



Taking Time to Look Back

Reflective Practice in Librarianship

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What makes a children's library program successful? What measures indicate success? Is attendance evidence of success? Is making a difference in the lives of program participants and facilitators evidence of success?

We often use numbers to measure success, but what does "success" really look like? I asked these questions after facilitating a new program called Accidental Art: For Children of All Abilities at the Library. Reflection on the experience led to an integration of theory in practice, and programming hasn't been the same since.

Accidental Art: For Children of All Abilities at the Library

In 2014, the Youth Services Inclusive Programming Committee of the Toledo Lucas County Public Library was formed to explore programming for children of all abilities. We had some experience in this area: our inclusive preschool program, offered jointly with the Lucas County Board of Developmental Disabilities, was well attended. Consequently, two pilot programs for school age children were proposed, one at a branch location and one at Main Library.

In preparation for the program at Main Library, I consulted families with children of all abilities who regularly visit the library. They were enthusiastic about our focus on inclusion; however, one family recommended targeted programs for children with specific conditions. While not aligned with the committee's vision of programs that encouraged an appreciation of differences and fostered acceptance, the family's input was important.

To honor the family's recommendation and simultaneously fulfill our mandate, elements of a program series from Barbara Klipper's book, *Programming for Children and Teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, were incorporated in our plan.¹ The series' sensory art activities and its focus on creativity and physical accessibility recommended it for use with children of all abilities.

Our program plan, which featured the children's book *Beautiful Oops!* by Barney Saltzberg, emphasized Saltzberg's message that mistakes can be opportunities to create.² Art making was limited to two simple activities: ripped paper collage and dropper painting using watercolor and pipettes. A social story was developed and a picture schedule was included in the program's digital presentation to help children transition between activities. Interpreters were available for children with hearing impairments. Program registration was limited to fifteen children and welcomed family participation. Two library staff members were assigned for adequate coverage. The room setup described in Klipper's book was reviewed with our staff to ensure accessibility.³ The program was publicized, and fliers were emailed for distribution to seven community organizations involved in serving children with disabilities.



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Twelve children and five adults attended the program. They listened to the story, interacted, and created collages and paintings. One family asked if we were going to offer similar programs. The supply receipts were submitted for reimbursement and program statistics were entered into the program database. Most of the artwork was left behind; the participants did not borrow the featured book, and program attendance was below capacity. I wondered if our program was successful.

As children's librarians, we are not taught reflective practice as a matter of course. We often find ourselves charging into the next round of programming with only cursory reflection on the programs we just finished. We collect a wide variety of program data to prove our worth to employers, library communities, funding sources, and to ourselves, but do we pause to critically consider our experience?



The program room was set up to provide easy access to materials and content.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is an intentional thought process undertaken to examine experience and improve action. Donald Schön identified two types of reflective practice: “reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action.”⁴ Reflection-in-action occurs during an experience and reflection-on-action is done afterward, to learn from experience.⁵ Reflection-on-action involves reflecting on what has happened; reflecting on your feelings about the experience and the role you played; examining your assumptions, knowledge, and the context of your practice; and synthesizing this information to improve future action.⁶ Healthcare and social work educators and professional organizations adopted the theory of reflective practice as a way to develop new and experienced professionals.⁷

Char Booth identified the importance of reflective practice in the preparation and development of library educators. “*Reflective practice* is the first element of instructional literacy, and is focused on pursuing instructor development as you teach or train.”⁸

Reflections on a Program

Reflection may follow a discomfoting situation.⁹ A quick recording of program data seemed an inadequate means of examining the success of our Accidental Art program. A framework to reflect on what had happened and evaluate the program's worth was needed.

In her article, “Measuring Outcomes for Teen Technology Programs,” Johannah Genett recounted how Hennepin County Library used outcomes to evaluate its established Teen Tech Squad program.¹⁰ The Institute of Museum and Library Services promotes the use of Outcome-Based Planning and Evaluation

(OBPE) as an important way to both plan and evaluate programs.

“OBPE goes beyond documenting *what* you did and measures *what difference* you made in the life of your audience—how has your audience changed.”¹¹ These changes involve changes in behavior, attitude, skills, knowledge, conditions, and status.¹² The OBPE logic model could be used to evaluate our program's merits and limitations and, if the process proved enlightening, it could guide program planning in the future.

Applying OBPE

The first step in OBPE is to identify the audience.¹³ Our identified audience was children of all abilities, ages five to twelve, their families, and caregivers.

The second step in OBPE is to identify the audience's needs and design activities to meet those needs.¹⁴ The Inclusive Programming Committee believed that all children needed access to library programs. Families with children of all abilities concurred and one family's expressed need for targeted programs was noted for future consideration. Activities were designed so children of all abilities could participate successfully. The program plan included a number of accommodations to improve access to activities.

OBPE next considers resources dedicated to or used by a program. These are called inputs.¹⁵ The program's inputs included a total of twenty-nine staff hours of planning, program development, technical services, marketing, custodial, and presentation/cleanup. The program was held in our children's program room and the cost in materials was minimal because existing supplies were utilized. Eight copies of *Beautiful Oops!* were



Our marketing department created a colorful flier that emphasized inclusion.

added to the library's collection at a cost of \$70. The program's cost in staff time initially raised concerns about its efficiency, but it was a pilot and future programs would require less staff planning time and leftover materials could be reused.

OBPE then examines program outputs or program products expressed numerically and used to evaluate productiveness.¹⁶ One program was presented, and twelve children and five adults attended. One online program listing was posted, and sixty-four fliers were distributed. Seven emails with attached fliers were sent to community schools and agencies.

At first glance, the program's inputs seemed disproportionately large compared to its outputs, but the next step in OBPE, determining outcomes, would measure benefit. Outcomes are what participants take away from a program and are evaluated by "a change in a target audience's skills, attitudes, knowledge, behavior, status, or life condition brought about by experiencing a program."¹⁷ That change, measured by percentage, is an indicator of outcome.¹⁸

Reah Joyce Rubin identified a continuum of library program outcomes: "Awareness of service, Participation/Use of service, Satisfaction with service, Perceptions/Feelings, Attitudes/Values, Community connections/Social networks, Knowledge, Skills, Behavior, and Condition/Status."¹⁹ Outcomes were not identified during the planning stage, but our program goal of providing an accessible library program for children of all abilities, ages five to twelve, corresponded to Rubin's first two outcomes: "Awareness of service" and "Participation/Use of service."

To raise awareness of service, the program was publicized to children of all abilities, ages five to twelve, their families, and caregivers. If marketing efforts were successful, a 50 percent publicity response rate was deemed a reasonable indicator of

success; that's 50 percent of participants reporting they heard about the program or saw our fliers and came to the program.

Unfortunately, a participant feedback survey was not developed to measure this outcome; however, only one of the seven community organizations responded positively to the event flier email. This highlighted the importance of collaborating earlier in the planning process. If the aim is to include children of all abilities, it will take the efforts of many service providers to make that happen. That being said, the participants included children of all abilities and families, despite our planning lapses.

To encourage participation, many program elements were included to ensure accessibility. If the program was accessible, a 70 percent participation rate was deemed a reasonable indicator of success. Ten of the twelve children, or 83 percent, attended the reading and discussion of *Beautiful Oops!*, and the same percentage participated in both art activities.

The plan produced an accessible program for the majority of our participants; however, two children did not fully participate. One child arrived late with his parents and missed the book portion of the program. He participated briefly in the art activities, but was observed to resist his parents' help. He interacted with other children with his mother's assistance.

The second child also had difficulty focusing on the discussion and art activities. He found other ways to interact with his peers. These observations supported the need for programs targeting specific populations, just as the family had suggested prior to program implementation.

Rubin's third outcome on the continuum is "Satisfaction with service."²⁰ It was not possible to evaluate our participants' satisfaction with service without a participant feedback survey. Participant feedback is essential to measure whether certain outcome indicators have been met, to determine program effectiveness, to plan future programs, and to justify services for funding.

Unexpected Outcomes

The outcomes listed at the top of Rubin's continuum—changes in knowledge, skills, behavior, and condition/status—are more difficult to influence than the previous three outcomes discussed.²¹ Rubin warns us to consider our role in changes as contributory. "The outcomes reflect the library's contribution to a goal. But outcomes cannot be attributed to the library alone."²² Three meaningful interactions were observed that indicated the program contributed to a change in the participants' knowledge and behavior. These changes were not planned for and were unexpected.

The first interaction occurred during the reading of *Beautiful Oops!* A child asked, "What is imagination?" Other children offered answers and ideas spontaneously. This discussion was evidence of participant engagement with the program and with other group members and demonstrated transfer of information. The children accepted each other's input as it was given.

The second interaction occurred during the art portion of the program. A group of children became curious about a boy who used a walker, and one girl asked his mother why he couldn't talk or walk unaided. His mother explained and taught them how to sign, "Thank you." She then led introductions and her son smiled at his new friends.

No other children or family members were asked to explain their abilities, and the facilitators did not assume an informational role. This interaction could have been emotionally hurtful if the boy's mother hadn't offered information and introductions. Curiosity about abilities may arise in future programs and should be anticipated.

The third interaction occurred several weeks after the program when this boy and his family returned to the library. The girl who asked about him during the program was also present. She approached, smiled, and greeted him by name.

The boy's mother responded warmly and prompted the boy to greet her. The boy expressed happiness. The girl asked his mother how to sign the word "Hello." The mother laughed and said, "You just wave!" The girl made eye contact with the boy, waved, and said, "Hello!" They stayed together for some time before going their separate ways.

These were meaningful, spontaneous interactions between children and a parent who may not have interacted otherwise. The girl's continued interest in talking to the boy in a way he could understand indicated that she was now aware of an alternative way to communicate and her question indicated that she saw the boy's mother as a source of information. The boy's patience, his happy responses, and his mother's obvious pleasure with these connections indicated engagement in new relationships.

The significance of these interactions wasn't fully understood until the OBPE logic model was used to analyze the experience. We all share stories about the effects our programs have on children's lives and feel good about our efforts, but without planned and measurable outcomes, it isn't possible to objectively determine a program's value.

Reflective practice enriches library service for children, their families, and caregivers. It promotes critical thinking about children's librarianship. Reflective practice and the application of the OBPE logic model led to a rigorous, prescriptive understanding of the merits and limitations of our inclusive program. Although OBPE was not used to plan and implement this program, using it to evaluate the experience generated vital questions about community needs, collaboration with community

partners, program planning, and standards for success. We can now confidently decide if we want to repeat this program and, if so, what modifications are required.

Future inclusive program planning should include early and ongoing collaboration with community partners involved in providing services to children of all abilities, as well as the community members intended to be served; the identification of community needs and library activities to meet those needs; and a determination of outcomes and evaluation methods to determine if outcomes have been met.

We may not be able to analyze every program this thoroughly, but we can practice reflection-on-action to help make future programs meaningful. We simply need to pause, step back, and ask ourselves questions about our last program:

"What did we do?"

"Why?"

"For what audience?"

"For what benefit?"

This simple reflection could change the way we practice. 

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