

Chapter 49

Public Libraries: Analysis of Services for Immigrant Populations and Suggestions to Improve Outreach

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ABSTRACT

The author, as part of a Master Thesis study, analyzes the impact public library services and programs have in the lives of local Mexican mothers with children attending school in the United States and provides suggestions on ways to improve outreach of services and support. Results related to library use, parental involvement, service and programs, challenges including funding, Spanish-speaking staff, pre-conceived ideas, and awareness issues, as well as the largest issue of outreach are all discussed. In addition, outreach solutions are offered and the overall benefits of the study are assessed.

INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are a wonderful resource for communities. It is not uncommon for library services to incorporate a range of activities and helpful services and programs for all ages, ranging from story time (Koontz & Jue, 2008) to family literacy programs (Khailova, 2013), GED (General Educational Diploma) classes (Vårheim, 2011) to ESL (English as a Second Language) classes (Koontz & Jue, 2008), computer/information literacy (Densley & Ross, 2013; Morrone & Witt, 2013) or the simple act of borrowing (D'Elia, Abbas, Bishop, Jacobs, & Rodger, 2007). Unfortunately, data indicates that many libraries are not being utilized to their full potential as 48.7% of young people in Clark & Hawkins' (2011) study said that they do not use public libraries at all, and only one third of the households in Glander & Dam's (2007) study used a public library in the month before and one half in the prior year. While there are many possible reasons why libraries are not being used, research reveals that the biggest influence in public library use is parental involvement (Clark & Hawkins, 2011) which can be impacted by other obstacles including education level, socioeconomic status, language barriers, ethnicity, and pre-existing perceptions among other factors.

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Public Libraries

Today's school libraries are wasting away, unused and underfunded. One of the challenges mentioned in the literature is the poor selection of culturally responsive resources and books (Constantino, 2008; Curtis, 2007; van der Linden, Bartlett, & Beheshti, 2014). Children in lower socio-economic neighborhoods may lack access to school libraries well-stocked with the necessary materials. There is a poor selection of books and many schools have less than the recommended amount of books per child putting them in the "at-risk" category according to standards for a strong school library (Abilock, 2005). They are spending far below the recommended amount to increase collection size. This leads to the sentiment that there wasn't enough variety to interest students or the wait for what did interest them was extreme (Constantino, 2008; Curtis, 2007). Many school libraries lack trained librarians causing libraries to often be closed during convenient hours of the day such as break times, and because of the already small collection, many have discontinued lending out books. On top of the issues already stated, libraries often aren't effective at attracting students and therefore do not get frequently used (Curtis, 2007).

Although some schools have libraries that are largely unused, there are also problems when school libraries are readily available. There can be a lack of material that fit the reading preferences and interests of the students. There were several reasons that school libraries lacked the preferred materials including perceived inappropriateness, that they were always checked out or never returned, and that there was less funding each year to keep up with the new reading interests of the students (Constantino, 2008; Curtis, 2007; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). This creates an environment where students are given the choice between reading outside of their interests, obtaining the material elsewhere, or not reading at all. Unfortunately, for those students who can't afford to purchase their preferred books, their choice is even more limited resulting in either being forced to read what does not interest them or not reading at all, neither of which helps to promote a healthy reading interest or habit (Worthy et al., 1999).

Many students completely lack the resource of a school library, underfunded or not. In 2008, more than 17,000 students in 42 schools in the Bronx alone lacked school libraries due to budget cuts and overcrowding. In some schools, there isn't room for a library due to the need of classroom space because there are so many children. Other schools that did have room did not have functioning libraries due to either long-delayed renovations, the absence of a librarian, the librarian was being used as a substitute teacher, or the space was converted into a classroom so that book borrowing was not an option (Kolodner, 2008).

The challenge of school libraries being either underfunded, underused, lacking in resources, or completely nonexistent creates a situation that requires effective use of community resources such as the public library. In addition, school libraries may not provide the relevant resources and access to educational programs families may need to support their child's learning. Therefore, since the school libraries are not able to support these needs, another community institution should be filling that gap. Public libraries are the only local, government funded, educational and social service that is freely available to kids from birth to adulthood and therefore serves an important role in the development of readers (Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006).

The relationship between literacy education and public libraries has evolved over time. There has been a complicated past between the two as reading education and the place that libraries hold in reading education has been high on the public policy agenda in the United States (Sensenig, 2011). Sensenig (2011) suggests two possibilities as to why the link between literacy education and public libraries has begun to dissolve. The first possibility is that libraries have changed their institutional identity, moving away from reading for children and toward adults and technology. This, therefore, removes them as a possible instrument for literacy education. The second possibility suggests that literacy education in schools has undergone a transformation, focusing on explicit instruction in reading rather than learn-

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