PEER-REVIEWED

Storytime in a Box

The Cooperative Approach to Preschool Storytime Planning

KATIE BOWERS, VIVIAN HOWARD, AND ALISON BROWN

Preschool storytimes have been a standard public library offering for more than one hundred years.[1] Most public libraries offer preschool storytimes several times per week and follow a familiar pattern of read-aloud stories intermixed with sing-alongs, action songs, and finger plays, frequently connected to a weekly theme. Planning for these weekly story-time sessions can take a significant amount of staff time, as staff choose a theme and then select relevant, age-appropriate, and appealing stories, songs, and activities to fill the time slot.

In multibranch library systems, this planning is often replicated at each branch, as each youth services team prepares its own unique program offerings. In search of greater efficiency, some public library systems have experimented with other models of program planning, with planning being done centrally for the entire system or by several branches partnering to work together. Is there a single model of program planning that works best and that staff prefer?

This research study evaluates staff opinions of cooperative program planning for preschool storytimes in a regional Canadian multibranch public library system, serving a geographic area that includes urban, suburban, and rural communities. This library system, which declined to be named, recently piloted a cooperative preschool program planning model at eleven of its fourteen branches. Prior to this pilot, all but three of the fourteen branches in the system planned their preschool story-time programs independently, with all program planning being done in branch.

In the pilot, participating branches were partnered with one or two other branches, each of which planned a set number of programs for a session and then shared these programs with their partner branches. Thus, in branches participating in the pilot, youth services staff were only responsible for planning a fraction of the number of preschool story-time sessions in comparison with staff at the "independent" branches.

This study surveyed staff at all fourteen branches, asking their opinions and attitudes about which method of program planning they considered to be more efficient and which they preferred as an approach to story-time planning. The survey was accompanied by two follow-up interviews with library staff members. The report that follows provides an overview of relevant prior research followed by a summary of our

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findings related to library staff attitudes and recommendations for preschool story-time planning.

The Benefits of Shared Reading

Evidence-based research has, for decades, consistently demonstrated that young children benefit in multiple ways from shared story reading. These benefits include a lifelong love of reading; a deepened understanding of the world; improved early literacy, critical thinking, and communication skills; increased empathy and compassion; improved confidence and creativity; better academic performance once they enter the school system; and strengthened family bonds.[2]

Research clearly demonstrates that early exposure to reading supports young children's development of early literacy skills that are crucial to academic success and personal development, including vocabulary, phonics, and language development; grammatical understanding; and knowledge of print concepts.[3] Shared early reading experiences are a strong predictor of reading success, and children who were read to regularly and often as preschoolers demonstrate improved listening, attention, and comprehension skills once they begin formal schooling.[4]

Researchers have found that the quality of the reading experience is vitally important and matters even more than the quantity of early reading experiences in supporting literacy skills and facilitating language development.[5] Interactive, engaged, dialogic reading that prompts thoughtful conversation, reflection, and critical thinking has been shown to increase children's literacy and social skills.[6]

In a 2006 study, Daniel Weigel, Sally Martin, and Kymberley Bennet noted, "Parents who express positive attitudes about reading and actively engage their children in literacy-enhancing activities are creating an atmosphere of enthusiasm for literacy and learning."[7]

Shared family reading, together with parental demonstration and promotion of reading, increases the likelihood that children will read for pleasure in the future.[8] Importantly, research suggests that children who have access to books at home and whose parents or caregivers promote reading for pleasure are more likely to be strong, confident readers, regardless of socioeconomic status.[9] The benefits of reading for pleasure extend beyond long-term education gains. A recent review of the literature commissioned by The Reading Agency revealed that reading for pleasure can lead to greater self-awareness, empathy, social and cultural capital, focus, relaxation, and communication skills. Those who read because they enjoy it are more likely to read frequently and widely.

Reading for pleasure is linked to strong emotional literacy, social inclusion, improved academic achievement, higher employment levels, and increased levels of trust, confidence, tolerance, and self-esteem.[10] Reading with children—and engaging them in careful listening, questioning, and responding—can lay important groundwork for critical thinking.[11] Critical literacy skills enable children to analyze and interpret their world and those of others.

Research also demonstrates that reading together deepens the relationship between a child and their caregiver and strengthens their emotional attachment.[12] Reading with a child increases caregiver confidence and sparks a deeper interest in the child's life.[13] Importantly, reading with a child has been shown to enhance parenting capacity as it provides an opportunity to discuss feelings and issues with children and impart lessons to them in a secure and intimate setting.[14]

The Role of the Public Library

Most public libraries play an active and engaged role in encouraging shared caregiver-child reading through preschool storytimes that exemplify the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's six early literacy skills: print motivation, phonological awareness, vocabulary development, narrative skills, print awareness, and letter knowledge.[15] These six early literacy skills form the basis of Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR), a framework introduced in 2004 by the Public Library Association (PLA) and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC).[16] The focus of ECRR is on modeling interactive, dialogic reading strategies and teaching parents and caregivers how to encourage these early literacy skills so that their children enter school "ready to read."

Thus, since the introduction of ECRR, preschool storytimes have increasingly functioned as a partnership between public libraries and parents/caregivers to promote research-based strategies for helping young children to develop critical early literacy skills. The second edition of Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR2) expands upon these early literacy skills, describing the importance of talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing for young children's early literacy development. Librarians who work with children are trained in how to use ECRR activities in their programming and explicitly model these activities in their preschool storytimes.[17] The Every Child Ready to Read framework has been widely adopted by public libraries in Canada.[18]

However, while there is a wealth of research documenting the best practices for story-time delivery, such as ECRR and ECRR2 approaches, and the impact of shared adult-child story reading, there is a dearth of research investigating what happens behind the scenes—how library staff approach planning for these critically important programs. This paper addresses that gap, by asking library staff who plan and deliver preschool storytimes about their preferred strategy: to plan all programs independently, with all planning being done in branch, or to plan cooperatively, sharing program plans with partner branches.

Research Findings

Three of the fourteen branches of this public library system have been successfully sharing the workload of planning preschool storytimes for several years. The cooperative approach emerged organically at the initiative of library staff and has been embraced by participating staff members as an efficient approach to the time-consuming task of story-time program planning.

Together, staff at the three branches decide on themes for a cycle of story-time programs, then divide up the themes among themselves. Planning involves selecting books and songs, as well as crafts and other activities, and preparing a written outline of the sequence of activities (a story-time "script") included in the storytime. Materials for each of the programs, such as books, song sheets, craft activities, and puppets, are placed in bins that are shipped between the branches every week. Thus staff at each of the "cooperative" branches only need to plan for a third of the story-time sessions in a given programming cycle.

This initiative temporarily expanded in early 2014, when eight other branches within the system were asked to join in a pilot project to test the success of cooperative program planning at other branches. Staff members were paired with programmers from one or two other branches. Experienced programmers from the three branches that had previously been successfully running cooperatively planned programs acted as mentors for this pilot.

Staff at the eight pilot branches were guided by their mentors through the process of sharing their program planning, from the first steps of deciding on themes to evaluating their shared bins after the program was presented to a live audience. The first cooperatively planned programs in this pilot initiative were debuted in March 2014, and the cycle was completed that May. After the conclusion, branch staff were given the choice whether or not to continue with cooperative program planning. Since May 2014, some branches have continued with the cooperative planning method, while others have reverted to preparing all programs independently. Prior to this study, their thoughts on each approach to program planning had not been systematically collected and analyzed.

Methodology

A mixed method online questionnaire was developed for distribution to all staff who plan and facilitate preschool programming as part of their regular duties. The questionnaire included three multiple-choice questions to collect basic quantitative data and seven free text questions to elicit more detailed, qualitative information. The final page of the survey asked participants to contact the researcher directly if they were interested in participating in a short, semistructured follow-up interview.

The questionnaire was distributed to children's programming staff at all fourteen branches in February 2016. Twenty-two staff members completed the entire survey and a further six staff members answered the multiple-choice questions only. Two participants volunteered to participate in follow-up interviews, both of which were completed in March 2016.

Participants who volunteered for an interview were asked a set of five open-ended questions, which often led to follow-up questions and further discussion.

Results

The majority of survey respondents (61 percent) work at an urban library branch, 36 percent work at suburban branches, while only one respondent works at a rural branch. Sixty percent of respondents are working at libraries that currently plan preschool storytimes cooperatively, while the other 40 percent work at branches where program planning is done independently. However, three-quarters (75 percent) of participants participated in the 2014 cooperative planning pilot.

Participants were asked about their perceptions of the benefits of cooperative program planning. The most frequently mentioned benefits were increased efficiency, exposure to new materials and new ideas, and sharing and cooperation between staff members. Staff also mentioned that cooperative program planning can result in increased variety in programs and increased creativity.

Participants were next asked about the disadvantages and challenges of cooperative program planning, and all responses agreed that the main disadvantage is that communities and story-time audiences are all different and unique; therefore, a program that is wildly successful in one branch may fail in a different branch with a different audience. The same program will simply not always work in the same way in multiple branches.

In addition, two respondents voiced displeasure about the intrinsic quality of the cooperatively planned programs themselves, stating that they sometimes did not get enough materials or enough variety of materials to conduct a successful storytime. Five respondents explained how more time was taken up by preparing programs for other branches than just for planning for their own branch, so the perceived increased efficiency was, in actual practice, illusory. Sharing a limited set of materials between branches, having to add materials to the bins to supplement overly sparse content, communicating with counterparts in other branches, and scheduling of bin transportation were also noted as disadvantages of the cooperative approach.

Participants had several interesting suggestions about how the process could be improved. One common recommendation was to make sure that the demographics are similar between participating branches and that the program being

shared between branches is being used for the same type of audience. Some participants also noted that more time for face-to-face discussion between library staff members throughout the planning process would be valuable.

The final two parts of the questionnaire asked participants for their views on how well both types of programs supported early literacy skills and on the overall quality of cooperative planned programs in contrast to those planned individually. Most respondents (65 percent) felt that both approaches supported development of early literacy equally and were not able to make a distinction based on this criterion, noting that all staff are trained equally and should be able to model early literacy skills regardless of whether a program is planned cooperatively or independently.

In contrast, 25 percent of respondents felt that individually planned programs were more successful at supporting early literacy because they were more tailored to the needs of their particular audience, whereas 10 percent felt that cooperative programs were more successful in this regard because they were more carefully and thoughtfully planned.

Almost three quarters of respondents (74 percent) held the opinion that both cooperatively and individually planned programs are of similar quality. Two respondents felt that cooperatively planned programs are of higher quality, and three felt that they are of lower quality than individually planned programs.

Several text responses to this question noted that the main disadvantage of cooperatively planned programs is not the quality of the program per se; participants once again reiterated that the main issue is that cooperatively planned programs do not always fit the community or even the style of the staff member responsible for delivering the program. Several respondents referred to cooperatively planned programs as "a cookie-cutter approach" in which programs are not personalized for the specific needs and interests of the audience they will be presented to.

Two interviews were conducted with participants holding very different opinions of cooperative program planning. Interviewee A continued to plan programs cooperatively after the conclusion of the pilot project, largely because she felt that cooperative planning ensured that ideas were fresh and new, and it also saved her time. She felt strongly that she was still able to personalize the cooperatively planned storytimes because she and her partners always incorporated choices in books and activities in order to encourage flexibility and the ability to customize.

In contrast, Interviewee B had participated in the cooperative planning pilot but did not enjoy the approach at all and reverted to independent program planning as soon as the pilot concluded. Interviewee B is an experienced library staff member who has been planning programs for a long time and enjoys the creativity and freedom of working alone to imagine and structure a session. She felt cooperative program planning tended to stifle this freedom rather than encourage it. She also noted that ideas and themes are constantly shared with youth services staff members within the branch and felt strongly that it is easier to prepare programs in house than to have to keep the needs of another branch in mind. These two interviews provided two diametrically opposed perspectives and very different reasons why this method may be the preferred choice for some programmers but not for others.

Overall, this research study identified some interesting differences in points of view concerning the benefits and the challenges of cooperative program planning. Staff opinions were quite divided on most aspects of the cooperative approach, making it challenging to conclude whether the cooperative or the independent approach is the best option for multibranch public libraries.

First of all, the issue of whether or not cooperative planning actually saved staff time turned out to be contentious, with no clear consensus of opinion. Some youth services programmers strongly believe that the cooperative approach saves time, while others feel that it is actually more time consuming than independent program planning. For example, one respondent noted that "less planning time is required per programmer" with cooperative program planning, while another said that the primary benefit of the cooperative approach "is being able to do a lot of programming with minimal planning time." On the other hand, a different respondent reported that she and her colleagues "think we actually spend *more* time trying to find a good selection of books to put in our bins [to share with other branches] than we would if we were picking two or three books for each week [for our own independent program]." Another observed that constantly having to think about what would work in other branches "increased rather than decreased our workload and prep time."

When asked about wanting to participate in cooperative planning in the future, one respondent noted that they would, but only if "there was extra time allotted for this task" because of the extra staff time it occupied.

Interviewee A observed that it took practice to actually save time by planning cooperatively. During the first cycle of cooperative planning, she felt that staff definitely took more time than they would have done planning independently. However, Interviewee A said that the process became easier as programmers became more familiar and comfortable with the needs of other branches.

Interviewee A also noted that she and her colleagues communicated regularly with their counterparts at their partner branches and gave them frequent feedback on the success of their program plans. She felt that this feedback was critical to the success of the cooperative relationship. She also noted that she always put a variety of activities in her story-time bins, some for older children and some for younger, so that partner branches could select materials most suitable for

their participants and thus have built-in flexibility and choice in using the program plan. Interviewee A had been participating in cooperative planning for a long period of time and therefore had learned how to balance the extra time it took to plan for multiple branches by planning extensively but only for a fraction of the number of programs.

One of the biggest advantages of cooperative program planning was identified as exposure to new ideas, stories, and activities. One respondent stated that there is "more variety of book selection [and] craft ideas" in cooperatively planned programs.

During a follow-up interview, Interviewee A expanded on this idea, explaining that she and her staff would sometimes think the themes chosen by other branches were a bit strange and would wonder how storytimes could be developed on themes like "pizza," "fruit," or "worms," but when they received the bin from their partner, they were surprised by how successful and innovative the stories and crafts were.

This respondent acknowledged that she and her staff would never have thought of these program themes and had been completely unaware of these materials, so the cooperative approach gave them some fresh new ideas and prevented storytimes from getting stale.

Another survey respondent observed that cooperative programming has a double benefit: it introduces new ideas but also ensures greater consistency of story-time quality and content between branches, as ideas and plans are shared. She noted that patrons may go to storytimes at more than one branch, and with the cooperative approach, they would have similar experiences at all libraries, and any differences in program style would only be dependent on the programmer's individual method of delivery.

Respondents observed that the main disadvantage of cooperative program planning, apart from the additional time required, was the fact that this approach does not take differences in communities into account. Respondents stated that even the best of the cooperatively planned program bins that they received from their partners would not necessarily fit the needs of their branch and patrons. One respondent summed this issue up especially well: "There are too many differences between our communities, branch capabilities, programmers, and program formats to [allow us to] confidently and competently plan for someone else."

Other participants explained how they have to "over prep [their] bins to compensate" for these differences, and even then they may be forced to adapt the bins they receive by adding in more books or changing the activities to better suit their branch.

Two participants who had previously participated in cooperative planning but no longer do so cited the differences in their branches and programming styles as the reason they abandoned this approach. Throughout the questionnaire responses, the term "cookie-cutter approach" recurred in multiple responses. This term was used to describe the fact that although cooperatively planned bins have consistent content, their materials and activities just do not work everywhere. Some respondents felt that this had a negative impact on the quality of the programming offered.

Recommendations for Best Practices

While the researchers and administrators were hoping for a definitive recommendation either to continue or discontinue cooperative preschool storytime program planning, the survey responses did not yield a clear answer. However, they do provide a set of valuable suggestions and opinions as to how the cooperative planning process could be improved.

1. **Encourage open communication**, constructive feedback, and even reciprocal branch visits for partner programmers. Communication emerged as a strong theme in both the survey and the interviews; staff unanimously agreed that regular communication has to be built in to the cooperative planning approach as a standard practice, whether it is through email, written comments, or face-to-face meetings between partners.

2. **Consider a "middle ground" approach** in which bins simply include the skeleton of a program theme (perhaps a song, a rhyme, a bibliography of stories, and a few craft ideas for different age groups). Programmers could then choose their own books to fit each theme so the storytime itself would be tailored to the needs of their branch and the type of stories the branch patrons enjoy. This approach would encourage more customization to the needs of the branch but would still save programmers' time. This approach would also solve the problem of books being out of circulation for long periods of time while they just sit in a bin. The bin would include a list of books, not the books themselves, and branch programmers would select actual titles from their own collection.

3. **Consider creating a "self-serve" online staff resource**, such as a wiki or shared drive, with preplanned ideas. This resource could list suggested themes along with recommended crafts, rhymes, songs, and books. There would be no need for physical bins to travel from branch to branch. Rather, it would just be up to the branch programmer to choose the weekly theme from the preplanned list and collect the resources.

Survey respondents were asked for their ideas about how the cooperative program planning process could be improved, and they provided many thoughtful suggestions. One respondent suggested developing each storytime in the form of "a kit that provides a basic activity and theme, then the [individual] programmer can focus on adding appropriate titles and supplies, tailoring the activity to the community." This approach would be a good middle ground to add a higher level of efficiency to program planning while still allowing for the specialized needs of each community. An approach like this would also help to rectify the issue of widely divergent age groups: programmers could work to prepare a basic structure and activity that would work for a diverse age group, then age-appropriate books and songs could be added at the branch level.

Another respondent noted that with the cooperative approach, "programmers need to feel more of an onus to plan for all the programmers in the group versus planning for themselves." Encouraging preparation of programs that could apply to a wide range of age groups could help remedy this problem. Another participant indicated that it would be valuable to have "a shared [story-time] template and resource list [as a] useful starting point." As one respondent noted, the cooperative program planning process would be more successful if "programmers understand that their program is not written in stone and can be adapted according to the needs of each group."

Improving communication between partner branches was also a theme that arose several times in the suggestions for improvement. One respondent recommended "more face-to-face meetings between [partner] programmers." Another said that programmers should be allocated "time to visit each other's programs; this would likely encourage more cooperation." Another respondent noted that partners should give each other feedback on what works and what does not, as candid and honest feedback could help to smooth out differences between branches early on in their cooperative relationship. Any sort of collaboration requires open lines of communication in order to be successful, and respondents clearly recognize the need for any programmers participating in cooperative planning to be open to constructive criticism.

It is clear that participants have very different opinions on the process of collaborative planning. Some programmers feel that cooperative planning is more efficient and ensures a higher level of consistency and freshness of programs. Other staff value the ability to serve the very specific needs of their own branch community. The ideal method would incorporate all of these factors to be efficient and to encourage idea sharing and communication between partners while still allowing for flexibility and customization. &

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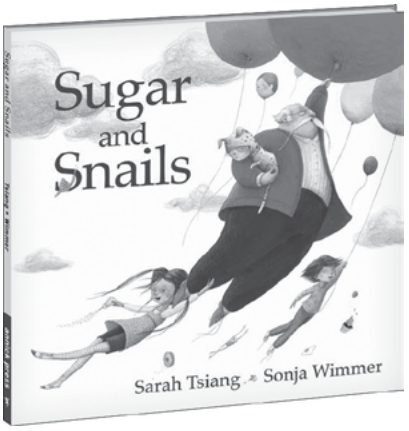

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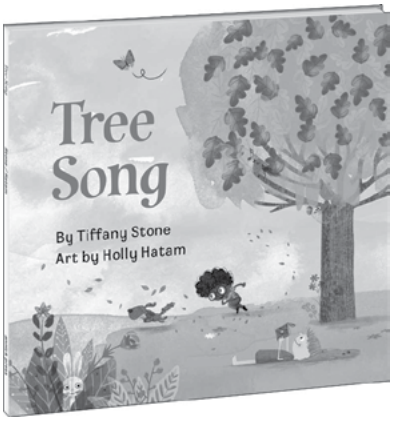

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