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Child Reading Literacy and the Role of Public Libraries: A Review of Secondary Sources

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Executive summary

Purpose of this review

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) has established children's reading literacy as a priority area for evidence building. IMLS's goal is to build evidence-informed approaches to understanding the needs, opportunities, and solutions around improving children's reading engagement in the public library field. As part of this line of work, a review of the research literature on the effects of literacy and reading programs in public libraries (Guven & Haddad, 2023) found that successful programs are based on effective content, instructional methods, and motivational practices, and that programs that incorporate practices such as read-aloud, book discussions, social interaction, adult reading support, and community participation had promising results on children's motivation for reading and reading skills. This review builds on that 2023 literature review by conducting analyses of data from secondary sources to better understand the components of reading engagement, how public libraries foster that engagement, and the role that public libraries play in a greater literacy ecosystem.

Research questions

The review addresses seven research questions:

1. How is engagement in reading defined at different developmental ages? What are measurable outcomes of engaged reading in the public library context?
2. What activities and outreach do public libraries see as best practices to engage children in reading? How do public libraries invest in staff and infrastructure to improve the implementation of these practices?
3. How do children engage with public library resources supporting their reading engagement (individually or together with their caregivers)?
4. How has children's engagement in reading changed over time with the introduction of digital and online resources in public libraries?
5. What does existing research tell us about what a healthy literacy ecosystem is? Where is a public library's best fit as a contributor, and in what ways do public libraries contribute to the overall health of the system?
6. Are there different patterns of children's engagement in reading through public libraries by public library infrastructure or community characteristics?
7. What are considerations for future studies examining the effectiveness of ways public libraries engage children in reading?

How the review was conducted

The study team collected and analyzed data from three types of secondary sources: (1) relevant literature, (2) landscape research and interviews with IMLS staff, and (3) administrative records on grants awarded by IMLS that support public libraries in promoting children's early literacy and reading engagement.

What the review found

The analyses of these secondary data sources revealed important themes related to children's reading engagement and the role libraries play in fostering that engagement:

- **Reading engagement is a multidimensional construct that can be difficult for public libraries to measure directly (RQ1).** Research points to several indicators of children's reading engagement at different developmental ages, but public libraries face challenges to measuring these indicators. Instead, public libraries tend to rely on program participation as a proxy for reading engagement.
- **Public libraries prioritize investments in training for staff to deliver reading literacy programming (RQ2).** The literature and landscape reviews point to the importance of providing professional development to equip public library staff to deliver programming. This emphasis on training is echoed by an internal documentation review of literacy-focused grants, which commonly report providing such training to staff.
- **Public libraries recognize the importance of involving caregivers in children's reading engagement (RQ3).** Many grant activities reviewed either directly engaged caregivers as participants in public library programming, such as storytimes, or provided them with resources, including ideas for literacy activities to conduct at home to effectively engage children in reading outside of the library. Manuscripts from literature and landscape reviews also emphasized that caregivers are central to children's reading engagement.
- **Public libraries have expanded their digital offerings, but little evidence exists about how these tools have changed children's engagement in reading specifically within the library setting (RQ4).** Although some grant recipients invested in digital resources like audiobooks or e-books to engage more children in reading, there was little evidence on how the proliferation of these resources has influenced children's reading in the library setting. Also, there is mixed evidence about the efficacy of digital offerings and engagement in formal learning settings.
- **Public libraries play an important and multifaceted role in the literacy ecosystem (RQ5).** As institutions that children and caregivers can access free of charge, public libraries play a critical role in a healthy ecosystem that emphasizes the importance of early reading and provide caregivers with the resources they need to support children's engagement in reading. Public libraries fill a variety of roles in the literacy ecosystem, acting as resource hubs that offer reading literacy materials for children and caregivers, as direct service providers of programs like summer reading, and as conveners of other community organizations devoted to improving children's reading literacy.
- **Researchers and public libraries recognize the importance of engaging various populations (RQ6).** Research suggests that, to engage communities most effectively in reading, public libraries must pay attention to linguistic, cultural, and economic factors that could hinder children's reading development. Public libraries can act as important resource hubs, providing access to books with authors and characters that represent the communities they serve.
- **Opportunities exist to investigate the effectiveness of public library programming (RQ7).** The literature review and grant data analysis consistently point to the importance of public library initiatives like storytime programs in supporting children's reading engagement. These data sources also reveal that there is limited evidence about the effectiveness of these programs, suggesting opportunities to invest in research that assesses the impact of public libraries' efforts to engage children in reading.

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