

Improving Childhood Literacy

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Abstract

This paper discusses my approach and solution to the problem of declining literacy rates among children in recent years. While there are many contributing factors, COVID lockdown and the reliance on technology have played a part. The approach to this problem was to start within my own community by building a Little Free Library. This library gave children the opportunity to have increased access to reading materials that interest them, free of charge. The children were also incentivized to read by the initiation of a summer reading program that included prizes for completion of a reading log. By generating interest in reading through this project, I have created an opportunity for the children of my neighborhood and their families to foster a life-long love of reading.

Keywords: Literacy, Innovation, Impact

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Section 1: Introduction to Capstone Project

My capstone project focused on improving childhood literacy, which has been on the decline in recent years. This is due to many factors such as COVID, where children had less access to books, stressed caregivers who were reading to them less, and the lost support from their school systems during lockdown (Wheeler, & Hill, 2021.) Further research shows that lifestyle factors and our society's reliance on technology are also heavily contributing to the decline. Many children are faced with unprecedented time in front of screens, and many "read" books online or participate in online reading instruction. Studies have shown that these types of reading engagements produce children who learn to become shallow readers, therefore reducing comprehension and retention (Levi & Amirshahi, 2022.). Children are also missing out on the tactile experience of holding a book in their hands, which can enhance their learning experience. Digital devices and programs can also be extremely distracting, again, reducing the efficacy of the child's efforts (Kutcher, 2017.)

The approach that I chose to address this problem was to start within my community, by building a Little Free Library for the children of my neighborhood to enjoy. These libraries provide a range of books free of charge, that children are able to take home and keep if desired. People can also donate books to the library, and return as many times as they would like for more. This low stakes approach to promoting literacy provides an opportunity for children to choose reading materials that interest them, putting them in charge of their learning. The libraries also create an experience for the children and their families to spend quality time together not only visiting the library but also reading together at home (U.S. Department of Education, 2023.)

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I based my project off the guidelines and recommendations from the organization Little Free Library.org. Their website provides individuals like me with resources on building and maintaining your own library. On their website you can purchase library materials, books, and even register your library in a searchable database so that others can find and visit your library (Little Free Library.org). My original intention with the library was to purchase a build kit from the Little Free Library organization, where kits ranged from \$200 to more than \$400. Due to financial constraints, I was not able to purchase a build kit for the library that included a roof and door for weatherproofing, making it accessible twenty four hours a day. Instead, I compromised and built a bookshelf that was placed in front of my home and stocked with books daily. The library was placed outside every day by 10am and remained open until at least 7pm.

In addition to the library I built, I also created a summer reading program to help generate interest and excitement about reading. The program consisted of a reading log that was placed on the outside of the library in a plastic sleeve. To participate, children needed to take a reading log from the library, read at least five times or five books, log the books they read and the time spent reading, and return their log to the library during a specified time. The incentive to participate in the program was a small prize for anyone that completed the log and returned it to the library.

I chose this project because I have seen these libraries before, and I was intrigued by the idea. My own children have visited ones at local parks. My inspiration was seeing how excited my children became to stumble upon these libraries and the excitement of wondering what new books would be available for them that day. I knew that this project could be exciting to the children of my neighborhood, and I decided to involve my own children in the process as well. I wanted to use this project as an opportunity to not only have an impact myself, but to also teach

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my children the value of giving back to the community.

Section 2: Elements Coming Together

Innovative Approach

While my idea to build and operate a Little Free Library was not a new concept, I did add personal touches that approached the problem of childhood literacy in a new and innovative way. I wanted to do more than just supply free books to my library visitors. When looking at the problem I was working towards, it was clear that just offering books would not be the most effective solution. I wanted to approach this problem from a child's perspective. What would make them want to visit the library? What would make them want to return for new books over and over again? Why would the children want to participate in this project? Asking myself these questions really helped me focus on who this project was for, what my goal was, and how I could make it of the most interest to the children.

When looking at the research regarding literacy, it is shown that some of the reasons that children do not choose physical books is due to cost, the effort needed to seek out books, and a lack of time (Wilkinson, Andries, Howarth, Bonsall, Sabeti, & McGeown, 2020.) With my project I was attempting to eliminate these challenges by giving the children of my neighborhood books free of charge that were quick and easy to access.

My Little Free Library is innovative because I took an existing idea and added both process and service innovation (Gibson, 2022.) Typical Little Free Libraries require you to drive to the location as most are located in parks and outside public buildings. For the children and families of my neighborhood, this process was improved because my library was within walking distance of all the homes in the neighborhood. This made access to books easier, cut down on the

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effort needed to find new reading materials, and also saves families time.

Next, my Little Free Library was innovative because of the implementation of the summer reading program that I created. This program was designed to specifically provide an incentive for the children to visit the library for the first time, to help draw them in. Then, it encouraged them to return for more books to be able to complete their reading log, where in doing so, they received small prizes. The entire experience was made to be enjoyed from a child's perspective, as research shows that when children are put in charge of their reading, the benefits are greatly increased. Children choosing their own reading materials helps motivate them, helps them to become independent readers, and helps to develop life long reading skills and habits (Mohr, 2006.)

Emotional Intelligence

This project has helped me become more self aware of both myself and of others. I initially struggled to decide on the right avenue to address the topic of literacy, spending weeks bouncing my ideas back and forth. I was worried how I could make the biggest impact in my community when I was just one person. Eventually, I realized that I did not have "go big or go home" so to speak. I had to take a look at myself, set realistic and attainable goals, and I had to accept that my project could create value even if the impact was small.

I am also a huge proponent of social awareness, and particularly empathy (Landry, 2019.) My entire professional career has been based on my empathy for others. Working both in healthcare and teaching allows me to practice my empathy for others daily. It is always something that I am cognizant of, and something that I try to teach my own children and students the importance of. That is why this project was centered around being aware of the wants and

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needs of my participants.

Creative Thinking

When thinking about my approach to address childhood literacy, I wanted to be as creative as possible. To do this, I approached this problem from a child's perspective, by getting my own children involved in the project design process. I also wanted to think of something that would not only encourage children to read, but excite them. I asked my children for their feedback about my ideas of what kind of library to build, where to put the library, and even had them design the signs. The end result was an appealing and colorful library that had a child's touch. I also had to use creative thinking in creating the summer reading program, and its inception was from brainstorming a way to engage, excite, and encourage my readers. These ideas were used to harness a combination of mine and my children's creativity to implement a solution that addressed more than just literacy, but also empowered children to be as involved in the process as possible.

Innovative Solution

My Free Little Library was an innovative solution to improve literacy because it was not a traditional or standard approach. Most literacy programs are formal and taught by teachers, who are choosing reading paths for the children involved. By taking this responsibility and placing it on the children, allowing them freedom of choice in the reading materials, and a fun way to do so. With the low-stakes reading environment created here, I was able to increase reading engagement and decrease intimidation compared to a traditional program. This solution empowered the children to take charge of their own learning (Regis College, 2023.)

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Section 3: Results

I feel that this project has been successful in many ways. Through donations, I was able to start the library with eighty-one books that were donated by fifteen neighbors, family members, friends, and work colleagues. On the last day of the project, we had a total of forty-three books taken from the library and put back into the community. The daily amount of books taken were tracked on a spreadsheet and were logged daily. I had a total of five children participate in and complete the summer reading program. There were a total of eight reading logs taken from the library, but only the five were returned. Five children in total received small prizes from a box that was placed outside with the library for the final days of the program. I was able to track the reading program success by the number of reading logs that were returned. I was able to survey three participants' families and ask their feedback on if they enjoyed the library and whether or not they had any suggestions. The responses I received were positive and mentioned that they would continue to use the library if it were to be made permanent. Another suggestion was that it would be nice if the library could be open during more hours of the day.

I believe that this project had a positive impact on me, my stakeholders (children and families of my neighborhood), and my own children due to their participation. I have had a few people in the neighborhood ask if we would still continue the library and how they could donate prizes. This shows me that the library added value to my neighborhood, and is also helping to create a sense of community where neighbors are wanting to volunteer to contribute to a cause for the greater good. This is also the feedback I received from people who donated to the library. They were happy to help a good cause with what they already had lying around the house. Many

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participants suggested that they were not only glad to be helping the cause, but that they were genuinely happy that the books would be put to good use and recycled.

I interviewed my next door neighbor and my own children to see how they felt about and how they viewed the library. My neighbor, who has two older children herself, said that she was so happy to see the library everyday and that if her children were younger, they would be eager to read alongside us and participate in the program. She was one of the people that asked if they could donate prizes, however, I had ended the program the day before. My own children had varied responses, based on their age and participation in the project. My oldest child provided much help in building the library and designing the program. She said she enjoyed the process and felt happy that people came to visit. My youngest children, who helped set up and break down the library everyday, said it was fun and “cool,” it made them tired, they liked watching the visitors come, and that it was “nice helping people be smart.” This shows me that even they saw the value in hard work (it made them tired, yet they never complained about helping day in and day out), and that even at their young ages, they understood the purpose of the project (improving literacy by “helping people be smart”). Ultimately, this project’s success was measured by the amount of books collected and total amount given back to the community, the responses of the participants, and my own family’s feedback on the work they contributed.

Section 4: Conclusion

While completing this capstone project, I found that the impact I was having reached beyond my neighborhood, which was not something I had anticipated when I began. Not only did I have children and families from my own neighborhood take books from the library, but to my surprise, some of our most frequent visitors were delivery drivers and postal workers. Even

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though I had anticipated my impact staying within my neighborhood, I am thrilled that my books were being distributed even farther out into the community and reaching more children and families. Seeing the delivery drivers take the time to browse the books and select something for their own families was an extremely rewarding experience. I imagined their children being excited to get new books when they got home from work, and I am so glad to have given them the opportunity to take a quick break from their jobs to focus on their families. They left with an unexpected break in their day and smiles on their faces. While I cannot see the total influence this experience had on them, it is my hope that they may be inspired to practice reciprocity in their own communities.

When I began this project, I was hesitant to put myself out into the neighborhood, where I would have to communicate with people that I did not know. This is not always something that I am comfortable with as I am a fairly quiet and reserved person. When I made the first social media post discussing my project with the residents, I was very nervous that someone may complain about the library being in my yard or someone not supporting the cause. I was surprised that I immediately began to receive positive comments, everyone was supportive, and that I began to make connections to others in the neighborhood. I did not expect for people other than me to get excited about the project, but I could both feel and see that that was the case.

The only thing that I would have done differently would be to weatherproof the library and possibly make it a permanent fixture. Adding a roof and door that closes with a latch would be the solution to making the library accessible even on inclement weather days. There were three days that I was not able to leave the library due to rain. Some of my feedback also asked for this solution. This shows me that there was value in the work that I did, and I am

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contemplating getting the library going again on the weekends, and possibly making a permanent install if I can find the right place and receive HOA approval.

In conclusion, while the scope of this project may have been small, the impact was still beneficial. Many books were given new homes, families were able to have new experiences together, and my own children learned about serving their community. While I had originally viewed this project as a work task that seemed daunting, it turned out to be a fun and rewarding experience for my whole family. Part of my decision to return to school to finish my BAS was to show my children what they are capable of. What I did not expect was for them to be able to take part in the learning process themselves, and I am eager to see how this experience helps shape their own self-awareness and charitable tendencies as they grow.

This capstone project ultimately allowed me to be successful at fostering a love of reading in the children involved by providing access to free books, an enjoyable experience, and an incentive to be active participants in their learning and reading abilities. My efforts made an impact beyond my own community, inspiring positive reading behaviors and habits. My Little Free Library was a space that promoted learning and connectedness to those around me. I am left with a lasting impression that small changes can have a profound impact, and this is a concept I will carry on with me past graduation.

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