

School and Public Library Partnership: Supporting Multilingual Students and Families

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Summary: This article emphasizes the reasons why public schools and public libraries should build partnerships to support multilingual students and their families. The findings from this study show that some of the benefits of such partnerships include increasing awareness of resources that the library provides, literacy improvement, community building, increasing involvement of multilingual families, and attending to students' needs.

Keywords: partnership, multilingual students, multilingual families, public school, public libraries, literacy improvement

Introduction

A substantial body of evidence points to the existence and significance of the opportunity gap in literacy achievement between multilingual students and monolingual English-speaking students. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2022) only 3% of our nation's multilingual students in twelfth grade, 5% of the multilingual students in eighth grade, and 10% of the multilingual students in fourth grade can read at or above grade level. This is compared to the 39% of monolingual English-speaking students in twelfth grade, 33% of monolingual English-speaking students in eighth grade, and 37% of monolingual English-speaking students in fourth grade who can read at or above grade level (NAEP, 2022). Research suggests that there is a persistence in the opportunity gap between multilingual students and monolingual English-speaking students. Some scholars have framed the term achievement gap as an opportunity gap to suggest that the lack of opportunities multilingual students face is the cause of observed differences in achievement (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Genesee et al., 2005; Umansky et al., 2017). In this article I use the term opportunity gap when I refer to the differences in literacy achievement between multilingual and monolingual English-speaking students. I also suggest that it is important that educational organizations work together in closing this opportunity gap.

Literature Review

Public schools and public libraries could both be seen as educational institutions that play a significant role in children's literacy development. While public schools serve students in grades K-12, public libraries serve a much wider population and are not exclusively educational institutions. They each have their own organizational structures and strive to

support the changing needs of students and communities that they serve. Clay III (2009) refers to libraries as “educational support centers” (p. 13) which provide additional resources to school libraries to enhance student learning. The most recent example of how public libraries take such role was evident during the Covid-19 pandemic during which public schools and public libraries engaged in high levels of collaboration to best support the learning needs of all students (Thompson et al., 2023).

In a case study about collaboration between school and public librarians Moreland and Kammer (2020) found that all the librarians involved in the study were involved in collaboration of some form and they identified three areas of collaboration among school and public librarians which included “sharing resources, sharing space and sharing programing” (p. 42). Lopez et al., (2016) found public libraries and the plethora of resources that they provide to be important spaces for family engagement. They share that the programs and resources that the libraries provide support breaking inequities that negatively impact the opportunities to succeed between children that come from low-income families and those that come from high-income families. According to Lopez et al., (2016) low-income families, including immigrant families use public libraries for “training, job searches, and service for immigrants or first-generation Americans.” (p. 6). The authors refer to public libraries as platforms that create opportunities for different stakeholders including schools, families and communities to work together and create ways to support student learning.

Both public libraries and schools strive to support immigrant families and students who bring a wide range of linguistic diversity in our communities. Hwang Lynch (2015) discussed the important role that libraries play in supporting newcomer immigrant families and the work that both public libraries and public schools do to diversify their book collections in

order to reflect the linguistic needs of the communities that they serve. Murvosh (2013) emphasized the importance of collaboration between public schools and public libraries in order to support the needs of students and she shares examples of such collaborative projects across America.

Methods

This exploratory action research study investigates the possibility of a partnership between a public library and an elementary school located in Northwestern United States to support multilingual students and their families. The research question that guided this study was: How can classroom teachers /schools build partnerships with public libraries to support multilingual students in literacy?

For this qualitative study data was collected through semi structured interviews with two children’s librarians and a school staff member who is a former librarian. Qualitative data was also collected through a short survey that was sent to 34 certificated staff and 25 classified staff. The survey was completed by 22 staff members and 21 of those who completed the survey gave consent for their responses to be used for the purpose of this research.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Otter.ai app. The survey was administered using Google forms and the data was exported to an Excel document. The interview transcripts and the survey data were analyzed using Saldana’s step by step guide. Deductive, inductive, and in vivo coding was used during initial coding and axial coding was used during the second cycle of coding before extracting themes.

Results

Five overarching themes that help answer the research question emerged from the data analysis.

1. Librarians pinpointed services that they provide for multilingual families.
2. Teachers and librarians identified partnership ideas that require low cost and time commitment.
3. Teachers and librarians identified partnership ideas that could be costly and require time commitment.
4. Teachers and librarians acknowledged benefits of partnership.
5. Teachers and librarians acknowledged challenges of partnership.

Table 1 shows the themes that emerged from the data analysis that address the research question How can classroom teachers /schools build partnerships with public libraries to support multilingual students in literacy?

Table 1

Descriptive Table

Overarching Themes	Description of categories within overarching themes
Librarians pinpointed services that they provide for multilingual families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English classes for multilingual families • Language line • Multilingual story time • Welcome center
Teachers and librarians identified partnership ideas that require low cost and time commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Librarian school visits • Library & PTA partnership • Increasing awareness of library programs and resources • Library cards
Teachers and librarians identified partnership ideas that could be costly and require time commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending to students’ needs • Field trips to library • Family reading night
Teachers and librarians acknowledged benefits of partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to library resources • Literacy improvement • Building community • Engaging more multilingual families
Teachers and librarians acknowledged challenges of partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding and lack of resources • Organizational structures • Time and scheduling • Teachers are maxed out

Librarians pinpointed services that they provide for multilingual families.

Both librarians shared that the public library provides different services for multilingual families. They acknowledged that before the pandemic the library was providing more services which they moved online during the pandemic and now they are trying to bring back in person. They have beginner English classes and talk time sessions weekly which are well attended. They also teach basic computer skills. The librarians shared about Language Line, a service that the library has in place to support people with limited English in the community, by having videocalls with interpreters as needed. The library also offers story time in languages other than English including, Mandarin, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic and Vietnamese. Two of the libraries in the county’s library system which are in neighborhoods with high immigrant population have a welcome center for immigrant families. They provide support with different services according to one of the librarians including “job searching, getting help for their kids, all of those things.” The people who lead the weekly informational sessions on those welcome centers are immigrants who have been able to succeed here and try to give back to their community. The libraries have collections of books in Spanish, Russian and Chinese and as one of the librarians shared, they are identifying what other languages are spoken in the community and work on “getting a certain collection of those other languages added to the collection”.

Teachers and librarians identified partnership ideas

that require low cost and time commitment.

One of the partnership ideas that was identified was increasing awareness of services that the library offers not only for multilingual families but also for all families. One of the staff members shared “I think the public library could share this info in the district newsletters, and as a print flyer in multiple languages that could go home in the first day packet, and then again, a bit later in the year. Teachers could mention this at conferences, etc.” The librarians also shared that it is important to remind the community that the library is there and as one of the librarians shared “And we’re not here just with books. There are so many other things that we’re trying to do.” Asking librarians to visit the local schools is another low-cost partnership idea. This is a current partnership that happens twice a year when the librarian comes to schools to advertise the summer reading program or for the Otter program.

The librarians were open to working with the PTA and being part of different events that the PTA organizes so they can increase awareness of programs at the library and sign up students and families for a library card. Ten of the staff members who took the survey identified “ensuring students have library cards” as a partnership idea.

Teachers and librarians identified partnership ideas that could be costly and require time commitment.

Attending to students’ needs was a category of this theme. The librarian that was assigned to the school in which this study took place has also partnered with the Justice Equity Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) student team and they are working on having the JEDI team work on book displays at the library which is a partnership that is very powerful for the students involved and promising for the future. Of those who took the survey, nine out of the 22 staff members said that having field trips at the library would be another partnership idea, even though they acknowledge that the cost of transportation to the library could be a challenge that schools need to deal with.

Teachers and librarians acknowledged benefits of partnership.

One of the benefits of school and library partnership that was identified was access to library resources. One of the staff members said that “Multilingual families would have access to the resources that the library provides” while the librarians shared all the programs that they offer during the school year and especially during the summer months when school is not in session. One of the librarians said, “in summer we have a lot of programs just because the kids are out of school.” When he has talking about the importance of partnering with local public school the other librarian shared “I feel like then we can reach a lot of kids and kind of give them resources that they can use for life and then reaching out to the families from there.” The second benefit they identified was building community, as one of the librarians shared “the library is

for anyone and everyone. And to me, the beauty is we are an educational institution, but it’s informal, and I would like to think it feels open and welcoming.” The other librarian shared that they are working on a needs assessment project in which they are collecting data from the community to better understand what the needs are as they are “trying to make the library feel like a community center.” Staff members also shared that one of the benefits of partnering with libraries could be that “students and families will feel more connected to their communities and understand resources.” Both school staff and librarians added that engaging multilingual families and ensuring that they have access to library resources is another benefit of this kind of partnership.

Teachers and librarians acknowledged challenges of partnership

One of the challenges of partnership identified was funding. The school staff reported that transportation for fieldtrips to the library costs money, and the library shared that sometimes they might have an idea, but they need to find the funds to implement it. Organizational structures of both institutions could pose challenges of partnership since according to school staff “The library and the district have regulations about official relationships and volunteer protocols that can make these relationships complicated to set up.” Another challenge that was identified by many participants was finding time to build relationships and partnership as well as finding the best time to plan activities that will work with everyone’s schedule. The last challenge identified was that teachers are maxed out and the librarians are well aware of the teachers’ capacity to add more to their plates.

Limitations

The limitations of this study could include the small number of participants, especially the number of librarians interviewed. Another limitation could be the fact that both librarians that were interviewed were serving the same library system. It would be helpful to interview librarians from other counties to get some insight on how partnerships between public schools and public libraries look in other counties. Limiting the stakeholders only to librarians and school staff could be another limitation of this study. Adding the voices of stakeholders like parents of multilingual students and multilingual students themselves would be helpful for future research.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the question How can classroom teachers/schools build partnerships with public libraries to support multilingual students in literacy? The data collected by the interviews with 22 school staff members, 2 interviews with children’s librarians and one with a staff member who was a former librarian showed that libraries provide different services for multilingual families; there are low cost and time partnership ideas as well as those

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