

Libraries, literacy and technology: A new training module for public librarians in developing countries targeted at integrating libraries into literacy programs

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Abstract:

Despite the natural link, most public library systems in the developing world are not formally connected to large-scale literacy initiatives led by either the government or international donors. This gap represents a significant missed opportunity for both sides. Libraries are missing a chance to increase their relevance and attract new resources, while literacy programs struggle to find a sustainable mechanism for supporting the essential community support element of literacy achievement. This paper discusses a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded program Beyond Access which has developed and recently published a new training module for public librarians that is meant to be a first step towards addressing this disconnect.

Keywords: Public libraries, early literacy, training

Introduction

Literacy challenges in many developing countries represent an increasing drag on social and economic advancement. A boom in youth populations tax under-equipped school systems and teachers use outdated methodology in overcrowded classrooms. While the United Nations' (UN) *Education for All* campaign (UNESCO, 2015) has been largely successful at increasing school enrolment around the world, concerns have now moved on to what children are achieving once they are in school. With more children in schools, developing countries grapple with supplying sufficient materials, training teachers effectively, and constantly adapting methods and curriculum to society's changing needs in the information age.

The most basic indicator of learning for young children is literacy, and insufficient and stagnating literacy rates in some countries are indicative of the difficulty in moving from enrollment to achievement. For example, UNESCO's estimated 2015 literacy rates in Bangladesh are 83% of the population, 69% in Ethiopia and 54% in Mali, 54% (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2015). This problem is not unaddressed, of course, and governments, donors and nonprofit organizations worldwide are investing in improving literacy outcomes (USAID, 2015). Typically, however, even though the value of community and caregiver involvement in reading skills development is acknowledged, these efforts focus almost, if not entirely, on schools. Despite the natural overlap, most public library systems in developing countries are not formally or systematically connected to large-scale literacy initiatives led by either the government or international donors. This gap represents a significant missed opportunity for both sides. Libraries are missing a chance to increase their relevance and attract new resources, while literacy programs struggle to find a sustainable mechanism for supporting the essential community engagement element of literacy achievement.

Beyond Access is a program managed by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that helps countries modernize their public library systems. The mandate of *Beyond Access* is to help developing countries modernize their public library systems. In each country, library modernization is tied to explicit national development objectives, so that libraries gain ways to measure and explain their value in the 21st century. In some *Beyond Access countries*, partners have identified literacy as the most appropriate topic on which to build public library development. In other countries, library modernization efforts are connected to digital skills or workforce development.

As part of this program, IREX has developed and recently published a new training module for public librarians that is meant to be a first step towards addressing the disconnect described above. Based on the key needs in early literacy development and the key assets most libraries already have, the *Libraries, Literacy and Technology* training module aims to equip librarians with the basic skills and knowledge to start integrating their institutions into literacy programs. This paper describes the background and content of the module.

Module objectives

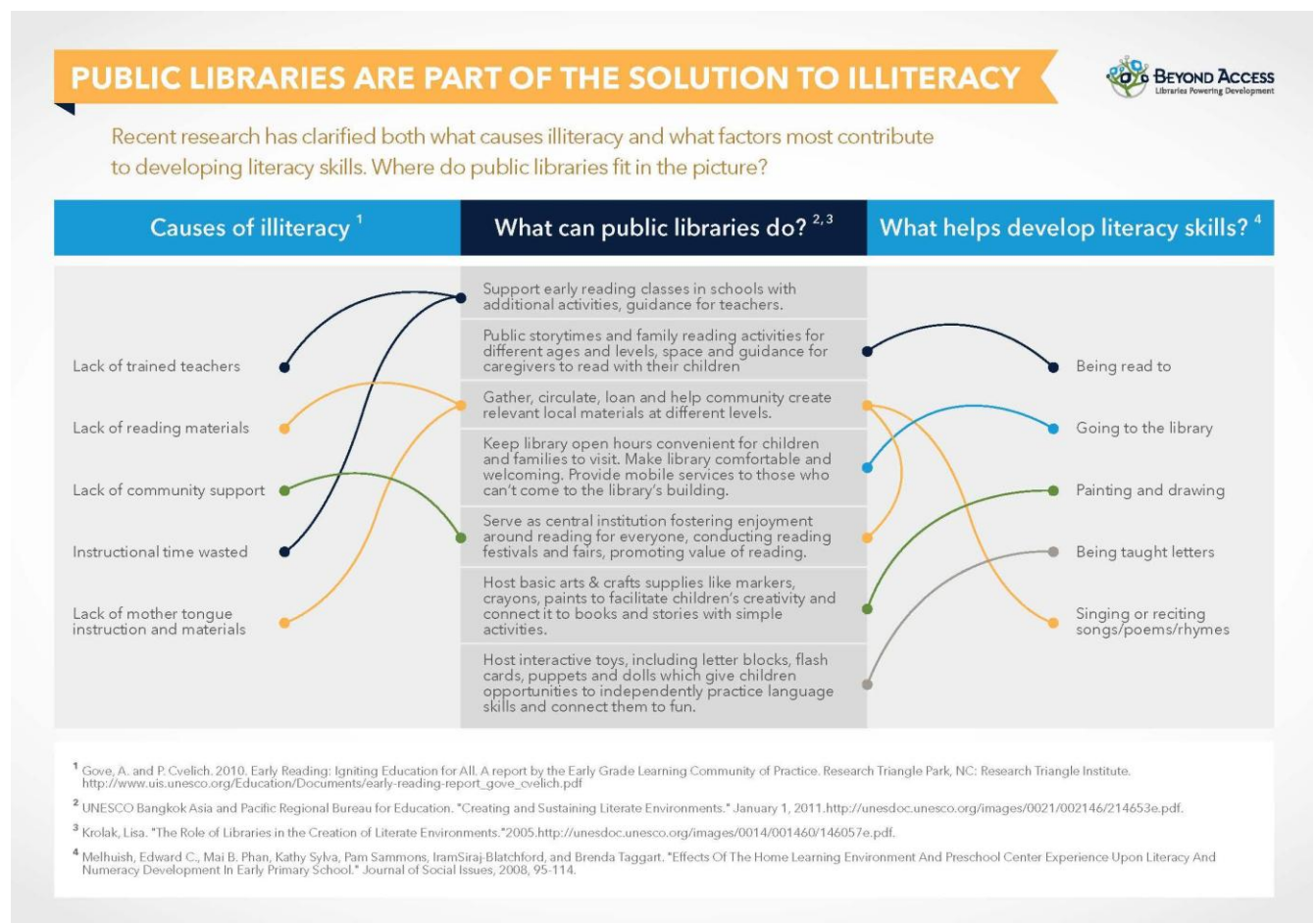
The training module starts from the following assumptions.

- When libraries are properly equipped and librarians are properly trained, libraries can:
 - create an *ecology of learning* which is a safe, comfortable space open to all where reading can be a collaborative, shared activity and is associated with enjoyment;
 - serve as a hub and coordination point for community literacy programs, ensuring that reading resources and opportunities reach those who need them most; and
 - host-shared, public access technology that can be applied to make learning to read fun and interactive.
- If librarians are trained in simple, useful activities that strengthen literacy initiatives, and receive the support necessary to offer these activities on a reliable basis, literacy initiatives will be measurably improved and libraries will gain increased recognition for their value.

The module is meant to help drive the process of integrating public library systems into existing literacy programs and initiatives, by providing librarians with the basic tools, skills and ideas necessary to offer and measure concrete, goal-oriented literacy services to their communities and to coordinate those services with the organizations and institutions responsible for such programs.

Informing the content

The new module is largely informed by the challenges school systems face in achieving reading improvement and the activities identified by researchers that most contribute to the development of early literacy outside the classroom. At the present, the module is focused on early reading, but based on need, IREX is exploring adding material to help libraries strengthen support for other age groups as well. The following diagram (IREX, 2015b) explains the considerations behind the module.



A 2010 Research Triangle Institute report entitled, *Early reading: Igniting education for all*, provides a useful framework for considering the potential role of public libraries in literacy efforts (Gove & Cvelich, 2010). The report identifies the key causes of shortfalls in reading achievement. For nearly all of these key causes, there are clear ways libraries can be part of the solution. The goal of the module is to systematically link typical deficiencies to useful activities through the library and its services.

This report found that ‘Teachers in many countries lack training and support’ and ‘instructional time is frequently wasted; [with] some studies indicat[ing] that less than half of the available time is used for learning’ (Gove & Cvelich, 2010). The report found that while the number of teachers has increased, this expansion has placed pressure on teacher training systems and brought people into the profession with lower qualifications. Teachers who lack the skills and knowledge necessary to improve reading skills amongst children often fall back on rote memorization and repetition, which does little to improve comprehension. Untrained and uncommitted teachers often lead to wasted time in school.

Where can libraries fit in this scenario? With the right training in some simple, proven activities and methods, librarians can become literacy-resource people who can support struggling teachers. Librarians can visit classrooms to conduct fun, engaging literacy games, lead read-aloud sessions and supervise independent reading time by bringing in supplementary materials. Where school systems don’t have the resources to train and sufficiently monitor and support every teacher, librarians can extend the reach of the library to support and supplement nearby classrooms, without additionally taxing the local education department.

Another key cause of poor literacy found in the RTI report noted that ‘children (and their schools) are poorly equipped with the most basic of resources, books’ (Gove & Cvelich, 2010). Due to increasing demand, many countries often have trouble producing, delivering and preserving a sufficient quantity of books to support learning. While textbooks are also often lacking, supplementary materials which are even more important for learning to read because they militate against the association of reading with work, are not available. Many reading programs explicitly seek to deliver materials for reading as pleasure to children, to reinforce home reading efforts. Through its *Literacy Boost* interventions in Malawi and Nepal, Save the Children has found that greater participation in community mobilization activities to bring books into the home leads to better student performance on letter naming, oral reading fluency, and comprehending connected text.

How can libraries play a role in the provision of alternative reading resources? Under conditions of scarcity, shared resources are a sensible interim solution, and libraries can serve as the home for a community’s shared reading materials. Teachers have numerous responsibilities and book-sharing usually falls beyond their priorities, skills and jurisdiction. However, librarians can ensure that books are used by those who need them most and provide access to appropriate books and technology. Librarians can be responsible for bringing appropriate collections to schools for either shared use on site or lending, and they can promote visitation of the library to students and their caregivers at schools and other community gathering places. They can also ensure that library opening hours correspond to the times when communities can use the library most. Where libraries also lack sufficient books, librarians can learn how to make the most of what they do have by leading activities that build on even the limited supply of resources, and focusing on the association of enjoyment with reading.

‘[The] language of instruction policies and approaches do not meet children’s learning needs’ was another key cause of poor literacy’ (Gove & Cvelich, 2010). As Gove and Cvelich note, ‘learning in one’s first language is essential for the initial teaching of reading’ (Gove & Cvelich,

2010). However, in many developing countries, the language of education differs from that which families speak at home. This dissonance cripples children's learning from the beginning, as they struggle to learn a new language at the same time as learning the system of decoding that reading represents. While recognition of this obstacle is gaining acceptance, most developing countries struggle to provide materials in the numerous mother tongues spoken by children in school.

Where mother tongue materials are rare, libraries can take responsibility for collecting them and making them available. Libraries can also focus on *creating* locally-relevant materials, especially where such materials in local languages are scarce. Many libraries have had success in bringing together communities by documenting local folklore, stories and history, and engaging community elders in retelling and young people in documenting these stories.

All of these factors coalesce around a need for community support. Numerous studies have validated the critical importance of family engagement in reading success. Even with the challenges presented by schools recounted above, researchers found that 'parental involvement is a more significant factor in a child's academic performance than the qualities of the school itself' (Shipman, 2012). Data from the multi-country OECD PISA exam indicates that 'students whose parents reported that they had read a book with their child every day or almost every day or once or twice a week during the first year of primary school have markedly higher scores...than students whose parents reported they had read a book with their child never or almost never or only once or twice a month' (Borgonovi, 2011).

At the same time, research also shows that certain activities in the home are most effective in the development literacy skills in young children (Melhuish, et al, 2008). These include:

- being read to;
- going to the library;
- painting and drawing;
- being taught letters; and
- singing or reciting songs/poems/rhymes.

None of these activities, including promoting library visitation, require specialized skills to facilitate and all can be conducted and reinforced by library staff with minimal formal training. In many Western countries libraries offer services that support and train parents in these activities as a matter of course, but in developing countries librarians and library staff are not usually equipped with the awareness and skills to offer these activities regularly in their libraries.

The argument for library integration in literacy programs

The factors described above demonstrate a clear role for libraries in the literacy picture. There are no other community institutions that have the characteristics, credibility, resources and skilled staff that explicitly promotes and supports caregiver-child engagement around reading. While schools and teachers may have difficulty separating the concept of reading from that of an academic subject, libraries are well-placed to reinforce the association of reading with pleasure. Children aren't graded or assessed in libraries, meaning there's already the advantage of an informal space where learning can take place outside the rigid confines of an academic system.

The module, therefore, is based upon the following line of argument.

- Early literacy is an increasing problem in many developing countries.
- Schools and teachers are overwhelmed and the problem cannot be solved entirely by increasing school resources or training teachers.
- As literacy efforts are centered in schools, reading is associated with schoolwork, further compounding the challenges to literacy achievement.
- Research shows that activities outside the school, most critically, those engaging children's caregivers, are among the leading contributors to literacy outcomes.
- Many countries have large public and community library systems, but they are not systematically utilized to serve literacy programs. As a result, librarians don't have the skills or knowledge necessary to support literacy efforts.

Creating the module content

Over the last year, IREX sought out, but was unable to discover any relevant training that could be applied to libraries and literacy in developing countries. A number of such training resources exist for more advanced countries such as the *Every child ready to read @ your library* (ALA, 2011-2015), but these programs contain assumptions about library resources and librarian background that make them unsuitable for the countries in which the *Beyond Access* program works.

To address this gap, IREX decided to build a module that equips librarians with the right knowledge and skills to begin offering proven, useful literacy activities in their libraries, which will position their library as a comfortable, welcoming space for families to enjoy reading and literacy activities together (IREX, 2015a). The module sets the following objectives for participants. By the end of the training, participants should be able to:

- identify the specific ways in which libraries can support literacy initiatives and programs in their country;
- design the layout of their libraries and arrange materials to best support literacy goals;
- plan and execute community outreach initiatives, including the coordination and partnering with organized literacy programs;
- support caregivers in reading with younger children, including by making smart use of technology; and
- measure basic data for library management and explain the impact of their contributions to literacy efforts.

The draft version of the module was completed in March 2015 and tested for the first time in Bangladesh in May 2015. The module includes the following sections.

- **Libraries and Literacy, the Whys?** - This unit provides background on why and how libraries should be a part of organized literacy efforts. It provides participants with the data and tools to be able to talk about the library's role and opportunity to practice explaining this role to others.
- **Users** - As with all *Beyond Access* training modules, this unit borrows from design thinking and focuses the librarians on the needs of their users and communities. It invites the librarians to see the library through the eyes of different people who may or may not use

the library, so throughout the training they can continually refer back to these users. Participants create personas or profiles of different types of users and reference these personas to conceive different services and resources the library might provide to meet their needs.

- Literacy skills and activities - This unit is the core of the training module. It provides a series of easy literacy games and activities that librarians can integrate into their library's regular services. Through activity cards (two-page instructional guides) librarians receive step-by-step guidance on how to prepare, conduct and follow-up each activity, as well as recommendations for tailoring the activities to different audiences. During the training, participants role play these activities for the group, thus gaining first-hand experience.
- Management of users' needs - This unit focuses on making key adjustments to both library procedures and the physical space so it is presented as a friendly, welcoming environment suitable for families to gather around literacy activities. Participants assess their workflow and consider how it will change when new services are added. They also redesign their libraries using either lego or other materials available in the training space.
- Community partnership - This unit gives librarians the tools to connect with other organizations working on literacy programs in their communities and to be confident explaining the ways the library can offer support. During the session, librarians role play meetings with potential partners and plot out advantages to both sides.
- Promotion - *Beyond Access* has found that most libraries in developing countries lack signage to alert community members of their location. This unit asks librarians to design signage and other promotional materials that explain library services to their community members.
- Using data - For libraries to remain relevant, librarians must be able to measure, use and share the results of their services. This unit is an introduction to collecting and analyzing simple data about literacy services in the library. It provides participants with sample library data and encourages them to interpret what it means, how it could affect their management of the library, and how they would share it with other stakeholders in the community.
- Tablets to support literacy efforts - Tablet computers are an ideal technology tool for encouraging the kind of shared, engaging experience around literacy that the module promotes. Adapted by trainers for locally relevant content, this unit gives participants the chance to experiment with different apps and explore how they might use them for organized activities in the library.
- The library service canvas - The final unit of any *Beyond Access* module includes the use of a specially-designed template where participants develop new ideas and create plans for concrete activities. They consider what kinds of resources they'll need, what partners they should involve, and how to assess the outcomes.

Early experience in Bangladesh

The module was conducted by a joint IREX-Save the Children team in Bangladesh in May 2015 for librarians from 20 libraries. Early feedback from the trainers suggest that the participants found the activity cards very useful as a way to visualize and experience specific activities in the library. They were also surprised at learning the different ways libraries around the world are supporting literacy programs. Librarians, however, were not used to planning out the details of events, so they had some difficulty with the service canvas. The Save the Children team believed that much of the follow-up support and monitoring would need to go into library space adjustments, since librarians were challenged in re-conceptualizing their space without major new resources. More information based on the behavioral changes of librarians after the training will be available in several months.

Next steps

As this is the very first version of a rather extensive product, the team and partners have identified a list of items on which to invest further effort. The module is meant to serve as a starting point, rather than a ready-to-use-off-the-shelf product. Hence, IREX invites feedback from other parties as to ways to improve and refine the material. Some items for follow-up already identified include the following.

- Expanding audiences for literacy activities - Including materials for audiences beyond children and families. The current module focuses on early grade reading, in part because IREX's partner for implementation is Save the Children Bangladesh, which is currently working on a large USAID-funded early grade reading program. However, libraries are ideal centers for lifelong learning activities and the module should be developed to include activities that offer opportunities to adults for improving their literacy skills as well.
- Simplifying the service canvas - It is important for training participants to leave the training with a written set of follow-up actions, but trainees struggled with all of the different pieces of the current version of the service canvas. There is a need for a more concise version that helps participants think through next steps and is easier to digest.
- Evaluating impact - IREX and Save the Children will be following and supporting participants over the next year to determine changes in behavior following the training. If the module is effective, activities in the library will both increase general visitation and have an effect on those who participate in the activities. Knowing that increased caregiver-child time spent reading is directly linked to literacy improvement, one of the key questions for evaluation is 'does the module have an effect on the amount of time parents and children spend reading together?'

While the module is still in its early stages, it is IREX's hope that this training, and the associated experience in implementing it, will contribute to a broader discussion of the role of libraries in organized literacy programs in developing countries and serve as a catalyst and tool to get that collaboration underway. Shared with a Creative Commons license, IREX welcomes feedback on the module, others' own variations on and adaptations of it, and volunteers to test it in their countries.

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