Literature Review: Literacy and Reading in Libraries (2011–2016)

Introduction

This literature review synthesizes the research conducted by Lesley Farmer for an annotated bibliography for the upcoming IFLA Guidelines “Using Research to Promote Literacy and Reading in Libraries”. It was written in April 2016 by Ellie Cheung and Annika Waldeck, under the supervision of Lisa Krolak (Head of Documentation, UIL Hamburg).

The review aims to identify recurring themes in the international literature since 2011. It is divided into three sections based on the emerging themes of the annotated bibliography. Each of these sections begins with examples, continues with a description of critical success factors for linking literacy and reading in libraries, and finishes by outlining the impact of the documented literacy activities in libraries globally. Finally, this literature review draws some conclusions about the state of the research on literacy and reading in libraries for the period 2011 – 2016.

(1) General functions of libraries in supporting literacy development

*Provision of an accessible literate environment*

Libraries serve as an important cultural institution in providing a physical learning space for all ages for developing and sustaining literacy skills (Howard, 2013). They can be in form of stand-alone buildings, set up within schools, located in community centres or provide their services with mobile libraries. Libraries provide their users a welcoming literate environment with a collection of diverse literacy materials which can stimulate individual or group learning. They are the ideal place for literacy activities (UNESCO Bangkok, 2011) and are considered as a trusted and welcoming place for cultivating a love of reading and promoting self-directed and content-rich learning (Howard, 2013). For example, in Cambodia SIPAR developed 230 school libraries, where children were provided with a comfortable and quiet environment to strengthen their literacy skills and expand their learning experience outside classrooms (Giraud & Huot, 2012). While a community-based public library in Basel developed a wide range of book collection covering over a dozen languages to meet the demands of immigrant population moving to their city, libraries in Canada offered story times in different languages to the community (Doiron & Asselin, 2011).

The success factors of libraries as literate environments include making the library a welcoming and interesting place to visit regularly, providing relevant reading materials of good qualities and developing a collection that is responsive to the needs of the community and the users’ choices (UNESCO Bangkok, 2011; Asselin & Doiron, 2013). Moreover, offering innovating and interesting literacy activities, connecting programmes and services with the collection, relevant training for the librarians, as well as effective collaboration with stakeholders and the community were also crucial factors for making libraries a successful literate environment (Asselin & Doiron, 2011; Easton, 2014; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2015).
The literature confirms the important function of libraries to provide a literate environment that brings about literacy gains (Easton, 2014). Through the provision of literacy materials and activities, libraries could have significant impact on cultivating a reading culture among families and communities, developing literacy skills of the pre-school children and students, promoting literacy among the youth, and sustaining literacy of the adult learners (Crossly, 2015; Desmond, 2012; Easton, 2014; UNESCO UIL, 2015).

**Dissemination of literacy resources**

Libraries strive to collect and make accessible relevant and appropriate materials for literacy development. To meet this goal, instead of limiting access to resources within the physical entities, libraries take a proactive role to make the literacy materials reaching out to the underserved communities. For example, in Uganda a library book bike was used to deliver a selection of library books to trading posts, health centres and homes, with an aim to reach those community members residing further away from the village (Doiron & Asselin, 2011). The Anchorage Public Library’s Ready to Read Resource Centre sent books, CDs, puppets and other literacy materials to child-care providers and families in isolated areas of Alaska (Howard, 2013). The Room to Read (RtR) classroom library model, which exists in eight countries (i.e. Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam Bangladesh, India, Lao PDR, Nepal and South Africa), supplied small collections of age and reading level appropriate books in the classroom. Teachers were trained on how to integrate books into classroom activities and support recreational reading (UNESCO Bangkok, 2011). Teachers’ capacity on using the literacy materials to promote literacy was also enhanced with the provision of training for them (UNESCO Bangkok, 2011).

The success of these initiatives in providing literacy materials to support literacy development at home, schools and communities in remote areas attributes to effective partnerships with community institutions and NGOs (Howard, 2013). Impacts of making library resources more accessible to the community included extended reading opportunities for students and children, and quality learning experiences for the children with direct access to literate materials (Howard, 2013). Provision of books with appropriate reading levels and content relevant materials to the target groups was also important for the effective implementation of literacy programmes (UNESCO Bangkok).

**Access to information and communication technology**

While information and communications technology (ICT) increasingly plays an important role in promoting literacy nowadays, libraries function as digital hubs for literacy development with the provision of easy access to information technology and effective use of ICT in promoting literacy programmes. For example, US high-school teachers and librarians developed a summer reading programme that used web-based approaches to motivate students to improve their reading and digital skills (Gordon, 2011). Public libraries in Norway complemented school libraries resources with the provision of digitalized picture books and other digital resources (Ingvaldsen, 2014). In the UK, research found that libraries provided
access to a wide variety of technology and supported parents and children in exploring digital knowledge and linking technology to literacy and reading habits (Shared Intelligence, 2014).

Success factors of libraries in linking ICTs to promote literacy development included the development of online reading materials, literacy apps, video, audiobooks and e-books to enhance people’s interest in reading and making the reading materials easily accessible (Howard, 2013; Gordon, 2011). Moreover, expertise of librarians and provision of training and guidance to teachers, parents and children on the use of the new literacy media as well as collaboration with schools were also important for ensuring the efficacy of using ICTs in developing literacy skills (Howard, 2013; Doiron & Asselin, 2011; Shared Intelligence, 2014).

With enhanced access to ICTs via the libraries and various ICT linking literacy initiatives, participants gained reading and research skills (Ingvaldsen, 2014). It is also found that students’ interest in reading was also enhanced with websites providing direct links to reading materials (Gordon, 2011).

(2) Significant roles of libraries in cultivating early literacy

**Promotion of reading in early childhood**

Libraries provide early learning opportunities and resources for literacy development of pre-school children. Libraries in different countries implemented early learning strategies to preschoolers and toddlers at the community, state and national levels. For example, picture books, paper theatre (also called ‘kamishibai’) and reading bags were used in Germany (Brandt, 2012), while a crowdsourced mobile platform for folk tales and children’s books in African languages has been launched in libraries in Kenya (Lajoie et al., 2014). Programmes in the UK centred on enhanced literacy attainment through book gifting (Burnett, 2014; Carpentieriet al., 2011). Portugal has even established ‘bebetecas’ – public libraries especially for babies and toddlers (Ramos, 2012).

Success factors for early literacy programmes for children included storytime resources for children and provision of literacy materials in children’s home languages (Lajoie, 2014; Nemec, 2012). Promoting reading enjoyment and shared reading with care takers, as well as training and support for facilitators contributed to the successful implementation of the programmes (Burnett, 2014).

These programmes improved early childhood literacy, developed an enjoyment of reading among children and led to more frequent visits to the libraries. Moreover, positive impact on children’s communication and cognitive development were also observed (Burnett, 2014; Lajoie et al., 2014).

**Empowering family for early literacy development**

The literature reveals that many libraries’ early literacy programmes targeted families to support them as the first teachers to pre-school children (Howard, 2013). For example, the South African Family Literacy Project promoted early literacy through parent competency in supporting their children’s reading. Three community libraries and eight box libraries were
established to work towards this goal (Desmond, 2012). San Mateo Public Library in the US collaborated with Peninsula Community Foundation to train parents shared reading techniques to engage them in doing daily “book cuddling” with their young children (Anthony et al., 2012). Rheinland-Pfalz public libraries in Germany offered an eight module early literacy programme for parents and their preschool children with the provision of age-appropriate print and audio books, storytelling rhythm activities, training and practice for parents.

Overall success factors appear to be provision of adequate pre-literacy resources, regular programme evaluation and promotion of public libraries as family-friendly places (Barratt-Pugh & Allen, 2011). Moreover, the success of the programmes also counted on close cooperation with professional partners, trained library staff to advise parents and organize workshops on early literacy practices and multi-level community-based interventions (Van den Berg & Bus, 2014; Peifer, & Perez, 2011; Pflaum, 2011).

Library programmes focusing on supporting families in early literacy development reported positive impacts, including more family shared reading, more parent-child verbal interactions and stronger family ties (Barratt-Pugh, 2011; Ramos, 2012; Van den Berg & Bus, 2014). Studies also show that children who were supported by their parents had greater gains in oral language, letter recognition and phonetic awareness (Anthony, William & Anthony, 2012). The literature mentions that these interventions were relatively low cost, but could yield considerable long-term results (Peifer, & Perez, 2011).

(3) Initiatives of different types of libraries worldwide in promoting literacy

**Academic Libraries**

Eight universities around the world collaborated to promote media and information literacy (MIL) as well as intercultural dialogue (Carlsson et al., 2012). Efforts included teaching MIL, analysing MIL education in national curricula and leveraging Common Core State Standards. In the US, the One Campus, One Book event in South Dakota integrated the book into a university course (Francis, 2011). The Queensland University of Technology Library in Australia provided online MIL tutorials to health promotion students (Hodgens, Sendall & Evans, 2012). In South Africa, University of Johannesburg organized a One Book, One Library project (Van Vuren, 2011).

The main success factors were the choice of interesting books, easy reading materials, local topics, author involvement, offering various ways to participate and collaborate, and programme evaluation and modification (Hodgens, Sendall & Evans, 2012; Francis, 2011; Van Vuren, 2011).

The impacts of the above programmes on the students included enhanced information exchange, acquisition of better research skills and social reinforcement of reading (Hodgens, Sendall & Evans, 2012; Francis, 2011; Van Vuren, 2011).

**Public Libraries**
The literature review reveals the important roles of public libraries in different countries by promoting literacy through the implementation of various literacy initiatives. Notably, several studies illustrate that across the world, public libraries use materials in local languages to develop local community literacy. For example, the “We Love Reading (WRL)” project in Jordan established a library in every neighbourhood. These libraries offered books in the local language and featured readings by women trained in reading aloud (Banihaniand & Abu-Ashour, 2015). In Ethiopia, CODE-Ethiopia set-up rural community libraries to support literacy, and created Amharic language stories and picture books in print and digital formats (Asselin, Abebe & Doiron, 2014). Libraries in Arnhem Land in Australia’s Northern Territory organized activities such as storytime at a women’s centre, provided access to local-language materials and supported social services (Shepherd, 2011). In India, the Early Literacy Project established community-based mobile libraries providing literacy activities in the child’s home language (Jayaram, 2012), while the Tural Litigation Entitlement (RLEK) project promoted adult literacy by sending 350 volunteer teachers to teach tribes in their communities (Sharma, 2011). In Honduras, the Riecken Foundation established over fifty community libraries to promote literacy (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2014).

Public libraries also served an important purpose as community spaces for education, training and social interaction, as the examples in Lithuania (Bibliotekospasangai, 2015) and the Palestinian West Bank demonstrate (Mohammed & Awad, 2014). In Egypt, village libraries helped newly literate adults to maintain their literacy skills and supported them in becoming active citizens (Sywelem, 2015). Moreover, different approaches were adopted by public libraries to enhance reading competences. For example, Latvia Valmiera Public Library’s ‘Read and Get Followers’ project used technology to motivate teenagers to read. The project partnered with a software development agency to provide e-books and create an app that enables readers to create their own e-book, build a network with followers and share reading experiences (EIFL, 2015). Public libraries in the Netherlands use a lifelong learning approach with a focus on recreational reading to complement schools’ emphasis on reading skills (Koren, 2011).

The success factors of the aforementioned programmes include conducting literacy activities with learning materials in local languages that are pertinent to everyday life, training library workers and facilitators, actively involving the community, and fostering partnerships, volunteerism and respect for human rights (Asselin, Abebe & Doiron, 2014; Jayaram, 2012). Effective use of ICT and transcending the school curriculum also contributed to the programmes’ success in enhancing literacy (EIFL, 2015; Koren, 2011; Sywelem, 2015).

The impacts of these literacy initiatives in public libraries included enhanced literacy of children, adults and women, the development of reading behaviours and competencies, more civic engagement, improved participation of women and increased networking (Sharma, 2011; Banihaniand & Abu-Ashour, 2015; Sywelem, 2015). These all help building a foundation for lifelong learning, cultivate social inclusion and foster countries’ long-term economic development.

**School Libraries**
School libraries around the world use various methods to raise their students’ literacy levels and promote positive reading habits. In the US, several school librarians used readers’ theatre to promote positive reading habits (Fredericks, 2011). Portugal’s school libraries offered a comprehensive collection of books that meet students’ needs and interests, organized author visits and cultural events, involved the school community and aligned their efforts with the National Reading Plan (Martins et al., 2012). Room to Read, a global organization dedicated to promoting and enabling education through programs focused on literacy and gender equality in education, reached out to 10 million children around the world by facilitating the growth of 17,500 school libraries with book-rich environments and training 10,000 teachers in literacy instruction and library management (Coddington et al., 2015).

A general success factor for school libraries seems to be the employment of a trained (teacher) librarian (Hughes, 2013). Moreover, the studies indicate that comprehensive collections meeting students’ needs and interests, author visits, teacher training on reading activities, local advocacy and partnership, as well as alignment with the National Reading Plan ensured the effectiveness of school libraries (Coddington, Jukes & Cooper, 2015; Martins & Martins, 2012).

Research shows that the school libraries’ efforts on literacy development had a positive impact on students’ literacy and learning outcomes (Frederick, 2011). Students read more frequently with enhanced motivation for reading (Nielen & Bus, 2015). It is also found that there was a link between the employment of a teacher-librarian and higher reading and writing scores, and positive correlation between school library programmes and student language test scores (Hughes, 2013; Lance, Schwarz & Rodney, 2014).

**Prison Libraries**

The Council of Europe recommended that every prison should have a library (Perschers, 2015). In Britain, British volunteers and prison librarians organized book clubs for prisoners (Hartley et al., 2014). In Australia, the “Better Beginnings” Family Literacy Programme of the State Library of Western Australia worked in collaboration with the Corrective Services and prison-based family support services to develop and deliver accredited adult literacy programmes that integrate family literacy principles. Moreover, inmates were also encouraged to make their own audiobooks of stories read by themselves and shared with their families to help improve family relationships (Jones, 2014). A Polish prison library’s literacy club enhances cultural activities by organizing meetings with authors and publishing prisoners’ writings (Zybert, 2011).

Peschers (2015) identified the following success factors when comparing prison library programmes in various countries: an attractive literate environment, access to information (especially media) and professional librarians.

The reported impacts of the projects were positive. In Britain, prisoners gained literacy skills which contributed to their rehabilitation and employability (Hartley & Turvery, 2014). In Australia, incarcerated parents improved their literacy skills and learned age-appropriate activities to share with their children during family visits (Jones, 2014). In Poland, the inmates’ awareness of negative behaviour and willingness to change increased (Zybert, 2011).
Conclusion

The literature review addresses the various functions of libraries in supporting literacy development. Libraries provide inviting and welcoming spaces for all people, regardless of age, gender and educational levels, to develop, sustain or enhance literacy skills. Libraries offer a rich variety of literacy materials to meet the different learning needs and interests of community members and strive to make their resource more accessible, using creative means such as using a bike to deliver books or establishing a library box rotating system in the classroom. They traditionally aim to provide services for underprivileged populations. With the advent of technology, libraries also serve as a digital hub to provide users with an ICT infrastructure for knowledge acquisition. Effective use of ICTs, such as digitalizing reading materials, using library apps and social media also foster the implementation of libraries’ literacy strategies. In sum, libraries provide learning opportunities for all that play a significant role in supporting people’s literacy development.

The collected studies also show that, next to the family and school environment as important spaces for the development of literacy skills, libraries are an important space and vehicle to promote good reading and literacy practices from a very young age. They are particularly important if the family is not offering a rich literate environment and is not fostering a joy of reading by setting a good example and regularly reading to and with a child. They also complement the important work of schools in teaching literacy skills as advancing literacy skills need constant practice. Libraries can provide users with constantly changing relevant and interesting reading and literacy materials and support the establishment of a positive attitude towards literacy.

Various types of libraries all over the world, including school libraries, academic libraries, public libraries and prison libraries, have taken different steps to promote literacy. Some have worked in partnership with schools, NGOs and other agencies. Some have adopted different approaches such as the use of ICT, production of reading materials in local languages, integrating their services with the school or university curriculum, and development of different community-based initiatives for meeting the needs of respective target groups and users. Studies show that being responsive to the needs of the target groups with the development of appropriate library collections and materials, effective partnerships with organizations and agencies, and the provision of adequate training to empower library personnel and relevant staff are the common success factors of the libraries’ literacy programmes. While the success of these programmes has not only enhanced the literacy levels of the target communities, they have also nurtured a lifelong learning culture, bringing long-term impact on social, economic and civic development.