materials) and a caring adult to introduce the child to literary pleasure. The public library and the early years librarian can meet these requirements (Greene, 1991; Wilkie, 2002).

THE EARLY YEARS: AN IMPORTANT FOUNDATION FOR FUTURE LITERACY

Literacy is acknowledged as a major global issue. Basic education, within which literacy is the key learning tool, was recognized as a human right in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1989 the United Nations endorsed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which afforded children the same range of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights as adults. All of the rights in the convention apply to all children and young people without discrimination, and key rights include the right to education, the right to literacy, and the right to play. Library practitioners are at the forefront of promoting children's rights and are a vital aid to literacy development by disseminating information about the importance of early literacy to parents, child-care providers, early childhood teachers, children's advocates, and political decision makers. Koren

(2003) draws attention to this opportunity: “For all who are concerned with children and young people, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child offers support in library policy and practice” (p. 1).

Using the public library is an important first step in local citizenship, and Halpin, Trevorrow, Topping, and Rankin (2012) propose that “the public library, in the UK and also around the world, can be seen as a fundamental human right, a basic expectation of society, community, and individuals.” Regarding the issue of child rights in terms of access to books, they state, “We are used to thinking of children as unformed extensions of their parents, and it is easy to overlook that they have rights, which may differ from their parents, particularly when considering the early years and the right to access books and information” (p. 231).

Waller (2014, p. 45) points out that a critical difference between contemporary and traditional views of childhood is that the former recognizes the differing contexts of children’s lives, children’s agency, and the significance of children’s involvement in co-constructing their own childhood through participation in family, community, and culture. The literacy practices that are important to the everyday lives of children do not take place in isolation to other social practices and interactions; in everyday life, they gain expertise in literacy practices that are directly relevant to their social and cultural experiences. The concept of *seemingly inconsequential actions* has a key role to play in supporting the development and socialization of babies and young children. Literacy is embedded in almost everything we do, and so its connections to social situations and practices are significant (Jones Diaz, 2007). Carlsson-Paige et al. (2015) explain that children engage in symbolic activities throughout the early years of childhood; in a print-filled environment and supported by the guidance of a skilled teacher, they will slowly begin to find ways to bring letter symbols into their play scenarios: “As they listen to and create stories, hear rich language texts, sing songs, poems and chants, their foundation for reading grows strong” (p. 5).

Parents’ involvement with their children’s early literacy experiences has a positive impact on reading performance and is the key to young children’s future literacy achievement and educational success (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). A “good start” in the early years can be a way of compensating for any negative effects of children’s developmental context (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). The quality of the home environment as a strong contributor to young children’s literacy and social competence and their subsequent educational success has been strongly established by longitudinal research by the Abecedarian approach (Ramey, Sparling, & Ramey, 2012) and Head Start in the United States, and in the UK by the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project. Wilkie (2002) uses positive evidence from the EPPE project in her introduction to a Youth Libraries Group publication, recount-

ing how Kathy Sylva, the principal investigator for the EPPE research team, was asked by the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education and Employment, “What is it that parents should do for their child in those early years?” Her reply was to “Take them to the library” (p. 1).

Bercow’s *The Bercow Report* (2008) and research by Roulstone, Law, Rush, Clegg, and Peters (2011) both demonstrate that a child’s communication environment influences language development, and that this is a more dominant predictor of early language than social background and can strongly influence performance at school. The number of books available to the child, the frequency of visits to the library, parents teaching a range of activities, the number of toys available, and attendance at preschool are all important predictors of children’s vocabulary at age 2 (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

Take Them to the Library: Early Reading Experiences and the Pathways of Opportunity

In many regions of the world, public libraries are regarded as an important part of their local communities, providing services for all and reflecting the diversity of the populations they serve. There is a strongly held view that libraries offer a welcoming, neutral space that provides opportunities for personal, cultural, and community development. Dugdale and Clark (2008) note that public libraries, with their welcoming presence in communities, are well-placed to help address the literacy challenge. Access is available to a vast amount of reading at all levels and for all interests. Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer (2006) summarize this in highlighting the fact that the public library offers “the opportunity to try out a book with no risks and the importance of no-cost use, the assistance of knowledgeable staff, [having a] wide choice, and the ability to browse and freely choos[e] reading material . . . support readers of all ages” (p. 99).

Historically, services for children have focused on those who could already read; more recently, early years librarians, playing a role in multi-agency working, are actively encouraging parents and carers of babies and very young children to join in language and literacy activities. This is enabling community involvement, cohesion, and capacity building (Goulding, 2006, p. 237). Reading can be a social activity, and very young children can be socialized as they participate in reading and book sharing. This is very popular, judging by the number of rhyme-time and story sessions offered in public libraries and other early years settings around the world. Reading has social benefits and the power to build relationships; in this way, reading can help form and nurture relationships from the earliest acts of parents sharing books with babies.

There is considerable evidence in the literature to support the value of library provision for young children and their families and encouraging early reading experiences (Elkin & Kinnell, 2000; Fasick, 2011; Roulstone

et al., 2011). The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals' *Start with the Child* report (2002) recognized the contribution that libraries can make in delivering government policies on lifelong learning, combating social exclusion, and improving the quality of life of children and young people in the UK. In a Canadian study, Stooke and McKenzie (2009) observed library and community programs for babies and toddlers with their caregivers and suggested that important work related to early child development and getting "ready-to-learn" at school was embedded in seemingly inconsequential leisure activities (p. 672). McKechnie's (2006) observations of story sessions for babies and toddlers in library settings "with many activities of different types going on at the same time" emphasizes the professional interventions by librarians and the "seemingly inconsequential" actions that support the foundations of early literacy (p. 198).

Social Capital and the Public Library: What Does This Mean for Babies?

The concept of *social capital* is a focus of interest and debate in the research and policy-making community. Research has shown that higher levels of social capital are associated with better health, higher educational achievement, improved employment outcomes, and lower crime rates. There has been considerable discussion about what should be counted as social capital. It has been described as the complex web of relationships among organizations, communities, and groups that make up civil society. Social capital is used to describe the social relationships, networks, and community strength, including reciprocity, good neighborliness, and trust. Halpern (2004) argues that the essence of the concept is simple enough, as people are connected with one another through immediate social structures—webs of association and shared understandings of behavior. Social capital is considered important in the building of an individual's *human capital*. Dex and Joshi (2005) are undertaking the longitudinal UK Millennium Cohort Study of babies born in the year 2000. Children will build stocks of social capital from their parents' financial circumstances and wealth, from their parents' human capital in the form of education and knowledge, from their parents' and wider family's social and relationship capital, and from the neighborhood's social capital and infrastructure of services. This has implications for the role of the librarian in supporting the young child and her family by providing a place for intergenerational encounters.

It has been proposed that libraries can help build social capital by providing a safe place to meet, socialize, and relax. Bourke (2005) argues that public libraries can build social capital through networking, and this potential has been noted by other researchers as well (Aabø, 2005; Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Johnson, 2010, 2012; Neuman, 2009; Rankin, Brock, Halpin, & Wootton, 2007; Svendsen, 2013; Vårheim, 2009). Ferguson (2012)

proposes that public libraries have a growing role as developers of social capital, and outlines strategies taken by public librarians who attempt to contribute to social capital, such as community outreach, the provision of meeting places, and the provision of universal services to the public. The library has a leading role to play in helping generate social capital at the individual or microlevel by providing greater support for families and parenting activities. Halpern (2004) advocates that the relationships between parents and their children are important for the development of both bonding and bridging social capital (p. 295). In the early years of a child's development, attentive and responsive adults draw the child into the social world, reinforcing and echoing the child's own interactions (p. 144). Parents' networks, connections, and interactions have significant impacts on children's education attainment, delinquency, and later-life chances. This approach underpins interventions like Head Start in the United States and the UK's Sure Start program, both of which are intended to help parents support their children.

Bookgifting as an Intervention

In the UK the charity Book Trust has played a leading role in developing and implementing bookgifting programs for different age groups. Bookgifting initiatives started in 1992 with the Bookstart project in Birmingham, which provided books for families of 6-to-9-month-old babies via health clinics and health visitors (Wade & Moore, 1998). The Bookstart project has been the catalyst for the development of public library services aimed at this user group, services such as rhyme-times, interactive sessions using songs, and action rhymes that encourage interaction between adult and baby—thus promoting communication, bonding, and enjoyment. It is interesting to note that Bookstart is different from many other projects in that it is offered to *all* families within the chosen areas rather than being targeted only at families considered “deprived” (Cooling, 2011, p. 6). As a pioneering initiative in children's bookgifting, the program has been of interest to researchers investigating its impact on language and literacy development in babies and toddlers, and the Bookstart idea has been copied internationally (Allen, 2010; Barratt-Pugh & Allen, 2011).

The Centre for Education and Inclusion Research (CEIR) (2014) at Sheffield Hallam University has undertaken a review of bookgifting programs designed for families with children up to age 5, particularly those that distribute books directly to babies and young children along with guidance for parents. Many countries have initiated programs that distribute books to parents through libraries and medical clinics, and this paper has drawn on international evidence to examine how far bookgifting programs lead to changed behaviors around parents reading to their children and how far, in the longer term, such programs are likely to lead to improvements in literacy attainment. Bookgifting programs, through the

simple act of giving books to parents and their babies and young children, aim to impact on three areas: the promotion of reading for pleasure; the incidence and quality of book sharing; and the extent of book ownership (CEIR 2014, p. 46). Although it is difficult to isolate the specific impact of bookgifting schemes given the many variables at play (p. 28), there is compelling evidence of the important contribution made by these three areas to children's long-term literacy attainment.

The importance of partnerships was identified by Carpentieri, Fairfax-Cholmeley, Lister, and Vorhaus (2011) in their European Commission report, *Family Literacy in Europe: Using Parental Support Initiatives to Enhance Early Literacy Development*. A key message from its analysis is that if programs and policies are to be sustainable, partnerships must be in place. Bookstart has managed to gain an important seat at many local and national policy tables; this has benefited partner institutions like the library service, which overall has a relatively weaker policy position and would struggle on its own to obtain a seat at such policy tables (p. 138).

The *EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy* final report stated that family literacy programs that focus on both parents and children and their interaction are highly cost-effective in increasing the literate environment at home. These are powerful, low-cost interventions (European Commission, 2012).

THE POLITICS OF THE SITUATION

In this paper I have argued that public libraries promote the development of young children through the agency of the early years librarian. To support professional practice, practitioners should be aware of the political environment influencing the public library service and its partner organizations. Public library activities that promote reading are playing a key role in supporting learning. There has been a significant increase in activity around early years provision in recent years, and now there are many cross-sector initiatives recognizing the key role of language in children's development. Complex structural models, with associated challenges, have been devised when a range of professionals endeavor to work together to provide services to children and their families (Rankin & Butler, 2011). Agency partnerships are helping parents support their children's early language and literacy, as well as communicating important messages about emotional and social development and health issues.

The challenge for librarians is to implement policies in libraries and work effectively with partners to achieve the effective delivery of services while not losing the unique selling point of the library. Karoly et al. (2005, p. xxiv) report that economic analyses of several early childhood interventions demonstrate that effective programs can repay the initial investment with savings to governments and benefits to society down the road.

Evidence has shown that librarians are successfully building partnerships based on bookgifting (CEIR, 2014) and reading. For young children and their families, by accessing their local library there is the chance to develop and achieve. Making parents and others in communities aware that librarians are a resource for early literacy information and guidance will help position libraries as community partners in the common public goal of helping children become successful readers and learners. Libraries can change children's lives.

CONCLUSION: THE PATHWAYS OF OPPORTUNITY

Despite compelling evidence about the value and impact of library services, this is a challenging time for publicly funded services, including those in the UK, as local authorities make decisions about what can and cannot be provided through the public purse. I have argued that the job of the early years and children's librarian is undervalued where the role is not understood by other professionals or policymakers. Brock's model (see fig. 1) shows librarianship as one of the key professions in providing access to universal service, and librarians' intervention is more than just reading stories aloud and singing nursery rhymes. However, librarians themselves need to be more politically astute about the value of their role. A challenging question still to be addressed is how to ensure that the policymakers responsible for educational and literary initiatives fully understand the potential of the public library and the many pathways of opportunity on offer. The key issues raised here are international, contemporary, and important; they demonstrate how librarians can and should have a powerful role in making a difference to the literacy skills of young children and their families. This paper has argued that this is not a simplistic perception, but that what is done in the early years library does indeed make a difference to social capital, educational achievement, and future chances in life.

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