Reading First, Libraries Last: An Historical Perspective on the Absence of Libraries in Reading Education Policy

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ABSTRACT

Reading education has been high on the public policy agenda in the United States. This article addresses the question of why public and school libraries have not been actively involved in legislative efforts to promote children’s reading development. An historical perspective on the place of libraries in current reading education policy in the United States is provided, and two possibilities are assessed—1) that libraries have changed, shifting in their institutional identity, and 2) that conceptions of the reading process and the best instructional practices have undergone a dramatic transformation in the wake of the cognitive revolution. The author concludes that newer models of reading focus on cognition and the sociocultural contexts in which literacy occurs, and justify greater attention to the role of libraries in children’s print literacy development.

INTRODUCTION

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (2002) set a target of having all students read at grade level by the end of third grade (p. 1535). As part of the emphasis on reading, NCLB included a federal grant program called Improving Literacy Through School Libraries, which was intended “to improve literacy skills and academic achievement of students by providing students with increased access to up-to-date school library materials, a well-equipped, technology-equipped school library media center and well-trained, professionally certified school library media specialists” (NCLB, 2002, p. 1567). Scant funding actually materialized. Although authorized at $250 million in 2001, appropriations started at $12 million in 2002 and rose to $19 million by 2010 (American Library Association [ALA], 2011a). In May 2011, the U.S. Department of Education discontinued dedicated funding (Whelan, 2011). This funding pattern makes very clear what was already implicit in the organization of the legislation. Buried at the bottom of the reading skills section, school libraries were seen as peripheral to the law’s stated central purposes of giving all children the opportunity for high-quality education and closing the achievement gap.

This story is a familiar one. A major factor in the growth of school libraries was the federal funding for school libraries made possible by the National Defense Education Act (1958) with its demand for “additional and more adequate educational opportunities” (p. 1581) and the first direct federal assistance for school libraries in Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965, p. 30). This regard for libraries was not sustained. Chapter 2 of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 grouped several programs, including the School Library Resources fund, into a block grant, allowing districts to choose how to use their Chapter 2 grants and not requiring spending on school libraries (1981, section 7351). As a consequence, school library media programs needed to compete with other programs at the state and district levels, and their growth ultimately stalled (Hopkins & Butler, 1991). In both cases, funding for school libraries was established but quickly eroded.

Given the public concern over reading achievement, why haven’t school and public libraries, the community institutions devoted to reading, been at the center of efforts to promote children’s reading development? This article focuses on the role of public libraries in federal reading education policy, but the peripheral role of school libraries in current policy provides an incisive sense of the situation. Despite their distinct institutional identities, particularly the potential for school libraries to support reading instruction directly, public and school libraries have found their fates increasingly bound together. The primary federal grant program for public, academic, and school libraries is the Library Services and Technology Act (1996), which was instituted when responsibility for library services was transferred from the Department of Education to the Institute of Museum and Library Services in 1996. Libraries as a group have been at the front of the line for cuts during the recent recession, and urban libraries have been subject to the deepest cuts in the past two years (Hoffman, Bertot, Davis, & Clark, 2011). As Allington (2002) concludes, “The limited access that poor children have to books and magazines in their schools, neighborhoods, and homes has barely been on the federal agenda, or on the agenda of state and local reform initiatives” (p. 14).

An historical perspective on the place of public libraries in current reading education policy in the United States is provided and two possibilities are assessed—1) that libraries have changed, shifting in their institutional identity, and 2) that conceptions of reading have undergone a transformation. According to the first argument, libraries have moved away from supporting children’s print literacy development after establishing their institutional identity a century ago. Initially devoted to the promotion of reading among children, libraries turned their attention to marginalized adults and access to technology, and this institutional divergence effectively removed them from the array of solutions...
to the periodic reading challenges of the last half-century. A second consideration is that libraries were marginalized as a consequence of changing conceptions of how children learn to read, particularly the ascendance of cognitive models of reading which focus on the way the individual processes text and how the process might be modified through explicit intervention. Convinced that knowledge bases and text-processing strategies were critical to individuals’ reading performance, researchers and policy-makers focused on explicit instruction, a service provided by schools rather than libraries.

THEORIES

This section discusses two theories that inform an understanding of the absence of libraries from reading education policy. First, DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) neo-institutional theory of isomorphism is used to explain how libraries and schools have adopted different change strategies despite having a common mission. They propose the theory that organizations become more homogeneous after they are structured into a field with other organizations. These organizations begin making changes that promote their legitimacy rather than their efficiency, adopting the characteristics of similar organizations regardless of functional considerations. When the public library emerged as an institutional category, it began to undergo substantial changes, some driven by the coercive authority of the state or cultural expectations. Among the other factors that impel change, mimetic pressures dictate that organizations deal with uncertainty by imitating similar organizations that are perceived as successful. Libraries copied other libraries, and as a result, they were less likely to cite partnership with schools as their guiding principle, as had been the case in the second half of the nineteenth century. Third, normative pressures result from professionalization as the members of a profession specify the conditions and methods of their work, share a body of expert knowledge, and associate in professional networks. As librarians claimed professional status, they asserted more autonomy in determining how to best serve their clients. The theory of isomorphism helps to explain how libraries and schools could diverge along institutional lines and why libraries might not be enlisted to help solve problems that have come to be considered the proper concern of the school.

The second part of this paper considers the emergence of new models of the reading process in the second half of the twentieth century. This linkage is analyzed using Kingdon’s (1995) account of government agenda setting. To Kingdon, the policies that emerge are not the simply the consequence of a rational, research-guided approach in which people set out to solve problems and adopt the best solutions. He frames the development of policy as the convergence of problem and solution “streams,” which are largely independent of each other. The solutions often exist before problems are recognized, and “advocates lie in wait in and around government with their solutions at hand, waiting for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions” (p. 165). This perspective invites an important question: What are the characteristics of the issues that enter or are expelled from the top of the public agenda?

This paper attempts to trace the historical roots of the current status of libraries and the current emphasis of reading education policy on explicit instruction in the component skills of reading. Primary sources include the publications of library leaders and librarians (Dewey, 1876; Leland et al., 1909), major surveys of libraries (Ayres & McKinne, 1916; Berelson, 1949; Wilson, 1938), and official library reports, from the landmark Boston Public Library Report (1852) to the ALA’s recent report on technology access (Hoffman et al., 2011). The article also examines policy documents, including the National Reading Panel’s (NRP) report (2000), the Reading First section of No Child Left Behind (2002), and the National Early Literacy Panel’s report (2008).

A COMMON MISSION

Libraries have not been targeted for public investment at a time when reading achievement has been on the public policy agenda. This turn of events can be partly explained by two key developments in the public library’s history: the attainment of institutional identity in the first decades of the twentieth century, and the gradual adoption of a community information model in the last half of the century.

In the nineteenth century, a consensus emerged regarding the central role of schooling as Horace Mann’s vision of universal popular education prevailed. The common-school movement was dedicated to children’s literacy, and literacy rates rose rapidly with increasing school enrollment (Cremin, 1980). The establishment of the school’s dominance did not curtail other forms of public education like libraries and museums. The free public libraries established in the 1850s emerged from a welter of school district, Sunday school, and social libraries, most relying on membership dues and maintaining strictures on reading materials (Carpenter, 2007). Edward Everett and George Ticknor, the visionaries behind the Boston Public Library, designed a place for research and recreational reading, although collections were far from a culturally democratic ideal. By the end of the nineteenth century, the name “public library” exclusively described, “separate local institutions that were publicly supported, publicly controlled, and freely open to all clients on an equal basis” (Cremin, 1980, p. 307). The spread of tax-supported municipal libraries was slow but steady, growing from 257 in 1875 to 566 in 1894. By the 1920s, libraries were ubiquitous (Carpenter, 2007).

Even as public libraries established an institutional identity, they adopted the rationales and arguments used by public schools, depicting themselves as key partners in a common educational project in order to ensure tax support. Andrew Carnegie’s philanthropy, among other bequests, gave the construction of library building substantial impetus in the 1890s, but library leaders knew that perpetual governmental aid was necessary for libraries to survive (Carpenter, 2007). Arguments for public libraries emphasized their functional relationship with schools. The Boston Public
Library’s famous report (1852) argued that the public provision of schooling reduced the effects of financial advantage and that libraries could do the same. The public library served to extend the school’s work, continuing to educate after the completion of formal schooling. School can impart, said the report, “with a noble equality of privilege, a knowledge of the elements of learning to all its children, but it affords them no aid in going beyond the elements” (p. 9). Library reformer Melvil Dewey (1876) extended this argument in promoting a national library movement. In the first issue of the American Library Journal, he observed that,

our leading educators have come to recognize the library as sharing with the school the education of the people . . . the school teaches them how to read; the library must supply them with reading which shall serve to educate, and so it is that we are forced to divide popular education into two parts of almost equal importance and deserving equal attention: the free school and the free library. (p. 6)

To Dewey, librarians rightfully aspired to the same moral status as preachers and teachers, and the way to attain that status was to give libraries a stake in the indisputably vital task of promoting literacy. Libraries could model the school’s literary efforts after the geographical diffusion of another primary institution—the church. As a Library Journal editorial noted,

Before many years we shall see branch libraries springing up in all poor quarters of the city close to the homes of the people who will use them, each serving a district not so large that the personal influence of the librarian cannot come into play—the parish churches of literature and education. (Cutter & Leyboldt, 1882, p. 3)

The case for libraries’ critical contribution to the ideals of the common-school movement also began to be made in local and national government reports on education. In its report for 1895–1896, the U. S. Bureau of Education (1903) described 1890 as the dawn of a new era in which public library establishment and maintenance became a municipal obligation. This was the case, according to the report, because “an efficient school system is hardly possible without the public library” (p. 526). In the report of the Education Survey of Cleveland (1916) reading was the most important ability for a child to learn in school, but the school years were also the time to instill life-long reading habits. Schools could offer the tools of reading, but libraries were required to provide the ideas and ideals, information and culture. For this reason, “the schools and the library must combine in united and concerted effort to bring to every boy and girl compelling stimulus to varied and voluminous reading if Cleveland’s children are to reap the best and fullest rewards of education” (Ayres & McKinnie, 1976, pp. 79–80).

Publications for library professionals demonstrated how schools and libraries were pooling their efforts. A contributor to the monthly journal Public Libraries described one program in a public school in Elgin, Illinois, in which students were tasked with using the library as a school assignment:

Lists of books in groups were copied upon the blackboard of each room by the teacher. The children were urged to read 5 and were encouraged to read the whole before they were changed at the middle of the year. No compulsion was used, but each pupil was credited with the number read, and whether historical or not. (Library Bureau, 1898, p. 153)

Themes of adventure and nature dominated the lists. The seventh grade list included: Boy Travelers in Russia, Robinson Crusoe, Tour of the World in 80 Days, What Mr. Darwin Saw, and Marvels of Animal Life.

School library reformers were motivated to demonstrate that library work aligned with the school’s efforts but also to frame the library’s distinctive contribution. Schools might specialize in teaching reading skills, but libraries could ensure moral and intellectual betterment, and cultivating and elevating tastes. As one volume by school library leaders argued, a child might learn to read but only imbibe the “cheap and sensational literature of the newsstand and the indifferent trash that has long masqueraded as ‘good books for boys and girls’” (Leland et al., 1909, p. 1). The contribution of truly good books would be moral improvement and the development of character. National heroes provided both models of reading and suitable subjects:

Little Abe Lincoln, in the crudeness, squalor, and struggle of a backwoods community, became different from his companions because his thoughts were occupied with what he read in Weems’ Life of Washington, the Biography of Henry Clay, Aesop’s Fables, and Pilgrim’s Progress. While in body he was occupied as were all other pioneers, in his mind he dwelt with another order of men. . . . The teachers of today know that with no library in the school the real work of the school cannot be done. (Leland et al., 1909, pp. 51–52)

The dated conception of a higher “order of men”—the sort of men reading the right stuff—is not incidental to this argument for libraries. Revisionist scholars have noted the troubling side of an enduring library mythology in which public libraries altruistically extend educational opportunity to the working class. Libraries were predominantly used by the middle class and headed by professional men who evinced a pervasive cultural arrogance. In a typical moralizing tone, one Library Journal editorial following the railroad strikes of 1877 claimed “every book that the public library circulates helps to make . . . railroad rioters impossible” (Dewey, 1877, p. 395). However, these public claims about libraries acclimating the lower classes to traditional middle class values were partly impelled by the liberating or even subversive capacity of libraries in responding to public tastes and expanding access to ideas. These kinds of editorial claims also mask the conflicting views held by library leaders, the tension between elevating public thought and meeting public demand. In reality, libraries were
less coercive than schools, being voluntary rather than compulsory and relying on a consumer model that thwarted the most extreme anti-egalitarianism. As Garrison (1979) argues, “Despite its conservative origins, the public library developed as a less intellectually restrictive institution than the public school” (p. xiii).

**THE COMMUNITY INFORMATION MODEL**

These initial differences became more pronounced as public schools and libraries began to develop more distinct institutional identities in the early twentieth century. The first phase of divergence was characterized by normative isomorphism as libraries and schools set norms for training professionals and constructing institutional spaces. Dewey organized the Library Bureau in 1876, which standardized library furniture and supplies. The 1902 catalog advertised such labor-savers as the Hammond Card Cataloger, the Danner Revolving Bookcase, and book trucks, as well as furniture designed to make children more comfortable. The profession of librarianship emerged in the establishment of the American Library Association in 1876 and the School of Library Economy in 1887, the first school for library professionals (Wiegand, 2009). The U.S. Bureau of Education’s massive *Special Report on Public Libraries in the United States* (1876) noted that “it is clear that the librarian must soon be called upon to assume a distinct position, as something more than a mere custodian of books, and the scientific scope and value of his office be recognized and estimated in a becoming manner” (p. xxiii).

A new professional ideology was recognizable by the mid-1890s. Library professionals asserted their autonomy, staking out specialized knowledge over which they could assert intellectual leadership. The rise of the library profession allowed librarians to influence the developing identity of the institution. However, this influence was limited by several factors, including the feminization of the profession and the low level of training that resulted, given the prevailing views of women as professionals. Garrison (1979) argues that, “the predominance of women in library schools, on library school faculties, and in library work functioned as an unmentioned but inflexible framework into which ‘professional’ education would have to be fitted” (p. 192). As a consequence, librarians lacked autonomy within the administrative structure and were subjected to non-professional, bureaucratic control. Libraries’ services and collections were also closely tied to public demand, not the best judgments of the profession. The subsequent attempts of library professionals to shift institutional focus from books and school-based literacy were significant but ultimately constrained.

Between 1920 and 1970, libraries began to focus more on adults, particularly low-income adults and immigrants, with the understanding that schools would take care of children (Cuban & Cuban, 2007). The university became the favored institutional role model with the increasing emphasis on adult education. The public library was envisioned as “the people’s university” (Johnson, 1938, p. 71) and a “community intelligence service” (Learned, 1924, p. 23). The concern for adult education heightened the sense that libraries were distinctive and vital, not just supplements of the school, and called attention to the problem of library distribution. Major surveys of public libraries found highly unequal distribution and use along socioeconomic lines. Wilson (1938) reported that the 37 percent of the population with no access to libraries was disproportionately rural, black, and located in the South. Libraries in states with low coverage also tended to have small collections. Using data from 1944–45, Berelson (1949) found that the most powerful predictor of library use was educational attainment. Ten to 15 percent of adults with only an elementary education used the library, while about 50 percent of college educated adults did so. As Berelson concluded, “The public library is probably as democratic an institution as is found in this country, in the sense that it is freely open to all comers; but its self-selected clientele is a more or less distinctive group within the community” (p. 126).

Responding to evidence of unequal access, public libraries attempted greater relevance to the realities of local communities and gravitated toward an information-based model (Cmiel, 2009). Direct efforts by progressive library reformers to make public libraries less bookish long preceded the community information model that emerged in the 1960s. One progressive critic argued that “children’s reading generally should not be hampered by the indiscriminate use of public library books by which the child is liable to destroy any skill in the use of print he may be in the way of acquiring” (Powell, 1917, p. 2). In addition to hindering their literacy development, a book-centered, cultural education was thought to neglect important practical knowledge and skills: “The assumption that knowledge is not cultural when it is practical, has always been apparent in the utterances of the disciples of the printed page” (p. 13). The importance of local relevance also had early proponents. Prominent public librarian and museum director John Cotton Dana (1920) argued that these institutions should draw from surrounding communities in order to be “live educational institutions,” rather than storehouses for artifacts and books.

Arguments for de-centering books in public libraries emerged with force in the 1960s, when advocates envisioned the enlistment of libraries in the War on Poverty. Focusing on the ways libraries could serve the poor, Kenneth Clark (1965) argued in the influential *Wilson Library Bulletin* that book-centered libraries can alienate the people most in need of their services:

One could speculate that for those human beings who have been so rejected in our public schools that they cannot read, every book is a symbol of their traumatic rejection and their actual inferiority. They do not go to the libraries because the library, in a very real sense, is another assault on their ego. The library and its books become symbols of their unworthiness. (pp. 43–45)

Kathleen Molz’s (1965) article in the *American Scholar* is also widely cited and provided the guidance for libraries to assume Clark’s perspective, arguing that the circulation of materials should be a secondary function of libraries, and that books should give way to more vital community information. The library profession’s efforts to inculcate a love of reading and push readers...
toward the best of the world of books had consequences for those with limited opportunities:

Within the last few years, the greatly increased school population collided with the ‘materials-oriented’ curriculum which places its emphasis on ‘related readings’ to precipitate a wave of eager young researchers into the nation’s libraries. . . . For the total illiterate, the city library can do almost nothing. Its contribution will continue to those whose with at least a few years of schooling. (Molz, 1965, pp. 98, 101)

The community information model was widely embraced by the mid-1970s. Libraries become more eclectic, and book borrowing declined in urban libraries (Cmiel, 2009). Cuban and Cuban (2007) argue that after World War II librarians began to give more attention to community and group services and the vocational needs of returning soldiers than to the promotion of reading. They argue that this orientation paved the way for libraries’ rapid adoption of computers and Internet access in the 1980s and 1990s, broadening the concern for adult education to information literacy and lifelong learning.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, library reports continue to frame public libraries’ most urgent contribution as access to technology. According to a recent report, 67 percent of public libraries are the only place people have free access to computers and the Internet in their communities, making libraries “first responders” for people seeking employment, continuing education, and government services (Hoffman et al., 2011, p. 7). The opening sentence of the ALA’s most recent annual report, The State of America’s Libraries, is also very telling: “The Great Recession may have come to an end, but there’s no end to libraries’ key role in helping hard-pressed Americans find employment or launch a bootstraps venture” (ALA, 2011b, p. ii). As they present themselves, the central tasks of public libraries are giving adults access to computers and assistance with job searches, and the swift acquisition of Internet connectivity has certainly contributed to robust library use rates.

The argument for the prioritization of new technology in public and school libraries is bolstered by two important shifts in the production and circulation of books. First, books have become substantially cheaper since 1880 due to economies of scale and speed in book making and printing (Kaestle & Radway, 2009). Inexpensive used books are plentiful and disposed of in significant volume. Second, the traditional codex, the ingenious binding of sheets of paper that arguably catalyzed much of revolution in the last 500 years (Barzun, 2000), is being challenged by the e-book and “vooks” (electronic texts with embedded videos). School administrators can even speak of their schools’ “beautiful library space” being freed from inordinate stacks of print (Tracy, 2010).

However, the story of libraries diverting attention and resources from children and making books more marginal to the library’s purpose can be overstated, as can predictions of the end of the printed book in an age of the learning commons and digital center. The percentage of public schools with a library media center grew from 36 percent in 1953–54 to 92 percent in 1999–2000 (Michie & Holton, 2005). While investment in technological infrastructure has also replaced some investment in reading materials in school libraries, reading materials consume most of school libraries’ budgets, and technology acquisition has plateaued (Farmer & Shontz, 2009). Neither the ubiquity of inexpensive print nor the advent of the e-book would suggest the need for a dramatic shift in library funding and mission. In fact, if anything, these technological shifts point to the increased importance of librarians in the promotion of reading development and the maintenance of print and digital collections.

Furthermore, children weren’t fully welcomed into public libraries until the end of the nineteenth century, when libraries began opening children’s rooms, but children’s services became institutionalized between the 1920s and 1950s (Walter, 2001). Berelson (1949) estimated that juvenile materials accounted for 50 percent of circulation and concluded that libraries have greater influence on the reading of children than the reading of adults. The ALA reports that between 2002 and 2007, circulation of children’s materials accounted for almost 35 percent of total circulation (Davis, 2009). These numbers may indicate a decreased focus on children in favor of information services for adults, but the bigger story is that children’s services have become entrenched as one of the public library’s core services. Public libraries are promoted as “early literacy centers” (Bohrer, 2005, p. 127). The American Library Association has a substantial number of programs and toolkits available for promoting early literacy, including “Born to Read” (ALA, 1999) and “Every Child Ready to Read” (ALA, 2004). Qualitative studies of public libraries support the idea that children’s services remain public library priorities (Neuman & and Celano, 2006; Mac Gillivray, Ardell, & & Curwen, 2010). Anecdotal evidence also supports this conclusion. Children’s rooms tend to be among the best-furnished and best-stocked spaces in the public library, and children’s and young adult librarians make story times and reading clubs the centerpieces of their programs.

**CHANGES IN READING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

Reading research and practice have changed dramatically in the last half of the twentieth century, and three interconnected events have contributed to these changes.

The first event was the concerted attempt, after 1950, to develop more informed links between reading research and practice. Although scientific experiments on reading acquisition have been conducted from the earliest days of the twentieth century (Huey, 1908), it was not until mid-century that research programs became wholly systematic in tackling the question of reading’s fundamental nature and optimal transmission (Anderson & Fox, 2004). Demographic changes contributed to concerns as the baby boom following World War II led to sharp increases in public school enrollment. The percentage of the high school age population also increased substantially, leading to a doubling of the total high school population between 1950 and 1965 (Gamson, 2007).
As a result, although reading acquisition had always challenged some students, the number of students identified with reading disabilities, as well as the proportion of these students, increased. This increase coincided with growing anxiety regarding the performance of American students and the nation’s global competitiveness and security following the Soviet launch of the satellite Sputnik in 1957. Print literacy attainment could now be framed as a national defense issue.

A milestone in the construction of the reading acquisition problem was Rudolf Flesch’s *Why Johnny Can’t Read* (1955). Flesch critiqued what he perceived to be the dominant method of teaching reading at the time, the “look-say” or sight words approach of popular basal reading series. He favored phonics, a method in which learners relate sounds to symbols to decode words. His solution reflected assumptions of behaviorism, a dominant theory in educational research and practice at the time. Behavioristic theory described learning as a stimulus-response process, which could be maximized with carefully organized experiences. These experiences included exposure to simple increments of information and the learner’s generation of observable responses that could be reinforced by educators (Reynolds, Sinatra, & Jetton, 1996). Guided by behavioristic theory, some reading researchers envisioned reading as a chain of discrete skills. The linked component skills of reading could be identified and then trained in isolation. Code-emphasis curriculum programs became standard by the end of the 1960s (Anderson & Fox, 2004).

The second event was the impact of cognitive psychologists on conceptions of the reading process that were more complex. Beginning in the 1950s, researchers pursued the interdisciplinary study of the mind as an information processor capable of attention, imagery, memory, pattern recognition, and problem solving. The new paradigm suggested that, like a computer, “the human perceptual system analyzed the stimulus array, extracted information from it in the form of neural codes, and that these codes entered into mental programs designed either to store them in memory, or to reason, make decisions, and guide actions” (Bower, 2000, p. 14). From a cognitive perspective, reading relies on the acquisition of a mental information-processing system that includes four processors: orthographic, phonological, meaning, and context (Adams, 1990).

These understandings led to a revision of earlier mechanistic information-processing models and a more sophisticated account of how the brain’s design principles allow the acquisition of the unnatural process of reading. The brain’s plasticity, or “open architecture,” allows it to make new connections among older structures, form highly specialized areas, and automatically draw information from these areas (Wolf, 2007). Children learning to read go through developmental milestones, following a normative process, but as Wolf memorably writes, “We were never born to read” (p. 3). The cognitive theorists emphasize that learning to read is very difficult, a fact that expert adult readers tend to forget after achieving automaticity. Reading is not one of the abilities that can be picked up naturally. It is not hardwired or genetically organized like language. Reading is a relatively recent cultural invention, relying instead on the reorganization of the brain’s circuitry based on crucial enabling experiences provided in the home, school, and community.

According to Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2006), print is a code that the child must unlock, and “the nature of the code and the key to deciphering it are now known” (p. 9). Neuroscientific studies of the reading brain have contributed to the legitimacy of this science of reading because we can “see” the brain at work, thanks to advances in electrophysical measures and neuroimaging (Hackman & Farah, 2008).

Cognitive models of reading were shaped by a third crucial development—the rise of a research discourse that prioritized the use of randomized, replicable designs. Educational research was arranged in a hierarchy with experimental approaches at the apex. In this paradigm, the “gold-standard” designs for research that attempts to make unbiased causal inferences are randomized field trials of educational interventions (Murnane & Willett, 2011). Following recommendations from the congressionally mandated National Reading Panel in 2000, the Reading First section of NCLB exclusively focused on “scientifically based reading research,” defined as the use of randomized, replicable designs. The phrase is employed 110 times in the Reading First section of the law (Schoenfeld & Pearson, 2009). Finally, the Education Sciences Reform Act (2002) required that the science of reading instruction be based on experimental designs, citing the need to establish causal links between methods of instruction and learning outcomes (pp. 4–5).

The enactment of the NRP’s research guidelines in NCLB has profoundly influenced practice. In particular, the research that has informed the development of reading education policies in the last decade relies substantially on the cognitive perspective, given the amenability of this perspective to restricted experimental designs. In addition, the reading science advanced by the National Reading Panel assumes a particular theory of cognition, one based on the cognitive accomplishments of individuals. Limiting cognition to “in-the-head” processes meant that the problem of reading acquisition could be efficiently addressed by focusing on the subskills of reading, ultimately fostering a “reconditioning” approach in the reading curriculum (Anderson & Fox, 2004).

Kingdon’s (1995) theory explains how educational reform resulted from the joining of problem and solution “streams.” As Berliner and Biddle (1995) argue, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) intensified the rhetoric of the mediocrity of American schools and teachers, fueling a “Manufactured Crisis” that has persisted for decades. According to Allington (2006), however, the reading scores of American elementary and middle school students in the NAEP assessments have actually risen gradually over the last thirty years.

The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) reviewed empirical studies and identified eleven variables that predict literacy achievement, including alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and rapid automatic naming of letters and numbers, and concluded that, “instruction focused on these skills may provide valuable literacy
preparation" (p. 78). In this initiative, libraries were not presented as a worked-out viable policy that supports literacy learning, a development that may be partly due to the institutional divergence described in the first part of the paper. As democratic institutions largely driven by user choice, libraries are more opaque to experimental intervention methodology. As "scientifically based" research knowledge is privileged, intervention programs receive more research attention and are identified as "what works." Democratically driven learning tools like libraries are then defunded.

THE CASE FOR LIBRARIES

The triumph of the "reconditioning" approach is reflected in the question that has dominated reading education policy—“What are the best practices in the teaching of reading?” Library advocates ask a different question: "What needs to be done to ensure that all children learn to read?" (Coles, 2007). However, as Kingdon’s (1995) framework suggests, answering this question does not increase the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes in the public policy arena. The question must be answered in a way that persuades people to accept advice and act on evidence that is often less than conclusive (Majone, 1989). Public ideas matter, and powerful ideas succeed. What kind of arguments would put libraries back on the reading education policy agenda? In this section, I argue that it is imperative to make a compelling argument for the essential role of well-stocked and convenient public libraries for all children in terms of children’s print literacy development, a strategy that recalls the efforts of late-nineteenth-century library advocates.

An emphasis on print literacy development does not neglect the sociocultural contexts in which people use written language for functional communicative purposes. Researchers who adopt a sociocultural approach (Gee, 2001) focus on literacies embedded in local contexts and typically make several key assertions. First, literacy events, actual interactions with print, are part of larger literacy practices, which are shaped by individual experience and social institutions. Any literacy event then—paying bills, writing grocery lists, reading books—must be understood in terms of what is happening and why it is happening (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004).

Second, social practice theorists reject the "autonomous model of literacy," in which reading and writing skills can be distinguished from larger discourses (Street, 1984, p. 2). According to Au (2006), "The autonomous model gives a natural advantage to mainstream students who have ready access to essayist literacy, including the codes of the culture of power” (p. 39). Text-based interactions are only meaningful in a cultural context, so this approach emphasizes variations across contexts. Third, the many differing contexts and purposes for reading and writing produce multiple literacies, but those with power may attempt to ensure that some of these literacies become dominant (Street, 1984).

Tusting and Barton (2005) contrast a situated approach with a skills-based view, rejecting the conception of literacy as "a measurable cognitive attribute of individuals" (p. 244). Similarly, Au (2006) argues that the type of literacy assessed on large-scale tests places students of diverse backgrounds at a disadvantage as this type of literacy has not been encountered often in their home and community.

For many scholars, acceptance of cognitive models of reading development does not necessitate neglect of sociocultural processes, and compelling arguments for the importance of libraries to print both literacy development incorporate both sociocultural and cognitive perspectives. In an attempt to unite both perspectives, Purcell-Gates et al. (2004) argue that in-the-head cognitive processes develop within socially determined literacy practices and that "to have any valid relationship to reality, research into a cognitive process like reading must reflect this contextualization of the cognitive by the sociocultural" (p. 82). Three lines of argument could prove particularly useful to library advocates.

First, libraries support early literacy development that is integral to later acquisition of print or school-based literacy. A child’s first five years initiate reading’s interrelated processes, and even infants can be viewed as emerging pre-readers (Wolf, 2007). Stories and non-fiction books place cognitive demands on children and provide information for establishing schemata to make sense of events and absorb new information. Children fall behind when in their early years they have access to few stories and opportunities for developing language, what Hart and Risley (2003) call “the early catastrophe” (p. 6).

One of the severe limitations of many analyses of reading development is the depiction of a simple, linear flow of component skills that build on each other in a cumulative fashion. As Paris (2005) has demonstrated, language and literacy skills can be constrained or unconstrained, based on whether they develop over a short period of time (decoding, for example) or a longer period of time (reading comprehension). Advocates of stage theory argue that because readers master some skills before others, the roots of language and literacy skills in early childhood cannot be disregarded (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2010). The skills that become highly important in the third and fourth grades rely on rich interactions with print that begin much earlier, which is why a narrow focus on basic decoding is especially detrimental for children from under-resourced homes. Libraries are indispensable supports for home literacy environments, especially for children who have less access to books. The resources provided by families with greater opportunity can support reading skills while limited access to these resources results in amplification of risk factors (Noble et al., 2006). As Ross et al. (2006) observe, “The public library is the only local government-funded, educational, and social service freely available to children from birth to adolescence” (p. 97).

Second, libraries contribute an advantageous overlap. The social, cultural, and political spaces in which people live provide an array of possible activities, but overlaps in practices among these spaces increase the traffic on certain paths of development. In this way, the cultural world promotes some paths and obscures the entrances to others (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Reading to young children is a particularly important socioculturally constructed literacy practice because it gives children access to a register that will eventually be
highly advantageous (Pellegrini & Galda, 1998). School-based literacy is only one form of literacy, not inherently better than any other, but home environments that align with the register used in school give some children a head start. Becoming literate in schools involves learning the school language register.

According to Gee (2001) registers or social languages have distinctive patterns of vocabulary, syntax, and discourse connectors. The social languages and genres typically encountered in classrooms and school textbooks have particular design features. The enculturation to school-based forms of literacy is ensured by immersion and adult guidance. All children, then, require exposure to these “protoforms” of school-based social languages (p. 724). As Gee argues,

What appears to cause enhanced school-based verbal abilities are family, community, and school language environments in which children interact intensively with adults and more advanced peers and experience cognitively challenging talk and texts on sustained topics and in different genres of oral and written language. (p. 724)

Access to a good, nearby library is no guarantee that such stimulating interaction will take place, but it is hard to conceive of a better means to make available materials on a wide range of topics and in multiple genres.

A third set of arguments concerns the importance of libraries to reading volume in the upper primary grades. Several studies have indicated that independent reading is a powerful predictor of school success. According to Stanovich (1986), reading volume is a critical factor in the acquisition of vocabulary and schema and results in the “Matthew effects,” wherein “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” (p. 360).

Ross et al. (2006) argue that people become readers through reading a lot of extended text. Pleasure in reading is necessary for students to make the time commitment necessary for the acquisition of powerful literacy, the ability “to be at home in a world that is thoroughly permeated by texts” (p. 7). Powerful literacy requires thousands of hours of reading, and the shorter-term motivation of pleasure ensures this investment. Pleasure and free choice are central rather than incidental elements in the making of readers, and public libraries specialize in providing access to books and guidance in choosing. Free voluntary reading, or recreational reading, is more likely to occur when children have access to books in their homes or in nearby libraries. Other studies have suggested that high-interest reading materials may not be readily available in classrooms or school collections, resulting in less voluntary reading and lower reading achievement (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Changes in the mission and functions of libraries and changes in conceptions of the fundamental nature of reading explain the neglect of libraries in current efforts to increase reading achievement. Libraries diverged from what was initially seen as a common mission with the public schools, but this divergence primarily served to expand the operations of libraries rather than putting them out of the business of providing children with books. Even more consequential, the advancements in reading research have resulted in an enhanced understanding of the reading process and of best practices. Ultimately, the distancing of libraries from reading education policy is less a consequence of institutional divergence than the result of a failure to be positioned as a viable solution.

Learning to read is foundational for academic achievement. The importance of libraries comes into focus with a model of print literacy development that links social practices of print literacy with the cognitive skills of literacy acquisition.

The claims of the early proponents of public libraries to the common mission of libraries and schools are worth revisiting and updating. In sum, libraries are an “INUS” condition for print literacy development—an insufficient but non-redundant part of an unnecessary but sufficient condition (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 4). Public library use will not improve academic outcomes by itself, but libraries can be an invaluable teammate in these efforts. It is difficult to conceive how school-based literacy can be developed and supported without convenient access to a compelling and varied collection of print materials, public spaces devoted to the enjoyment of books, and school and community librarians who promote and model a passion for reading.

References


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