

# **An Investigation of Library Services Offered to Kindergarten Students in Rural Public Schools in Washington County, Pennsylvania**

*By Michelle Minnick*

Kindergarten represents a transition year in the lives of children. They move from the protective settings of homes and preschools, where learning was conducted in an informal learning environment, to the more systematic and structured setting of a kindergarten classroom. The stakes are high in this transition year, and expectations of what children need to have learned by the end of kindergarten have changed dramatically in recent years. Today, in addition to socialization the traditional emphasis in kindergarten the crucial skills of learning to read and write are the focus of the curriculum (Morrow, Strickland & Woo, 1998).

Children enter kindergarten with very different levels of knowledge about written language; therefore, instruction needs to be adapted for these differences. However, regardless of a student's prior knowledge, children at this age need to engage and interact with a rich variety of printed materials (Morrow, Strickland & Woo, 1998). The goal of a successful literacy program for kindergarten students is to expand their literature experience so that they are exposed to a wealth of books that will encourage them to learn to read.

It is crucial at this stage of development for children to learn that books are a source of information and pleasure. This is most easily accomplished in a library setting where books corresponding to the child's level of development are displayed and used on a daily basis (Cox & Zarillo, 1993). An important aspect is that kindergarten students have access to material appropriate for their level of development. Having access to a vast amount of printed material that is suitable for their age usually makes it easy for media specialists to teach children about the pleasure of reading.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Why is learning to read easy for some children and difficult for others? Ideas of how children learn to read have changed radically in the past thirty years. Previously, it was believed that children learned to read from formal

instruction. However, now we know that much of how they learn to read is the result of their informal everyday experiences with print (Manning, 1997).

Obviously, parents play an important role in this process, but how much does the place where the parents make their home contribute to their child's emergent literacy? Do rural children get an adequate amount of exposure to literature to make learning to read easier for them?

There have been numerous studies that have indicated the importance of reading to children. However, if kindergarten students and their parents have limited access to the appropriate level of reading material, and the public library is too far away to be easily accessed, then it needs to be the responsibility of the public school to provide library services to both.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which rural school library media specialists in Washington County, Pennsylvania were providing services to kindergarten students and their parents. The study also ascertained what type of services were being provided, whether or not the collection was adequate to support the kindergarten population, and what was budgeted to support the collection. Lastly, this study investigated the library media specialists' perception of the need for services to kindergarten students.

## **Limitations**

This study was limited by the following:

- Only media specialists in rural public school districts in Washington County were surveyed;
- Private rural schools in the county were not considered;
- It utilization of public libraries was not measured;
- The number of responses received from the media specialists;
- The preconceived attitudes of the media specialists' kindergarten collection.

## **Definition of Terms**

### *Kindergarten*

a class for children between the ages of five and six that serves as an introduction to regular school

***Kindergarten Student***

children between the ages of five and six years of age enrolled in an introduction class to prepare them for first grade

***School Library Media Specialist***

an individual who possesses school library media certification from the state of Pennsylvania.

***Rural School District***

a school district that serves a population of 10,000 or fewer residents

**Justification of the Study**

This research may be useful to library media specialists who teach kindergarten students, as they may find services that could improve and expand their current program. It may also be used to compare Washington County's rural public school library programs for kindergarten children with each other. Additionally, this study may also be of interest to kindergarten teachers, parents and administrators who would like to see increased library services provided to kindergarten students.

**Review of Literature*****The Parent or Caretaker Role in Nurturing Young Readers***

"Although librarians and many parents have long realized the value of introducing young children to books, the rationale for doing so has recently received renewed support from the work of early childhood educators" (Carlson, 1985). The concept of emergent literacy has become popular in the last ten years. At the core of the emergent literacy belief is the idea that attitudes and behaviors about reading and writing begin long before a child learns to read. Lancy (1993) defined emergent literacy as "a set of behaviors and concepts about literacy that precede and develop into conventional literacy."

The concept of emergent literacy has led librarians and other educators to be even more aware of the important role parents play when they introduce the riches of books and literature-centered activities to young children in a natural way (Carlson, 1991). The role of parents in literacy development has been stressed many times in the literature:

"From the earliest days, parents, in our kind society, should introduce their children to the world of books. They should read to them often and they should look closely at themselves as readers. They present a vital example for their children to copy" (Butler & Clay, 1987).

Real and lasting impressions come from home. Parents are the first teachers children meet, and they are also children's teachers for the longest periods. Therefore, the success of the school literacy program frequently depends on the literacy environment at home (Morrow, 1993).

### **The Important Role of the School Library Media Center in Cultivating a Desire to Read**

The Association for Library Services to Children stated, "Libraries contribute to kindergarten learning in two ways: through the services, programs and materials that help parents increase their skills and capabilities; and through programs that serve children directly." School libraries that provide books for parents to read to their kindergarten-age children, books and other materials for children to borrow, and programs that bring young children to the library will increase the likelihood that these children will use the library when they are older. The school library should be a place where children feel welcome and are able to visit not just during their scheduled library period, but many times throughout the week. Library programs that bring children and books together are the first steps toward a literate society (Association for Library Services to Children, 1990).

The librarian should be interested in the preliterate development of the child so that in time there will be a reading child, and in still more time a literate adult (What Works: Improving School Libraries to Improve Student Reading, 1996). Librarians need to help parents by encouraging them to read aloud to their children through modeling and helping parents to choose quality literature that is developmentally appropriate for their children. Bringing children and books together are the first steps toward creating a literate society.

If schools do not deliberately and thoughtfully entice children to read during their early years, the motivation to learn to read and to acquire the reading habit may never develop (Morrow, 1993). It is important, therefore, that librarians, parents, and other educators ensure that children have access to a literature-rich environment at a young age.

It is difficult to teach a kindergarten student to read unless they are first taught to *want* to read. Unless a child wants to read, they will never do enough of it to become good at it. This is where the importance of a media specialist comes into the picture. Librarians can act as models, advisors, resources and cheerleaders to children learning to read (Carlson, 1991). They have the opportunity to teach in the most powerful way- through example.

When a librarian chooses an especially good book to share with a kindergarten class, they introduce the children to the magic of books and awaken

their yearning to read for themselves. Sharing quality literature with kindergarten students gives the children a glimpse of the excitement, drama, and beauty that is contained in books. When the librarian shares his enthusiasm for a good story with the class, he provides a model for the students to follow (What Works: Improving School Libraries to Improve Student Reading, 1996).

## **Reading and Comprehension**

Research repeatedly comes up with the same conclusion: reading developmentally appropriate, quality literature to young children is a successful way to teach them to read. Delores Durkin (1980) studied children who read early and found that a common factor they all shared was that they were all read to frequently. Lesley Mandel Morrow (1998) reported that a combination of reading to children and follow-up activities such as creative dramatics or discussion related to the story were particularly helpful to reading achievement.

Exposure to books helps children understand the kind of language used in writing. Children are able to understand language better as a result of being read to, and are also able to express themselves better. Additionally, children with a rich background of book experience are more able to narrate an event and describe a scene, skills which are very useful for both oral and written communication (Glazer, 2000). This is one of the reasons follow-up activities to sharing a story are so important.

Children should be encouraged to reconstruct stories that are read to them. Sometimes this reconstruction of a story is referred to as “readinglike behavior” (Stainthorp & Hughes, 1999). We have seen emergent readers pretend to read a much beloved story that has been read to them over and over. Children can remember not only the plot and the sequence of events, but they also change their language style to match the book. This demonstrates careful listening, and their story-telling focuses on the personal meaning of the story (Glazer, 2000).

Pre-reading discussions are just as important for the kindergarten student as discussions following a story. Discussing the content of a book before it is introduced will help children become involved in and learn from the text when it is presented. Librarians can share artifacts and pictures that relate to a story that they are planning to read aloud. The objects can be shown to the children to initiate discussion that provides information that will help the children understand the story better (Slaughter, 1993). The use of objects and pre-reading can also motivate children and focus their attention on the story. Another advantage to this technique is that by setting up an exhibit of objects relating to a particular story, the librarian enhances the classroom’s literacy environment.

Another technique to help kindergarten students with comprehension is dramatization the story. When children dramatize a story, they are called upon not only to recreate the story's events, but also to pay attention to the correct sequence of those events (Cox & Zarrillo, 1993). To do this accurately, they must internalize and fully comprehend the content of the story. Dramatization helps children refine and deepen their understanding of the story and, in the process, make the story their own (Cox & Zarrillo, 1993). A typical procedure is for the teacher to read the story first and then ask for volunteers to act it out.

## **Making Appropriate Book Selections for a Kindergarten Audience**

Selecting appropriate books for kindergarten students is a skill that must be developed by the librarian. All books are not created equal; there is a mass of poorly written and unimaginatively illustrated books to choose from. It is important that the librarian expand his library with books that will fill kindergarten students' minds with curiosity and stimulate their thinking (Kruise, 1992).

Caldecott books should always be added to the library's collection, and media specialists should read reviews from professional library journals before making other selections. However, sometimes a librarian will not be able to find an expert opinion on a particular book. In this case, librarians must develop their own criteria for what constitutes a good book, and then form an opinion about which books are right for certain students in what specific situations (Carlson, 1991). The librarian's own opinion of the book is always a good guide. "Good children's literature is not just interesting to children, it is timeless" (Clay, 1991).

According to Cox and Zarrillo (1993) there are eight criteria a librarian should remember when selecting appropriate books for kindergarten students:

- A simple, well-developed plot centered on a sequence of events, with action predominant. A slight surprise element makes the children wonder what will happen next and adds much to a story;
- A large amount of direct conversation;
- Use of repetition, rhyme, and catch phrases that children memorize quickly and easily;
- Situations involving familiar happenings;
- A simple and satisfying climax;
- One main character with whom children can easily identify;

- A variety of ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds;
- Illustrations: young children “read” pictures.

A good book for a kindergarten student is one that catches and holds the student’s attention. Suspense is the classic way to hook a reader into a story; a book without this has a poorly constructed plot. A good plot is important. “For kindergarten students, the plot should be simple, without subplots or flashback to confuse them, the action should be believable without being predictable, and the problems should not be too quickly overcome” (Slaughter, 1993).

However, there are some books that can exist without suspense or plot because they offer something else. The sounds of rhythms of language can be very pleasurable for a kindergarten student. Some books do not even require words to be fascinating. Today, there are numerous beautifully detailed wordless picture books. These books are designed for students who are in the stage of reading pictures (Kruise, 1992). Wordless storybooks offer delightful opportunities for children to create their own stories to accompany the pictures.

Whether a story relies on words or plot, a main character in a story which kindergarten students can identify with is vital. The character must possess personality traits or exhibit behaviors that students of this age can easily relate to their own lives.

Nonfiction books make up an important part of the library collection as well. However, even nonfiction books for very young children must be factually accurate. They do not need to be complex or detailed, but that does not mean correctness can be sacrificed. It is a good idea to avoid books that combine fact with fiction for the kindergarten age group (Lancy, 1994).

Whether the book depicts fact or fiction, the pictures must accurately portray the story’s action, mood, and intent. Emergent readers will pay very close attention to the pictures to tell the story or provide information (Slaughter, 1993). Therefore, the pictures need to accurately depict the story. Young children also rely on the pictures to give hints about the print. Some authors give a wealth of picture information to support limited text and this style is also very popular with emergent readers.

In most cases the media specialist will have kindergarten students that are starting to read on their own. Therefore, these students will need books that they can be successful with, so it is important to have materials in the school library collection to meet these needs. Emergent readers need to have success when they first begin to “crack the reading code” (Clay, 1991). Early success helps them to gain and keep their momentum for learning. This means that these beginner books need to be worth reading, but also readable. Just like adult readers, children need interesting content to motivate them to press on.

Having a familiarity with a book also makes it readable. In fact, anything that assists a kindergarten child predict what comes next helps with reading.

Persuading children to read can also be made easier for librarians if they take the time to get to know their audiences. Kindergarten students have many different preferences in books. Not only are they interested in different topics, they also are attracted to different genres. For example, some like fantasy, while others prefer informative nonfiction. It is important that the librarians cater to all tastes. One thing all youngsters seem to have in common, however, is the desire to take books home to their parents (Kruise, 1992). For this reason the librarian should allow kindergarten students to check out books from the library just like students do in other grades.

### **Rural School Libraries**

Many rural school libraries lack the funding and resources of larger school libraries. They often have inadequate staffing which hinders the personal one-on-one service a librarian can offer a student (Lucas, 1996). It has also been suggested that rural libraries lack the funding needed to keep their collections from becoming stagnant (John, 1995).

Since the school librarian has limited funding, it is especially important that the librarian invest careful thought into the selection of materials that will best meet the library's goals. For young children, books tend to be the most important component of the media center collection. Adding quality children's literature to the collection will keep the collection fresh and inviting for young readers.

Librarians, teacher, and parents, regardless of where they reside, share the common desire for children to succeed at learning to read. Young children that do not initially struggle with reading because of exposure to literature have better reading and writing skills and usually do not have difficulty expressing themselves. Ensuring that a child becomes literate is essential to the child's future success in life. If reading to young children makes learning to read easier and more enjoyable for the child, then teachers, librarians and parents should utilize it to the fullest extent.

### **Procedure**

Washington County is located twenty-seven miles southwest of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It has a mixed economy built on agriculture, light manufacturing, coal-mining, and small businesses. Farm land is abundant and there is an air of independence about the people, believed to be fostered long ago by farmers and craftsmen who risked life and comfort by settling beyond the secure confines of Pittsburgh (Root, 2000).



In Washington County, forty-four of the sixty-six townships (62.1%) have populations of 2,500 or less (Facts for Citizens, 2000). The rural school districts in this study comprise between six to eight townships on average.

For the purpose of this study, twelve elementary media specialists in nine of the rural school districts in Washington County (one district had three very small elementary schools) were asked to complete a questionnaire designed by the researcher. The survey was distributed by mail to 100% of the targeted population.

The two-page questionnaire was designed to address the types of library services provided to kindergarten children and their parents. It also addresses the librarians' perceptions of the need to provide services to this group. In addition, it addressed the approximate dollar amount spent on this portion of the library collection.

The questionnaire was mailed on October 2, 2000, to the twelve rural elementary media specialists in Washington County. A cover letter and a self-addressed stamped envelope (see Appendix) accompanied the questionnaire. All of the participants were asked to return the questionnaire by November 1, 2000.

## **Analysis of the Data**

The results of the survey were analyzed in response to six research questions to determine what services library media specialists were providing to kindergarten students and their parents, and whether or not adequate collections were available to serve the kindergarten population. Results were also tabulated to determine the availability of a public library and whether or not school library media specialists perceived a need to provide services to kindergarten students and their parents.

Of the twelve questionnaires mailed out, there were eight usable surveys returned. One survey was not used in the tabulation because the faculty member was not a certified library media specialist and three surveys were never returned.

### **Question #1**

Out of the eight surveys that were returned, six library media specialists (75%) indicated that services were provided to kindergarten students and their parents. Two (25%) of the library specialists indicated that services were not provided to this population.

**Table 1:**  
**The number and percentage of school librarians providing services**

Responses	N = 8	Percentage
Yes	6	75
No	2	25

One respondent indicated that, before the start of the school year, she holds an orientation at the library for all kindergarten students and their parents. At the orientation she explains library services targeted at this age group, reviews the loan period, and explains to the parents some of the important skills their kindergarten students will learn at the media center. She then concludes the fifty-minute orientation by telling a story to the children.

One of the respondents not providing services indicated that a lack of time prevented them from offering services for kindergarten parents. Another respondent stated that to offer services to parents, the library would have to extend its hours of operation and the school board was not willing to pay for the extra staff time.

**Question #2**

The researcher wanted to know if there was a relationship between the distance of the nearest public library and whether the school media specialists provide services to kindergarten students and their parents. The questionnaire, therefore, asked the respondents to indicate the distance of the nearest public library from the school.

**Table 2:**  
**Distance of nearest public library**

Distance of Public Library in Miles	Provided Services		Did not provide services	
	N=6	%	N=2	%
0 - 10	2	33		
11 - 20	4	67	2	100

As Table 2 indicates, 67% of public schools that were eleven to twenty miles away from the public library provided library services to this population.

### Question #3

The library media specialists that provided services to kindergarten students were asked whether or not they had ever worked in collaboration with their nearest public library in offering services to this population. Two (33%) of the respondents replied that they did.

**Table 3:**  
**The number and percentage of school libraries working with their public libraries**

Responses	n = 6	Percentages
Yes	2	33
No	4	67

One respondent indicated that she had a public librarian come in on a regular basis to read and tell stories to this age group. Of the four respondents that replied “no”, two indicated that they were just too busy to establish a collaboration program with the public library.

As the researcher wanted to know how aggressively the public library pursued these collaborations, she interviewed Marcia Reed from the Citizens Public Library (the library that serves seven out of the nine districts surveyed). She is the librarian in charge of the school reading program. Ms. Reed said that when she tried to initiate reading partnerships with the public schools in Washington County she first sent a letter to all of the principals and the school media specialists letting them know she was interested in forming a partnership. According to Ms. Reed, she only received one call from an elementary principal inquiring about the program. And, after repeated phone class, she only managed to interest one other school librarian. When asked what reasons the other media specialists gave for not being interested, she said, “Most replied they were too overwhelmed with the daily operations of the media center to take on another project at that time.”

### Question #4

The library media specialists were asked to indicate what specific types of services were provided to kindergarten students and their parents. The questionnaire contained a list of five statements regarding types of services provided. Respondents indicated which services were provided by checking “yes” or “no” to each statement.

**Table 4:**  
**Types of services provided**

Services provided	n = 8	Percentage
Regularly scheduled library time	8	100
Students are able to check-out easy readers	6	75
Parents are able to check-out books	5	62.5
Students are able to check-out nonfiction books	3	37.5
Students are able to check-out audiovisual material	1	12.5
The library is open for use to parents after regular school hours	1	12.5

As indicated in Table 4, regularly scheduled library time was the most frequently provided service with eight (100%) of the respondents providing this service. Kindergarten students were allowed to check-out easy readers in six (75%) of the libraries, and parents were able to check-out books in five (62.5%). There were three (37.5%) library media specialists that reported that kindergarten students were allowed to check-out nonfiction books, and only one (12.5%) of the librarians would permit audiovisual material to be checked out. The same was true in regard to the library being open after school hours, as only one (12.5%) of the libraries had this service.

#### Question #5

In order to permit the researcher to assess the adequacy of the collection, the questionnaire inquired about the number of students enrolled and the approximate amount of money expended annually for the kindergarten collection.

**Table 5:  
Approximate budget for kindergarten students  
and the number of children enrolled**

Approximate average budget	Enrollment 15-35	Enrollment 36-56	Enrollment 57-77	Enrollment 78-98
\$100-\$199	2	2		
\$200-\$299		3	1	
\$300-\$399				

The number of titles purchased on an annual basis to support the kindergarten collection appears to be quite limited considering the average cost of most juvenile hardback books is \$17.22 (Bowker Annual, 1999). It does, however, appear that there is some correlation between the number of kindergarten students enrolled and the amount of money spent on the kindergarten collection.

**Question #6**

The school library media specialists were asked whether or not they perceived a need to provide library services to kindergarten students and their parents. Respondents checked “yes,” “no,” or “not sure” regarding their perception of a need for such services.

**Table 6:  
Library media specialists’ perceptions of the  
need for kindergarten services**

Perceived need for services	Yes		No		Not sure	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Provided services	5	83.3			1	16.7
Did not provide services	1	50			1	50
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>75</b>			<b>2</b>	<b>25</b>

The results were tabulated for those school districts that provided services and for those that did not, and then were totaled. Overall, of those providing service, five (83.3%) of the library media specialists indicated that they perceived a need for those services. However, one media specialist was not sure that the services were needed.

Concerning the two media specialists that were not providing services, one (50%) thought that service should be provided and one (50%) was not sure. Although this data is limited, it does appear that most media specialists believe it is important to offer services to both kindergarten students and their parents.

## **Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations**

The importance of reading to children at the kindergarten age has been established by research. For the kindergarten population it is imperative that they, along with their parents, have access to the resources necessary to help ensure they become literate adults.

This research project examined the extent of services being offered to kindergarten students and their parents by rural public school districts in Washington County. The research results suggested the following conclusions:

- Seventy-five percent of the school library media specialists indicated that some services were being provided to kindergarten students and their parents.
- The majority (75%) of library media specialists believed that there was a need for such services.
- The top three services provided were the ability for students to check-out easy reader books, regular library time for kindergarten students, and parent check-out services.
- The amount budgeted annually for the development of kindergarten collections was minimal.
- Twenty-five percent of school library media specialists are not providing services to kindergarten students and their parents.
- Sixty-seven percent of the media specialists surveyed do not collaborate with the public library to offer services to the kindergarten population.

On the basis of the summary, findings, and conclusions previously mentioned, the writer makes these recommendations:

- Since the study included a very small number of rural schools, a larger study should be carried out, possibly studying four or five counties to see how the results varied.
- Since this study only concentrated on kindergarten students and their parents, another study should be conducted using a larger sampling of children. Possibly, a study could be conducted examining services for kindergarten through third graders, and the effects these services have on their reading abilities.
- A follow-up study should be conducted to determine the long-term benefits of quality library services and parent involvement in kindergarten.

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## APPENDIX A

October 2, 2000

Dear Library Media Specialist,

I am a graduate student who is in the process of completing my Master of Library Science degree with Pennsylvania School Media Certification at Clarion University of Pennsylvania. I am currently enrolled in a class entitled "The Rural Public Library in an Urban Environment." In this class, we are studying the problems and limitations of rural libraries. One of the assignments for the class is to conduct a research study that addresses a specific topic regarding rural libraries that we have a special interest in.

As a life-long resident of Washington County, I'm very interested in learning what library services and programs are offered in our schools. I am also very fascinated by the role libraries, media specialists and literature play in inspiring young children to read. Therefore, the goal of my research paper is to investigate what services are offered specifically to kindergarten students in rural school districts in Washington County.

I have enclosed a short questionnaire that I would appreciate if you would complete and return to me by November 1, 2000. This survey is only being mailed to eight rural districts in Washington County, so your reply is extremely important to me. Please be assured that all responses will be kept confidential.

I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for you to return the survey to me. Again, I appreciate the time you have taken to complete the survey.

Sincerely,

Michelle Minnick



Please check what best describes your Pennsylvania Teaching Certification

- emergency certification to be a library media specialist in Pennsylvania
- permanent certification to be a library media specialist in Pennsylvania

1. Are library services provided by the public school to kindergarten students and their parents?
- yes     no

Reason why services are or are not offered: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. How many miles is the nearest public library from the school?

- a. 0-10    b. 11-20    c. 21-30    d. over 30

3. Have you ever worked in collaboration with the local public library to provide services for kindergarten students and their parents?

- yes     no

4. Please indicate which of the following library services are provided to kindergarten students in your district by placing a “check” in the correct box below.

Yes	No	STATEMENT
		Kindergarten students have a regularly scheduled library time.
		Kindergarten students are able to check-out easy readers.
		Parents are able to check-out books.
		Kindergarten students are able to check-out non-fiction books.
		Kindergarten students are able to check-out audiovisual material.
		The library is open for use to parents after regular hours.

5. Please indicate the number of kindergarten students enrolled in your school:

\_\_\_\_\_

What amount of the library budget is spent specifically on the collection for kindergarten children?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you perceive a need to provide services to kindergarten students and their parents?

- a. yes      b. no      c. not sure

Additional comments:

\_\_\_\_\_

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