UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SUPPORTING PRESCHOOL LEARNERS IN SCHOOL LIBRARIES

BY

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Introduction

In the spring of 2003, our school principal and I met with the municipal public librarian who was setting up early literacy activities as part of an outreach program for rural families. Our community qualified for this program due to our distance from town and because of the increasing number of preschool-aged children in our area. Our community had twice voted against paying for services to access the public library in the nearest town. The only way for families to access this library was to purchase family library cards at a cost of seventy-five dollars. Despite the provincial trend of declining enrollment, our school was growing, and many more families in the area had very young children.

When the principal and I met with the public librarian, we determined that the early literacy activity could be housed in the learning support classroom, which was empty most of the time. The program consisted of stories, songs and interactive learning games, and was well received by the community. I offered library book exchanges to the families during every lunch hour of program. The welcoming experiences of the program brought families into the school who might have chosen alternative educational arrangements such as private school or home-schooling. It was rewarding to see these children engaged with reading while their parents visited, discovered potential playmates and learned about our school.

The following year, a twice-weekly Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) program was offered at the school, using a now empty classroom. The program flourished for a year, but as the school population increased, there was no longer a classroom to house the classes. Other community arrangements have continued to

provide meeting places and activities for families in the area, but the connection to the school library has been lost. The school continues to have an annual program offered to children ages 3 and 4 through a provincially-funded program called Ready, Set, Learn (Ministry of Education, n.d.a). This program, spearheaded by the Kindergarten teacher, provides activities on several occasions in the spring of the year. Every year, at her invitation, I provided space for displays from community outreach services or agencies and gave informal discussions about their services. In this way I am introduced to the attending families as another friendly face in the school.

I began the Teacher-Librarian by Distance Learning (M.Ed) program soon after the original ECEC course finished at the school. Although I watched with interest as support of ECEC programs began to grow in British Columbia, during my coursework, my concern was directed to issues facing me as a teacher-librarian in more immediate ways. Learning about plagiarism, creating a library handbook, finding a good research model for my school and dealing with a reduction in my assignment as teacher-librarian occupied my time. It was not until I took EDEL 567, the educational research course with Dr. Herb Katz, that I explored how effective ECEC programs benefit children and their families. During EDES 549: Leadership in Information Literacy with Dr. Lois Barranoik I began to question the role of the teacher-librarian in the face of so many cuts to programs both within the school district and within the province. While I wrote my papers about advocacy and the principal's role in the process of teacher-librarian cuts, I considered why employment was found in our district for literacy coordinators and literacy coaches. These jobs involved aspects of teacher-librarianship that seemed obvious to me, but were less so to those hiring for the positions. I observed a gap

between my vision of the teacher-librarian as literacy leader in a school, and the perceived role by district staff who were reducing teacher-librarian assignments while hiring literacy coaches.

Provincially, literacy was being touted as the number one goal for British Columbia (Campbell, 2005). In light of this, the government announced that they were looking for ways to strengthen early literacy experiences for preschool-aged children in the context of literacy development of four stakeholder groups (preschool learners, school-age learners, adults and senior citizens) by involving community in the planning and implementation of these programs (Read Now BC, n.d.). Grassroots organizations looked to the schools for support and for room to set up ECEC programs. School staff members, most notably Kindergarten teachers, principals and non-enrolling specialists such as speech and language pathologists, began working with community members and organizations to create spaces and opportunities for young children and their families (Hughes, 2007). By this time I was very concerned the skills and knowledge of teacher-librarians were being overlooked. To me, it was obvious that teacher-librarians should be involved in this process, but to others it was less so.

Early childhood education and care continued to gain importance provincially when the government announced the intention to have full-day Kindergarten offered across BC, as well as offering schooling for three- and four-year old children in schools (Point, 2008, p. 37). Contemplating the ramifications of these announcements, I began to envision a place for elementary school teacher-librarians as a part of the school team to welcome these young learners into our schools and provide appropriate services, support

and learning opportunities. It was time to grasp the opportunity that these children provide and to extend the teacher-librarian's role to assist these young learners.

In this capping paper I wish to provide context to the history and importance of ECEC. I will give my perspective of the current understanding of the characteristics of ECEC, particularly in British Columbia, and will trace the grassroots movement to house learning programs for young children in schools. Finally, I will suggest ways for teacher-librarians to support young learners in their district and schools.

Literature Study

When Did the Interest in Early Childhood Education Begin?

Three seminal studies from the United States are mentioned in the literature. The earliest is the Perry Preschool Program which followed children who joined the preschool in successive classes from 1962 to 1965 (Schweinhart, 2003). Data was collected from 123 children of low-income black families annually from age 3 to 11 and then at ages 14, 15, 19, 27 and 39-41. The experimental design of the study shows strong scientific results because children were randomly assigned to two groups: program or no-program. The study showed that children who attended the program had higher economic and educational achievement levels and lower rates of criminal activity (p. 4-5).

Campbell and Ramey (1995) document the Abecedarian Study which enrolled children during the years 1972 to 1977 and also used an experimental, longitudinal design, assigning impoverished children to randomized groups, including one group who received no ECEC program at all. Campbell and Ramey used data from this program to show that children examined 10 years after preschool ended and who had preschool instruction, had greater academic achievement than those who did not attend.

The third seminal study, the Chicago Longitudinal Study used a quasi-experimental design to analyze the achievement of children enrolled in the preschool for impoverished families in Chicago from 1983 to 1986 (Reynolds, 1999). This study showed that participation in the program was significantly associated with higher academic achievement and with increased parental involvement in schools (¶ 10). These three studies form a cornerstone of research into ECEC.

Efficacy of ECEC Programs

Providing exemplary literacy instruction to preschool learners has been the focus of much research. Nathanson, Steif, Marzkr and O"Brien (1998) documented factors that showed potential for effectiveness within Even Start preschool programs directed toward poor families in the United States. Two recommendations of this study relate to the efficacy of the ECEC program: one, staff must have their training needs met and two, small child-to-staff ratios support instruction (p. iii). A later study analyzed the effectiveness of Even Start (St.Pierre, Ricciuti, & Rimdzius, 2005) and found children who participated in Even Start did not make significant literacy gains when compared to a control group without Even Start programming. Several hypotheses are given for the unsatisfactory results, two of which relate to ECEC structures: one, the instructional activities were not sufficient in duration, and two, the quality of instruction was deficient because each location developed their program independently (pp. 28-29). Another case study which used naturalistic inquiry also examined how the quality of literacy support is a variable impacting the consistency of ECEC instruction (McGill-Franzen, Lanford, & Adams, 2002). This study examined five preschool settings; two serving middle class families and three where the families were poor. The findings of the study show the

children attending the preschools serving poor families spent less time on literacy activities and provided fewer literacy experiences when compared with the children at the two preschools serving middle class families.

It is a philosophical stance to believe that the purpose of the ECEC experience is to improve literacy using overt instructional means. In a review of the literature, Nel (2000) notes early experiences with literacy have been surmised to be damaging to children. In this article, the author examines how learning is affected if children are directed toward academic learning without regard for their need to learn through play. She concluded that academic goals can be met by integrating the goals into activities that are developmentally appropriate for these younger learners. Hatch (2002) argued standards and academic expectations for preschool-aged children may cause harm when they reduce and limit the experiences of children rather than enhance them. As standards and benchmarks become the method for assessing the worth of a program, he questions whether these young children should be expected to meet stringent standards when they are not developmentally ready, or if in order to prove that the standards are being met, the young learners are being expected to gain readiness by completing activities using methods better suited to older children, such as pencil and paper based tasks. Hatch supports contextual-based learning of literacy where the experience and discovery of concepts are celebrated. The HomeSchool Study of Language and Literacy Development examined how families and ECEC programs enhance language and literacy growth (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). The study followed students from preschool to seventh grade and beyond. The assumption of the study was that children in middle school will demonstrate comprehension after they have experienced enriched language opportunities

in preschool (¶ 5). The study authors found that success in literacy in school is related to homes and schools which encourage learning, engage the child in extensive conversations, and assist to develop a large vocabulary. Four groups were analyzed: Children with either high or low support at home for literacy attending preschools where language development was a high or low priority.

> What we found is that, while a child with a high-home/low-preschool combination would score *below* the mean for the sample on all three measures of kindergarten abilities, a child with a low-home/high preschool would score *above* the mean. The implication is that excellent preschools can compensate for homes that have well-below-average language and literacy support-at least as reflected in the children's kindergarten skills. (p. 17).

Family Support and Services for ECEC Children

Support for families with preschool children is often an integral part of ECEC programs. In a bibliographic listing of the benefits of family literacy programs, Padak and Rasinski (2003) examine research which shows the advantage for children, parents, families, and societies. Ryan (2005) studied the effectiveness of the Manchester Even Start Program, and notes the limitations of the small sample size and the non-randomized design, but speculate that home visits may make this an effective program (¶ 1). Saracho (1999) examined the family's role in developing literacy skills. This qualitative study videotaped 15 families in a school setting practicing literacy strategies they learned during literacy workshops. The results suggest that the families could use familiar experiences to support literacy development in their children (¶ 14). A correlational study from Finland (Leppanen, Niemi, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2004) revealed that students who

made the most literacy progress in preschool were those who came to preschool with enhanced skills.

A small formative experimental design based on qualitative research guidelines was undertaken in Australia to examine low-socioeconomic families and their literacy interactions (Jay & Rohl, 2005). After these practices were determined, the study participants designed workshops based on their needs. The project authors encourage others to begin small when designing family literacy projects and speculate that small numbers may encourage a natural growth for the future (Conclusion section, ¶ 2).

The review of the literature suggests that ECEC programs provide economic, social and educational benefits to children, families and communities. Results from the studies indicate effective ECEC programs have far-reaching benefits when skillful literacy teaching components have a central place in the preschool program. Family literacy support within ECEC programs can contribute to the growth of both parents and children. As Gorey (2001) concluded in a analysis of short-term and long-term benefits of ECEC programs,

> This meta-analysis of experimental and quasi-experimental research showed strong support for the idea that early childhood education is a highly effective preventive intervention…perhaps this reviews most telling finding is that as preschool intervention intensity increases, so does the magnitude of its positive effects. (p. 22)

Canada Begins to Examine ECEC

From 1998 to 2004, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conducted a review of early childhood policies and programs of its

member nations As a member of the OECD, Canada participated in this study, and results from the country profile clearly showed that ECED programs in Canada were underfunded and inadequately examined (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006, p. 302). As pointed out in the analysis of Canadian results, different levels of government are responsible for ECED programs based on population type, or whether the program is considered an educational or a social program. Education and care are considered two different responsibilities; therefore different ministries deliver programs based on the difference. Ranking last in the report, Canada spends 0.4% of GDP on education and care of children aged 3 to 6 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). This funding level includes financial support of Kindergarten programs within schools, and the extra funding provided by the provincial government in Quebec for childcare. These results indicate inadequate funding of ECEC programs in relationship to other wealthy countries. Since this study, Canada began making changes to the funding level and type of programs for young children.

Several factors have brought about change in this perception and funding, three of which are important to this paper. One is the significant research showing that brain development in the early childhood years can fundamentally improve a child's life chances. Two, the research mentioned above which suggests positive ECEC outcomes for children and their families over time and three, the development and use of a questionnaire designed by McMaster University researchers for Kindergarten teachers to use when identifying "at risk" children (Offord Centre, 2004).

Brain Research Changes How We View the Early Years

Brain research has created understanding of the importance of the critical stages of functioning for learning and revolutionized how we view the capacities of our children. In the past, intelligence was viewed as a "fixed trait" with little scope for change. Now it is understood that the capacity for learning is malleable and can be enhanced given support during critical times of development. During the first six years of life, the synaptic pathways are formed and these pathways are affected by everything in the child's environment, including exposure to sound, light, temperature, physical touch and smell (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007, p. 19). If these pathways are underused, they are discarded. Specific functions are assigned to certain pathways and reinforce the expansion of new pathways. For example, learning may be supported on the pathways created for language development as well as the capacity for emotional growth (p. 20-21). The brain's ability to change, called brain plasticity, is greater when it has been stimulated. After specific periods of maturity, especially those occurring during early childhood, the capacity for brain plasticity are reduced (p. 25-26). McCain and Mustard (1999) investigated early brain development research in relationship to learning, social development and health. They note:

> Given that the brain's development is a seamless continuum, initiatives for early child development and learning should also be a continuum. Learning in the early years must be based on quality, developmentally-attuned interactions with primary caregivers and opportunities for play-based problem solving with other children that stimulate brain development. (p. 52)

When examining the brain research, McCain and Mustard considered ways that a child entering the school system at ages 5 or 6 was already exhibiting characteristics that

would inhibit or enhance their development in school. This suggests the school setting would be less effective at influencing life outcomes for children from impoverished circumstances. McCain, Mustard and Shanker (2007) envision an ECEC system in place as equally comprehensive and funded as the public school system is today. They acknowledge the need for reform in how we view younger learners. They write, "Early childhood service integration involves a transformation of culture, methodologies and schedules (p. 161)."

British Columbia Uses the Early Development Instrument

In British Columbia, the integration of early childhood services began when communities started examining data generated by the Early Development Instrument: A Population Based Measure for Communities (EDI). This instrument was developed by researchers at McMaster University to give communities information about their children's readiness for school.

The three goals of this questionnaire-based instrument are to report on populations of children in different communities, assess the strengths and deficits in students, and predict how children will do in elementary school (Offord Centre, 2004). School districts across British Columbia began using the EDI in 2000 through the Human Learning Partnership (HELP) Mapping Project sponsored by Dr. Clyde Hertzman of the University of British Columbia. Since 2000, Kindergarten teachers in virtually every BC school fill out the questionnaires based on the readiness of their students in five areas: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development and communication skills. Using this information HELP creates

maps of communities and neighbourhoods which are returned to the communities annually and are discussed at public forums. From this data, plans are made regarding services needed. Dr. Hertzman reports that up to 25% of children entering Kindergarten are not developmentally ready for the tasks associated with school (Mort, 2004). When compared to the provincial assessment completed by children at the grade 4 level in British Columbia, 17 to 21 % of grade 4 students are not yet meeting expectations in reading, writing and numeracy (Ministry of Education, 2008b). Mort (2004) connects school readiness to the academic attainment of children as determined by their standing on provincial examinations and concludes that community efforts must begin earlier than Kindergarten in order to mitigate the negative tendency. According to Janus and Duku (2007), school readiness is impacted by health, gender of the child, income level and family structure. They confirm that "Children who are not exposed to appropriate stimulation will not be able to form the building blocks for the abilities expected at 5 years of age (p. 376)."

The EDI collection and sharing cycle has impacted how community members, including school districts, identify young children who are at risk. This ongoing analysis and subsequent discussion give community members the opportunity to work together and identify services in order to improve school readiness. By having Kindergarten teachers complete the assessment and analyze the results as part of a greater community, school staff members have become advocates for young children. This has opened up how school districts view their responsibility toward younger learners. Mort (2004) concludes:

> School districts have begun to embrace a new role and responsibility by examining developmental indicator data at school entry, by planning interventions in response to the data, and by partnering with other agencies to serve the needs of young children and their families (p. 8).

StrongStart BC Centres

The provincial government has taken various steps to support families with young children. One recent initiative is the establishment of StrongStart BC centres. These centres are drop-in early childhood family programs established in a variety of schools across BC. Each centre has funding provided by the provincial government to offer school-readiness activities and literacy support. Created for children ages 3 to 5, but welcoming all children, the programs available are intended for parental or care-giver participation (Hertzman, 2008, p. 4). School districts choose whether to house a StrongStart centre in their schools. This choice is based on whether there is unused space in the school and if administration and staff wish to provide this service. Each school district applies to the government for funding of a centre, and the government has committed to fund 400 StrongStart centres by 2010; a significant increase to the already 189 centres currently running (Ministry of Education, n.d.a).

Reflection and Sharing

How Can Teacher-Librarians Support Early Childhood Programs?

Teacher-librarians have considered the needs of very young children for some time. Thomas and Goldsmith (1992) discuss the partnership needed between the school library media specialist and the early childhood educator. They recommend teacher-librarians choose developmentally appropriate resources and speculate that resources typically found in school library collections may not serve the needs of these learners. Most importantly, they point out the need for a partnership between the ECEC teacher and the teacher-librarian.

Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2004) discuss their research findings regarding play, fun and literacy learning. In their article they advise school librarians to purchase cloth or board books so that young children will manipulate books without fear of damage. As well, they encourage teacher-librarians to read to the children with family members present, modeling questioning and predicting in order to support families in reading activities. The creation of a school library where families and children are busily engaged in literacy activities is their goal.

Braxton (2004) links brain development with early literacy exposure and promotes inviting young families to access the school library collection, especially if distance and time are factors when accessing the public library. She suggests advertising school library services locally and providing story time gatherings during occasions when parents may be at school with their older children. Although Braxton recognizes that school librarians are busy serving the children already in the school system, she views the time as an investment in the future of the children who will come to school excited to learn.

MacDonnell (2006) cautions school library media specialists against using standards and teaching practices better suited to older learners. She comments on the wide range of abilities often found in a group of preschool students who will have different levels of experience with literacy activities. As well, social and emotional needs of the younger child are paramount to the teacher's understanding when working with younger children. She suggests researching the developmental needs of young children and partnering with the ECEC school specialist when creating programs and providing resources for these learners.

Alternatively, Keller (2005) proposes using learning standards and guidelines currently in place in the United States to serve as helpful models when designing programs for young learners. She suggests creating "a framework of building blocks designed to introduce and reinforce information literacy skills for preschoolers and primary children (¶ 7)." Provincially, a document entitled *British Columbia Early Learning Framework* has been developed to assist StrongStart BC facilitators and others to create a productive environment for young children. In this document, literacy and language skills are one of four main components of early learning, and within this component, suggestions include access to books, oral language development and language-based activities (Ministry of Education, 2008b, pp. 30 – 32). This document could be used to tie the needs of the preschool learner and their family to the skills and capacities of the teacher-librarian in creating appropriate and enjoyable literacy opportunities in the school.

Supporting Young Learners in our Schools

Teacher-librarians can be an invaluable and integral part of designing and implementing literacy programs for young children and their families. Parents need schools to be centres of services for their children and teacher-librarians can embrace this shift in what a school provides to its community. The following are some structures I envision teacher-librarians can use to support younger learners.

Communicate our Willingness to Become Involved

In order to expand our role, it is important that school district staff know teacher-librarians are willing and able to provide these services. I suggest that as a group, we ask to be invited to partner with district staff when considering implementing programs such as StrongStart centres. By attending meetings, assisting with applications and discussing current programs with district staff, principals and ECEC teachers, we can identify areas where our knowledge of literacy development will be useful. Looking beyond the boundaries of our regular duties will increase understanding by stakeholders of the skills we can provide to all learners in our schools. When our principal and I sat down together with the public librarian in order to facilitate a literacy program for preschool-aged children, we did so in order to provide a service to our community. What followed was a grassroots effort to provide services to a population previously underserved. Little did we know that ECEC would become so important to our province.

Continue to Inform our Practice

If the provincial government does provide schooling to children ages 3 and 4 in the public school system, the entire school community will need to understand developmentally appropriate learning activities and interactions for this age group.

Teacher-librarians are always searching for best practices for their teaching, and using the information we discover, we can inform ourselves and others about preschool learners. As noted, research exists regarding young learners and the best way to engage them. We cannot necessarily use the same model with this age group as we have with older learners; therefore we will have to embrace new ways of teaching and interacting with younger children. When the ECEC program existed for the year at my school, we structured the preschool children's interactions with school members so that they would feel welcome and safe. Because they often seemed intimidated by open spaces, we limited their movement within the school so that they felt supported as they explored. As they gained confidence, we could see them becoming more interested in the older children and would connect with them with smiles and waves. Additionally, as I began to know the ECEC teachers, I brought library resources to them. The teachers welcomed this relationship with the school library.

Brain research presents fascinating information regarding appropriate interactions for preschool learners. Disseminating and sharing this information with school staffs would allow teacher-librarians to offer leadership to school members who may question why preschool-aged children are being involved in the school system. Teacher-librarians can facilitate, encourage and provide information regarding this monumental change.

Change our Learning Space, our Collection and our Library Program

A point clearly revealed in my investigation is that preschool children come to school with their parents or caregivers. No longer will the community and the parents be left at the door when their child walks in. This change has been happening already, especially in the primary grades, but will occur more so with younger learners. Inviting

young children in the school means that outside community services will also have a greater role in the school. Outside services include nurses, speech and language pathologists, parenting facilitators, support workers for English as a second language learners and others who will find a natural connection to the services provided within the school. The library has always been used to provide a meeting area for community organizations, and this will rise as outside agency support increases. Creating inviting learning spaces for young children and their families will also be necessary. Our resource distribution policy will also change as we open our library resources to parents and community workers. As we expand our client base, we will need to increase services regarding how users access the collection, search for materials and suggest resources. As well, collection development will change because the resources for younger children are very different than those for older learners. Board books, wordless books, parenting resources and furniture sized for young children are only a few considerations when contemplating changes to the physical environment of the library.

Collaboration and Partnerships

Teacher-librarians are willing to work together with colleagues in order to design excellent learning environments. Opening up our collaboration efforts to include ECEC teachers will only produce stronger learners. As school teachers, we have provided educational opportunities to children ages 5 to 18, now we must learn how to engage and educate young children. It will be challenging and enjoyable to collaborate with ECEC teachers when designing literacy activities for preschool children. I look forward to learning about young children from the experts.

Summary and Conclusion

ECEC has gained importance and understanding as communities look for ways to support families and children. No longer the responsibility of parents and immediate care givers, this shift in thinking, combined with increased understanding of brain development has caused governments and nations to consider ways to raise healthy children. From the idea that potential was fixed in the child's intellect, we now understand the malleability of human intelligence. Faced with this understanding, governments have begun to consider how schools could educate younger children. With declining enrollment and empty classrooms, schools have been invited to use the extra space to provide support for these children and families. Teacher-librarians can offer significant services in order to support this change to our school system.

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