

Watch Out for Alligators on the Library Shelf

by Jane Carroll McRae
Northwestern Regional Library

There is a new kind of non-book material on the shelves of the libraries in the Northwestern Regional System with headquarters in Elkin, on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.

At first glance these shelves look strangely like those of a toy shop, for they are filled with dolls and tinker toys, puzzles and building blocks, counting games and tools — all educational equipment.

This is the library's answer to the problem of the children who are left out of all kindergarten, Head Start and Day Care programs. In a project funded by the U.S. Office of Education's Higher Education Act, Title II-B, for Library Research and Demonstration, the library is seeking to find a way to fill the educational gap for these "left out" children, who constitute nearly a third of all eligible pre-school children.

North Carolina has a major reading problem, so serious that the governor of the state found it expedient to call for a state conference to try to tackle the problem. A major point of discussion in this conference was the difference made in a home where there is reading material and some knowledge of how to help the

child at home.

Co-ordinator of the project is Mrs. Barbara East, graduate of Winston-Salem State University in the field of Early Childhood Education. Her co-worker is Mrs. Linda Mathis Brown, holder of a teacher's certificate in Kindergarten through Grade Three from Meredith College. Together with six other staff members they form a teaching pool to go to the parents and baby sitters to train them in giving their children a learning background in the home.

"Parents always have been the first teachers of children," says Mrs. East, "and a major part of their learning takes place long before they enter school."

Over the four-county region served by the project, it is not unusual to see a father seated with a doll on his lap, trying to master the technique of teaching his son how to tie his sturdy high top shoes. There are mothers playing all sorts of games with matching up colors. There are baby sitters working with piles of buttons of every shape and size to sort out.

"All of this is the background for learning to read," says Mrs. East, "for even learning to bounce a ball has much to do

with the co-ordination required for writing and for handling books."

When team members go into a home, they do a demonstration learning session with the child, putting great emphasis on story telling and experiences with books, even for the very youngest. The use of a piece of educational equipment is taught, so the parent or sitter may continue the sessions with the child until the next visit of the teachers.

"I had no idea my child could learn all these things," said one amazed tobacco farmer, who at first had tried to turn the workers away because he thought his son was too young.

For group activity the library sends a van to round up the children and bring them to the library for a Story Hour. Though many parents are non-users of the public library, they are showing response to the joy of their children when they bring home the books of their choice.

For children who cannot be reached for Round Ups or special sessions, the bookmobiles deliver education materials and give a brief demonstration of the use to the parents and sitters on the routes. These demonstrations are followed up with a brief visit each month by the teachers with the project.

Getting all of these activities going required a number of workshops. First there was the problem of training librarians in dealing with the influx of pre-school children into the libraries. Invited to these workshops were also staff members from Head Start, Day Care and Kindergarten Programs.

Then there were workshops for the parents and baby sitters, getting them together in groups to help them with what is expected of a child who enters school, what skills can reasonably be learned in the home.

Planned for the future are workshops in oral communication, first for the project staff and librarians, then later for the

parents.

"Learning to communicate with a child is top priority in any home and in any program," says Mrs. East.

Craftsmen, who abound in the mountains of North Carolina, are entering into the spirit of the project. There is Dennis Martin, who was able to make wooden trucks, beads for stringing, and wooden puzzles two inches thick so they stand up and make a toy. These "home grown" toys are considerably cheaper and sturdier than anything that can be bought on the market.

In order to make sure that the children are actually learning as well as having fun, a testing group has been set up by Miss Marian Ricks, chairman of the Early Childhood Library Specialist Program at North Carolina Central University. The first testing indicated definite progress on the part of the children, giving the parents and sitters a sense of accomplishment for their efforts.

For skeptical librarians who feared that the project would take the emphasis away from books, there is the increased circulation of books for pre-school children and a definite increase in adult users from among the parents and sitters involved.

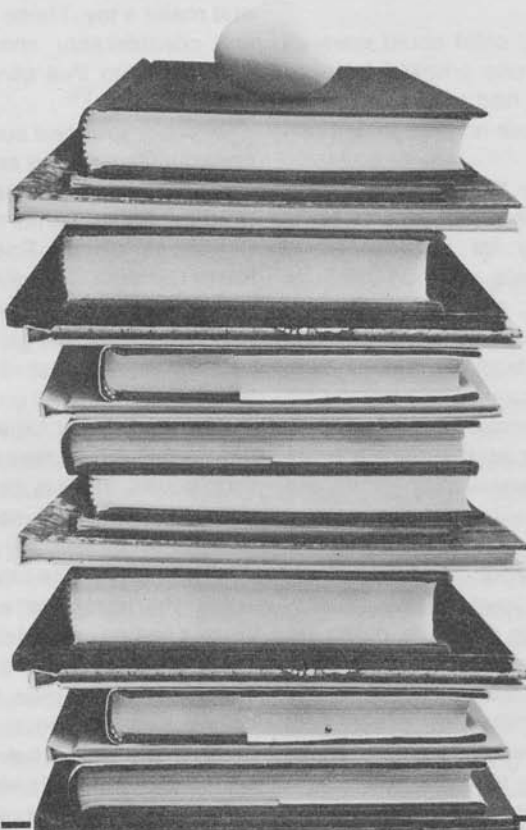
For the librarians who major in good housekeeping and fear the housing of anything as unwieldy as plastic elephants and alligator puppets, there is the fact of having very few toys damaged and the surprisingly neat shelves where this unorthodox material is stored.

As for the bookmobile librarians who have taken the time to train parents in the use of the materials, there are remarks like, "Why, this has changed my whole outlook about bookmobile work. The toy run brightens my whole week."

As for the image of the library, just watch a three-year-old put together an alligator puzzle and call his grandfather in from the tobacco barn to see, as he announces, "I got it at the library!"

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