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# Solid Foundations: A Primer on the Crucial, Critical, and Key Roles of School and Public Libraries in Children's Development

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## ABSTRACT

This article will first look at the important role that school and public libraries play in children's development by providing crucial encouragement, critical access, and key time for reading and literacy. Then we will explore the importance of school and public library collaboration for children's literacy and academic success. We will examine the ways in which research has demonstrated that public libraries and school libraries can work together when facilities are closed, access is limited, and budgets are cut, and will conclude with the implications for library and information science (LIS) researchers in fields beyond school libraries and youth services.

## SOME THINGS BEAR REPEATING: A PRIMER ON THE CRUCIAL, CRITICAL, AND KEY ROLES OF SCHOOL AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Learning and innovation skills increasingly are being recognized as the skills that separate students who are prepared for increasingly complex life and work environments in the 21st century, and those who are not. A focus on creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration is essential to prepare students for the future (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004, para. 1).

School libraries and public libraries can work together to support children and young adults in gaining these necessary skills. The public library is often a place where children first experience the wonder of libraries and reading. Children come to the public library at story times and to choose books to read at home. Librarians develop collections to meet the needs of young, prekindergarten aged children and provide assistance to

parents who want to help their children develop early literacy skills. Public libraries also use programming to promote children's development by bringing in actors, musicians, authors, and illustrators to share their work and to talk about the power of all types of creative expression. As children enter school, children and young adults use the public library to have access to a large collection to support their interests and needs during out-of-school times and complement the information they have available to them at school. Traditionally, public libraries have provided children and their families with free or inexpensive access to books and other reading materials. From birth to the senior years, children are welcomed into libraries to participate in reading programs and social activities that encourage literacy and community.

School libraries build on the tradition of recreational reading from the early years and focus on continuing a love of reading while also supporting the curriculum and information and technological literacy necessary for the twenty-first-century learner. The teacher-librarian is a learning specialist who "speaks the language of curriculum and its various dialects of reading, social studies, science, or whatever curricular program is popular" (Loertscher, 2007, p. 51).

Even as technology becomes increasingly prevalent in schools and Internet access more pervasive in homes, the roles of a teacher-librarian and a strong school library program to promote learning in and out of school remain important when we look at recent discussions about twenty-first-century learners. According to Donham (2007), education in the twenty-first century proposes the following key elements:

- Core subjects: English, reading, or language arts; mathematics; science; foreign languages; civics; government; economics; art; history; and geography
- Emerging content areas: global awareness; financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; health and wellness
- Learning and thinking skills: critical thinking and problem-solving; communication; creativity and innovation; collaboration; contextual learning
- ICT literacy: ability to use technology to develop knowledge and skills, in the context of core subjects
- Life skills: leadership, ethics, accountability, adaptability, personal productivity, personal responsibility, people skills, self-direction, social responsibility
- Assessments: use of standardized and classroom assessments (p. 211)

The school library program and the teacher-librarian are central to achieving this vision for twenty-first-century learning. From the work of Keith Curry Lance and his colleagues, we know that "a strong library media program helps students learn more and score higher on standardized

achievement tests than their peers in library-impooverished schools. The findings . . . hold true for every school and in every grade level tested" (Hamilton-Pennell, Lance, Rodney, & Hainer, 2000, para. 1).

This article will first look at the important role that school and public libraries play in children's development by providing crucial encouragement, critical access, and key time for reading and literacy. Then we will explore the importance of school and public library collaboration for children's academic success. This article will address how public libraries and school libraries can work together when facilities are closed, access is limited, and budgets are cut, and conclude with implications for library and information science (LIS) researchers in fields beyond school libraries and youth services.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARIES TO READING AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Children who read, or are read to become better readers, according to a substantial body of research (see, e.g., Allington, 2006; Krashen, 2004; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006). Shin (2004) reports that direct encouragement by parents, teachers, or librarians promotes reading with children, although for this strategy to be effective, children must have access to many books. For reading to be particularly compelling, choice should be in place, and children need to be supported in developing the confidence to read anything they choose, regardless of its difficulty.

#### *Encouragement Is Crucial*

Low-achieving readers in a public library summer reading program benefited from a support system for their recreational reading. While support may come from a variety of different sources, parental support and adult relationships affected children's recreational reading habits and attitudes (Thompson, 1991). Similarly, La Marca (2005) found that "an interested, knowledgeable teacher-librarian who chooses to communicate with his/her students can make a difference to the levels of access students will have to the materials that they want to read" (p. 97). The role of the enabling adult, whether that is a parent, a teacher, a librarian, or other trusted adult, in the public library or in the school library, is an important aspect of reading promotion for children (Carter, 1988; Chambers, 1991; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006).

#### *Access Is Critical*

Access to books also plays a role in children's ability and interest in reading. Children need to have a wide variety of reading material available to them at home, at school, and at their public library. Neuman (1999) investigated preschoolers' access to literature in a study of the Books Aloud program in which day care centers were "flooded" with high-interest picture books, creativity supplies, and staff training, with ongoing organi-

zational support provided by the public library. This experimental study addressed a number of questions related to access to literacy, including:

What do people (teachers, aides, children) do with greater access to books? How do social practices change? How does the child-care community fit early literacy into its ongoing history? And, what are the shorter and longer term effects of greater access of children's literacy abilities? (p. 290)

Results of the Books Aloud program showed dramatic changes in the way these child care centers used books and literature with preschool children. For example, of the one hundred child care facilities in the sample, eighty-three increased children's access to print materials. The children in the child care centers who received the increased access to materials learned "more about the basic print conventions and letter names, [and] also appeared to develop a better sense of how these abstract symbols actually work" (p. 302). Neuman also investigated the longer-term effects of the "book flood" intervention by following the children into kindergarten, six months after the initial intervention. Although the logistics of tracking the children were difficult, the results of this follow-up analysis demonstrated that the children who were part of the Books Aloud program achieved more highly in every academic measure, compared to the control group. Neuman's study emphatically documented that children's access to books and to adults who encouraged their exploration and interaction with print, significantly impacted their literacy abilities.

Providing children with access to reading materials in school does not have to be on the scale of the "book flood" described by Neuman (1999). Smaller interventions can be effective and may include strategies such as: ensuring that school libraries have large collections and adequate opening hours (Krashen, 2004); displaying books and related materials in an interesting way in places where children will see them (Allington, 2006); allowing children to choose their own books (Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006); and accepting the reading choices that children make, including magazines, series books, and light fiction (Allington, 2006; Krashen, 2004; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006). Children also need access to a variety of formats for reading material at an appropriate reading level (Allington, 2006; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006). A print-rich environment stimulates more reading. Children need to be read to in order to experience literature that is beyond their own reading ability, and they need help and guidance in selecting reading books and other material. Children need opportunities to talk about their reading with adults and other children. The support of an interested adult who knows about appropriate books is an enormous encouragement (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals [CILIP], 2002, p. 33).

*Time Is Key*

In addition to having adult encouragement for reading and access to varied reading materials, children need time to read for pleasure. Krashen (2004) provides compelling evidence about the importance of free voluntary reading (FVR) in children's lives. According to Krashen, free voluntary reading means reading out of desire, without having to write a report, answer questions, or take a test at the end of the book. In schools, free voluntary reading is often referred to as sustained silent reading (or SSR) and occurs when everyone in the school spends ten or fifteen minutes reading whatever they choose, including comics, manuals, graphic novels, magazines, pamphlets, or novels. School libraries, of course, have a role to play in SSR in schools, but so do public libraries since children often obtain their reading materials from their community's library. Ensuring children have access to reading materials they can use at home and at school to read recreationally is an important function of libraries in the community.

"Libraries are a hugely important part of children's and young people's lives because they bring books and children together; they provide reading opportunities free of charge, and so they encourage experimentation and learning" (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals [CILIP], 2002, p. 9). Libraries play an integral role in promoting reading-for-enjoyment and literacy through access to collections beyond those available at school, readers' advisory services that introduce children to new resources and authors, and children's and young adult programs that inspire children to pursue their interests through reading. Public libraries can impact children's literary development in many ways. Parents, teachers, and community members are now beginning to realize the importance of public libraries as an integral part of the team that supports children and their families in a variety of reading and literacy activities.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL-PUBLIC LIBRARY COOPERATION FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

If school library programs and teacher-librarians working with public libraries and librarians are keys to the vision of developing literate twenty-first century adults, what happens when school libraries and/or school library programs are nonexistent, underfunded, and/or understaffed? Research has told us that children and their parents use their local public libraries to supplement or replace the school library. How, then, in light of diminishing school libraries and constant family need can public libraries help children gain the skills needed to be productive and capable citizens in the twenty-first century?

*Public Libraries Stand in for Declining School Libraries*

Research in Alberta, Canada, as well as South Africa and Australia, has suggested that children and their parents go to public libraries to find materials and support for children's curricular projects. For example, Hart's (2003) study of student use of public libraries in Cape Town, South Africa, found that "public libraries in South Africa's disadvantaged townships are indeed 'doing the work' of school libraries. The learners rely almost exclusively on the public libraries for their school projects, homework and assignments" (p. 80). Similarly, an Australian study found that public libraries already demonstrably provide considerable support to formal education and that student demand on public libraries is increasing. However, local governments, education departments, and individual schools demonstrate little awareness of this trend through increased support for libraries (Bundy, 2006, p. 134).

Hart (2003), Bundy (2006) and de Groot and Branch (2009) have all found that public libraries were being used to supplement or replace school libraries, in part because school libraries were nonexistent (Hart, 2003) or because they lacked adequate resources and services (Bundy, 2006, de Groot & Branch [2009]). The findings of these studies suggested that building school and public library relationships through resources (human, financial, and collections) was essential to support children with school projects and assignments in addition to recreational reading resources.

*School and Public Library Relationships.* The theme of the importance of building relationships between school and public libraries can be found consistently in recent research. Lack of communication and understanding about each libraries' roles and purposes were often mentioned as barriers to establishing these relationships. Hart's (2003) study suggested that there was a "need for more systematic and programmed contact with the local schools or with at least selected grades and teachers. Perhaps then classes could come to the library . . . for a more structured experience. . . . Perhaps the quality of learning in the library might then be enhanced" (p. 80). In another study, Hart (2000) recommended that formal communication structures between public librarians and teachers need to be established before these relationships can fully develop. According to de Groot and Branch (2009), public libraries "indicated that their relationships with schools in their communities are, at best, difficult to maintain, and at worst, non-existent" (p. 72).

Similarly, Hart (2006a) noted that public librarians do not have the day-to-day contact with teachers that a school librarian would so that when children come to the public library for assistance, the staff do not always know about the project or the best way to help the students. This challenge highlighted that "the relationships between school and public library are crucial to effective information literacy education in public libraries" (p. 6).

De Groot and Branch (2009) found that there is “sometimes a tension that exists between school and public libraries and this tension may be attributed to a lack of understanding about each other’s goals and missions” (p. 72). Hart (2006a) found that the local teachers did not understand how children searched for and found information in the library. These teachers viewed school libraries as a place where librarians simply give children the information they required. As a result, teachers did not see the need to collaborate or communicate with school library staff. A similar lack of understanding about the roles of the public library and their staff was alluded to in Bundy’s (2006) study. He suggested that “there is a major opportunity for partnerships between schools and public libraries in the education of young people, but it is one which largely requires an awareness of and attitudinal shift by educational bureaucracies, individual schools and their teachers” (p. 134).

In an earlier study, Bundy (2002) found that school and public libraries were not able to “achieve their cooperation potential until they [understood] better the perspectives, contexts and needs of their professional colleagues in the other sector” (p. 68). De Groot and Branch (2009) stated “with no specific contacts within a school or division, public library staff members often have no one to work with in the schools to promote services and programs or to determine how school and public libraries might collaborate to better serve students in both locations” (p. 73). Yet, when the relationships are established and resources were pooled, assistance to children with school projects was enhanced.

*Resource Pooling between Libraries.* A second theme from recent research related to resources, including staffing, collections, and physical space. Hart (2000), for example, found that public librarians in Cape Town (South Africa) did not generally have the qualifications or training to provide educational enhancement and that their facilities were insufficient to support academic service to students. Hart found that “librarians seem to be struggling to cope with the increased demands placed on them” (p. 81). Library staff acknowledged that “they do not know how to support learners in the library, who, all agree, are ill-prepared” (Hart, 2006c, p. 10). Hart (2003) also suggested that the lack of training and formal qualifications for many public library staff “might weaken the case for recognition of their role in formal education” (p. 80).

De Groot and Branch (2009) also found concerns about staffing in their Alberta study. Their survey and interviews revealed that library staff had varying qualifications from “Master’s level degrees in Education or Library and Information Studies to no formal education or training” (p. 73). The authors found that public librarians tried to help students with questions and research but there were “difficulties in providing these kinds of services with untrained staff or with small numbers of staff members” (de Groot & Branch, 2009, p. 73).

Similarly, an increased educational role for South African public libraries was problematic for many participants because of the pressures the role would put on already tight resources (Hart, 2006a, 2006b). Library staff expressed frustration about the shortage of space in their libraries and indicated “a wish for children to use their libraries quickly and not ‘loiter’” (Hart, 2006b, p. 11). Staffing, especially staff training and qualifications, and space issues were significant concerns expressed in Hart’s studies of South African public libraries. In Alberta, Canada, public libraries expressed “a strong desire to access professional development opportunities for their staff related to information literacy, curriculum, and research projects” (de Groot & Branch, 2009, p. 73).

Bundy’s work from Australia highlighted similar concerns. A recent survey of Australia’s public libraries found that many librarians were “frustrated at their inability to provide better services and resources to their younger users due to lack of . . . [government] support, funding, staffing, and congested libraries unattractive to young people” (Bundy, 2007, p. 1). In the same study, researchers asked librarians to describe barriers to awareness and use of the library by children and young people. Respondents suggested that low staffing levels, no money for resources, and lack of space were all barriers to children’s and young adults’ use of the public library. “Many respondents indicated that a lack of adequate funding for public libraries in Alberta has meant decreased resources in all aspects of library service” (de Groot & Branch, 2009, p. 73). Tellingly, “a librarian commented that given our already slender funding . . . it is highly imprudent to duplicate services already available (or that are supposed to be available) through the school system” (de Groot & Branch, 2009, p. 73).

De Groot and Branch (2009) also found limited funds for purchasing print resources was an ongoing concern for public libraries in Alberta. Public libraries in the study were trying to provide a range of print resources, including materials that encourage recreational reading and support research. Several respondents indicated that classroom teachers were heavy users of the public library collections—taking out all of the books on big cats, for example. According to the authors,

a common concern by many respondents is best described as “curriculum grid lock,” a problem that occurs whenever schools teach the same content at the same time. This means there is tremendous pressure on the resources available in one community on a particular topic. One librarian commented that “we simply could never have the resources to handle the volume of requests when this situation occurs.” (de Groot & Branch, 2009, p. 74)

The public library has a different mandate than a school library, and choosing to spend limited budget dollars on curricular resources solely to support school projects created a conflict of priorities for librarians.

*Supporting Student Projects, Assignments, and Information Literacy.* A final theme that emerged from recent research related to the assignments and projects for which children sought assistance and resources in the public library. Hart's studies in South Africa found that the absence of school libraries in most schools meant that public libraries "might be expected to take on a more directly curricular role" (Hart, 2006a, p. 5). Public library staff in this and other studies conducted by Hart (2000; 2003; 2006b; 2006c) indicated that "learners are inadequately prepared for their information-seeking in the library and that public library staff have to intervene on an individual basis—for example in helping learners understand their assignment topics" (Hart, 2006a, p. 7). When asked, teachers in the local schools seemed to underestimate the time it took for students to develop meaningful questions and the difficulties often experienced by students in the early phases of their research projects. This lack of understanding on the part of the teacher helps explained, in part, why in this study,

time and again, public library staff were observed struggling to help learners who cannot articulate what they need. They often have to explain assignments to learners—who, because they lack information-seeking strategies and also perhaps because of their weak English, just do not understand what they need to do. It seems that what they *think* they need is a page to copy. (Hart, 2006a, p. 14)

Hart (2000; 2003; 2006c) and Bundy (2002; 2006) attributed some of the problems experienced by public librarians in helping students with their school assignments to new, South African and Australian government-mandated curricula that emphasize twenty-first-century skills through resource- and inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning. Similar findings from Alberta indicate that the implementation of a new, inquiry-based social studies curriculum in Alberta is causing a shift in the use of information resources. According to de Groot and Branch (2009), the new curriculum,

requires students and teachers to have access to a wide range of print and electronic resources. In addition, students need the information literacy skills to effectively identify their information need, locate the required information, and evaluate its appropriateness. As this new curriculum becomes more firmly entrenched in Alberta's schools, students will be relying on public library resources and services even more for their information needs.

This shift from traditional, textbook-focused teaching to a more student-centered approach has resulted in the need for students to become information literate and to have access to more resources to complete assignments. As a supplement to, or a replacement for, school library programs, public libraries are being forced into providing curricular resources and support for twenty-first-century learning in ways very different than they have in the past.

In the de Groot and Branch (2009) study, respondents spoke of the parents' role in finding information for children's assignments and the last minute nature of many parental and student requests for help. Public librarians were concerned about trying to provide resources at short notice (e.g., leaving no time for interlibrary loan, branch, or library system requests). These last minute projects also left little time for working with children to develop information literacy skills.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In a perfect world, strong public libraries and school libraries would work together to support the information and recreational reading needs of children and to prepare them to succeed in school to become effective twenty-first-century citizens. Public libraries provide the first experiences for young children and their families, thus beginning their love of reading. Summer reading programs for children and young adults also support the love of reading during out-of-school time. When children are in school, the teacher-librarian and the school library program should continue to support the recreational reading of children by building strong collections of resources of interest to their school community while also supporting the dynamic curricular needs of students and their teachers. The teacher-librarian should collaborate with teachers to develop inquiry units that allow students to create new meaning from a variety of resources (from libraries and other sources), a key aspect of twenty-first-century learning. The school library collection should be well-stocked with curricular resources and the school library program should focus on the processes of learning with students. Teacher-librarians should be trained to help teachers and students develop important skills and to connect to the rest of the world.

Preparing children and young adults to be literate twenty-first century citizens is a big job, and an important one, and we need both public and school libraries to work together. It seems like, in some places, public libraries have been doing more than their fair share—and the time is now for state and provincial jurisdictions to build strong school library programs and collections and to hire trained teacher-librarians and library support staff.

### *Implications for LIS Research*

The important relationship between school and public libraries has implications for researchers who work in areas that do not pertain to school libraries and children's services. Participants in every aspect of information creation, provision, and maintenance have experienced school and/or public library services, and those experiences can affect expectations for and understanding of subsequent involvement in information use, practice, and research. For researchers who focus on academic libraries,

an awareness of the strengths and challenges academic library users may have regarding information-seeking may be an important part of understanding user behavior. For researchers who focus on social informatics, an awareness of the ways in which schools and libraries prepare children to become literate and participating community members is relevant to the study of information in society. For researchers who focus on information policy, the decisions of school districts and local governments to fund library services have effects far beyond the establishment of explicit or enacted policy. Though this list is far from exhaustive, the implications are clear: the development of children's literacy and learning through libraries has relevance to all areas of LIS research.

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