

Out of the Box and Into the Book

Innovative Library Partnerships to Close the 30 Million Word Gap

MICHELLE BALDINI AND MARIANNE MARTENS

Recent research has shown that early literacy is directly connected to school readiness. Talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing, the basic tenets of Every Child Ready to Read 2 (ECRR2), not only increase young children's vocabulary, they also help them process new information. However, the disparity in vocabularies of children of lower and higher income families is one of the greatest battles of the twenty-first century.

Research reported by psychologists Hart and Risley found that by age four, children in lower socioeconomic status (SES) families heard 30 million words fewer than their counterparts in higher SES families.¹ More recently, a study conducted at Stanford University found that child-directed speech increased children's ability to retain, interpret, and learn new vocabularies more quickly.²

This is supported by Patricia Kuhl's work on early learning and the mind, especially her work on how environmental factors (such as SES) shape early learning and how early intervention

and exposure to language optimizes brain development.³ Parental involvement in early literacy programs of all kinds is crucial to the health of the developing brain. Moreover, children raised in lower SES families are at greater risk for overall academic failure. Closing this word gap is becoming a major priority of organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, Hillary Clinton's Too Small to Fail Initiative, Reach Out and Read, the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) and Public Library Association's (PLA) ECRR2, and ALSC's Babies Need Words Every Day.

Libraries are leading advocates for early literacy and closing the word gap. Because they serve all populations, they can make a significant impact on families, especially in lower SES populations. Scholastic states that, "Six in ten parents with children ages 0–5 (60 percent) have received advice that children should be read aloud to from birth; however, just under half of parents in the lowest-income households (47 percent) received this advice vs. 74 percent in the highest income households."⁴



Michelle Baldini, MLS, received a starred review for her first young adult novel, *Unraveling* (Delacorte 2008). She earned an MLS, specializing in young adult literature, and has since worked extensively in the field of children's literature. At the School of Library and Information Science at Kent State University in Ohio, Michelle works as Coordinator of the Reinberger Children's Library Center alongside the top leaders in librarianship and children's literature. **Marianne Martens**, PhD, is Assistant Professor at Kent State University's School of Library and Information Science, and co-directs the Reinberger Children's Library Center. Her research and teaching covers the interconnected fields of youth services librarianship and publishing, with a special

focus in the area of Digital Youth. Prior to her academic career, Martens worked in children's publishing in New York. You can read more about her at mariannemartens.org.

Overall, public libraries make it their mission to provide service to the entire community with a special focus on the underserved. They can make a difference in reaching these lower SES populations. Healthcare providers also play an important role in reaching this vulnerable population. Both can work together to educate families on early literacy.

Several organizations are partnering with libraries to reach children and their parents and caregivers in unconventional ways, for example, healthcare providers and nonprofit organizations.

In view of this, Kent State University's School of Library and Information Science (KSU/SLIS) partnered with Akron Children's Hospital to explore new ways of closing the word gap. Two events were held last spring at the Emily Cooper Welty Expressive Therapy Center at Akron Children's Hospital.

A Daily Dose of Reading: Partnering to Promote Early Literacy featured keynote speaker *New York Times* best-selling author and illustrator Rosemary Wells. Wells has long been an advocate for early literacy with her book *Read to Your Bunny*. She recommends that parents and caregivers, "Every day, make a quiet, restful place for twenty minutes. Put your child in your lap and read a book aloud. In the pages of the book you will find a tiny vacation of privacy and intense love. It costs nothing but twenty minutes and a [free] library card."⁵

At the event, Wells read to a group of thirty-five attendees (children and families, and therapy dog Maverick). Wells also spoke to professionals who work to promote early literacy, and local experts on literacy and healthcare gave five-minute lightning talks. Speakers included Community Health Supervisor for Summit County Public Health, Aimee Budnik; Karen Carbaugh, the *Reach Out and Read* Coordinator at Akron Children's Hospital; Nicole Robinson, the Outreach Manager for the Wick Poetry Center at Kent State University who promotes early literacy with patients and families at the hospital; Laura McFalls, Early Childhood Specialist for Akron-Summit County Public Library; Bibliotherapist and Bereavement Consultant for Akron Children's Hospital Mandy Seymour; and Kathy Fry, Coordinator for the Reading Rover program at Akron Children's Hospital. Speakers shared their work on educating parents and caregivers on the importance of early literacy and discussed programs that support these efforts and opportunities for collaboration.

The following day, SLIS held a symposium for librarians and educators, again keynoted by Wells. The symposium included a music and movement program where librarians Laura McFalls and Anne-Marie Savoie got the audience up and moving as they demonstrated how to give an educational and entertaining program. ECRR2 shows that children learn through singing,

and music and movement programs are a fun way for children to learn language, gain social interactions, develop emotional connections, think creatively, and stay active.

Tricia Twarogowski, who was awarded the 2010 Autism Society of North Carolina's Autism Professional of the Year award, gave a presentation about the importance of serving young children with autism and other disabilities. She is branch manager at the Northwest Akron Branch of Akron-Summit County Public Library and offers sensory storytime in collaboration with the Autism Society of Greater Akron. You can see Twarogowski's "Programming for Children with Special Needs" blog series on the ALSC website.⁶

To promote the goals of ECRR2 and close the 30 million-word gap, it seems that there are important ways that librarians and healthcare professionals can collaborate. Both work daily to advocate for better and fair education and for the wellness of children. Each have access to lots of children, especially those in SES fam-

ilies. Cultivating partnerships with key community members who have access to children in need will help battle such things as the disparity in vocabularies and close the word gap—a million at a time. ☺

Libraries are leading advocates for early literacy and closing the word gap. Because they serve all populations, they can make a significant impact on families, especially in lower SES populations.

References

1. Betty Hart and Todd R. Risely, "The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3," *American Educator* 27, no. 1 (2003).
2. Anne Fernald, Virginia A. Marchman, and Adriana Weisleder, "SES Differences in Language Processing Skill and Vocabulary Are Evident at 18 Months," *Developmental Science* 16, no. 2 (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/desc.12019>.
3. Patricia Kuhl, "Linking Infant Speech Perception to Language Acquisition: Phonetic Learning Predicts Language Growth," in *Infant Pathways to Language: Methods, Models, and Research Directions*, eds. John Colombo, Peggy McCardle, and Lisa Freund (New York: Erlbaum, 2008).
4. Scholastic, Inc. Kids and Family Reading Report, 5th ed., accessed Oct. 21, 2015, www.scholastic.com/readingreport/index.htm.
5. Rosemary Wells, *Read to Your Bunny* (New York: Scholastic, 1998), 28.
6. Tricia Twarogowski, "Programming for Children with Special Needs," *ALSC* (blog), accessed June 23, 2009, June 30, 2009, July 8, 2009, July 15, 2009, July 22, 2009, www.alsc.org/blog/2009/06/programming-for-children-with-special-needs.