

Research Question: How has the participation of children ages 3-12 in Seattle Public Library programming changed year by year from 2019 to 2023?

Topic: Library services during the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic changed many people's day-to-day lives due to uncertainty, restrictions, and lockdowns. Children were especially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including a negative effect on areas of cognitive development and reading skills where children were shown to have lower cognitive ability and reading skills than their counterparts before the pandemic (PRENDERGAST, 2023; Sato et al., 2023). Public library services and programming also looked very different during the COVID-19 pandemic with the rise of lockdowns, social distancing, and virtual services and programming (Grassel, 2020; Soulen & Tedrow, 2022). This raises the question of how libraries have been keeping up with these societal changes and what is different now, five years after the discovery of the virus and the social changes that were made. Some public libraries have continued the use of virtual programming and others have created more academic-focused programs to help children whose education was negatively impacted by this tumultuous time (Goddard, 2020; Grad, 2021; McChesney, 2022). The research has shown two major areas where the public library has changed in these past five years: programming related to kids' reading habits, literacy development, and school readiness, and virtual services with consideration to access and the digital divide.

Kids' Reading Habits, Literacy Development, and School Readiness During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a notable impact on the children's reading behaviors and literacy growth. The changes primarily resulted from sudden shifts to online teaching, closures of libraries, and limited availability of reading resources. Consequently, there is increasing concern regarding the lasting effects on underprivileged children from marginalized communities.

Throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a notable reduction in the availability of physical materials in libraries, leading to restrictions in access for children within educational settings. Soulen & Tedrow (2023) discovered a decline in school library resources as reported by parents, highlighting the obstacles families faced in promoting their children's reading habits. In response, many libraries made prompt adjustments to their services in order to better meet the needs of the community. For example, public libraries implemented virtual storytelling sessions, online reading competitions, and carefully selected digital libraries of electronic books and audiobooks. McChesney (2022) argued that these adjustments played a pivotal role in enabling ongoing education for young individuals amidst the pandemic. Initiatives such as "Read-Alouds Live" facilitated children's engagement with narratives in a collective manner, fostering a sense of unity despite geographical separation. However, the increased use of these digital tools has exacerbated inequalities in access, particularly for families with lower incomes who encounter limitations in internet access and device possession (Goddard, 2020; Pun, 2020).

According to Prendergast (2023), empirical evidence suggests that children who were born or brought up within the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic showed notable setbacks in achieving literacy developmental milestones, with notable impacts on social interaction, speech, and motor skills. Throughout history, libraries have played a vital role in advancing children's literacy through onsite programs that cultivate a passion for reading and improve foundational literacy abilities. Nevertheless, the shift to digital platforms posed challenges. Although online storytimes offer convenience, they frequently lack the necessary interactive engagement to support early literacy development. The efficacy of these digital resources was diminished due to the lack of in-person interactions with librarians and peers (Cahill et al., 2022).

Research has emphasized the significant impact of family involvement on the preservation of children's reading abilities amidst school closures. Children who engaged in reading activities within their household demonstrated more modest decreases in literacy proficiency in comparison to their counterparts. Nevertheless, numerous families faced challenges in supplementing the inadequate access to educational resources from schools and libraries, frequently lacking the requisite assistance to encourage reading within the home.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had an impact on children's preparedness for structured education, consequently influencing their social, emotional, and cognitive growth. Libraries have traditionally facilitated school readiness by offering interactive programs that promote social-emotional development and early academic skills. Regrettably, the transition to online programming restricted these opportunities, resulting in the deprivation of many children from crucial early learning experiences that support social interactions and suitable classroom conduct (Cahill et al., 2022).

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the significance of ensuring equal access to library resources, particularly for marginalized communities. It is imperative for libraries to continually modify their services and advocate for equitable access to resources aimed at fostering successful literacy development among children. Creating inclusive environments is crucial in ensuring that every child is adequately prepared for future academic challenges.

Virtual programming and library services during the COVID-19 pandemic: the digital divide and differences in access

Over the past five years, researchers have examined the swiftly changing landscape of virtual programming and remote library services. Noting a rise in demand for digital materials and programming, scholars of library and information science have recorded the increased popularity of ebooks, Zoom, and Discord (Goddard, 2020; Grassel, 2020). Such research has found a spike in the circulation of digital materials and decreasing circulation of print materials (Soulen & Tedrow, 2023). With regards to programming, public librarians have shared experiences of using mobile outreach to distribute activities designed to be completed at home (Beckman, 2021). While much of the research on remote programming primarily attends to programming meant to develop pre-literacy skills and school readiness in children under the age of five, a growing body of work studies not just virtual storytimes, but also teen activities and intergenerational activities conducted in a virtual format (Thompson & Reed, 2021). These analyses of remote library services included examinations of virtual programming with a social justice focus, such as online community forums dedicated to anti-racism (Thompson & Reed, 2021). Research into public and academic library makerspaces documents virtual makerspace programming that provides access to both physical equipment and thriving online communities (Kim et al., 2023). As public libraries have adapted the format and content of their programming and services, researchers have documented and analyzed these changes.

Against this backdrop, emerging research explores the dynamics of access to virtual programming, while also analyzing the efficacy of virtual programming designed to impart preliteracy skills. Bearing in mind the changes in storytime format since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we would be wise to attend to research on children's engagement with books read aloud in person, over a live video chat, or in a prerecorded video (Gaudreau et al., 2020). This research finds that young children are more engaged with books read aloud in person

or in a live video chat (Gaudreau et al., 2020). Researchers have recorded and brought attention to disparities in access to digital materials (Soulen & Tedrow, 2022, 2023). At the same time, researchers analyzed efforts by public libraries to provide internet access to their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Thompson & Reed, 2021). Additionally, scholars focusing on newly popular virtual storytimes found that this new medium offered accessibility benefits as families did not need to visit the physical space of the library to participate in library programming (Cahill et al., 2024). When approaching questions of injustice with regards to access to online services, researchers must be attentive to questions of justice and equity (Pun, 2020; Soulen & Tedrow, 2022, 2023). Raymond Pun offers an analysis of barriers to Internet and technology access both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of critical race theory (Pun, 2020). Recent research on virtual library programming calls attention to questions of access, community building, and pre-literacy skill development.

Conclusion

Research has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound effect on children's development. This effect was not uniform across different communities and geographical areas, with many marginalized communities, such as economically disadvantaged and communities of color being negatively affected more than others. The COVID-19 pandemic also sparked a monumental change in the way that public libraries interact with their patrons and create programming to serve their communities. Many public libraries have risen to the occasion to meet the emerging needs of children who were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic with programming and services, though there are still inequalities in access that need to be addressed

within these programs. Our research question is: How has the participation of children ages 3-12 in Seattle Public Library programming changed year by year from 2019 to 2023?

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