Seeking Early Literacy for All: An Investigation of Children's Librarians and Parents of Young Children with Disabilities' Experiences at the Public Library

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores children's librarianship and early literacy in the lives of children with disabilities. Informed by critical disability theory, underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological development theory, this project was constructed as an interpretive case study. Eleven children's librarians working in western Canada were asked about providing early literacy resources for children with disabilities in their libraries, and fourteen parents of young children with disabilities living in the same region were asked about their children's experiences in public libraries. Scans of twenty ALA-accredited institutions' course offerings and other professional development training opportunities related to early literacy and disability topics provided additional context. Librarians commented on the relative rarity of children with disabilities at their libraries, while parents were seen to be reluctant to approach librarians to discuss their children's needs. The parent interviews revealed a broad range of experiences, as some families found their libraries accommodating and others' experiences were less positive. Even with the very small sample size, the study's findings support a rationale for more responsive, inclusive early literacy experiences for, and research about, young children with disabilities in public libraries today.

Introduction

As part of a multisection dissertation study undertaken in 2014 in western Canada, this qualitative case study explores the intersections of children's librarianship and early literacy in the lives of children with disabilities. Semistructured interviews with eleven children's librarians' were conducted to gather their thoughts on how they are prepared for providing,

and how they actually provide, appropriate early literacy resources for children with disabilities in their libraries. In another set of semistructured interviews, fourteen parents were also asked about their encounters with their public libraries when seeking early literacy resources for their young children with disabilities.

The general field of early literacy research presents a rich array of evidence from various disciplines that points to what most researchers, educators, and theorists agree is the importance of a childhood that includes experiences with literacy (Hamer, 2005; Hamer & Adams, 2003; Lonigan, Shanahan, & National Institute for Literacy, 2009; Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000; Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010; Teale, 1999). Because of heightened interest in early child development in general and early literacy specifically, the past few decades have seen early learning discourse (initiatives, programs, services, advice and recommendations, and so on) proliferate across the Western world, both in print and online (American Library Association [ALA], 2011; Quirke, 2006; Wall, 2010). This discourse often includes messages for parents about early literacy, pointing out information about typical language- and literacy-developmental milestones, as well as school-readiness-skills checklists and invitations to participate in community early literacy learning opportunities. Many of these messages mention the public library as a key resource for the provision of early literacy resources and experiences for all children.

While a review of some professional children's librarianship literature reveals that services for children with disabilities is a topic of considerable concern (Akin, 2004; Association for Library Service to Children, 2015; Baldassari-Hackstaff, Kerber, Krovontka, & Olson, 2014; Banks, 2004; Banks, Feinberg, Jordan, Deerr, & Langa, 2014; G. Barker, 2011; Grassi, Huth, & Jin, 2016; Klipper, 2014; Prendergast, 2015a, 2015b), a thorough review of library and information studies (LIS) research literature reveals that very few prior research studies related to this particular topic exist (D. Barker, 2011; Kaeding, 2015; Koulikourdi, 2008; Poulson, 1994; Prendergast, 2013; Ross & Akin, 2002; Rovenger, 1987). Also, while prior research has investigated the home and preschool literacy experiences of young children with significant disabilities (Craig, 1996; DesJardin, 2010; Flewitt, Nind, & Payler, 2009; Kliewer et al., 2004; Marvin & Mirenda, 1993; Ricci, 2011; Weikle & Hadadian, 2003), very little is known about how families of children with disabilities choose to use and participate in early literacy learning opportunities offered to young children and their families at public libraries. Among many other early literacy resources that may or may not be present in the lives of children with disabilities, the public library has not yet been thoroughly investigated as a site where these children (and their families) may be provided with early literacy support. Better understanding of how, and to what extent, children's librarians in

public libraries can or could provide responsive early literacy resources to parents of children with disabilities may help with the creation of more inclusive and appropriate resources across the field of children's library services, as well as contribute to the field of early literacy in general.

The core research questions of this study are as follows:

- What are some children's librarians' experiences with and perspectives about serving children with disabilities in their communities?
- What do parents of young children with disabilities have to say about their experiences with and uses of the early literacy resources of the public library?
- What are these professional children's librarians' thoughts about any training they have received or training they believe they need to receive for providing early literacy programs, services, and collections that meet the needs of children with disabilities?

Theoretical Framework

As this study explores early literacy in the lives of children with disabilities, the research lens used herein is informed by critical disability theory. Critical disability theory proposes a stance that society's response to a person's impairment (physical, cognitive, sensory, and so on) both creates and contributes to the person's experience of having a disability (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Goodfellow, 2012; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010). The emphasis is placed on societal influences rather than just on an individual's specific characteristics. In this critical disability paradigm, the historically prevalent medical model of disability (also referred to as a "deficit-model") is rejected as oppressive, dehumanizing, and unjust, and disability is therefore construed as mainly a social construct. Taking a critical disability stance requires an acknowledgment of Western society's historical, systemic, and still persistent exclusion of people with disabilities. In this study, when considering libraries as sites of participation in early literacy, onus for the identification and removal of barriers is placed on the librarian and library rather than on any person with a disability or parent/caregiver of a child with a disability.

This study also is framed by Bronfenbrenner's conceptualization of human development. The early version (1986) of his ecological systems theory conceptualizes a child at the center of five overlapping systems—microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—that interact and influence a child's development. The microsystem is any context in which the child is recipient or participant in any interaction or activity; both homes and libraries can be considered different microsystems. The mesosystem is constituted when forces from outside the microsystem exert a direct influence on the child within the microsystem. A significant aspect of this particular study's theoretical framework con-

siders the role of the children's librarian within a child's mesosystems of developmental support.

In later iterations of his theory, Bronfenbrenner elaborated on processes within the systems framework. The latest model, which he called the Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), includes the person's unique characteristics or biology in the framework. In this model, human development takes place as a result of progressively more complex, reciprocal interactions between a child and the "persons, objects and symbols" (1994, p. 572) in his or her immediate environment. In this framework, these interactions and experiences are considered to be the processes by which development takes place; the contexts are considered to be the various settings in which children live and interact in their daily lives (home, school, library storytimes, therapy sessions, and so on).

Finally and most importantly, the PPCT model emphasizes that processes and contexts are repeated over extended periods, and that both the frequency and intensity of all these influences over time together drive development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The aspect of time in this bioecological framework is particularly relevant to this current study because not enough is known about whether young children with disabilities are provided with early literacy experiences to the same degree that their nondisabled age peers might have. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological development theory encourages a consideration of where libraries and librarians might fit into each of the unique bioecological systems of children who are labeled with disabilities, particularly mesosystem influence of the professional children's librarian.

This study is also informed by a number of other theories that, like Bronfenbrenner's, emphasize the social nature of literacy (Heath, 1983, 2012; Mahn, 1999; Perry, 2012; Street, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky pointed out that the outcomes of children with disabilities are influenced by the society in which they live, a view reflected in current critical disability studies. Children with disabilities should be afforded the same kinds of opportunities to build their skills, via scaffolding by parents and others, as those offered to their nondisabled peers (Gindis, 1999; Smagorinsky, 2012; Wang, 2009).

Literature Review

In an article that appeared in this journal in 1987, Rovenger wrote, that "libraries and librarians have been overlooked and underutilized as resources for children with learning differences" (p. 427). Also, there is still only a very small body of research that explores early literacy in library contexts in general (Campana & Dresang, 2011; Celano & Neuman, 2001; Dresang, Burnett, Capps, & Feldman, 2011; McKechnie, 2006; McKenzie & Stooke, 2007; Mills, Bayo Urban, Campana, & Nelson, 2014), and,

as mentioned above, an even smaller amount that covers the topics of early literacy (or libraries more generally) and children with disabilities together. Also, researchers have only rarely investigated parents' notions of library use and storytime participation by families of young children (Becker, 2012; Dail, 2004; McKechnie, 2006; McKenzie & Stooke, 2007; Nichols, 2011; Sensenig, 2012; Stooke & McKenzie, 2011; Walter, 2003; A. Ward & Wason-Ellam, 2005). Moreover, while the work of children's librarians has evolved to include a significant role in the early literacy movement (ALA, 2011; Celano & Neuman, 2001; C. Ward, 2007), their impact on the early literacy experiences of children with disabilities remains largely unexplored in recent research literature concerned with early literacy and libraries.

Early literacy promotions and programs within North American public libraries draw heavily from a resource developed specifically for children's librarians: Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library (ECRR). The program provides children's librarians with extensive resources in order to help them develop and present early literacy–themed training workshops for parents and caregivers of young children, as well as strategies for inserting early literacy tips into storytime programs for young children and their parents and caregivers. The overall aim of these workshops and early literacy tips are to increase adult awareness of early literacy skill development, and how adults can help support that development in their daily lives with the young children in their care. Revised in 2011, the second edition of ECRR identifies many of the everyday things that parents can do to support literacy development, and describes the literacy benefits of playing, singing, talking, reading, and writing with young children. The program also strongly emphasizes the importance of providing literacy environments and hands-on learning opportunities. Librarians using ECRR tenets demonstrate ways that parents and caregivers can play, sing, talk, read, and write with their children in order to provide them with ways to build literacy skills and, in doing so, best prepare them for school and learning to read.

Beyond the continued uptake of the revised ECRR initiative, and as mentioned above, the recent professional library literature also provides evidence that the topic of children with disabilities is of high importance to practicing librarians, who frequently report on their programs and services for children with disabilities (Jarombek & Leon, 2010; Leon, 2011; Prendergast & Lazar, 2010; Winson & Adams, 2010). However, relatively few resources are available for librarians who hope to develop their expertise in serving families of children with disabilities (Association for Library Service to Children, 2015; Farmer, 2013; Feinberg, Jordan, Deerr, Langa, & Banks, 2014; Klipper, 2014; Prendergast, 2015a). Even with the dearth of both academic and professional library literature available to inform practice, library programs that target the perceived needs of children with

disabilities are becoming more common in public libraries across North America. Many such programs were started by librarians in response to parents' requests that their children with disabilities have their own story-time programs, while others are run in partnership with early intervention therapists, such as speech-language pathologists (Prendergast & Lazar, 2010).

Other professional literature describes approaches to the creation of inclusive spaces, collections, and programs. For example, Banks (2004) described a Brooklyn Public Library program, The Child's Place for Children with Special Needs. Contrary to what the name suggests, The Child's Place is for children both with and without disabilities and is an inclusive setting built on principles of universal design and multiple intelligences theory. In this deliberately inclusive service model, early literacy is supported for a diverse range of children simultaneously, within the same activity or program, with individual children benefiting from within their own unique developmental stage. Research literature from the early childhood education discipline reveals a multitude of studies about inclusive early literacy (Flewitt et al., 2009; Kliewer, 2008; McCloskey, 2012; Mock & Hildenbrand, 2013; Nind, Flewitt, & Payler, 2010), and these represent another rich resource for librarians to inform their own approaches to inclusive practice in early literacy.

Methodology
Case Study Research Overview
Yin (2009) emphasizes that the case study approach allows the researcher to gather data from multiple sources (interviews, observations, documents, artifacts, and so on), and believes that this can provide comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Case studies in sociocultural research offer engaging ways to present stories about people's lives that help address social and education issues for which there is little empirical understanding and to answer researchers' questions. By exploring salient themes that emerged across the two different participant groups' interviews and considering LIS course content and professional-development opportunities for librarians, this study uncovered and *re*storied both librarians' and parents' lived experiences about services, collections, programs, and other resources aimed at providing early literacy experiences for young children with disabilities, and then identified some persistent gaps and barriers and considered ways to address these moving forward.

Data Sources
This study drew on data from semistructured interviews with children's librarians and parents of children with disabilities, and samples of relevant LIS course documents and professional-development programs and activities.

Conducting the Study

Ethics. The study received approval from the Office of Research Services' Behavioral Research Ethics Board of the University of British Columbia at Vancouver. All participants' names, addresses, and places of work, as well as any other potentially identifying information, were anonymized to protect privacy. All names are pseudonyms.

Recruitment. Librarians were recruited by contacting public library directors at ten municipal libraries located in western Canada. Library directors were asked to distribute the study's recruitment flyer among their libraries' professional children's services staff members.

Librarian Participants. Eleven professional librarians with master's degrees in librarianship who worked at four different public library systems responded to the recruitment flyer, and each were invited to participate in one face-to-face, semistructured interview of forty-five minutes to an hour in length (see table 1). These librarian participants all worked in early literacy resource provision in their libraries for at least part of their current workday, performing such duties as conducting storytimes, developing literature collections, and performing readers' advisory services for young children and their parents and caregivers. Librarians were compensated for their time with a gift certificate for a local bookstore.

Parent Participants. Parents were recruited via posters placed in community spaces, as well as in service agencies that serve families of children with disabilities. Thirteen families from five different urban and suburban municipalities in western Canada agreed to participate (see table 2). Twelve mothers and two fathers (one couple chose to be interviewed together) were interviewed, for a total of fourteen adult interviewees. In this sample of thirteen families with children ages 2–8, two of the children were adopted and the rest were biological. Families were compensated for their time with a gift certificate for a local bookstore.

LIS Courses Sample. Course content found on a random sample of twenty ALA-accredited institutions' websites was gathered and analyzed for evidence of content pertaining to early childhood literacy topics, as well as content about serving people with disabilities in any type of library. Of these twenty sampled institutions, course descriptions that included any significant content about serving people with disabilities of all ages, as well as course content specific to early years librarianship, were compiled. Children's literature course descriptions were also captured if they included topics pertaining to early childhood literacy, disability, and diversity issues. This data was used to triangulate the librarian participants' statements about any of their own LIS programs' course content that focused on early literacy generally and, more specifically, on serving families of young children with disabilities.

Professional Development Sample. Throughout the time this study took place (January–December 2014), professional-development opportuni-

Table 1. Librarian participants

First names (pseudonyms)	Year of MLIS graduation	Current position status
Annika	2006	part-time
April	1992	full-time
Belle	2012	auxiliary
Lana	2008	full-time
Molly	1996	full-time
Natasha	1990	full-time
Piper	2004	full-time
Robert	2013	auxiliary
Sally	2010	auxiliary
Sandy	2013	part-time
Sophia	2003	full-time

Table 2. Parent participants

Parents' names (pseudonyms)	Children's names, ages	Disabilities as described by parents	Family makeup and language(s) spoken in home
Abigail	Thomas, 4	Autism spectrum disorder	Two-parent, heterosexual; English, Tagalog
Amy	Evan, 7	Autism spectrum disorder	Two-parent, heterosexual; English
Anna	Andy, 4	Language and motor delays	Two-parent, heterosexual; English, Mandarin
Annie	Michael, 6	Autism spectrum disorder	Two-parent, heterosexual; English, Mandarin
Diane	Jane, 8	Cerebral palsy	Two-parent, heterosexual; English, Arabic
Elizabeth	Maggie, 8	Cerebral palsy	Two-parent, heterosexual; English
Jessica	Benjamin, 2	Autism spectrum disorder	Two-parent, heterosexual; English, Mandarin
Joanna	Nicolas, 7	Autism spectrum disorder	Two-parent, heterosexual/ blended; English
Laura	Blossom, 6	Learning disabilities	Two-parent, heterosexual; English
Leslie	Natalie, 4	Global developmental delays	Two-parent, heterosexual; English
Mary	Mark, 8	Autism spectrum disorder	Single-parent; English, Vietnamese
Richard	Bobby, 7	Autism spectrum disorder	Two-parent, heterosexual; English
Steve and Cindy	Lulu, 2	Autism spectrum disorder	Two-parent, heterosexual; English,* Mandarin, Cantonese

Note: *Another European language was spoken in the home, but is not identified here to protect the family's identity.

ties specifically geared toward children's librarians were captured into a table document. Opportunities were identified by looking at several library-association and library-focused professional-development websites, and by asking colleagues across North America what they knew about them. These opportunities were divided into in-person and online categories, and whether they were free or not was noted. Brief summaries on each opportunity were captured in the table, including such data as format, length, topic coverage, and so forth. By the study's conclusion, this table contained nineteen separate professional-development opportunities aimed at children's library professionals that included content about working with children with disabilities and their families and/or inclusive early literacy resources. Most opportunities, either online or face to face, were fee-based, and only three free webinars were found that were related to this topic. Also, some free webinars were restricted to those who worked within a particular jurisdiction. The data in this table helped to triangulate the information provided by participating librarians regarding their knowledge of and access to professional development about early literacy and serving families of children with disabilities.

Data Analysis

Using the constant comparative method of inductive analysis that "enables the investigator to build an understanding of the phenomena under investigation through the lives, relations, actions and words of the participants themselves" (Freeman, 2005, p. 81), data analysis for this project commenced as soon as data gathering began, and was continuous throughout the entire project. Throughout the analysis process I considered how my study's findings via the librarian interview transcripts, the parent interview transcripts, and the document scans of LIS courses and professional-development opportunities related to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, where the influences of the PPCT model are considered within the larger multilayered framework moving from the microsystem of the child in question to the larger societal norms and practices that influence a person's development. Using the qualitative research software program ATLAS-Ti, the interview data for both participant groups (librarians and parents) were analyzed for common themes, as well diverse experiences. Each group of interviews was first transcribed, coded, and analyzed separately; then the librarian codes and parent codes were merged to identify any related content. For example, segments of text in which librarians' experiences about children with disabilities attending their storytimes were merged with segments of text in which parents spoke about what happened at storytime. Each grouping of overlapping content was then re-analyzed, with additional codes added to help delineate significant themes that appeared across the two participant groups. Significant themes were

further explored by rereading and sometimes recoding segments of texts to construct a robust and nuanced picture of participants' experiences from their unique perspectives.

Findings

The dual-perspective aspect of this study presented some challenges in terms of how to correlate and communicate what seemed to be most salient across the data set; after all, the librarians and parents who participated in this study were not known to one another. It was my assumption that they were all talking about different people in different libraries at different times. However, the degree to which the participants, whether librarian or parent, intersected was noteworthy, suggesting that there is indeed common ground to be explored between both groups in the pursuit of supporting early literacy for children with disabilities. For this paper, three themes are explored in detail: accommodating environments; inclusion in storytime; and community outreach. Following this are findings that discuss the librarians' thoughts about their preparedness and any LIS course content they undertook about early literacy and children with disabilities, as well as any subsequent professional development they have had since graduating. Next, the librarians' present their ideas on how to fill knowledge gaps in the profession, and were asked specifically to comment on how to prepare new librarians for this work. Finally, parents also offered their thoughts about what would make libraries more accommodating and helpful for families of children with disabilities.

Accommodating Environments

The children's librarians were asked for their thoughts on how their libraries were doing with regard to access by people with disabilities, particularly children with disabilities and their families. Accessibility, in terms of how well families with children using wheelchairs would be able to access the physical space of their libraries, was thought by the eleven librarians to be possible, due to the fact that all the workplaces they were considering were on street-level or had functioning elevators. However, when they considered the children's areas of the library, most librarians conceded that things like computer tables, shelving, and other furniture might make negotiating the space with a wheelchair or walker difficult, but perhaps not impossible. One librarian, Lana, described her library's children's area as follows: "I would describe the space as pretty tight for people to move around even with the regular-sized strollers! It's a small space and, quite realistically, getting in there with a larger stroller or wheelchair would be quite a challenge, I am sure of that."

Only the librarians working in new branches were completely confident that their spaces would be easy to navigate by anyone using mobility equipment. However, none of them was aware of specific families of children

with physical disabilities who used their library on a regular basis. On the other hand, none of the parents of children who used wheelchairs had any complaints about their library's physical accessibility; moreover, the parents said that they found library staff to be consistently welcoming and accommodating.

When asked to consider more specifically how well their libraries were able to accommodate and support families with children who have behavioral and/or cognitive disabilities, four of the eleven librarians expressed some concern about how well staff members at their libraries might be able to consistently offer supportive and respectful service. In particular, Piper, a librarian with ten years of experience, was quite worried about what she said were a few of her colleagues' tendencies to rush to judgment when so-called tantrums occurred rather than first approaching and offering assistance to families whose children were in distress and/or misbehaving. Similarly, Molly, a librarian with nearly two decades of experience, thought that some of her colleagues' abilities to recognize when "invisible" disabilities might be at play were a significant issue. In a scenario offered by a parent, Joanna, a mother of a young son with autism spectrum disorder, described a past experience at her public library, where she said she felt scrutinized for her son's behavior because he tended to run around and frequently went behind the circulation desk to look at the checkout machinery. Although she eventually enlisted the aid of his behavior interventionist to help him learn how to behave in the library, she did not recall ever being approached by a librarian or any other staff member offering to collaborate on strategies that might have helped her child learn how to behave appropriately in the library. His eventual success (he regularly visits the library now without any behavioral issues) was accomplished without any support from the children's librarian.

Inclusion in Storytime
Because storytime comprises a significant area of early literacy resource provision offered at the public library, the interview protocol included discussing storytime and children with disabilities in some detail. The librarians all emphasized their personal commitment to including children of all abilities into their storytime programs, but said that they only rarely had attendees who have obvious disabilities. Each of them described a variety of strategies that she/he took to foster inclusion, based on what was perceived to be the individual needs of children and often in close consultation with parents and caregivers, but sometimes simply relying on common sense. These inclusion strategies, despite being described by Piper as "trial and error" due to librarians' admitted lack of expertise, were reported nonetheless to usually result in positive experiences. However, librarians Sally, Annika, and April in particular spoke about some instances in which children in storytime were behaving in ways that

made them think that perhaps "there was something going on," but were unsure about broaching the topic with the children's parents and worried that if they did so, the parents would be embarrassed and choose not to return.

As for the parent interviewees, several reported trying storytime, but abandoned it because of the effect the crowded, noisy spaces seemed to have on their child's behavior during the program. Abigail recalled taking her son Thomas to storytime when he was a toddler; she described the setting as hot, noisy, and crowded and Thomas was unable to control his behavior. He was prone to physical outbursts and sometimes stepped on, kicked, or hit the other children. Even though she said that she actually dreaded going, Abigail persisted for a while because it was important to her that they go to the library. However, she ultimately stopped attending storytime altogether:

> I didn't know he had autism at the time, I didn't know what sort of interventions I could do so I stopped taking him. . . . I didn't know what he had then, but if it was smaller [that is, not crowded], then he would have had more space and I could have actually reached him but there wasn't any space—the noise was also bothersome to him so I think if it was a bit smaller and not so crowded [we would have continued with the program]. I don't think the kids enjoy it anyway because it is superhot in there and it's crowded.

When she was asked whether she had ever discussed Thomas's difficulties with the children's librarian who led the program, Abigail conceded that she had not, but neither had the librarian approached her with any suggestions.

Although reported to be rare occurrences overall, when children with disabilities did find a good fit with a storytime program, the librarians viewed their parents as more likely to keep bringing them, even if things got difficult from time to time. For example, a children's librarian, Sandy, at a busy urban branch described her recent interactions with a family at her weekly storytime programs. She had begun offering an afternoon timeslot, and a mother with a little girl with a significant global disability began to attend in the afternoon instead of the typically crowded morning program. Sandy thought this might be because the afternoon program had far fewer attendees—sometimes just one or two other families:

> It resulted in really intimate programming and it was really lovely and it allowed us to just sit at a table, which was a bit different for my storytimes because the girl was a little bit older, and I think it enabled us all to focus a bit better—I mean I have no idea, but I do think the mum felt more comfortable just because there were less kids, and the daughter would often do a lot of exclaiming loudly or real crying if we moved on to something else—there were lots of tears around the transitions between different activities, but it just really didn't matter because it was so small . . . some parts of it were really nice interactions and I feel

> like that mum feels really comfortable in that space and greets me
> really warmly when I've seen her out walking around near the branch
> and when I've seen her in the branch too.

None of the study-participant parents of children with disabilities that
affected their behavior was able to share similar experiences about their
child's successful storytime attendance, and none had ever approached
the librarian who led the storytime program about their child's special
support needs. Like Abigail, they simply stopped attending storytime.
However, both parents of children with physical disabilities (whose needs
for accommodation were simply to make room for their wheelchairs)
talked about their very positive experiences at their local libraries. For
example, Diane, who is an immigrant from the Middle East, has an 8-year-
old daughter, Jane, with cerebral palsy, and they have been making regular
visits to the library since their arrival four years ago, when Jane was still a
preschooler:

> We don't have a public library in my home country so I came here
> and then we saw the public library and the programs and all the books
> and the storytimes and I was so happy because I thought she was really
> engaged in the community and she is getting more socialized, so these
> programs—anytime we heard about any program in the library we used
> to go to that program and one time they did this fairy program and she
> was all dressed up and she went in her little wheelchair and everyone
> was taking pictures and she was so happy!

Overall, the interview data from both groups suggest that attendance at
storytime by children with a variety of disabilities was rare, and that chil-
dren's librarians willingly made adjustments and accommodations on a
case-by-case basis when and if they became aware of the need to do so. Par-
ents, on the other hand, seemed reluctant to approach librarians about
their children's needs concerning behavioral issues. Both families of the
two children with physical disabilities had extremely positive, accommo-
dating, and successful storytime experiences, however, and although the
librarians said that they rarely had children who used mobility equipment
like wheelchairs attending storytime, they gladly reorganized the room to
ensure access.

Community Outreach
Overwhelmingly, the librarians in this study believed that effective commu-
nity outreach was an important and largely untapped strategy for meeting
the needs of families of children with disabilities. Also, they were already
aware that without an ongoing, trusting relationship with the child's par-
ent or caregiver, learning about how to best accommodate an individual
child's needs is difficult. Children's librarians seemed willing enough to
hear from and work with families of children who need special accom-
modations or extra supports, but very few had actually done so. Annika

pondered the possibility that traditional community outreach may not be sufficient: "Maybe we're not reaching the right people. Maybe families that have kids with specific needs are so immersed in their child's own therapies or behavior classes or whatever resources they are already accessing—are we redundant? Or is there a place we can go?"

Also, since few children with obvious disabilities actually seem to be attending the early literacy programs offered by this study's participating librarians, or even observed to be visiting the libraries with their families to choose books, the question about how to actually locate them loomed large in our conversations. Lana elaborated on what she believed were some of the issues in conducting effective outreach to parents of children with disabilities in her community:

> The business of making those connections is actually something that is kind of like growing a little pea, you know, you have to plant it, you have to love it, you have to water it, you have to give it sun—and then it will grow—meaning, you need time, you need time to make [it] happen. . . . It's actually cold-calling, introducing yourself, trying to get a meeting, trying to talk to people, it takes time to build that . . . the way my week runs, I don't know how to sprout that pea, I just don't want it to die, really!

Lana went on to describe her current workload and the problem she faced with regard to dedicating sufficient time to build community relationships with service providers who work with children with disabilities and their families. Since none of the parents interviewed on this topic had ever approached a librarian about their child's special needs, even when obvious difficulties were apparent, it seems easy to conclude that the word is just not getting out about librarians' willingness to work with these families to make the library a positive experience for them and their children.

Children's Librarians' Training Opportunities

Of the eleven children's librarians interviewed, four said that they had not taken any children's literature or children's services courses in library school because they had planned to work in other areas of librarianship. Nevertheless, they ended up working as children's librarians and consequently learned on the job. Two of these four explained that they had been mentored by experienced colleagues, and the other two had attended multiple professional-development workshops and conferences that helped prepare them for children's library work. Since these four had not taken any children's literature or children's services courses in their LIS programs, they were able to comment only on what they recalled from other class content that touched on community diversity and working with the public. Each remembered having conversations and occasionally even assignments about working with adults with disabilities. The seven remaining librarians had taken at least one children's literature course, and most

had also taken at least one course on library programs for children. Five of these librarians could not recall much that was specifically about disability, but most vaguely recalled being made aware that public librarianship meant being prepared for the entire spectrum of diversity. Robert was the only children's librarian who emphasized that the children's literature and program courses he took all included frequent references to how to consider the needs of children with disabilities in library work today. However, Belle, a children's librarian who graduated two years ago, was emphatic in saying that the topic had never come up in her children's services courses: "Nothing—and I can say that with certainty—that was specifically targeting or including topics of children with disabilities . . . absolutely none." She was disappointed that her library degree did not offer any course content on what she believes is a critical area of service knowledge for children's librarians working in public libraries. When asked how she was going about filling this perceived gap in her training, Belle also said that she is currently enrolled in a six-week, online professional-development course offered through the Association of Library Services to Children on the topic of library services for children with disabilities, which she paid for herself and was completing on her own time after work.

General early literacy topics were also thinly represented in participants' LIS programs, with only three librarians saying that they had taken the single course available on this topic at their library schools. None of the librarians recalled much of the course content or assignments that required her/him to consider or learn how to prepare environments that were meant to be inclusive of a range of children, although a few had vague recollections of discussing inclusive design in their library-design courses. With only eleven participants (who attended three different Canadian library schools over the span of two decades), it is difficult to discern much about how early literacy and the needs of children with disabilities are tended to across the field of LIS. However, an analysis of course content from a random sample of twenty library degree programs indicated that there was only a single course at one library school specifically for training to serve people (of any age) with disabilities, and there were only three courses exclusive to early childhood literacy at three library schools. This does not mean that disability and early literacy topics were not covered in other courses, but simply that there were very few courses devoted specifically to these aspects of public librarianship found in this random sample.

The librarians were also asked about any professional-development training opportunities that were taken after graduation that dealt with early literacy and/or disability topics. The longer they had been working as children's librarians, the more likely it was that they had attended workshops and conferences that included some type of early literacy training. Since ECRR workshops have been offered at Canadian and U.S. library conferences for over a decade, with free webinars also available from time

to time, all eleven interviewees had at least introductory training in the ECRR program's basic tenets. There were, however, mixed opinions on whether ECRR resources were very inclusive. While Robert, a fairly recent graduate, mentioned that the webinar he completed on this program included considerations for children with disabilities, most others said that none of their ECRR professional-development training included content about providing early literacy services and/or programs or other resources for children with disabilities and their families.

Most thought that the ECRR program was geared to typically developing middle-class children, while only Sophia was comfortable with her own ability to adapt the basic framework of ECRR training for different groups of parents, including those whose children have disabilities. Of the suite of professional-development opportunities mentioned by the librarians, both the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program (PCMGP)[1] (BC Council for Families, 2008) facilitator training and the Mother Goose on the Loose (MGOL)[2] program were identified as having content that was applicable and/or easily transferable to situations in which parents of children with disabilities might attend storytimes. Sophia, who has over a decade of experience working in communities with vulnerable families, related that she recently attended the MGOL workshop: "I love what was emphasized at the end in the Mother Goose on the Loose program about talking to the parents and just telling them that it was all okay and just reassuring them that everything that is happening is okay and while there were different experiences that was okay too." Sophia especially appreciated this training program's emphasis on the importance of warmly welcoming the parents into early literacy program settings.

Another issue arose when discussing institutional support for pursuing professional development. Not surprisingly, it was highly preferable that training be offered as part of their regular paid work, with tuition fees covered by the institution. Both Belle and Molly, who were taking online or evening courses, said they were paying their own fees and doing the course work off-hours, during their own free time, which neither librarian thought was sustainable or ideal, and they both said they would be glad when their courses were completed.

Filling Knowledge Gaps
   Expanding LIS education. During the final segment of the librarian interviews, librarians were invited to offer their ideas for filling in their own perceived knowledge gaps and what kinds of training they thought would work well for all children's librarians. While none of the librarians intend to return to library school for additional classes, they thought this topic should be covered much more deliberately and intensively than what seems to be fairly standard across North American LIS programs.

In terms of how to accomplish this, there were some differences of opinion. Sophia, who was herself quite comfortable with her own level of expertise in this area of practice, thought that an entire course about the general topic of disability was well-warranted in librarianship, mostly to help allay some of the fears and discomfort many people seem to feel when they encounter people with disabilities:

> I think courses where they talk about different people with different types of disabilities because there are very specific types—I mean I don't think you would ever understand all of them—you would always encounter things that you didn't necessarily understand but if you had enough—if you had some basic knowledge about how do you approach some people with some of the disabilities. . . . Some basic skill sets and just an understanding of the barriers and what tools we have to assist them going around those barriers—overcoming them.

Belle, a novice librarian who was studying this topic via distance education on her own time, thought that disability issues should be touched on in all courses in order to normalize the notion that people with disabilities of all ages are part of the communities we serve and should not be treated as a separate topic: "It needs to be introduced in an MLIS program, not as an elective specialty course on patrons with disabilities—because that is just perpetuating this kind of isolationist and segregationist view of the topic—it needs to be woven into the core."

The librarians agreed that their LIS degrees did not do enough to prepare them for early literacy work with families whose children have disabilities, and many identified large gaps remaining in their professional knowledge in this regard. Whether or not library schools continue to add courses that include sufficient coverage of this topic, the interviewees agreed that they both want and need more training in this area of children's librarianship.

Access to professional development. When considering professional-development opportunities for themselves, the librarians all emphasized the importance of hearing directly from disability experts, as opposed to a class that focused on engaging with research on disability topics, which they would expect in a graduate course. Lana thought it important that she learn "a little bit more about the actual difficulties and barriers of children with disabilities." For her part, Molly, a librarian who had been mentored in children's librarianship by an experienced colleague, wanted more training on child development, but did not want to take a course outside of work time either. Finally, Piper sympathized with staff members who might be reluctant to approach families with children with disabilities, and thought that training on how to make initial contacts positive for everyone was important for all library workers:

> I think people need to know. Just in general, people can get scared about how to approach a family that has children with disabilities so instead people avoid—"I'm just going to go to the back room right now!" So just maybe being aware of what different, like someone with autism, what you might need to know about that and just techniques—I guess awareness in general is what people need then build that comfort level.

Overall, the librarians agreed that while professional development in this area was important, none of them was particularly clear on what different opportunities might be available. Some had heard rumors of a training toolkit in their jurisdiction and others occasionally stumbled into conference programs on disability themes, but most indicated that they rarely heard about free or low-cost online or in-person learning opportunities on this topic. The overview of professional-development opportunities undertaken in this case study revealed an array of mainly online learning opportunities, most of which were webinars conducted by other practitioners who presented their own program models aimed at serving people with disabilities.

Parents' Ideas for Children's Librarians

The parents' interviews included a question about what they wished the library could do for them. Their answers were varied and included general statements, such as "more storytimes" so that the current ones were not so crowded, and suggestions to limit attendance at programs by implementing ticket systems. Mostly, parents needed encouragement to think about what kinds of things they would be comfortable asking for help with, and they did seem to prefer to interact at a distance from the children's librarians in their communities. Only one family talked about their daughter Lulu's current attachment to "her favorite librarian," whose program she regularly attends and were completely satisfied with their experiences there, aside from the occasional crowding at storytimes. As previously mentioned, one parent, Joanna, admitted that she had not approached the children's librarian to seek help while she and her son's behavioral interventionist were working on a plan, including the creation of a simple "social story" to help him learn how to behave appropriately in the library. But neither did the children's librarian approach her, and Joanna conceded that it would have been nice to be offered help at the time.

Another parent, Laura, has three children with learning disabilities, and has extensive knowledge of community resources due to her years of advocacy for her children. She thought that libraries could play an important role in helping to distribute the kind of information she often finds herself called upon to share in her informal social network, where she frequently meets parents of children who are newly diagnosed with a disability. Laura says that they do not know where to turn for information and thus may experience crisis if they do not obtain the help they need:

> They need a place to go where their child is looked after and somebody
> who knows what they are doing and recognizes that there are chal-
> lenges and embraces that rather than everybody turning their nose
> up and they don't get the help and they go deeper and deeper down.
> . . . Parents need information, and there should be information . . .
> [available] at the library. . . . It would be nice if parents could go . . .
> because I am sure there's tons of information at the library that they
> could be utilizing and they don't even know, and if you don't know
> you can't get it. . . . And you wouldn't even think about that—most
> people don't think because everybody is online now—nobody thinks
> about going to the library to get information . . . and they have it at
> the gym where you can drop your kids off at the daycare and go and
> workout, like why don't they have it for when you want to read about
> your child's disability?

Other parents discussed their ideas for how to make school-age pro-
grams more accessible to their children who need extra support in order
to participate, as they had experienced barriers to these in the past. For
instance, a few parents thought it would be good to have older teenagers
act as one-on-one volunteers in informal programs for school-age chil-
dren; this way, their children would have more supervision and attention
and they could attend without their parents lurking about.

Discussion

The findings from these interviews with eleven librarians and thirteen
families revealed an array of opportunities in this area of children's li-
brarianship. Curriculum content about disability was seen to be sparsely
represented in library schools, which has been noted in prior research
(Katz, 2009; Subramaniam, Rodriguez-Mori, Jaeger, & Hill, 2012) and
was confirmed by the literature review conducted for this present study.
Although there seemed to be more early literacy–focused courses on of-
fer in current LIS education, the needs of children with disabilities are
likely still receiving insufficient attention in those courses. For the most
part, the professional children's librarians who participated in this study,
who ranged in experience from novice to veteran, agreed that they felt
somewhat or significantly underprepared to meet the needs of families of
children with disabilities and wished they could access better training in
this area.

This study's findings also suggested that children's librarians who
are willing and (somewhat) able to offer responsive, inclusive services,
and parents who want and need such services, rarely encountered each
other, but when they did the benefits of such interactions were obvious,
especially when viewed through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems
framework (Goodson, 2011). For example, Sandy's narrative about pre-
senting a smaller, adapted storytime program with a girl who has disabili-
ties represents the mesosystem influence within this child's microsystem of

the library. The interactions between Sandy and the child, as well as with the child's mother, in this comfortable, less crowded, intimate context provided repeated opportunities to experience literacy in more meaningful ways than the child would have in the crowded morning program. Moreover, Sandy's efforts to build a trusting relationship with the mother seems to have resulted in this family's sustained interest in visiting the library for programs and other materials for the child. Less accommodating library experiences, such as feeling scrutinized when her child cried, may have resulted in this mother being reluctant to return because her daughter's frequent emotional responses may have seemed too difficult to manage without Sandy's support and encouragement. In this example, the mesosystem role of the librarian exerted a positive influence on the opportunities for the child to experience and interact with objects, symbols, and people and in this way supported her continual literacy learning.

Echoing Rovenger (1987), this study suggests that librarians and their role in encouraging early literacy development in young children may remain underutilized resources in the lives of families whose children have disabilities. Unless librarians receive further training and undertake intensive community outreach, they are likely to remain underutilized. Both professional development and outreach would require institutional support for librarians to take the time needed to learn more about disability issues in early childhood, as well as the time to foster productive relationships with community partners and the families they should be serving. For their part, families seemed aware of and were utilizing their public libraries, but they typically did this passively. Families reported that they rarely or never approached children's librarians with requests of any kind, and preferred to do their own book searches after receiving recommendations from other professionals working with their children.

While willing, the children's librarians only rarely encountered families whose children needed extra support of any kind, whether in storytime or elsewhere, but when they did so they tended toward relying on their common sense and instinct to make the interactions as productive and positive as possible. Also, and not surprisingly, children with physical disabilities were welcomed in public libraries, and even when concerns existed about tight spaces and crowded rooms, the general attitude from both children's librarians and parents was one of complete confidence and acceptance. However, children with disabilities affecting their behavior tended to have more barriers than just noisy, hot, and crowded storytimes to deal with. While the librarians seemed eager to learn about ways to help these children, they admitted that they did not encounter them very often and tended not to approach them, nor were they approached by these children's parents with specific requests for assistance. This suggests that parents of children with disabilities causing difficult behavior tend to avoid

library spaces and thus have limited opportunities to meet and interact with librarians willing to help them and their children.

There are many research studies and other resources within the general field of early childhood education designed to teach practitioners effective strategies for including children with disabilities (Barton, Reichow, Wolery, & Chen, 2011; Brug, Van der Putten, & Vlaskamp, 2013; Conn-Powers, Cross, Traub, & Hutter-Pishgahi, 2006; Dennis, Lynch, & Stockall, 2012; Vakil, Welton, O'Connor, & Kline, 2009), as well as how to work supportively and collaboratively with their families (Gallagher, Fialka, Rhodes, & Arceneaux, 2002; Harry, 2002; Ray, Pewitt-Kinder, & George, 2009). With the resources available in a closely allied field of practice, it should not be difficult to draw on this existing knowledge to build capacity in children's librarians' abilities to work more effectively with and include children with disabilities that impact their behavior and their families. The opportunity to fill this gap by professional-development opportunities and the continued evolution of LIS coursework concerning diverse children need to be embraced by the professional as a whole. For example, Joanna relied upon her child's behavioral therapist to help her son become oriented to the library. Here was a lost opportunity for parent and librarian, in partnership with the therapist if necessary, to work together on the common goal of this child's library participation and access to early literacy supports and resources.

Working with individual families to accommodate children's special needs represents a significant way that children's librarians become part of mesosystems of support, and in this way provide equitable early literacy resources across diverse communities of children. This is the foundation of inclusive practice. The rarely occurring, ad hoc approaches to meeting individual children's needs, such as those offered by my study's participants, need to give way to broad shifts in the profession as a whole on approaches to how inclusive early literacy resources are developed, promoted, and delivered to all children and their families.

LIMITATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

This is a small case study, involving only eleven librarians and thirteen families of children with disabilities. While it is possible to highlight significant themes, it is not advisable to attempt to generalize the study's findings to every situation concerning librarians and their work that supports children with disabilities. However, the diversity of experiences reported herein does suggest that a range of possibilities exists when parents and children with disabilities interact with the early literacy resources of the public library, and that it is likely that significant gaps remain in how well those interactions are rendered productive for the children's equitable access to the resources. Children's librarians are one group of professionals

with continually expanding expertise regarding early childhood literacy, and this study's purpose was to highlight the possibilities inherent in considering their mesosystem role in inclusive early literacy resource provision.

By considering Bronfenbrenner's mature bioecological systems model (PPCT) wherein children are afforded frequent and successful interactions with "objects, symbols, and people" in public library contexts, this study proposes that more frequent interactions around early literacy resources would represent a positive force for children's early literacy development, in much the same way as regular home reading and opportunities to engage in interactive play with peers supports early literacy growth. By the same token, fewer or less successful interactions within the library context could inhibit literacy growth because of lost opportunities to engage with the resources that are freely available. This study begins to uncover some of the ways in which libraries and librarians can play significant mesosystem roles in the microsystems of young children with disabilities and their families.

Recommendations

The study suggests that access to better academic preparation, ongoing professional-development opportunities, and systemic community outreach to families whose children have disabilities are all of critical importance if change is to occur. What follows below are suggestions on how the field of children's librarianship can improve the ways in which families are able to access and benefit from the significant early literacy resources of the public library.

LIS graduate programs should assess course content regarding early literacy to ensure that it includes information about engaging with families whose children have disabilities, and that graduates have the necessary tools to provide inclusive early literacy resources in public libraries. Additionally, content about serving people with disabilities who need accommodations to access the library should receive more attention in all courses focused on user experiences in every type of library. Library leaders should both encourage and provide professional-development opportunities for staff who currently work with children and families that provide specific information about working with families whose children have various disabilities and how to plan for their participation in children's library services more generally.

Library leaders should also foster ongoing professional-mentoring relationships within libraries wherein more experienced, knowledgeable staff are made available to colleagues with less experience in inclusive library services. LIS faculty should conduct more research that uses a social-model-of-disability perspective and explores the intersections between the disability experience and libraries as a whole. Librarians who work in all

types of libraries should similarly be willing to participate in academic research that attempts to better understand how well libraries are able to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities. Overall, the field of librarianship needs to establish effective strategies that foster inclusion of all, beginning in the early years and continuing across the lifespan.

Conclusion

Children's librarians are skilled professionals who potentially have a great deal to offer in terms of early literacy learning to families whose children have disabilities. Interview data suggest that when they encounter such, these librarians try to be supportive in terms of helping the children derive the most benefit from their experiences in libraries. Similarly, parents report that they have had positive experiences at their libraries, including attending storytimes and especially in regard to book collections and the physical space accommodations for those with mobility issues. Exceptions to this are found when attending crowded, noisy storytimes, and when children's behavioral disabilities are a factor, resulting in parents feeling scrutinized by library staff, as well as by the general public. Given the relatively rare occurrence in this sample of parents and children's librarians having anything other than only superficial contact, the librarians remain a largely untapped resource for families of children with disabilities because these children are very likely not participating in programs at a rate proportionate to their number in the population at large, currently estimated to be 5–15 percent (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2006; Office for Disability Issues, 2014). Children's librarians should continue to be recognized for their already significant roles in early literacy resource provision for diverse communities, while concerted attention is paid to the remaining gaps in how well they are able to meet the needs of children with disabilities and their families today.

Notes

1. Parent-Child Mother Goose is an early literacy program developed in Canada that focuses on oral-language play between parents and their babies.
2. Mother Goose on the Loose is an early literacy program that draws on early brain development and was created by a U.S. children's librarian and early learning consultant, Betsy Diamant-Cohen.

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