New Zealand’s Public Libraries and Early Literacy

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Abstract
This paper presents selected results of a study exploring storytimes in New Zealand public libraries and their contribution to the development of pre-school children’s early literacy skills. An analysis of observations of storytimes and interviews with the librarians leading the sessions suggests that they have a role to play in community-based literacy development through their focus on the six key early literacy skills emphasised by Ghoting and Martin-Diaz (2006), namely: print motivation, vocabulary development, print awareness, letter knowledge, narrative skills, phonological awareness. It was found that the sessions concentrated on developing some of the skills more than others. Thus, while the development of print motivation appeared to be one of the key drivers behind the sessions, expanding children’s letter knowledge did not feature as strongly. This was considered an appropriate and legitimate focus by the librarians interviewed who felt that the role of the library was to inspire children to read for pleasure and to introduce them to the delights of books, reading and the library, rather than to teach them the mechanics of reading. The paper concludes with a consideration of the relationship of public library reading initiatives for young children with the early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki.
Introduction

Public libraries throughout New Zealand Aotearoa provide a range of services to pre-school children in recognition of the fact that, “[a] quality children’s library equips children with lifelong learning and literacy skills, enabling them to participate and contribute to the community” (IFLA Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section, 2003, p. 1). Overall, public libraries aim to encourage young children to develop a love of books and reading with all the social, psychological, well-being and education benefits this brings. Public libraries deliver a range of services and resources to achieve this aim including the provision of a diverse stock, space targeted at the needs of young children and their caregivers, knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff and the delivery of a variety of activities and programmes. This paper focuses on the last of these – programming, exploring a familiar feature of public library services to young children: pre-school storytimes. Usually scheduled in a regular weekly slot, storytimes generally run for about 30 minutes, often include action rhymes, songs and other activities as well as stories and are frequently followed by a craft activity. Many library services in New Zealand differentiate their programming for young children, running sessions based on Active Movement principles aimed at babies and toddlers as well as storytelling sessions for older pre-schoolers.

Despite the extent and range of storytime activities taking place in New Zealand’s public libraries, there has been little investigation into the motivation behind their delivery or evaluation of their benefit. Bamkin et al. (2013) provide an overview of the reasons why we read stories to children whether this is in a home, educational or library setting which include an introduction to a literate culture and the nature of narrative as well as the promotion of cognitive, literacy, creative, communication, and social skills. It also enables children to explore the world of stories and books, experiencing a variety of culture and emotions. For libraries, specifically, promoting library use is another key motivation mentioned in the literature. Judy MacLean (2008) suggests that librarians want children to discover that visiting the library can be an enjoyable and valued part of their lives, for example. Beyond this, though, there is the belief that children can gain meaningful literacy experiences through library storytimes and many of the programmes in North America in particular focus around the development of six key pre-literacy skills (Ghoting and Martin-Diaz, 2006):
1. Print motivation
2. Vocabulary
3. Print awareness
4. Letter knowledge
5. Narrative skills
6. Phonological awareness
The research described here explored the nature and delivery of storytimes in public libraries in New Zealand Aotearoa. We used direct observations of storytimes to identify the kinds of activities taking place and interviews with librarians to gain insight into their approach to and aims for the sessions. We visited 4 public library services in New Zealand, observing 12 sessions overall and undertaking 11 interviews. For the observations, we developed an observation schedule based on a literature review. The schedule focused primarily on how the librarians approached the storytime and what they did but we also had sections covering the children’s behaviours/reactions/interactions and those of the caregivers accompanying them. The interviews were semi-structured covering the librarians’ background, information about the sessions (frequency etc.) and questions about the librarians’ approach, e.g. the kinds of material they use and why, their aims for the sessions, what they want the children and their caregivers to gain from the sessions.

The remainder of this paper gives an overview of selected results, focusing particularly on the six pre-literacy skills listed above and exploring whether the storytimes observed supported their development. Many of the points discussed under the separate headings are, in fact, closely linked but are discussed discretely here to provide a clear understanding of the six skills and the techniques used to support them in the sessions observed.

**Print motivation**

Print motivation is being interested in and enjoying books and reading. Mary Jalongo (2004, p. 2) states unequivocally that, “Children’s experiences with literature need to begin with enjoyment”. The underlying premise is that children who enjoy books and stories will be curious about how to read and they will want to engage with reading. For the purpose of this study, we were interested in how library storytimes supported this element – how the children were encouraged to take pleasure in reading and how the librarians helped the children enjoy books.

For many of the librarians, encouraging print motivation was their principal driver. One librarian, asked to state the main aim of the sessions, said:

“A love of reading, because everything else comes from that.”

The observation and interview data identified a range of techniques used to encourage print motivation during storytime sessions. Firstly, the librarian always welcomed the children warmly and tried to convey enthusiasm and excitement. All the session started with a welcome song, usually Tēnā Koe. This seemed to serve a range of purposes. The song clearly signalled the beginning of the session and it was obviously the routine so the children knew what to expect next. Tēnā Koe is a
well-known song so all could join in and by encouraging participation from the children (and caregivers) from the start of the session, it made them comfortable about interacting later.

Secondly, the librarians read with enthusiasm to engage the children. The degree of animation they displayed in telling stories depended on their personalities to some degree; some were more comfortable adopting characters’ voices and acting out parts of the stories than others. Generally, though, the librarians were aware of character and pacing and used child-directed speech, including changes in rhythm and exaggerated rises and falls in pitch. Another device used in two observations was joint reading, when two librarians read a story together. This worked particularly well with the New Zealand Post Book Awards Children’s Choice Winner, *The Three Bears… Sort of*, based around the device of a child constantly interrupting a caregiver reading the classic fairy tale.

Choosing appropriate books is also an important element in print motivation. In interview, many of the librarians said that they had to enjoy the books themselves to convey enthusiasm to the children, e.g.:

> “Everything I choose [to read] I choose that I like, because I have to have that passion to pass through whatever I deliver and if I don’t like it I can’t work with it.”

Some of the librarians highlighted the importance of the language in the books they chose to read aloud at storytime, emphasising the role of rhythm and rhyme in particular while others focused on the visuals.

As well as selecting books that they enjoyed reading to the children, the librarians were also aware that they had to choose books which appealed to their young audience. The librarians were often concerned that the books should be age appropriate so that the children were engaged. Because of the open nature of the sessions, the librarians generally had a stack of books ready to read and then chose those that they thought would appeal to those attending. They also adapted how many stories they read depending on the audience:

> “You just judge the group of children and their interest. Or if their concentration is stretched I don’t read the three stories, I will just read two. I might read more, sometimes I have more stories to read”

One interesting aspect of book choice is genre. Michael McKenna (2001) writes of the benefits of exposing children to a range of genres, topics, styles and authors so that they can see that there is plenty of material they find interesting and enjoyable.
Generally, the librarians used picture books and storybooks aimed at younger children. In one session, the librarian showed some non-fiction books to the children and told them that they could find them in the library and, when asked about non-fiction, the librarians said that they used it occasionally but we did not witness its inclusion in any of the sessions.

Another technique used to promote print motivation was the re-reading of old favourites and books or stories with which the children were likely to be familiar. The children were excited when they knew which animals were hidden under the flaps in Dear Zoo, for example, and the librarians often played on this, pretending to guess incorrectly so the children could put them right. There is also research supporting the repeated reading of stories. It can help children become familiar with the vocabulary and language used in a book so contributing to language development. Horst (2011) found, for example, that young children learnt more new words when they were read the same book repeatedly than when different books were read to them. Repeated readings also promote narrative awareness; the children will be able to understand and talk about the story the more they hear it.

The other aspect of Dear Zoo which the children enjoyed was the interactive nature of the book, and pop-up or lift-the-flap books were commonly used in the sessions observed and were considered a good way of engaging the children and making them excited about books and reading. One librarian said she often kept these types of books until the end of the session when attention may be flagging as a way of energising the children and re-engaging them if necessary. Another technique used to keep the children interested in the books read was to intersperse the stories with other activities, songs and rhymes primarily to maintain attention. One librarian said:

“I have tried just doing stories, one after another without any rhymes or songs and after two stories they get a bit fidgety, even if the stories are quite engaging. I think they like to have a break.”

Audience participation was frequent and extensive and can be considered another useful method of encouraging print motivation by involving the children in the stories told. Animal books were used often for this in the sessions observed, with the librarians asking the children to make animal noises, for example. Choosing books with a repeated phrase was another device used to generate excitement and participation. Props (felt boards, cutouts and puppets/soft toys, for example) were also used frequently in the storytimes to encourage interest and engagement and these can also be a way of supporting narrative awareness, as discussed below.

**Vocabulary**
How many words children learn and how well they understand and use these words will have a significant impact on the kind of readers they eventually become. Reading involves decoding and understanding printed words, and having a large vocabulary makes it easier to gain meaning from what is being read. Books and stories present a structured way of introducing rich vocabulary and span content areas that may not arise in day to day conversation or be part of children’s lived experiences. Children hearing stories therefore benefit from exposure to unfamiliar words or just words that are not often used in everyday language because written language is very different to that spoken (Purcell-Gates, 2001). Shared interactive reading is particularly helpful in building children’s vocabulary by providing opportunities for questions and explanations around words and their meanings. The library storytimes built the children’s vocabulary in three ways. Firstly, the books chosen often included language and vocabulary which was more complex than day-to-day talk. One librarian talking about how she chose books said:

“I will choose [a book] based on its language and its uses so there may be a particular word in there that is interesting to me, it sounds interesting so I might use it, particularly just for that word”

A second method is to explain unfamiliar words. Talking about specific meanings of words strengthens children’s vocabulary which will help them understand what they read later. There were not many incidences of this in the sessions observed but it did occur occasionally. One librarian reading *Dear Zoo* explained the meaning of ‘fragile’, for example. Finally, talk around books promotes language and vocabulary. The librarians asked a lot of questions while reading and after the sessions during craft activities.

Print Awareness

Print awareness refers to developing an understanding that print carries meaning and beginning to understand how printed language works. The term is also used to refer to some of the mechanical elements of reading and understanding print conventions - knowing how to handle a book, for example, how to turn a page, understanding about the cover of books and directionality. When children are comfortable with books/print, they can focus on gaining meaning from the text. The librarians in the sessions observed developed the children’s print awareness in a variety of ways. They often tried to convey the sense that books were a unique and special object. In one session, a child threw a book and he was picked up on it very quickly, with the librarian telling him firmly:

“That is not the way we treat books”.
The relationship between speech and print was highlighted through librarians pointing at words as they read aloud. This was not always common practice, though. An understanding of print conventions was generally modelled by the librarians who showed the audience the front cover, read the title, often pointing at it, and naming the author. This introduced the children to different aspects of the book and also some terminology associated with books and reading.

**Letter Knowledge**

To learn to read, children need to develop an understanding that letters are different from one another and have different names and sounds. Early skills in letter knowledge have been found to be one of the strongest predictors of later reading success (Stevenson and Newman, 1986). There was little focus on this element in the sessions observed. Some librarians used I-Spy books and the children were invited to try to guess the concealed animal/item but alphabet awareness was not a common feature of the storytimes. When asked about it, many of the librarians said that they were not teachers and it was not their job to teach reading. One librarian said that she used:

> “an opportunity to use alphabet if it presents itself in a format that I like, I don’t go out and search for that, because I don’t want to…um… I don’t think it’s necessary”

This was a common approach. Another librarian commented, for example:

> “My main thing is they’re coming in the library and seeing it as a fun place to be. I’m not there to teach”

**Narrative Skills**

Narrative skills are another important predictor of later linguistic and literacy achievement (Riley & Burrell, 2007). This includes awareness that stories are structured in a particular way and the ability to describe things and events as well as being able to follow a story. Narrative awareness and skills were promoted during storytimes not just through the reading of stories but also through talk around the books such as asking for predictions, especially common in relation to interactive books. The librarians also frequently asked the children for descriptions or explanations of what was taking place in the story or what was happening to the characters. One librarian explained how she asked the children what they thought the story was about:
We always talk about the first page, the front cover and I love it that they can’t read because then they can’t just tell you what that book is going to be about so you’re really drawing on their [imaginations].

At the end of the stories, some of the librarians asked for reactions and the use of props and craft activities during and following the storytimes were also used to reinforce particular stories or themes.

Another device that can develop children’s narrative skills is the linking of stories to events or details from the children’s own lives to encourage them to start to put together coherent and meaningful accounts. To achieve this, the librarians provided the necessary structure to help the children relate events from the books to their own experiences, generally achieved through questioning and talk around stories. One librarian reading the story of the *Three Little Pigs*, for example, started a conversation with the children about their houses – whether they had stairs, a garden, pets etc. Another explained how she tried to link the story with the children’s experiences:

“I hate ending the book on The End, I like to end the story with, ‘Can they relate to that?’”

She also suggested that the children’s experiences in the library could encourage their narrative skills, saying that she hoped:

“they’re able to go away and maybe talk about one thing, or they take one thing away from storytime that they talk with or share with someone. My hope is that they’re going back home and sharing these experiences with their mum and dad and families at home. And that they see the joy in not just books and words but what they see as well, that they can make that connection between their world and what they see in books.”

**Phonological Awareness**

Phonological awareness is the realization that words are made up of smaller sounds – phonemes and syllables etc. – and the ability to hear these and play with them through, for example, rhyming and alliteration. Helping children hear the smaller sounds in words will help them later to sound out words when they begin to read. In the library sessions observed, phonological awareness was primarily promoted through rhyming which is probably appropriate for the age of the children participating. Reading researchers have identified a range of phonological skills and the sequence in which they are typically learned; enjoying rhymes comes early on in this sequence while being able to produce a rhyme often comes later (Moats and Tolman, 2009).
The storytime sessions gave the children plenty of opportunities to explore the sound structure of oral and written language, to experiment with sounds and rhyming and to participate in action songs/rhymes. These types of activities form a foundation for the development of letter knowledge as the children will go on to learn to associate sounds with symbols and thus create links to word recognition and the decoding skills necessary for reading. Many of the books read were rhyming. As indicated above, the librarians liked the rhythm of rhyming books and they often played with the rhymes by, for example, pausing before the second word of a rhyming pair to encourage the children to try to identify the rhyme. Although the children did not always identify the rhyme correctly, they were, nevertheless, given the opportunity to play with language. Rhyming songs were another common feature of the sessions observed. Again, these allowed the children to learn how language works while having fun. Many of the songs and rhymes recited were counting rhymes, such as Alice’s Camel and Five Little Speckled Frogs, thus also introducing children to numbers and counting. Singing, generally, also aids phonological awareness through the use of rhythm, rhyme and repetition, and the different notes in songs naturally break words into syllables. All the sessions observed included plenty of singing of well-known songs and action rhymes.

Conclusion

The data suggests that public library pre-school storytimes in New Zealand encourage the development of a range of early literacy skills. The librarians observed and interviewed were particularly focused on encouraging print motivation – inspiring children to want to read for pleasure. They were also keen to promote the library as the place that they could go to fulfill their leisure reading needs. Related to this, librarians could vary the types of materials they use during the session to ensure children are gaining a good overview of different types of media, including non-fiction, graphic novels or comic strip type books and electronic or digital media too. Interestingly, developing children’s letter knowledge was generally not considered one of the main aims of storytime. In fact, in some cases there was some resistance to the idea that the library sessions could be used to develop the children’s understanding and identification of letters, with some of the librarians suggesting that a focus on this aspect could discourage the children as it would be too much like their experience at early education settings. The desire to differentiate the library setting from the early childhood environment is understandable and rational but library services concerned to demonstrate the impact that they are having on their communities and the value they are adding in this context may want to consider demonstrating how their library programming fits with the early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki. In interview, the librarians were asked about how they thought their sessions linked with Te Whāriki but it was not apparent that they were aware of it, often through being caregivers themselves, it was not apparent that they
had really considered how their sessions interacted with or contributed to the
different strands within Te Whāriki. There may be scope for exploring these
connections in more depth.

The relevant part of Te Whāriki is under the strand
children are given the opportunity to experience the stories and symbols of their own
and other cultures, and develop:

- an understanding that symbols can be “read” by others and that thoughts,
  experiences, and ideas can be represented through words, pictures, print,
  numbers, sounds, shapes, models, and photographs;
- familiarity with print and its uses by exploring and observing the use of print in
  activities that have meaning and purpose for children;

and also

- an expectation that words and books can amuse, delight, comfort, illuminate,
  inform, and excite. (Ministry of Education, 1996)

The evidence presented above suggests that New Zealand’s public libraries are
contributing in many ways to this strand through their storytime sessions with pre-
schoolers but a clearer articulation of the relationship could help position public
libraries as a key player in community-based literacy initiatives.
References


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i See: http://www.sportnz.org.nz/managing-sport/guides/active-movement-activity-guides-for-children-0-5-years-