Beginning with Martin Luther’s call for universal education and literacy in the home in the 1500s, the dialogue on the merits and methods of early childhood education has been raging ever since. Despite decades of experimentation in educational programming for children, and more recently an explosion of sophisticated neurolinguistic research involving very young children, the literacy statistics for both adults and children in the United States remain worryingly, arguably unacceptably low. As of 2020, the US Department of Education recorded 54% of US adults as reading below a 6th grade level. The NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) report card for 2022 recorded 37% of US fourth graders reading below a ‘basic’ (functional) level. The NAEP report stresses that this ‘below basic’ percentage has not improved appreciably since the 1990s. The Right to Read Act, introduced in the US Senate in the same month as the 2022 NAEP report was released, appears to be in response to the stagnant statistics:

“This bill expands access to school libraries and literacy skills support for elementary and secondary school students, including by authorizing comprehensive literacy state development grants and increasing the number of state-certified school librarians in high-need schools.” (Reed, 2022)

While the maintenance of literacy support programs at the elementary and secondary school levels is undoubtedly worthy of federal attention, the consensus among early childhood experts is that the most durable effects on literacy come from work done with children in their pre-kindergarten years. A 1998 statement from the NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) confirms that the pre-kindergarten years are when “children take their first critical steps toward learning to read and write” and stresses that “failing to give children literary experiences until they are in school can severely limit the reading and writing they ultimately attain.” (NAEYC, 1998) Research from the Institute for Learning & Brain Science has shown that “measures of phonetic learning in the first year of life…predict language abilities and pre-literacy skills at the age of 5 years”, meaning that “success in school begins in infancy.” (Kuhl, 2011) An important nuance to keep in mind when considering the urgency/impact of early literacy initiatives is that “what happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or a fragile stage for what follows.” (Shonkoff, 2000)

Presumably with such research in mind, the Universal Prekindergarten and Early Childhood Education Act was re-introduced in the US House of Representatives in March of 2022. Universal pre-k initiatives at the state level have been in motion since 2015, (Teale et al, 2020) but until pre-k is universal (and even when it is), I feel there is an argument to be made for understanding the librarian’s ethical commitment to equitable access (ALA, 2021) as an obligation to provide not just access, but robust early literacy initiatives that will help future generations to attain literacy levels needed to truly make use of the library’s resources in a meaningful way. Put more bluntly: if 54% of adults and 37% of fourth graders struggle with basic literacy, doesn’t this render much of what the library has to offer effectively inaccessible, making something of a mockery of the librarian’s promise to ensure equitable access?

This is not to say libraries across the US are failing in the early literacy department; quite the opposite, as discussed in more detail later. The ALA coordinates a multitude of committees, partnerships and initiatives devoted to literacy at all levels. That being said, the word literacy does not appear in either the ALA Code of Ethics or the Library Bill of Rights. It seems worth pursuing, at least as a thought experiment, the potential effects of explicit reference to literacy in either document. Could language that insists on literacy as a core component of equitable access be the catalyst for a world in which the library is understood by society at large as the natural, even routine, first chapter in every child’s educational journey?

A commitment to literacy in the ALA Code of Ethics or Bill of Rights could also serve as a mandate for Library and Information Science programs across the country to add a ‘Literacy: How It Works and Why It Matters’ course to their core degree requirements. Requiring such a course might draw students toward Children’s and Youth librarianship who otherwise would have passed it over as just another elective. Requiring such a course could also help to ensure that LIS graduates who do apply for Children’s or Youth librarianship positions are well-versed enough in early literacy instruction that they can remain competitive alongside those with Early Childhood Education degrees during the application process. Interviews conducted by the team that issued the 2017 report on the ECRR (Every Child Ready to Read) program are particularly revealing on this point. The report states that “as libraries’ focus on early childhood education spreads, library directors expect job candidates to have training in early childhood education.” (Neuman et al, 2017) One librarian explains that “the expectation is that the [job candidate] will be familiar with family literacy and parent engagement. We specifically ask them, “How would you incorporate phonological awareness in your story time?” If they look at us with confusion, they probably don’t go to the next round of interviews.” (Neuman et al, 2017) Another librarian is more straightforward: “across the country everyone is saying the same thing: library school graduates are not coming out with the kinds of credentials we need them to have.” (Neuman et al, 2017) As early literacy initiatives continue to gain momentum, the hope is that LIS majors have received the training necessary to be able to say “this is what’s going on with your kid, and this is what’s going on in her little brain, and this is why it helps.” (Neuman et al, 2017)

LIS programs could potentially heed this call to focus on early literacy by adopting the medical school model of rotations, whereby the hypothetical core class mentioned above would include placement as a volunteer or intern within a library-based literacy initiative for the duration of the course. Adopting such a model (especially if rotations in other fields were programmed in as well) would undoubtedly extend both the length of an LIS degree, and the level of (time) commitment expected of candidates. The current prohibitive costs of higher education and the subsequent pressure on students to either work while in school, or finish school as quickly as possible in order to start working to pay back loans render the possibility of moving such a proposal from thought experiment to pilot program highly unlikely. A less radical approach, as suggested by librarians interviewed during the ECRR survey, might be to establish robust and well publicized partnerships between public libraries and LIS programs to facilitate/fast track volunteer opportunities for LIS students at local branches involved in literacy support.

While producing more graduates with an early literacy focus might be one goal/outcome of bringing literacy into the ethical fold, it also seems worth considering that even LIS graduates who do not go on to work in early literacy or public library settings will better serve their patrons if armed with knowledge of and sensitivity to the inner workings of literacy; with 54% of the US adult population struggling to read beyond a 6th grade level, any information organization looking to expand or provide equitable access to its services will have to contend with this issue in some form.

Taking an even broader view, one might argue that an explicit, codified, ethical commitment to literacy instruction is the only meaningful way to substantiate the library’s longstanding reputation as a pillar of democracy. The conception of the library as embodiment of democratic ideals and engine of democratic participation is deeply rooted among American thinkers, writers and librarians. Embedded in many of these assertions is the assumption that the population being served by the library has the literacy skills needed to actually make use of its resources in the name of informed civic participation. In a letter to Herbert Putnam, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said the silent part out loud (italics my own): “I have an unshaken conviction that democracy can never be undermined if we maintain our library resources *and a national intelligence capable of utilizing them.*" (Waters, 1976) The necessity of literacy for democratic participation has not only been well understood but often weaponized throughout American history; plantation owners denying the people they enslaved the ability to become literate, followed by the inclusion of literacy tests in the voter registration process in Reconstruction and Jim Crow era southern states being one of the more egregious and long-standing examples. Frederick Douglass’ famous statement comes to mind: “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”

Given this history, it becomes difficult to view the library’s commitment to literacy instruction as anything but an ethical commitment. The ALA Code of Ethics pledges “to confront inequity and oppression…and to advance racial and social justice”. (ALA, 2021) There is perhaps an argument to be made that the broad commitment to social justice implies/takes under its wing a commitment to literacy, and therefore a separate and explicit commitment to literacy is not needed, and would only invite a litany of other ‘narrower’ causes lobbying for their own line in the Code of Ethics, thereby undermining the generally understood strength of a code of ethics to lay out broad guidelines that can account for/be applied to a wide variety of unforeseen situations. Here I would counter that, if anything, literacy should take social justice under its wing and not the other way around. Douglass understood literacy as foundational to freedom, FDR believed democracy would fail without it. A 2020 report from Gallup and the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy reminds us that:

“It is well-established that literacy is linked to a variety of positive outcomes, such as higher education, income, health and civil engagement. Likewise, macroeconomic research has long-shown that higher levels of human capital — measured by educational attainment, cognitive ability and literacy — are associated with higher economic growth at the national level.” (Rothwell, 2020)

If freedom, democratic participation, economic prospects, and health and education outcomes are understood as the bread and butter of social justice, and literacy is a prerequisite to positive results in all these domains, then one might reasonably argue that to commit to social justice without explicitly committing first and foremost to literacy instruction would be a half-baked, empty promise. Moreover, given the (unfortunate) political coding of the phrase ‘social justice’ in contemporary culture wars, an ethical commitment to literacy might be a politically savvy channel through which to achieve the social justice agenda without labelling it as such.

The exigency of addressing America’s literacy crisis is deepened by the fact that the proficiency required to be considered functionally literate has and continues to increase. The growing dominance of the information/knowledge economy has revealed that “functional literacy now require[s] a person to move beyond literal meaning, to interpret texts, and to use writing not simply to record, but to interpret, analyze, synthesize, and explain.” (Westby, 2004) Put another way, “technological changes have redefined dramatically what it means to be literate in American society.” (Van Kleeck, 2010) The consequences of struggling to read will thus be compounded for future generations.

The remainder of this paper is structured as a survey of some of the key topics I imagine would be included in the abovementioned hypothetical LIS course ‘Literacy: How it works and why it matters’. I will focus specifically on early childhood education and early literacy, since, as discussed earlier, the literacy inputs a child receives before entering kindergarten are so highly correlated with future reading ability, and also because my research indicates that early literacy is an area in which many libraries across the country have already determined they have a potentially decisive role to play.

**Glossary of Common Early Literacy Terms**

*Phonological Awareness:* “awareness of, ability to manipulate phonological segments in words at the phoneme, syllable and rime level” (Schwanenflugel, 2010)

*Phonemic Awareness:* ‘insight that every spoken word can be conceived as units of sound that are represented by the letter of an alphabet’ (ECRR, 2010)

*Print Awareness:* understanding ‘how books work’, directionality (left to right, top to bottom for English), pictures versus print distinction, turning pages, holding books, associating reading with learning new information

*Decoding (Phonics):* the ability to match graphemes (letter combinations) to phonemes (sound combinations), allows readers to sound out words they’ve never seen before

*Fluency:* reading quickly, accurately and with expression, moves beyond decoding and allows for comprehension/interpretation of text

*Vocabulary Enhancement:* giving children more words/concepts to use when speaking and recognize automatically when reading means better comprehension and more expressive communication with others

**Current state of research**

It appears that the groundbreaking neuroscientific and neurolinguistic work done in 1990s (often referred to as the Decade of the Brain) continues to provide a solid foundation for early literacy researchers to build upon. A literature review led by early literacy giant Bill Teale describes 2006-2015 as “a decade of measured progress” in early literacy research. Teale and his colleagues identify the following 4 trends:

1) more focus on even younger kids

2) more focus (and more focus needed because of demographic shifts) on bilingual development

3) more focus (and more focus needed) on digital technology

4) broad consensus that preschool programs need to be ‘literate spaces’, but more research needed comparing instructional methods (especially if universal pre-k is the goal)

They also speculate that the upcoming decade of early literacy research may represent a ‘paradigm shift’ due to the increasing ubiquity of technology, particularly the touchscreen, in the lives, educational and otherwise, of young children.

**Early Childhood Education History—Philosophies and Methods**

Below is a (very rough!) outline of some of the key developments in early childhood education in America.

During the Colonial era, the expectation/norm was that mothers would use phonics and the Bible to equip their children with basic reading skills in advance of any formal education. (Note the previously mentioned exclusion of enslaved mothers and children from this arrangement.) The Phonics+Bible method is an example of direct instruction. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s famous 1762 “Treatise on Education” eschewed direct instruction (on philosophical grounds) in favor of what is now often referred to as constructive learning; children should learn through play and exploration of whatever they naturally express interest in. Perhaps the most famous embodiment of this argument is Friedrich Froebel’s conviction that “play is the highest expression of human development in childhood” and the establishment of his first kindergarten in Germany in 1837. The kindergarten system would be brought to the US 20 years later by Margarethe Schurz of Watertown, Wisconsin. The turn of the 20th century would bring a raft of now famous early education philosophies, including Maria Montessori’s eponymous method, Rudolf Steiner’s Waldorf School, and later Loris Malaguzzi’s post-WWII Reggio Emilia. While each method is of course unique and influential in its own right, even a cursory review reveals a continuation of Rousseau and Froebel’s emphasis on learning through play rather than direct instruction.

Play and exploration have indeed been confirmed by later research to be crucial components of early childhood development, including in the development of early literacy skills, and the value of facilities for young children to play and explore together remains uncontested to this day. However, perhaps of greater consequence to generations of young children learning to read than the battle of Rousseau et al against direct instruction was the rift between mother, child, and literacy that was wrought by the Industrial Revolution, followed by the institution of compulsory education. Mass industrialization took many women, and therefore young children, out of the home. The institutions set up to care for the children of working mothers did not program early literacy into their daily activities. With the introduction of compulsory education in the 1850s, mothers were often actively discouraged from working on literacy at home in order to legitimize/strengthen the role of schools. It would take decades before parents would again be encouraged to take an active role in their child’s pre-school early literacy development.

The importance of life before kindergarten would gain national attention with the launch of Head Start in 1965. But this was first and foremost an anti-poverty program, (as opposed to an educational program) and if literacy instruction was provided, it was heavily influenced by the fervor for direct instruction methods spawned in part by the 1955 publication of Rudolph Flesch’s “Why Johnny Can’t Read” and more broadly by the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union for academic superiority. Direct instruction methods tend to focus on constrained skills (letter knowledge, phonological awareness), but research has since confirmed that unconstrained skills (vocabulary, comprehension, conceptual knowledge) are of equal if not greater necessity in building an effective literacy skill set. (ECRR, 2010)

Unconstrained skills like vocabulary and comprehension are built through conversation and other interactive activities. Indeed, as far back as the early 20th century, Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist, built his theory of child development, which included the development of literacy skills, using social interaction (e.g. conversation) as its first principle. Marie Clay’s research in the 1960s established the field of emergent literacy, which highlighted the importance of early exposure to basic concepts/conventions that literate people take for granted. However, even as further research during the 1970s and 1980s confirmed the importance of fostering print awareness and other skills through parent/child interaction, the major policy document of the 1980s, titled “Becoming A Nation of Readers” lacked a crucial caveat. While the campaign’s directive, ‘Read to your kid!’, undoubtedly set the ball rolling in the right direction in terms of reuniting parents and children in the early literacy journey, today’s early literacy experts confirm the need for an important qualification of the directive: “it is [now] apparent that it is not only being read to but also how adults engage children in discussions about books that is important to later reading achievement, particularly reading comprehension. For the greatest benefit to the child, books should be shared in an interactive manner that encourages the child’s verbal participation in the activity.” (Van Kleeck 2010)

The advances in neurolinguistic research during the 1990s, followed by sustained federal funding throughout the 2000s for early literacy/early education research via the Reading Excellence Act, the No Child Left Behind Act and the Education Sciences Reform Act likely contributed to the generally optimistic 2006-2015 literature review by Teale and colleagues discussed above. It is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate as to why such a solid body of research has not yet translated into meaningful improvements in literacy statistics at the national level, but the Every Child Ready to Read initiative, discussed next, makes clear that libraries can and should play a leading role in curating/administering evidence-based early literacy programs that can be utilized by all parents and children of a given neighborhood.

**ECRR (Every Child Ready to Read)**

Launched jointly by the PLA (Public Library Association) and ALSC (Association for Library Service to Children) in 2004, the ECRR program aims to educate, encourage, and support parents of very young children (ages 0-4) in their crucial role as ‘first/best teacher’ of pre- and early literacy skills. The skills ECRR aims to cultivate in young learners are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, but these skills are mainly presented to parents as talk, sing, read, write, play.

As of 2017, 6000 libraries across the US have incorporated the ECRR Toolkit into their programming for young children. Bringing Literacy Home [PROPER TITLE], ECRR’s 2017 report based on extended visits with librarians at 60 libraries across the US would most likely be required reading for the hypothetical course I am proposing. Three key takeaways from the report are:

1) Design of the physical space matters

-Librarians discussed the importance of a space that sends the message ‘Come and hang out!’, especially to parents who are unfamiliar with the library, or insecure about their own literacy skills.

2) Story hour needs to be interactive

- Parents sit with children on the floor and participate in activities related to the book including call and response, movement, and singing. Librarians also take time during story hour to give parents quick tips and explainers on which literacy skills are being developed through each activity and how, and how the parents might engage in similar kinds of play/learning at home.

3) Digital technology must be used to enhance, not replace human interaction

-Librarians have had success in creating designated parent/child computer stations equipped with a special large/small seating unit so that parents and kids can use interactive e-books together, or kids can look on/converse as parents do Internet tasks

**Conclusion**

Framing literacy instruction as an ethical responsibility and enshrining it in the ALA Code of Ethics may not be a realistic, efficient or effective proposal toward solving America’s literacy problem, but, to borrow a page from the speculative designer’s playbook, I make the proposal more in the hopes of stretching the library’s collective awareness/imagination on the issue than of seeing this particular proposal enacted.

Literacy instruction as ethical responsibility

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Literacy services as top priority of every library administration

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Advocacy for necessary funding, advocacy for literacy focus in LIS programs

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next generation librarians with knowledge, interest, and resources to build/maintain robust programs/outreach at every local library

↓

increased/consistent participation in programs, particularly by parents with pre-k aged children

↓

shift in collective understanding: literacy starts at the library

↓

future generations experience benefits of early literacy programs at the library, can expect continued support if needed, and can engage meaningfully with text resources at the library and elsewhere

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