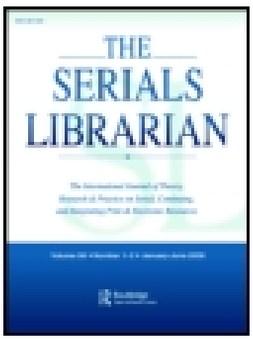

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Research Article

Are We Creating Opportunities for Homeless Children to Succeed in the Digital Age?

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ABSTRACT

As society becomes more dependent upon technological resources, to share information and provide education, it is imperative that we ensure inclusive information access and provide resources for digital literacy in order to decrease barriers to information for marginalized communities. This research focuses specifically on the digital literacy needs of homeless youth. The findings presented here will contribute knowledge to the public library sector and allow librarians to develop, improve, and promote digital literacy programming for homeless youth. As a result, public libraries will be better positioned to bridge the digital literacy divide that exists today and begin moving towards a greater level of equity.

KEYWORDS

Digital Literacy; homelessness; libraries; youth Development; children; public Libraries

Introduction

At the core of their mission, public libraries provide access to information, promote literacy, are welcoming spaces for their patrons, and have an increased opportunity to position themselves as digital literacy experts for children in need. "Libraries, at the root of providing people with access to information in all formats–print, digital, multimedia–must re-evaluate and expand their roles in light of the accelerating trend of digital information. They should be a significant player in the evolving information ecosystem."[1] Homeless children are particularly vulnerable when it comes to lack of access to information and computers, with no signs that the problem is going away. The Point-In-Time homeless assessment done by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development in January 2018 documented "56,342 families with children, representing one-third (33%) of the total homeless population in 2018."[2] The public libraries in our research are in many ways providing a place for children to gain digital literacy skills but they need to do more to actively engage with homeless children through targeted programming and outreach. Throughout our research, we attempted to answer the following question: Are we creating opportunities for homeless children to succeed in the digital age?

Literature review

Digital literacy defined

Digital literacy for children represents having access to technological tools and the education to use those tools in order to thrive in our society. Access to the Internet and "the ability to read on the Internet to learn information"[3] is a skill that is no longer optional as we are "in an age where the Internet is an increasingly essential daily tool for finding answers, seeking understanding, and communicating, that spells big trouble"[4] for children without strong digital literacy skills. As digital resources and media are commonplace in our society, patrons are using the library in many ways, including accessing digital tools and seeking out learning opportunities. Digital literacy is a necessity,

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not a luxury for children, and if they are not receiving these skills at school, public libraries need to fill this void for their youngest and most vulnerable patrons.[5]

The concept of a digital divide between children who have access to information technologies versus those who do not (such as homeless children) deserves mention and is a frequent topic in the literature regarding digital literacy. The "digital divide is characterized by two crucial problems: (1) limited and costly infrastructure and (2) limited digital literacy in low/middle income communities."[6] In addition, "the digital divide is the gap between people in access to and use of information and communication technology. The explosion of technology over the past several years means that some will have access and others will not and the former will prosper and the latter will lag behind" (Eisenman, 2018, p. 12). Low income children and homeless children often do not have computers at home and "struggle to get the computer time they need" (Celano & Neuman, 2010, p. 68). Computer time is a precious commodity and public libraries are needed to bridge this digital divide. "Libraries must be part of an evolving national dialogue about how we marry robust access to technology resources with the twenty-first century literacy skills necessary to ensure digital opportunity for all" (Clark & Visser, 2011, p. 39).

Current outreach and programming

There is a lack of literature that addresses specific digital literacy outreach programs directed at children and their families who are experiencing homelessness. Libraries may be helping homeless children indirectly through their programming, but these children are not specifically sought after. Goulding, Shuker, and Dickie gathered information that supports integrating digital media into story time did so because "[i]t introduces children to digital skills they will need in the future."[7] Daily life reinforces the need to understand the benefits and limitations of technology and children need those skills yearly in life as they become necessary in school and work. This issue resides in the fact the some children have access to beneficial technology while others do not, Warschauer writes that, "from a policy standpoint, the goal of bringing technology to marginalized groups is not merely to overcome a technological divide but instead to further a process of social inclusion."[8] Not having the understanding and skills of technology has negative impacts on children academically and socially. Reliable internet access is seen as a basic requirement to be successful in life, but many people are unable to afford internet access fees. Hotspot lending programs are an example of how libraries are trying to reduce these barriers. Libraries participating in these programs, "use them to connect their own smartphones, tablets, or other devices; typically, up to ten devices can be connected to one hotspot."[9]

In an effort to move beyond the issue of access, libraries have developed community partnerships with public and private institutions in order to create innovative and sustainable initiatives to address digital literacy needs. In Texas, the San Antonio Public Library system has partnered with Goodwill Industries and the San Antonio Housing Authority to create the Digital Literacy Passport Club. "Participants who complete seven classes–on such topics as email basics and Microsoft Word–are then eligible to receive refurbished digital devices from Goodwill."[10] In partnership with New Horizons, a Seattle homeless youth shelter, the Seattle Public Library has worked to organize a Teen Drop-in Social Hour. "Each week, some five to 12 teens use the time to consult with social service providers or seek job and education resources."[11] Likewise, the Charlotte Digital Inclusion Alliance (CDIA) in North Carolina utilizes community partnerships to better meet the needs of the community. In partnership with the Nonprofit Technology Network, funded by Google Fiber, the CDIA, "aims to shrink the county's digital divide from 19% to 9% by 2026."[12] By working with a variety of public and private institutions, libraries are providing more than access, they are teaching the skills necessary to succeed in an increasingly digital world.

Research methods

Survey

For our primary data collection method, we worked collaboratively to create and disseminate an online questionnaire to libraries within our four respective cities (Seattle, WA; Tucson, AZ; Minneapolis, MN; and Charlotte, NC). We chose this method because standardization of the questionnaire allowed us to create comparable data within our separate communities. After careful analysis and revision of our original draft, we compiled a list of fifteen questions into Microsoft Office Forms and generated a shareable link to our survey. The final version of our survey included ten multiple choice questions, one rating scale, and four open-ended response questions (see Appendix for full questionnaire). The link was then distributed to libraries via Facebook and emailed to approximately 35 libraries, both through general contact email addresses and to specific people when we were able to obtain their direct contact information.

Interview

We also chose to conduct what Pickard refers to as a standardized, open-ended interview in which, "all interviewees are asked the same open-ended questions but allowed to respond in any way they feel is appropriate and with any information they choose to share."[13] (Pickard, 2013, p. 199). We chose this method because it allowed us to gain in-depth knowledge regarding digital literacy, and the open-ended nature of the questions allowed us to explore research subjects' opinions, experiences and beliefs regarding digital literacy programming and homeless youth outreach. We also chose this method because we wanted to standardize our interview questions for us to later be able to compare our findings.

We encountered a significant amount of difficulty securing interviews with library staff. Researcher work schedules and library hours were frequently conflicting. This served as an obstacle to arranging and obtaining an interview with library staff, as reaching a librarian proved to be difficult. When called, listed library contact numbers were typically answered by Library Assistants whose most common response was to pass our information along. Although we would have been happy to interview a Library Assistant, we found that offering to pass our interview request along was the most common response to our request. Promises of returned calls rarely came through. Likewise, email addresses were difficult to obtain, and we were only able to secure a limited number of direct email addresses. However, most of our emailed interview requests were not responded to. Ultimately, we were only able to conduct one interview with a Teen Services librarian at the High Point Branch of the Seattle Public Library in Seattle, Washington.

Results

Questionnaire

We sent out approximately 35 questionnaires to a variety of library staff and personnel and received 15 responses, for a response rate of 43%. On average, the questionnaire took just over fifteen minutes to complete. Not every question was answered by every participant, but most participants answered a majority of the questions. Participants had several job titles, including: Children's Librarian, Library Associate, Adult Services Librarian, Program Manager, Teen Librarian, Consultant and Library Director.

Several themes emerged during the analysis of our questionnaire. We each separately coded the results and compared our answers to strengthen the credibility of our analysis. First, computer skills (knowledge of settings, functions, typing, and basic interface navigation) and Internet navigation (knowledge of search engines and basic web functions) are the most common focuses of digital literacy programming, with video (video creation, editing, web presence development via platforms

like YouTube) being the least common. The most common target age range for youth digital literacy programming is 7–10 years old with 11–14 years old being the second most common age range. Eighty percent of our questionnaire respondents indicated that children do not need to register to attend digital literacy programs. Of the twenty percent that indicated children do need to register, half said parental approval is required. The most common types of digital literacy programming for those libraries that offer tech drop-in hours are Internet navigation, computer skills, communication and social media skills, personal device and app skills, word and spreadsheet skills and resume building skills.

Several libraries partner with outside organizations, the most common being public schools, although they collaborate to varying degrees. Most libraries do not have direct outreach to vulnerable populations (especially to homeless youth), although many expressed an interest in doing so. Sixty-nine percent of questionnaire respondents indicated the most common ways for homeless families to learn about their digital literacy programming is through information posted in the library.

The most common factors preventing a progression of digital literacy programming were budgetary restraints and staffing shortages, which prevent targeted outreach to children who may be experiencing homelessness or their families. Several librarians want to expand programs and reach new people but cannot for those reasons. When children do participate in digital literacy programs, over half of respondents "strongly agreed" that children learn valuable skills that will help them improve and succeed in using new literacy skills. Nevertheless, measuring the success and efficacy of digital literacy programs varies by library and program. There does not seem to be a consistent method in place that would offer feedback from program participants as to how their involvement in digital literacy programs have helped them gain new technical skills. Most feedback is collected verbally from participants, audience responsiveness and in general observations by either librarians or program directors. One respondent that took our questionnaire noted "we don't currently have great tools or markers to determine success …. attendance is usually about 25–35 kids each session and we feel successful if those youth are interested and engaged learners." Another respondent did indicate that they have seen a teen go on to become successfully employed, and another child had improved problem-solving skills after participating in a Code Club.

Interview

We conducted one interview with Ken Gollersrud, Teen Librarian at the High Point Branch of Seattle Public Libraries. He has been a librarian at this branch for nearly a decade and has been involved in digital literacy programming for the last four years. Mr. Gollersrud defined digital literacy as giving youth an opportunity to learn skills around digital media technology, to practice those skills, to work as a team, and to teach each other. He has led several different types of programming with his youth patrons including Storyhood that is done through Taleblazer.org (a mobile app that allows location-based game creation). Other digital literacy programs include Finch robots and a ten-week Minecraft series that was very popular "[youth] really like the social aspect of it because they want to be able to talk to each other" and "in some ways I see technology kind of limiting, isolating people and yet this program kind of brought youth together so that was pretty cool."[14]

It was evident throughout this interview that Mr. Gollersrud had no way of knowing whether the youth he worked with in his digital literacy programs were experiencing homelessness. He said that unless they offer that information to him he would not know. He did indicate that many of the youth come from homes where they do not have access to a desktop or laptop computer, so drop-in tech hours and other programs are really a draw for those children. Most of the youth he works with are from the local neighborhood and many are Somali immigrants. In addition to not having knowledge of the housing situation of his youth patrons, there are many additional barriers to access digital literacy programs for any child at his branch. These barriers include scheduling as it is difficult to find times where both he and his patrons are available to participate. Mr. Gollersrud's branch also

has one large meeting space that must be shared with other librarians, programs, and community members who can book the meeting space, so this creates a logistical barrier. For the Minecraft program he must share a kit with other branches so often it is not available when he might need access to it.

The High Point Branch library does not partner with any outside community organizations or public schools, but they do partner with the Seattle Central Library. This partnership has evolved because the two founders of the digital media literacy programs are headquartered at the Seattle Central Library and are involved in the creation of many programs. The majority of funding for these programs also comes from the Seattle Public Library Foundation, although Mr. Gollersrud indicated he was uncertain what percentage comes from other sources. The primary ways young patrons and their families learn about digital literacy programs at the High Point Branch is by word of mouth and fliers set out at the library. There is no direct outreach made to children who may be experiencing homelessness.

Finally, Mr. Gollersrud spoke about the positive impact the digital literacy programs at his branch have on his youth patrons. The only program that utilizes any concrete measurement of effectiveness is the Minecraft program, which has an online survey at the end for children to complete. Most impact measures are from his observations: children primarily gain social skills by interacting with their peers during these programs and even during tech drop-in hours. "They are teaching each other and learning from each other constantly. They're better teachers of each other than I would be. It's a lot of sharing and teamwork that I constantly reinforce because that is what the real world is like."[15]

Discussion and conclusion

Digital literacy skills are increasingly necessary for work, communication, education and personal life. It is therefore necessary that we work to ensure equitable access to these skills for all. Our research indicates that all too often libraries are taking a one-size-fits-all approach to developing digital literacy programming. This method fails to account for the specific needs of marginalized communities.

As mentioned in the literature review, public libraries take the need for digital literacy programming seriously, which is supported by our finding that all the librarians surveyed offer digital literacy help for their patrons. In addition, most respondents indicated that they wanted to increase the amount of digital literacy programming offered, one even mentioning, "there can never be too much" (Participant 14). However, due to issues such as budget restrictions or staffing shortages, they are not able to do as much as they would like.

One particularly unfortunate finding that directly impacts this research is that most librarians do not do any direct outreach for homeless patrons, which we theorize is likely because social stigma causes most people to conceal their homeless status. This highlights the importance of incorporating value-sensitive design in library programming, especially if it is a program that could be relevant for that population. Considering homeless patrons as indirect stakeholders in library digital literacy programming would be a first step towards improving those programs. A next step would be to increase trust with homeless patrons, so that they feel comfortable enough to divulge their homeless status and discuss their specific needs for library programming. Although our results indicated that children who participate in digital literacy programs (including those who are experiencing homelessness) learn important skills, the wide differences between how libraries define digital literacy and success of their programs make it nearly impossible to analyze if they are truly helping homeless youth.

There are several opportunities for further research. The digital literacy needs of homeless youth are still poorly understood. Further research should examine the barriers that exist which prevent this population from achieving digital literacy and should identify the areas of growth important to this community. This research would require careful ethical considerations, as it would involve

working directly with a vulnerable population. Another area for further research would be to establish metrics to evaluate successful digital literacy programming. Without a thoroughly developed understanding of how digital literacy is defined, researchers, librarians and homeless youth often define success of these programs differently. While librarians may say that a successful digital literacy program is, *teaching people how to use email and make a resume*, homeless youth may feel that successful programs teach *social media skills, coding, or gaming*. Without this clarity, well-intended programming may be completely missing the mark.

Overall, our findings suggest that libraries do take digital literacy programming seriously, but they are lacking in directed outreach and programming to homeless youth. There are several reasons for this, some of them uncontrollable, but it indicates a rich vein for future work in this area.

Notes

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13. Alison Jane Pickard, *Research Methods in Information: Chapter 17 Interviews*, (London: Facet Publishing, 2013), 199.
14. Ken Gollersrud, Personal Interview, November 5, 2019.
15. Gollersrud, Personal Interview.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Appendix. Questionnaire

Question 1: What is the target age range for youth digital literacy programming at this branch?

(a) 0-2
(b) 3-6
(c) 7-10
(d) 11-14
(e) 15-18

Question 2: Do you need to register to attend these programs?

(a) Yes
(b) No

Question 2A: If yes, how do children register?

(a) Online
(b) At library branch (in person)
(c) Other

Question 2B: Do you need parent approval to register (if under age 18)?

(a) Yes
(b) No

Question 3: What is your position at the library?

(a) Children's Librarian
(b) Reference Librarian
(c) Adult Services Librarian
(d) Program Manager
(e) Other

Question 4: Which of the following types of digital literacy programming does your branch currently offer? (select all that apply)

(a) **Computer skills** (knowledge of settings, functions, typing, and basic interface navigation)
(b) **Internet navigation** (knowledge of search engines and basic web functions)
(c) **Communication skills** (email, Skype)
(d) **Social media** (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
(e) **Personal device and app** (cellphone, laptop, smartphone capabilities)
(f) **Misinformation** (how to find and identify quality sources online, avoid scams and identify fraud)
(g) **Privacy** (how to secure and protect digital information)
(h) **Word, spreadsheet and presentation software** (knowledge of Microsoft Office Suite, Google Docs, Sheets and Slides)
(i) **Resume skills** (job search platforms and techniques, formatting, development of a professional online presence-LinkedIn)
(j) **Website creation** (coding and development)
(k) **Video** (video creation, editing, web presence development via platforms like YouTube)
(l) **Other** (please fill in the blank)

4B: If your library offers tech drop-in hours, which of the options above are you currently equipped to handle? (choose from options above)

Question 5: Does your library system or specific branch partner with public schools or community organizations?

(a) If yes, which schools/organizations and how does that partnership work?
(b) No

Question 6: What do you know to be the common ways for homeless families to learn about these programs?

(a) Directed outreach to shelters
(b) Outreach/advertising in public schools
(c) Information posted at the public library
(d) Other

Question 7: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement:
Children who participate in our public library's digital literacy programs learn valuable skills that will help them improve/succeed in using new literacy tools?
Strongly Agree ___
Agree ___
Neutral ___
Disagree ___
Strongly Disagree ___

Question 8: What kinds of methods do you use for measuring success or progress in your digital literacy programs among participants?

Question 9: Do you have outreach methods in place to reach vulnerable populations (including homeless children?)
9A: If yes, what are those methods? If no, why not?
9B: How do you judge the efficacy of your program(s)?

Question 10: Is there any other information you would like to share about your digital literacy programming?

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey.

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