

Information Services Literature Review:

Students of Early Childhood Education

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Information Services and Users

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Introduction

Information literacy is becoming increasingly important for younger and younger people. As the trend towards an information literate society continues, more and more programs are being offered for the very youngest members of the community. Conversely, these young children are at a stage where they are not able to participate actively in the reading process. Any program developed for young children must therefore include a caregiver for those children.

Many programs exist, and have existed for a long time, that have actively encouraged parents to read to their children, and to bring their children to the library. However, one group of caregivers seemed to be, until recently, left to care for themselves: childcare workers. Increasingly, as libraries become more aware of how influential these workers are in the lives of the children in their care, they are being included in the target group for library programs. More and more is being done to encourage childcare workers to make use of the resources that the library offers. Some libraries are going as far as to work with local junior or community colleges to offer more books from the required reading lists of students who are studying to become childcare workers (Hunting, 113).

User Group

The user group studied consists of students taking the two-year program titled Early Childhood Education from Red River College in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In general, the students are female, in their early to mid-twenties, and speak English fluently. The students are residents of the city of Winnipeg. Each cohort takes courses together, and expects to graduate at the same time. Past cohorts have graduated between forty-two and fifty-two students.

Though there are many traits that make this group heterogeneous, for example, living arrangements, family obligations, employment situations and socio-economic background, the students share one overarching trait that is common to the vast majority of current post-secondary students: it is expected that every person has significant internet access on a daily or almost-daily basis, for communication, for research, and for other scholastic activities. In keeping with their status as community college students in a vocation-oriented program, the employment outlook for these students is very good.

One of the difficulties of studying such a narrowly defined user group is that it was near impossible to find materials written that detailed services offered to this user group in particular. Though students in childcare worker or early childhood education programs were included in one article, they were hardly the focus, and were mentioned more as an avenue for further outreach by the public library that served them, or were lumped together with current childcare workers. (Hunting, 1999) To truly capture the breadth of necessary services for this community, the search was widened in two separate, yet equally important directions.

First, the search was widened in the direction of the future career of these students, to include services provided to early childhood education and childcare workers. This yielded many results, most of which were directed at early elementary school teachers, who work with older children than the target group. However, the search did yield some interesting results. Second, the search was modified to include the wider concept of community college students in general. The particular needs of this group of students require that multiple facets of their roles as library users be explored. Only by combining these two search directions can a truly comprehensive snapshot of the information services offered to early childhood education students be developed.

Services for community college students

Community college students are a very unique group for a library to serve. Generally, the college has a local base from which its population is drawn, and offers diploma programs that tend to be career oriented. (Warren, 297) This can lead to innovative ways of addressing these clients information needs in the library setting. For Maness, it meant that the library only contains 3,000 to 4,000 printed monographs, and that the substantial collection of the library has been converted to digital format. The library focuses on outreach, promotion and instruction in usage of electronic sources. This happens both with the students, and with the instructors. “The ability to build relationships with faculty is a major core competency of academic librarians” (Maness, 20). This allows the library to further its outreach within the classroom setting, in precisely the same way that libraries in large academic institutions have started to do.

Many community college libraries promote information literacy through internal and external partnerships and special projects. Teaching and learning are the core focus of community college instructors, and this aids in the quest to bring information literacy to the attention of the students, as does the focus on information literacy from accrediting agencies and professional organizations (Warren, 298). Warren (2006) talks about the various projects that community college libraries have undertaken to overcome their unique challenges. There are collaborative projects that paired community colleges with high schools, state-wide Information Literacy Summits, partnerships with college departments, new librarian positions, and virtual reference services (299-301). “Community college librarians, in collaboration with others, engage a diverse group of learners, provide multiple learning options, and assess outcomes” to aid their students (Warren, 302). These options are geared towards information literacy

initiatives. This is a worthy goal and provides students with skills that they may not otherwise have picked up.

Services for early childhood caregivers

Early childhood caregivers are a very difficult group to define. This can include parents and grandparents, healthcare workers who deal primarily with families and young children, childcare workers, and elementary school teachers. Many of the services that are described in the plethora of articles that exist are geared towards a specific subset of this group- for the most part parents, and even more specifically, at-risk and low-income parents, as they are the ones who are most likely to undervalue books and the written word, or to overlook the importance of reading to their children. That being said, the programs for parents do still have some relevance to childcare workers, as they are essentially offering services for the child, and training for the caregivers, whoever they may be.

Many programs and public libraries focus on improving access to books for the very young and offering packages, training and seminars for those who interact with them (Cullinan, 750; Huntting, 113; Flatow, 107). Each of these programs offers an in-library portion, including expanded sections for books for young children, a space set aside particularly for children and families, as well as the typical story-time programs. These few libraries are not alone. The American Library Association produced a video in 1995 giving a tour of the best library programs for babies in the state of Maine (Flatow, 108). This video “emphasizes the idea that libraries should provide baby programs as a pre-reading experience.” Though these library programs are generally developed with parents in mind, much of the information they contain can be shifted to be applicable in the childcare worker’s setting. The expanding collection of

books can be circulated among childcare workers as well as parents, the literature and bibliographies that librarians prepare around themes suitable for this age group can then be used to plan childcare centre activities.

However, this still does not address the fact that there are few services offered specifically for childcare workers. Huntting talks about one library that was very close to a school offering training for childcare workers. “It seemed logical to have collections that would back up any efforts to educate these students in the value and use of children’s literature” (113). The library in the Chicago-area community that she describes offered workshops on puppets, music, crafts, and literacy in both English and Spanish. Virtually all of the feedback from the childcare workers who participated was positive. Of the many participants in the various workshops, there were very few comments that were less than glowingly positive. This particular library also offers “Book Start” kits that include English and Spanish library materials and finger plays on themes that are appropriate for use with young children.

This program, called “Jump Start”, targeted childcare workers and students who would soon join their ranks. While the public library can in no way replace the academic library that students rely on, they can still offer services that might otherwise be difficult to reach for students at branch campuses that do not have libraries (Huntting, 117).

It’s Never Too Early, a state-wide initiative in Maryland aimed at language development, targets childcare workers and parents. (Minkel, 38-39) This program focused on presenting book collections, story-time programs, and other language activities. The program also impressed upon the public librarians that they “should focus on teaching language enrichment games and activities to the adults who interact with young children on a daily basis” (Minkel, 41).

Both of the programs mentioned above offered bilingual services to the childcare workers, which was deemed important as the Spanish-speaking communities in these locations are substantial. They also emphasized the idea that reading to children is important, no matter what language the reading is in. Some of the childcare workers were hesitant to use their own mother-tongue as they felt that it was more important for the children to hear English stories and rhymes. (Minkel, 40)

One important aspect to both of these programs is that they were conducted as outreach programs. The program participants were contacted in their work setting, and often the library programming was in fact given in that setting, not at the library. Many of the childcare workers indicated that “getting away from the agency for a workshop would be a problem” (Hunting, 116). Though this in fact separated the program participants from the library setting and the new collections that were being developed, this difficulty was quickly circumvented by having program presenters talk about the new resources that the library had to offer, and encouraging the childcare workers to go to the library when they had the chance.

The services offered to the particular students in the user group studied, as shown above, have to be separated into two distinct categories: services for community college students, and services for childcare workers. Though the specific user group was mentioned in one study, they seemed to be a secondary consideration, as the library felt sure that many of their needs were being met through the community college library, and the public library was a supplement specifically for the students living in the neighbourhood.

Analysis

The services offered to students in early childhood education programs are not a topic that is generally discussed in the abundant literature on user services in libraries. In this, at least on the surface, they may seem to be a somewhat neglected user group. However, the needs of this user group can be broken down into two distinct sections: the needs of community college students, and the needs of childcare workers.

For community college libraries, information literacy programs and initiatives are the cornerstone of their offerings in services to students. In this they do not differ from other post-secondary institutions. However, what did seem lacking were services that specifically address the needs that community college students have that are different from their four-year college or university counterparts. Community college programs are generally much more focused on career oriented work than are other institutions. The students in these programs, though

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