

TYPES OF LIBRARY MATERIALS FOR PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract

New insights from research into early childhood development have led to the awareness of the importance of the early years in the development of the child. Consequently, educators including children's librarians are developing early child development programs for pre school children. The paper examines a wide range of library materials that are available for the pre-school information user group. These include books, audio-visuals, toys and games. The role that each of these plays in the physical, social and intellectual development of the pre-school child is discussed. It suggests that imported library materials must be supplemented with locally published ones in order to build a balanced collection.

Introduction

Children learn and develop rapidly in their early years. In the last four decades, there has been an increase in research by natural and social scientists on child development. The work of Bloom (1964), Durkin (1966), Piaget and Inhelder (1969), White (1975) and others emphasized the importance of the early years in a child's cognitive development. This has resulted in "increasing evidence that the early period of child development affects cognition, learning and behaviour in later stages of life..." (Mustard, (2002). Children who cultivate an interest in learning before they enter school are more likely to perform better than those who do not (THE WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPAEDIA, 1996). Consequently, educators including parents, librarians and other child care

personnel have become increasingly aware of the value of introducing literature to pre-school children (the term "pre-school" in this paper is used for a child from birth to six years).

There is a wide range of library materials that are available for the pre-school child. These include books, audio-visuals and toys. Each of these materials has a role to play in the physical, social and intellectual development of the child. Some aspects of the development of the child have a bearing on the type of materials used. The level of physical and perceptual development of the child for example, determines the physical form of material that can be appropriately offered to him. Likewise, the limited intellectual understanding and experience of the pre-

school child directly affect the content of materials that can be used.

Books

The stock of materials provided by libraries has been for centuries predominantly books and similar printed matter. The increased awareness of bringing books and very young children together, in recent years, has led to a corresponding increase in the publishing of books for pre-school children especially in the developed countries. These books are published in a variety of formats with appropriate contents and roles.

Although publishing for children is on the increase in developing countries including Ghana, the range of materials is limited and lacks the variety found in developed countries. The reasons for this situation are several and an attempt to discuss them in this article will not be made. Consequently most of the examples of materials cited are by publishers in developed countries (especially the U.S.A., U.K.)

Washable literature

Washable literature includes cloth books or rag books and others made of plastic in various shapes, with characters printed on them. Some of them are made of fabric sewn into the form of a book with pictures and sometimes there are a few words of text. These books can be crumpled or floated in a bath. They are suitable for small babies who have no physical control of their bodies. The adult has to smoothen the book out and hold it for the child to see the pictures.

It has been suggested that these books are not very useful for the child. Referring to rag books, Tucker (1981) for example argued that, "pictured objects can be seen clearly if they stand out distinctly from their backgrounds – something that rarely happens in the smudgy printing and faded colours of rag books...".

Opinion is divided also as to whether washable literature should be treated as toys or books. Nevertheless, the child's exposure to them will help the child identify characters later seen in books and things in his environment. Other bath books include the "Spot range" and the Blackie titles which are suitable for children under three years. "Baby's first things" and "Baby's first friends" for example, are safe, soft and washable little books that contain bright and cheerful pictures of objects that small children love looking at.

Board books

Board books are stiff and glossy books made of strong cardboard and laminated cards. They can be wiped down with a damp cloth when dirty and are very useful for their sturdiness. Board books are "a sounder investment against sticking fingers and the whole range of destructive affection which children can bring to their first books..." (Tucker, 1981).

The books are bound at their spines just like any ordinary book and are appropriate for young children who are not capable of turning the paper pages of books. "Of the many things a board book can teach a baby, an important one for the future of the

reader is the concept of page turning – and that if you turn the page back again the picture will still be there” (Taylor, 1984). The board book format is suitable for children less than two years, since books for infant use at this stage need to be physically strong. However some of them may have a rather more complex content suitable for children above this age. Publishers such as Macdonald and Company, Methuen, Hamish Hamilton, Heinemann and others publish high quality board books that are suitable for pre-school children.

Zigzag and concertina books

In a sense, zigzag and concertina books constitute an extension of the board book and are bound in such a way that the child can pull them out to make a strip of pictures which he can see. Some of them are made of thick shiny cards and are virtually indestructible. They may have slots in which to fit objects contained in a pouch in the inside cover. Zigzag and concertina books offer the child visual stimulation. They also assist the child in developing motor skills. On the other hand, they are a little difficult to open and manipulate and therefore must be used with the support of an adult. Examples are Blackie Concertina Books and others published by Walker Books.

Novelty books

Included in this category are pop-ups, split-page and flap books. Novelty books enable the child to be involved in an activity as the story develops through the book. Carle (1982), for example, developed a series, “Play and read Books” which have

movable parts and cut out shapes, allowing children to take active part in reading the books as they slide and push shapes through slits in the pages. By doing this the children generally develop their manual dexterity, apart from enjoying the story.

Some of the novelty books are based on well-known finger games, each ending with a pop-up surprise. Other books, through the medium of flaps, show the entire “first” in a baby’s life, and one that if suitably filled out by a parent will turn into a wonderful souvenir of a child’s early days (Bradman, 1985).

“Walking puppet books”, published by Methuen are combinations of a book and a finger puppet all in one. Examples include “Alfie the acrobat”, “Bertha the ballerina” and “Katie the firsky”. These books are illustrated in full colour throughout and each has two cloth legs, designed to fit tiny fingers. Little children can make each puppet act out its own story and perform other activities in addition.

Press-out books are also available. In this case, the child can press out and stand up all the characters or join them depending on the subject of the book. In the “Press-out train book”, (Peppe, 1987) for example, the children can press out and join all the carriages on the train and pull it along.

Novelty books appeal to children of all ages, but they are more appropriate for children of three years and above who have developed a certain degree of fine motor control needed to operate them gently.

Rhyme and songbooks

Children react to sound and rhythm of language from the very earliest age since they are attracted by the sound of human voice. Soon, they learn to differentiate between the human voice and other noises in the environment. "Baby talk", addressed to the child... is in fact found in most cultures as an important way in which mothers simplify language, so helping infants to acquire the first stages of speech and comprehension" (Tucker, 1981). Through a reasonable selection of nursery rhymes, the child learns the words for many objects and persons, widening both vocabulary and experience. Nursery rhymes give a feeling of familiarity and security to the child. In addition, nursery rhymes can help the child learn the alphabet, counting, days of the week and also learn about the social life around him, such as going to bed or getting up.

Listening to the rhythms and the pattern of sounds in rhymes assist in preparing children for the more precise listening skills they will need when they are learning to read. One of the characteristics of the pre-school child is his ability to imitate attitudes, feelings and actions of those around him. They therefore imitate rhythm and the more involved activity of acting out stories and nursery rhymes after they are repeated several times.

Games and nursery rhymes can serve as an effective way of amusing and stimulating the young child and helping him to develop confidence. "Any activity involving pleasurable repetition when an infant can soon learn to predict what is going to happen next, can also be important

in the growth of general confidence" (Tucker, 1981).

Finger plays are included in some nursery rhyme books. They can serve as a first step towards a love of reading. Through finger plays, the children can learn about the various parts of the body. The child can show the features of the body, pick out fingers and toes in finger play activities. As the child takes part in these activities he also learns to associate with other individuals in his social milieu, enhancing his social development. First important relationships are built up between adults and children through shared pleasure in language, games and other popular routines. Rhyme and songbooks therefore play an important role in the physical, social and intellectual development of the pre-school child.

Picture/Storybooks

Picture books are produced for very young children and there is a wide variety of styles to choose from depending on the children's stages of development. These books treat subjects of interest to the young child in familiar situations and project everyday routines of family life.

Most of the picture books for the very young child are brightly illustrated with primary colours. They contain a few words and are written in simple language and set in large type faces. Picture books are very useful and pleasurable for children. As Tucker (1981) points out:

"The whole picture book world... has a wealth of experience to offer children and every time a child goes from one book

to another, there will always be the possibility of finding out something more about colour, form, texture and movement”.

By looking at pictures in books and pouring over details in their own time, children develop their interpretive skills. Thus picture books “offer the child of most ages, but particularly when he or she is small, an arena where they can grow in confidence and understanding quite quickly with or without adult help”(Tucker, 1981). Picture books can both slow down and simplify experience by presenting it in more readily comprehensible terms for the child.

The slightly longer storybooks for young children also concentrate on familiar events in their own environment. Stories are usually woven around moods, characters and plots that small children can recognise immediately. This is because they depict similar dramas that arise from playing, shopping, eating, relationships with animals, pets, toys, parents, grandparents and others.

Books with clear pictures can be shown to a small baby up to six months. These brightly coloured picture books shown to the baby will encourage him to focus on the pictures. This will make it possible to show successive pages. Gradually, the baby will master the art of grabbing and holding the book; with time he will be able to pick a book left within reach.

For babies from six to eighteen months old, the pictures in the book still need to be bright and simple if they are to catch the infant’s eye.

From eighteen months the picture needs of the pre-school child are more detailed.

Books, which have pictures that are more complex than those formerly used, are required. Since the child’s interest is high in pictures and in language, ‘ABC’ books for example can be used for the child. The intention of introducing such a book to the child at this stage will not be to teach the alphabet as such, but to acquaint the child with books in general.

By the age of three, language and experience should equip the child for more complex and sophisticated stories. He becomes more discriminatory in his tastes. It is a suitable time to introduce the first fairy tales.

From four to five years and above, the child will continue to enjoy his old favourites although he will now enjoy longer and more complex stories too. The essential need for elaborate illustrations will be reduced slightly, but still remain important. He will also need books, which can be easily read.

Special purpose books

These books are designed to specifically help the process of socialization, by preparing the child for dramatic changes in his life. As the child grows, he has to learn how to face problems, how to take care of himself, how to feel comfortable and confident with others. These “situation” books help to make feelings and attitudes easier to understand, talk about and easier to manage. They may deal with the arrival of a new baby in the family, the experience of moving house or going to the hospital or the more emotive subjects such as death. The first experiences series by Civardi (1986), for example includes titles such as “Going to the dentist”, “Going to the hospital”, “Going to school”, “The new

baby” and “Moving house”. Each book provides information on what to look for in a new situation and can help to build up confidence.

However, there is as yet little research on the effect of “situation books” on children, or on the skills and techniques required to use them with children. Most of what is said about their value to pre-school children therefore is based on subjective evidence. On the other hand, their wide availability suggests that they do have an important role to play in the social development of the child. In using these books, the child needs the support of an adult.

Concept Books

Concept books are precursors of information books. They are designed to teach the child basic concepts such as numbers, colours, time, shapes, sizes and the five senses. In the five senses “Walk books series” (Children’s Press, 1988) for example, each book shows a child enjoying the sights and sounds of different places such as the city, zoo, beach and the park. This series can help children to utilize their senses better while at the same time they learn to appreciate the world around them.

The “Beth and Billy Books” series published by Macdonald (1988) look at several concepts, which can prove to be a puzzle for very young children. These books examine different aspects of a child’s life and development within the context of an easy-going family. Titles in the series include “My week”, “My family” and “My friends”.

It is important to note that theoretically, it is possible to divide books into various categories, whereas in practice it is more difficult to do so. This is because the content of one book can cover more than one category. A nursery rhyme book for example can contain rhyming words or counting finger rhymes in which case it can be used as a rhyme and concept book. The need of the child may determine the way a book is used.

Audio-Visual Materials

Developments in the means of recording and communicating ideas have added to the printed word a wide variety of alternative media, using modern technology. Librarians are therefore increasingly building and using stock, not only of books and similar printed matter but also other materials such as audio cassettes, recordings on discs, videos and others.

Audiocassettes

Audiocassettes can appeal to the oral sense of the child and can be included effectively in the collections for pre-school children in libraries. The “Sounds Like” cassette packs produced by Macdonald Publishers for example contain cassettes and wall friezes designed to introduce pre-school children to the sounds of the alphabet and numbers. Each cassette includes a variety of songs, rhymes, stories and sound effects to assist in holding the child’s attention. The friezes provide visual support for the cassettes. They help the child to learn about numbers, colour and nature as well as help to develop self-expression.

Apart from entertaining children, audiocassettes can help the child to learn to listen, for as Redford (1983) rightly states,

“Cassettes are far from being mere entertainment:

listening is a skill that children, to their disadvantage, often never acquire. Young children can learn it effortlessly by listening to tapes”.

Local folktales, songs and nursery rhymes can be recorded on audiocassettes and added to the collection of library materials for pre-school children. By listening to cassettes, children can expand their imagination and this will encourage them to read when they have mastered the art.

Videocassettes

An important area in publishing for the under-fives is video. Videocassettes are available for use by pre-school children. Some of them are based on picture books and others are based on television series. “Puddle Lane” for example, is a video production of a television series (Yorkshire Television) aimed at pre-school children. Similar productions could be made for pre-school children in developing countries including Ghana.

Videocassettes can form part of the collection for pre-school children and can also be used as elements in promotional activities in public libraries. The video can serve as an element of aural and visual stimulation for the pre-school child and older pre-schoolers can conveniently handle them. However, they are comparatively

expensive and this serves as a limitation on their use in public libraries.

Toys and Games

Toys and games, which are manipulative materials, can play a considerable part in the development of the child. Psychologists have emphasized the value of play for pre-school children. Jean Piaget a great psychologist sees children’s play as useful in three ways. First, it provides a way for children to practice and reinforce skills. Secondly, play gives children a chance to use symbolism (both language as symbol for things and imaginative play where one thing stands for another thing) and thirdly, games and play with rules provide social skills (Edmonds, 1985).

Play allows the pre-school child to take part in physical activities that develop both muscle control and coordination. It fosters intellectual growth by giving practice in observation, increasing attention span and building concepts through first hand experience. When children play together, they learn to associate with others, follow simple rules and this promotes social development (Edmond, 1985).

Children therefore learn and develop intellectual, physical and social skills through play. It enhances the “development of speech and language, concepts, symbols, imagination, attention span, fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination, visual and auditory discrimination” (Ponish, 1987).

As in the case of other library materials for pre-school children, the librarian should have a clear plan for the collection so that the toys selected for the library can foster

a variety of learning activities in the areas of development. The toys must be evaluated for safety, sturdiness of construction and suitability for the targeted age levels.

Toys that promote intellectual growth can be explored and manipulated by the pre-school children. By using these toys, skills including number concepts, colour recognition, letter recognition, shape discrimination, problem solving, cause-effect, size and spatial relationships are acquired. Some toys for this developmental area are shape sorters, number games, puzzles and puppets. For physical development toys include blocks, pull toys, peg boards, stacking toys and various size balls. They help children to develop fine and gross motor coordination.

For social and emotional development, toys include dolls, and family play sets. The social toys encourage the use of imagination through pretend play. They invite children to start playing together, increasing the socialization process. It is therefore useful to have a collection of toys in the library. Toys and games add a new dimension to other library materials since they are also a valuable medium of communication for children.

The children's librarian must therefore be aware of what is available in order to select appropriate materials that reflect the broad needs (social, physical and intellectual) of the pre-school child.

Conclusion

In developing collections for pre-school children, the children's librarian must

therefore be aware of what is available, in order to select appropriate materials that reflect the broad needs (social, physical and intellectual) of the age group. It is essential that imported books must be supplemented with locally published ones in order to develop a balanced collection with material portraying the cultural background of the children. Suitable books written in the local languages will enhance the quality of the collection.

Provision should be made for audiovisual materials to reflect the new age of information and communications technology.

Local toys as far as possible must also be included in the collection along with modern imported toys. Though, "books are still an essential resource in libraries, children, especially pre-school and younger children can learn more happily and willingly through toys" (Fayose, 1991).

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