
Elementary Students, Reading Achievement, and the Public Library

Linda S. Proseus

As an elementary school teacher, a parent, and a graduate student in Library and Information Studies, I often observed children reading books from the public library. It seemed obvious to me that these children either liked to read or were strongly encouraged to do so by a parent or other adult. I also found myself assuming that they were probably good readers.

When I asked other teachers, they agreed that probably the better students were the ones using the public library. The local children's librarian, however, was more hesitant to guess the reading ability of children coming into the public library.

As my graduate studies introduced me to the wide range of activities offered to children at a public library, I began to think further about what type of student would be most likely to patronize the public library. Would the nature and frequency of use be related to the reading ability of the individual student? It would seem reasonable to expect that exposure to literature and reference materials at the public library could be related to educational progress, or that children comfortable with reading might find the public library a desirable place to be.

A search of the literature revealed very few studies investigating the connection between public library use and the reading ability of elementary students. However, the need for such studies has been well documented. For example, John Saunders in the August 1986 *Library Association Record* quotes the National Consumer Council finding that libraries make efforts to measure performance but "really don't know who is using their services—not even in terms of actual numbers, let alone social makeup."¹

Some authors have researched attitudes and reading interests of the elementary child, though their results are inconclusive. Winnick² presents evidence that fifty to seventy percent of a community's children are users of the public library. Langer³ and Raykovicz⁴ found that good readers/

high achievers prefer library books to other types of books and regard reading as a pleasurable activity. In contrast, lower achievers see reading any books as a school-related task. Ekechukwu⁵ reported that more fifth graders had a favorable attitude toward the public library than toward the school library. On the other hand, Schulte⁶ found that high interest in reading was related to frequent use of the school library, but it was unclear what relationship the public library had to reading interests.

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Even such a well-established public library program as the summer reading club has not been examined well enough to determine its effects on children, according to Goldhor and McCrossan.⁷ Their 1966 study found that participation had only a small effect on reading growth, but a similar study in 1978 reported that thirty voluntary participants maintained or improved reading levels when compared with seventy-seven non-participants.⁸

Griswold⁹ undertook a major study from 1976-1980 that showed the relationship of fourth graders' achievement to various family outings. He found that a visit to the public library was unquestionably the best predictor of school achievement, but he was reluctant to specify whether the library visit led to school success or the achievement of the student motivated the library visit.

The Project

My study was undertaken to determine if a relationship can be found to exist between the reading achievement of elementary students in

Linda S. Proseus is Media Coordinator at Forest Hills Middle School in Wilson, NC.

TABLE 1.
Library Use Survey

Statements	Answers (select one)			
1. I have been to the public library to do school work.	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
2. I have been to the public library to read books, magazines, papers, or other things for fun.	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
3. I have checked out books, records, videotapes, or other things from the public library.	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
4. I have been to story hours or other programs at the public library.	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
5. I have joined the summer reading club at the public library.	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
6. If I wanted to check a book out of the public library, I would: use my own library card. have a family member to do it for me. have a friend do it for me. have no card or person to do it.	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often

Wilson County and their use of the public library by asking which services of the local library children use and how frequently they use them.

Fourth- and fifth-grade students were chosen as subjects because most children of this age have learned to read well enough to do so independently, and they have a relatively high interest in reading. Also, school reports and assignments in these grades could require use of reference materials which are found at the public library.

Three elementary schools in the city of Wilson were chosen as test sites. Media coordinators in each school administered a survey questionnaire during regular library classes, selecting one fourth- and one fifth-grade class at random. After completion of the survey, each child's first six weeks' reading grade was recorded on the form.

The questionnaire is reproduced in Table 1. For items one through five, children were asked to respond "never," "seldom," "sometimes," or "often" to statements concerning public library use. Answers to the last item indicated possession of a personal public library card or use of other means to check out books.

The percentage of card holders dropped as the reading grades became lower.

Data Analysis

Of the 139 surveys returned, 137 were accepted as complete, sixty-three from fourth graders and seventy-four from fifth graders. Table 2 indicates the percentage of students receiving grades A through E in reading for the first six weeks' period.

TABLE 2
Six Weeks' Reading Grade

Grade	No. of Students	Percentage
A	28	20.4%
B	44	32.1%
C	27	19.7%
D	25	18.3%
E	13	9.5%
Total	137	100.0%

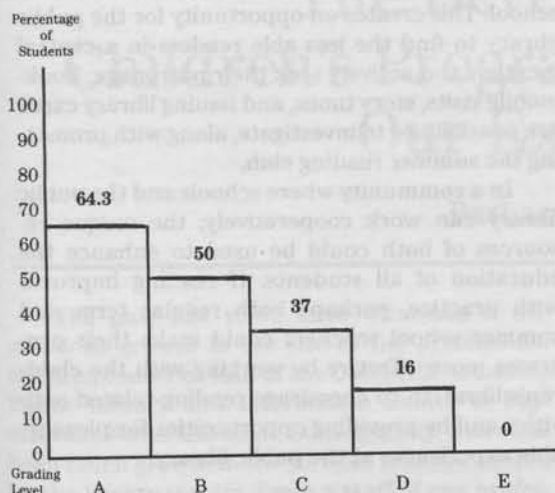
Responses to the first survey question indicated that less than twenty percent of students at any reading level often use the public library for school work. C students reported the highest percent of frequent use (eighteen percent), while A students showed the least (three percent). An average of sixty-three percent at all achievement levels seldom or never do school work at the public library.

Many more students evidently use the public library for recreational reading because less than twenty-five percent at all reading levels said they had never done this. It is more likely, however, that a child who frequently reads for fun at the library is a good student, since forty-six percent of the A students selected the "often" response while none of the E students did.

When asked how often they had checked out materials, only ten percent of the A students said they had never done so. In contrast, fifty-four percent of the E students never check out items. Table 3 shows that the percentage of students at each grading level who often check out items decreases as reading grades become lower.

The question concerning attendance at children's story hours or other programs found that less than twenty percent at any reading level frequently participate. The poorest readers' scores were most extreme, with none of the E students

TABLE 3.
Percentage of Students at Each Grading Level Who "Often" Check Out Materials



having often been to story hours and forty-six percent having never attended.

The A students scored highest (eighteen percent) in frequent enrollment in the summer reading club, but all reading levels, fifty percent or more have never participated. The average and below average readers were more likely to have never enrolled, as shown in Table 4.

The sixth survey question asked the children how they would check out a book if they desired to do so. Over eighty percent of A students would use their own personal library cards, but only about thirty percent of E students chose this response. The percentage of card holders dropped as the reading grades became lower. (See Table 5.)

TABLE 4.
Percentage of Students at Each Grading Level Who Have "Never" Joined a Reading Club

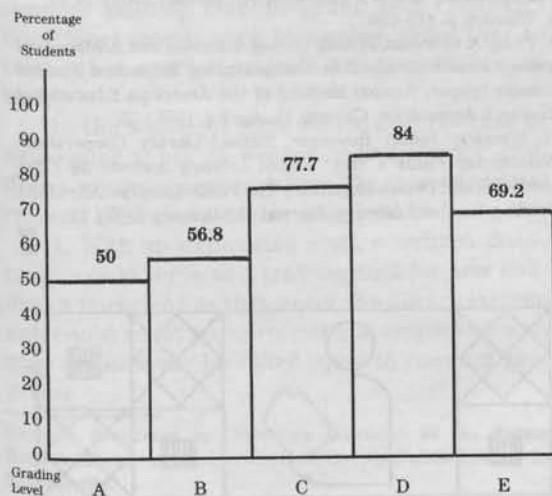


Table 6 illustrates the percentage of students at each reading level who said they have no personal library card and no family member or friend available to help them check out a book.

It is interesting to note that the E students were both least likely to have their own cards and most likely to have no way to check out a book.

But at any reading level, at least sixty percent of the survey participants seldom or never use the library . . .

Implications

When analyzed as a whole, results of the survey show that students at all reading levels use the public library at least sometimes. In some instances, a failing student would be almost as likely to be found there as an honor student, particularly for a story hour or for doing homework. But at any reading level, at least sixty percent of the survey participants seldom or never use the library for these purposes. This may be an unexpected revelation to the children's librarian pressured to provide multiple sources for school reports. It would seem that fourth and fifth graders' research needs are being met at school or at home.

Checking out books is probably one of the first activities that comes to mind when discussing use of the public library. The pattern of responses to questions three and six tends to reinforce the feelings of some teachers that the

TABLE 5.
Percentage of Students at Each Grading Level Who Are Library Card Holders

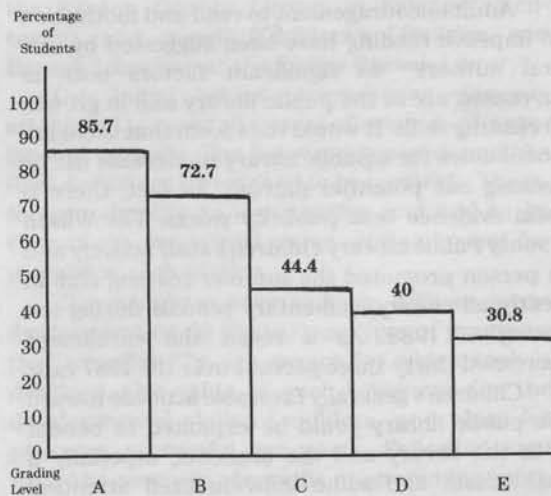
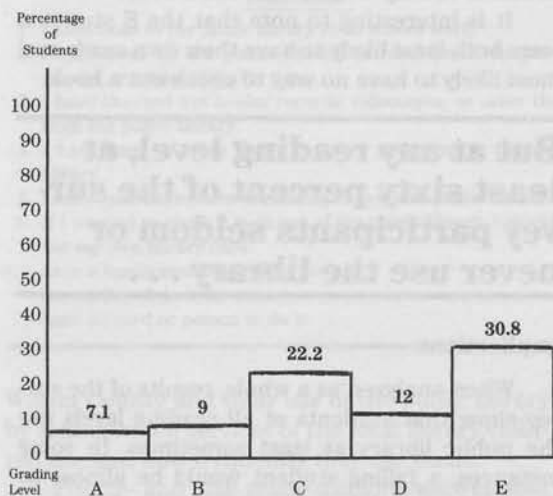


TABLE 6.
Percentage of Students at Each Grading
Level Who Have No Way to Check Out Materials



better student is far more likely to have a library card and to check out books than is the failing student. When the term "library use" is more broadly defined to include other activities, however, reading ability becomes a less reliable indicator of public library use.

In a community where schools and the public library can work cooperatively, the unique resources of both could be used to enhance the education of all students.

Conclusions

Adult encouragement to read and motivation to improve reading have been suggested by several authors¹⁰ as significant factors both in increased use of the public library and in growth in reading skills. It would thus seem that there are possibilities for a public library to increase use by seeking out potential patrons. In fact, there is local evidence that publicity works. The Wilson County Public Library children's staff actively and in person promoted the summer reading club in nearly all county elementary schools during the spring of 1988. As a result the enrollment increased thirty-three percent over the 1987 rate.

Children's generally favorable attitude toward the public library could be exploited to benefit both the library and the students, especially if enthusiasm and some individualized attention

are provided by the adults involved. For example, North Carolina has recently begun requiring failing or near-failing students to attend summer school. This creates an opportunity for the public library to find the less able readers in a central location and actively seek their patronage. Bookmobile visits, story times, and issuing library cards are possibilities to investigate, along with promoting the summer reading club.

In a community where schools and the public library can work cooperatively, the unique resources of both could be used to enhance the education of all students. If reading improves with practice, perhaps both regular term and summer school teachers could make their programs more effective by working with the children's librarian to encourage reading-related activities and by providing opportunities for pleasurable experiences at the public library.

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