



Observing preschool storytime practices in Aotearoa New Zealand's urban public libraries



Anne Goulding^{a,*}, John Dickie^b, Mary Jane Shuker^b

^a School of Information Management, Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140, New Zealand

^b School of Education, PO Box 600, Kelburn, Wellington 6140, New Zealand

A B S T R A C T

This study explores how preschool storytimes in public libraries in Aotearoa New Zealand incorporate practices which have been identified as beneficial for children's early literacy skills. The results of observations of storytimes in four public library services are reported, focusing on whether they included activities that foster six key literacy skills: print motivation; phonological awareness; vocabulary; narrative skills; print awareness and print concepts; and letter awareness. The results indicate that the storytimes observed focused strongly on techniques to increase children's print motivation, and other skills, such as the development of letter awareness, did not feature as frequently. It is suggested that the librarians leading the sessions were wary of introducing more formal instructional elements into the storytimes because they felt it might detract from the main aim of the sessions, which was to encourage children to enjoy books and reading.

1. Introduction

Storytimes for preschool children have long been a common and popular feature of public library programming both in Aotearoa New Zealand,¹ and internationally. Albright, Delecki, and Hinkle (2009) document how public library storytimes have evolved over time in the United States (US) while still retaining techniques developed in the 1940s and 50s to “entertain, educate, and make [children] lifelong learners and readers” (p. 13). While some library storytimes in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere have been extended through the inclusion of ICT devices and electronic formats (Goulding, Dickie, Shuker, & Barber, 2015), the vast majority are still centred around hard copy books, acknowledging the important role print books continue to play in children's lives and their value in supporting early literacy.

Through their delivery of storytimes, public libraries claim to be encouraging reading engagement, thereby supporting literacy and learning in communities. *The Strategic Framework for Public Libraries in Aotearoa New Zealand (Public Libraries of New Zealand, 2012)* quotes a Ministry of Education Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) which cites libraries as a key local community institution that can help improve academic outcomes. Verification of this assertion is lacking, however. In fact, the BES notes clearly in relation to the impact of “accessible institutions and social agencies” on children's achievement that, “[t]he

available New Zealand evidence is sparse” (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003, p. 26). The difficulty of isolating the impact of community institutions, like public libraries, on children's development and well-being and distinguishing it from all the other family and neighbourhood factors that may have an influence is acknowledged by, among others, Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998); but if public libraries are to promote themselves effectively as contributors to the literacy and learning agenda, it is important to try to understand what they do, and why and how they do it. This study explores how public libraries in Aotearoa New Zealand try to support young children in their literacy development through one area of their work with children and families—preschool storytime programs. The research questions guiding the study are:

1. How do storytimes in public libraries in Aotearoa New Zealand support young children's early literacy practices?
2. What evidence is there that the storytimes include opportunities for the children attending to experience the six early literacy skills of
 - a. Print motivation
 - b. Phonological awareness
 - c. Vocabulary
 - d. Narrative skills
 - e. Print awareness

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: anne.goulding@vuw.ac.nz (A. Goulding), john.dickie@vuw.ac.nz (J. Dickie), mary-jane.shuker@vuw.ac.nz (M.J. Shuker).

¹ Aotearoa (translated as Land of the Long White Cloud) was originally the Te Reo Māori term for the North Island of New Zealand but is now used commonly to refer to the whole country. The phrase Aotearoa New Zealand is used in this paper in recognition of the bicultural nature of New Zealand society.

- f. Letter knowledge (Ghoting & Martin-Diaz, 2006)
3. Do the librarians' storytime practices focus on the six skills and, if so, what strategies do they use to integrate them into their programming?

1.1. Problem statement

For this research, the term “early literacy” is understood as, “the array of skills, competencies, and attitudes that precedes, but directly influences, a child's beginning to read” (McConnell & Rabe, 1999, p. 2). Decoding skills, in particular, are the foundation on which reading instruction builds. Underlying decoding skills are alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, and rapid automatic naming (Burchinal & Forestieri, 2011), and shared reading is considered central to these (Hindman, Skibbe, & Foster, 2014). The benefits of reading aloud to young children are discussed in the education, pediatric, and librarianship fields (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2011; High et al., 2014; Rankin & Brock, 2015). Research has established that reading with young children before they enter formal education is associated with the development of key early literacy skills (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Pentimonti, Justice, & Piasta, 2013), and that acquisition of these skills at a young age are predictors of later reading achievement and academic success (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000; Meng, 2014). Given the significance of literacy and academic achievement for positive socio-economic outcomes, reading to children and exposing them to books and other reading materials during their early years is strongly advocated by governments around the world including in Aotearoa New Zealand where the Ministry of Child, Youth and Family (n.d.) advises parents and caregivers to read bedtime stories, “or just read books at any times” to develop children's language, communication, and learning skills. A range of programs and activities have been established by relevant agencies and publicly-funded organisations to support and supplement parents' and caregivers' efforts in nurturing their children's early literacy development, including in public library services. Campana et al. (2016) note how libraries currently promote their storytime programs as way of supporting children's early literacy skills and school readiness, but also suggest that these programs are “largely undocumented” (p. 370) and, consequently, the success of libraries as early literacy partners remains uncertain.

Preschool storytimes are ubiquitous across Aotearoa New Zealand's public library services, which devote considerable effort and resources to their provision; but little is known about exactly how these programs work, the kinds of early literacy skills that are promoted through the sessions, and how effectively the staff running the sessions follow and demonstrate good practice in early literacy skills development. Through their provision of preschool storytimes, public library services in Aotearoa New Zealand are claiming, or seeking to establish, a role as key players in the literacy agenda, but until they can provide evidence of their contribution to early literacy activities in communities, their aspirations to be considered neighbourhood partners in their local or national learning ecosystems (see, for example, Auckland Libraries, 2013) are unlikely to be fulfilled. The study reported here partly addresses this lack of evidence by 1) identifying the extent to which storytime programs around the country demonstrate good practice in terms of preschool children's early literacy experiences, and 2) analysing how storytimes in public libraries in Aotearoa New Zealand support early literacy practices within communities.

2. Literature review

2.1. The importance of reading with young children

Library preschool storytime programs usually incorporate a range of activities including rhymes, songs, play, and crafting, but at the heart of the sessions is the telling of stories and the reading of books. Reading

aloud with young children plays a vital role in the development of their nascent literacy skills in a number of ways (Bus et al., 1995). Firstly, it introduces children to the structure of stories and other schemas and literary conventions which are pre-requisites for understanding texts (Heath, 1982). In other words, reading with children helps them understand how narratives work (Sénéchal, Pagan, Lever, & Ouellette, 2008). Secondly, reading aloud exposes children to the “written language register”; written language is more complex than spoken language (Bus et al., 1995) and a wider variety of sentence structures is used in written language, and so children who are read stories regularly have the opportunity to hear a range of different ways in which words and language can be used. In multi-cultural societies like Aotearoa New Zealand, encompassing children with a diversity of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the language children hear through listening to books being read is closer to the standardized language they will encounter in school. Therefore, participating in story reading sessions can make a valuable contribution to their preparation for formal education (McNaughton, 2002). Similarly, book reading also exposes children to a variety of written discourse – the various ways that authors and illustrators tell stories and express meaning (Meek, 1988). Not only are the structures used in written language more complex than in spoken language, but the vocabulary used in books is also more complex than the vocabulary commonly employed in spoken language (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Even the simplest of storybooks can contain novel terms and expressions, and so reading to children fosters their vocabulary, particularly when parents and caregivers explain and discuss unfamiliar words and their meanings (Fletcher & Reese, 2005). Sharing books with children also introduces the concept that print conveys meaning—“print awareness” (Justice & Ezell, 2002)—and that words are made up of different letters and sounds, assisting with letter recognition skills and phonological awareness.

Reading with children supports important early literacy skills which form the foundation for the development of an understanding of some of the more formal aspects of written English and more formal reading skills, preparing children to enter school. Much of children's storytime programming in North America and beyond has focused on “school readiness”. The *Mother Goose on the Loose*² program used extensively in US and Canadian libraries is badged explicitly as an early literacy program designed to help children develop “skills for success in a classroom” and, as its title suggests, the *Every Child Ready to Read*³ approach also emphasizes reading readiness. Beyond this, though, and particularly evident in the librarianship literature, is the importance attached to reading with children to engage and inspire them (Rankin & Brock, 2015). The ability of books and stories to engage and inspire children is known as “print motivation” or “reading engagement”, and the research evidence suggests there is a “virtuous circle” in which children who enjoy books and reading will be curious about how to read and will want to engage with books and reading (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007). Research has also found that children who have positive and enjoyable experiences with books are more likely to persevere with learning to read even when they encounter difficulties (Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000). Children will benefit from reading with adults who enjoy reading themselves and can convey enthusiasm, excitement, and appreciation for the books they are sharing, because these adult attitudes support the children in their enjoyment of reading. From this perspective, literacy is a sociocultural practice through which children acquire the knowledge and understanding of reading as they actively participate in literacy-related activities in all kinds of different everyday social contexts, while the experts around them (e.g., parents, caregivers, teachers) mediate their new experiences (Perry, 2012). In summary, previous research indicates that children are more likely to read for pleasure, and benefit from all the educational, social, and well-

² <http://www.mgol.net>.

³ <http://www.everychildreadytoread.org>.

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