

Looking for Literacy in All the Right Spaces: The Laundromat

Susan B. Neuman, Maya Portillo, Donna C. Celano

Laundromats might not seem like the right places for literacy programs, but in many communities, they are emerging as the right spaces to enhance children's opportunity to learn.

Four-year-old Andres stretches out on a colorful alphabet rug in the new literacy corner. Oblivious to the world, he happily hums to himself as he builds a tower of blocks. Nearby is a bookshelf with a set of shiny new books. Another rack holds an assortment of puppets, puzzles, and drawing materials. Soon Darius, also 4, arrives. He points at the newly built block tower and asks, "Did you build that?" The boys chat back and forth. "We have to be careful. If it falls, it will make noise," warns Andres. Both boys gather all the blocks as they discuss what to build. At one point, they build a "cat holder" for a toy cat and pretend to feed the cat a crayon as "food." "Let's say we have a pet cat and these crayons are cat food," Darius says. "It's your turn to feed the cat."

Although Andres and Darius might think they are only building with blocks, what looks like play is serious business. As a veteran reading teacher might tell us, the boys are using what is called playful, decontextualized language (Weizman & Snow, 2001). Their pretend talk shows a level of abstraction, a central feature of "book language" and a necessary component of learning to read (Price, Van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2009). As the veteran teacher might also say, this type of conversation happens frequently in early education classrooms throughout the country, as well as in public libraries, community centers, and other spots that feature literacy centers. What is unusual about this literacy-rich scene, however, is that it takes place in a rather unexpected place: the local laundromat.

Over the last few years, literacy-related areas such as the one in this Brooklyn, New York, neighborhood have popped up throughout the country in laundromats, creating family-friendly spaces with toys, books, and early literacy activities (Erickson, 2019; Timsit, 2019). Industry specialists have estimated that families in these neighborhoods are likely to spend an average of 2.5 hours on each weekly visit at the laundromat (Wallace, 2019; see, e.g., [\[laundrycares.org\]\(https://laundrycares.org\)\). Previously, children might spend these hours waiting patiently as parents went about their tasks, amused only by video games, TV, and candy machines. Now, however, laundromats are beginning to recognize their unique role in helping their communities. Although they might not seem like the right place for literacy learning, they may be the right space for reaching families where they are, particularly in underserved neighborhoods.](https://</p>
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Having studied early literacy for decades, we were fascinated by this somewhat unconventional approach to promoting literacy in the early years. Noting that very young children spend 80% of their day out of school rather than in it (Grob, Schlesinger, Pace, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2017), we saw the potential of this approach for family engagement. Yet, at the time, there was no evidence to suggest that these spaces were making a difference, raising a number of questions: Were children using these spaces to engage in early literacy activity? In what ways did these literacy-related play areas support family engagement? How might these neighborhood facilities contribute to children's opportunity to learn?

These questions formed the basis of a study of six laundromats, three of which were transformed into literacy-related play areas (i.e., treatment sites) and three of which were not (i.e., control), all in underserved neighborhoods in New York City boroughs.

Susan B. Neuman is a professor in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University, NY, USA; email sbneuman@nyu.edu.

Maya Portillo is a research associate in the Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service at New York University, NY, USA; email maya.portillo@nyu.edu.

Donna C. Celano is an assistant professor in the Communication Department at La-Salle University, Philadelphia, PA, USA; email celano@lasalle.edu.

We focused on laundromats operating as part of an energetic effort of the Laundry Literacy Coalition, the Clinton Foundation's Too Small to Fail initiative (<http://toosmall.org>), and the LaundryCares Foundation (<https://laundrycares.org>), which sought to help promote early literacy in low-income neighborhoods. Our project was designed to examine the efficacy of this initiative in two phases. In the first phase of the project, the Coalition put in place small family engagement play areas in laundromats to examine how this changed ecology might promote early literacy activities. In the second phase, the Coalition added another important collaborator to the project: children's librarians from the public library branches in New York to model reading activities for parents and children on a weekly basis. Our role was to examine how these changes might influence literacy activities for children and families in these neighborhoods. By using a mosaic of methodologies, including observations, brief surveys, and interviews, we were about to find out.

The Need

As Teale and Sulzby (1989) so powerfully demonstrated, literacy learning begins early in young children's lives. As children gain facility with different symbol systems, they begin to develop the insight that specific kinds of marks—print—represent meanings. At first, they use the physical and visual cues, such as logos in environmental print, to determine what something says. Many parents delight in seeing their children recognize common labels in the grocery store and see how children are beginning to make the assumption that print is permanent. Soon after, children begin to understand that within these signs, there are letters and sounds (Ehri & Roberts, 2006). Although it may seem as though some children acquire these understandings magically or on their own, studies have suggested that they are the beneficiaries of considerable, though playful and informal, adult guidance and instruction.

Nevertheless, as we all recognize, there is considerable diversity in children's oral and written language development. Young children are likely

to encounter many different resources and types and degrees of support for early reading and writing (McLane & McNamee, 1990). Some children may have ready access to a wide range of books; others may not. Some children will observe their parents writing and reading frequently, and others only occasionally. Some children will receive direct instruction but others much more casual and less scaffolded assistance.

What this means is that children will come to school with many different experiences and skills. In neighborhoods where there is concentrated poverty, children may have far less access to the resources and early skills necessary for them to thrive in schooling (Neuman & Celano, 2012). Although these children are likely to be highly capable and motivated to learn, studies have shown how the devastating effects of poverty may stymie children's opportunities, limiting the number

of neighborhood supports available and isolating families from one another (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Massey, 2007).

Recent studies (Barron & Bell, 2016), however, have begun to recognize the potential of building agency within marginalized or underresourced neighborhoods, considering these communities from an asset-based cultural perspective. Rather than conceptualizing learning as tied to specific places, this perspective assumes that learning is distributed and can be assembled across a variety of environments (Takeuchi, Vaala, & Ahn, 2019). Local spaces such as playgrounds, grocery stores, and wellness centers can create intentionally designed spaces for learning, catalyzing new learning experiences and bridging opportunity experience gaps. In effect, space may be conceived of as permeable and open to multiple learning opportunities. Bridging across boundaries, this view recognizes the intersecting roles of families, community organizations, and institutions in nurturing young learners, leveraging local resources, and expanding creative agency more equitably. From this perspective, the approach supports a community-based literacy, understanding that for young children in particular, every context becomes a place for literacy learning.

PAUSE AND PONDER

- In what ways can community businesses support children's early literacy?
- What challenges do families living in underserved neighborhoods face in facilitating their children's early learning?
- How do informal spaces that children visit, such as playgrounds, museums, and grocery stores, contribute to literacy development?
- In what ways could teachers help foster community engagement?

Creating Literacy-Related Spaces in Laundromats

Taking on an asset-based approach, the LaundryCares Foundation went into action. Space is often at a premium in laundromats, with little to be set aside for literacy-related play areas. Yet, taking the educational lead, the Too Small to Fail team made the most of the space, creating small, attractive nooks that included an open-faced book shelf filled with children's paperback books, a small couch for parent-child reading, a child-sized table and chairs, a dry-erase board, magnetic letters, paper and markers, a child-sized washer and dryer, and puppets and a puppet stage. Attractive signs with ideas for family engagement dotted the landscape, offering parents helpful ideas for home-based activities (see Figure 1).

These materials were designed to support talking, singing, reading, writing, and play, essential activities for early literacy development in the targeted laundromats in the study. The open-faced bookshelves included an evolving set of children's books for parent-child reading and pretend reading, activities to promote parent-child talk, puppets to encourage abstract language, and magnetic letters and drawing tools to encourage written expression.

Over the course of the next two months, our NYU team studied children's and family engagement in all six laundromats, contrasting the differences in activity

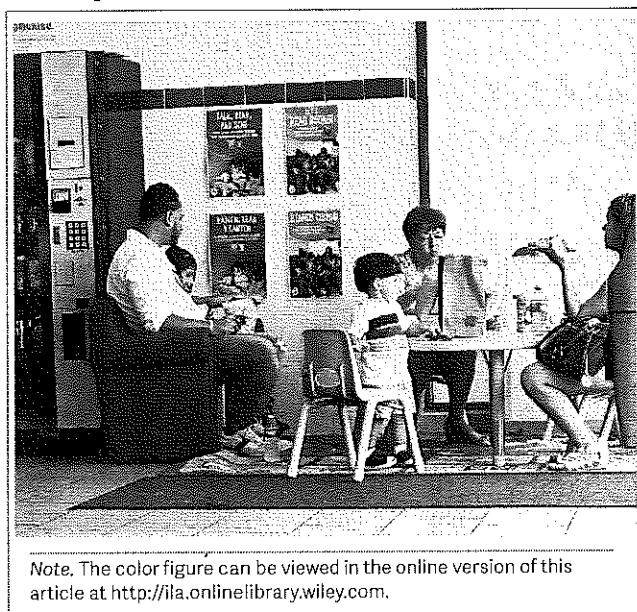
between the transformed laundromat play areas with those laundromats that did not have these areas. After that, we spent another two months observing the ways in which children's librarians might further support children's activity and family engagement. Spending more than 350 hours in the field, we watched community literacy learning in action. This is what we found.

Literacy-Related Play Centers Promote and Enhance Children's Access to Print

Laundromats are pretty busy places. Before play centers were in place, parents spent most of their time washing and folding laundry (70% of the time); in between these tasks, they would often spend time chatting with adult friends (10%) and using their individual mobile devices (10%). We saw virtually no reading activities in any of the laundromats.

Once the literacy-related play centers were in place, however, the landscape for the laundromats with play areas changed dramatically (see Figure 2). Throughout the two-month period, we recorded more than 138 literacy activities (reading, talking, playing, writing) in our observations in these laundromats, compared with a combined total of five literacy activities in the three control laundromats. Children spent on average about 6.5 minutes on an activity, leaving the area frequently to show their parents their work, then returning to engage in another activity. In other words, the literacy-related play was frequent but not sustained as children engaged in reading, writing, and play behaviors.

Figure 1
Literacy in the Laundromat



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://jla.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

Literacy-Related Play Areas Fostered a Sense of Community

The literacy-related play centers appeared to create a "social infrastructure" where families could gather, network, and engage with others around early reading activities (see Figure 3). Children met new friends, engaged in literacy play together, and wrote notes and drew pictures that enlivened the laundromat, making it a more personal space. The following are two examples:

A young girl (7 years old) walks over to literacy corner, where two boys (6 years old) are sitting. Girl asks, "What's your name, do you go to school? I go to school over there. Do you want to play?" One of the boys responds and says, "My name is Osborne." They end up reading the papers posted on the wall and use the plastic alphabetic letters.

Figure 2
Differences Between Treatment and Control Laundromats: Number of Literacy-Related Play Activities

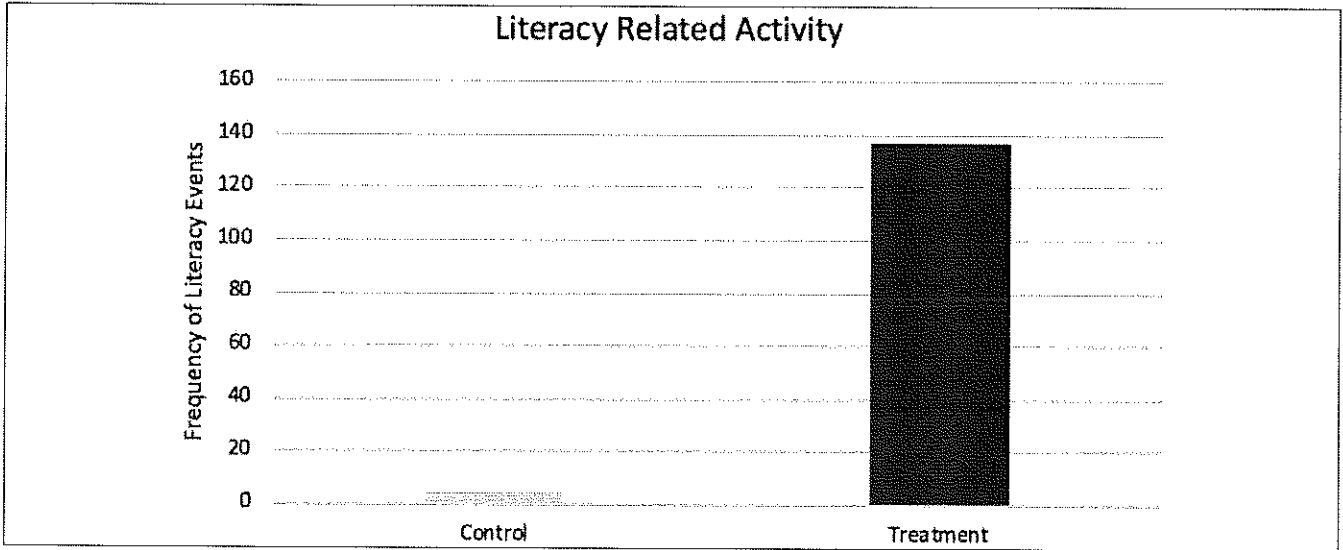
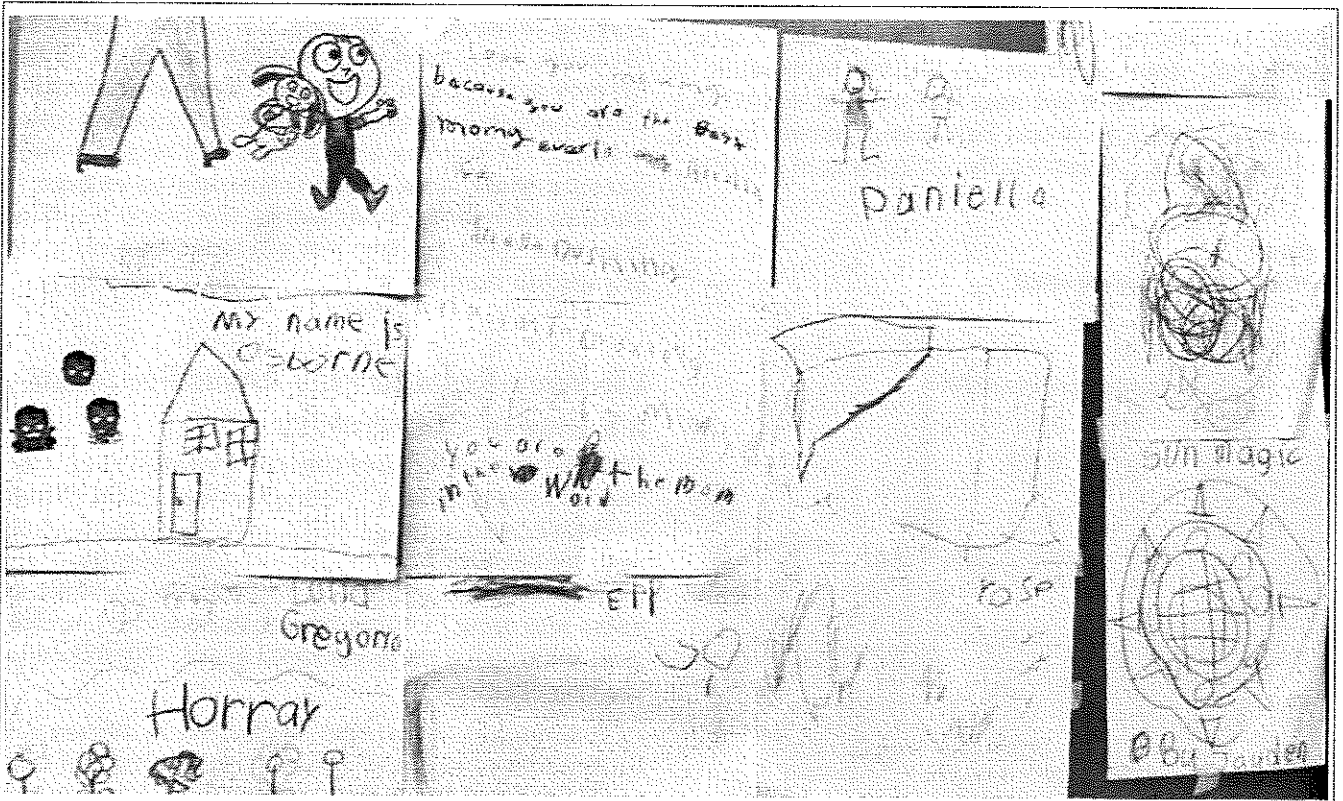


Figure 3
Children's Writing and Artwork in the Literacy-Related Play Area



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

A girl and a boy come to literacy corner (7 and 5 years old). The two children play together with letter board and puppets. The older child begins to ask the younger child about letters, slowly teaching him. Then she tells him to find a book. The boy begins to run around. When he settles, the girl picks up a book and begins to read to him.

In both cases, these literacy-related activities were generated by the children themselves. The environment helped to spark their play in ways that naturally involved reading and talking. These types of activities were common in these centers, giving children time to play with older children who might use more complex and diversified language models.

Given that parents were typically busy doing laundry, it was not surprising that parent-child engagement was intermittent, often in between washing, drying, and folding activities. At times, however, parents supervised or supported children in reading, as in the following example:

A family comes to literacy corner (Mom, Dad, and 3-year-old daughter). They choose a book and mother begins to read it with daughter. Mom says, "Let's find a banana. Juliette, can you help me find the banana?" Mom continues to prompt child while going through the book.

More often than not, however, it was the child who initiated the parent in activity. For example,

A daughter (5) and father (40) sit in the literacy center. The child says, "Daddy, I want to read to you!" She takes a book from the dad and starts to read to him. She points to pictures and makes up her own story. The father is very involved and responds to the story as she goes along. When they finish, the daughter starts to play with the letter magnets and said, "Dad, look at this!" and points to a word she had made (not actually a word).

In brief, these literacy-related play centers seemed to support children's engagement in playful learning (Hirsh-Pasek, Alper, & Golinkoff, 2018; Roskos & Christie, 2007). Their imaginative play, pretend reading, and interactions with others appeared to help them use literacy in a very natural way, supporting and extending their emerging skills.

Enter the Librarian

The laundromat may not be considered an ideal setting for storytime activities, but here, one might

be wrong. Rather than waiting for the children to come to a library, NYC's children's librarians came to them, recognizing the importance of reaching families where they are. Over the next two months, we saw a dramatic shift in the literacy-related play. Timing our visits to observe the librarians' activities with families, we were able to compare activity with and without the presence of a librarian. At the same time, we continued to make occasional visits to the control sites, allowing us to compare the treatment laundromats with "business as usual," spending in total an additional 125 hours in laundromats.

Children Engaged in More Sustained Play With Librarians

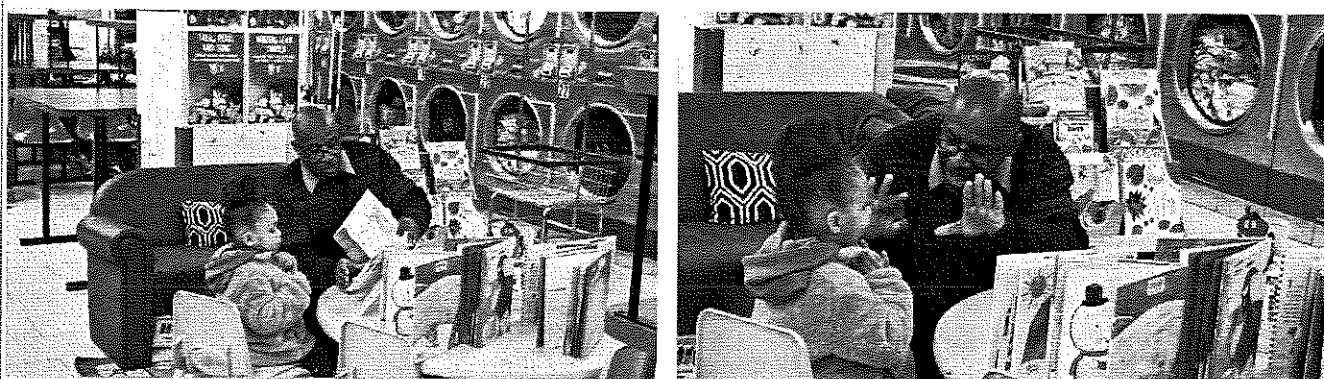
Children's play in areas became more sustained in the presence of a librarian. On average, three children, ages 2–6, participated during their time together. The average stay per child was 47 minutes, a substantial amount of engaged time in early literacy activities as compared with the 6.5 minutes that we saw when children were playing alone. During their visits, a librarian would read an average of four books per session to children.

As the photographic analysis in Figure 4 shows, children were highly engaged in literacy activities. Librarians generally began their sessions by placing a rich display of books on a table for children to select a favorite read-aloud. They actively involved children in the reading through finger plays, gestures, and motions in the interactive read-aloud. These readings were interspersed with active games, pretend play, and art and writing activities.

To their delight, children often received one-to-one interaction with the librarian, followed by activities alone or with other children. Librarians modeled read-aloud practices, developmentally appropriate activities, and active listening and responsive conversations with children through their time together. In addition, a positive social-emotional climate seemed to emerge throughout these sessions. Children giggled, smiled, and engaged actively with the librarian and other children in the play area. The dull routine of visiting the laundromat was transformed into a fun activity.

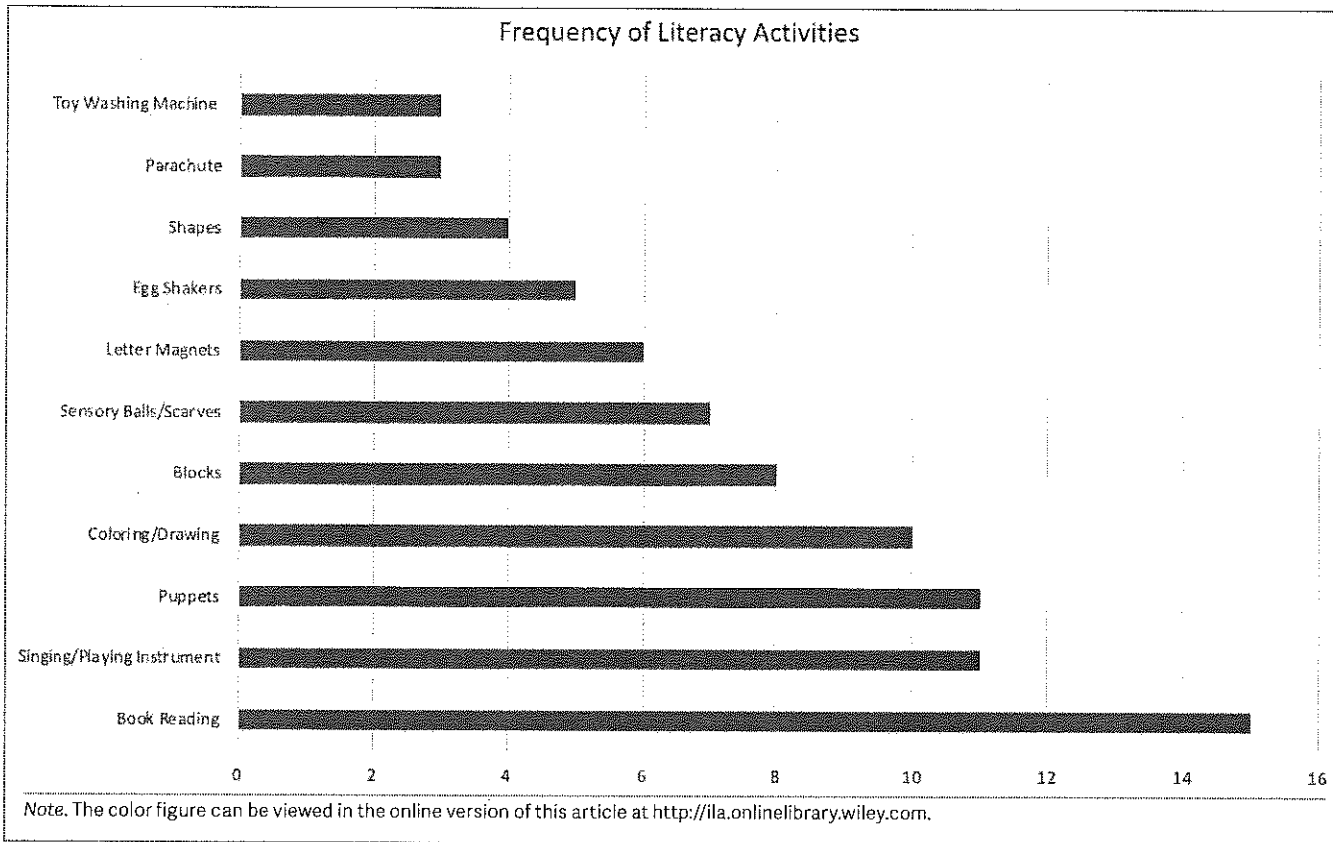
Figure 5 shows the rich and varied array of literacy-related activities during these sessions with librarians. Book reading was always the centerpiece. At the same time, librarians actively

Figure 4
Children's Librarian Reading and Playing in the Laundromat



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

Figure 5
Literacy-Related Activities in the Laundromat



involved children in singing, puppetry, coloring and drawing, and other activities throughout the session. Much of the activity provided a rich

context for conversation and literacy development, including art activities, blocks, and letter magnets.

Parents Observed Rather Than Engaging in Literacy Activity With Their Children

As these pictures highlight, librarians did what they do best: immerse children in a rich array of literacy activities. However, we noted a different pattern of involvement from parents. In this case, most parents did not directly participate with their children during the visits with the librarian. We recorded 54 instances of direct interaction between parents and their children during this time. Often, it was to praise their child, review their artwork, or watch as they spelled a word on the magnetic board. For example, parents would take pictures of their child with the librarian, obviously proud and delighted with their child's involvement, standing to one side so as to not intervene in the activity. At the same time, they usually let the librarian do the activity, participating along on rare occasions.

Figure 6 describes the frequency of parent behaviors. For slightly less than half of the time, parents observed children's reading or play. These observations often occurred intermittently as parents folded or washed laundry or waited for a cycle to finish. In some cases, parents worked in an area close to the librarian so that they could oversee the activities. As noted in Figure 6, parents also interacted to manage their child's behavior (even though it was rarely needed), trying to make sure their child was sitting properly, using a quiet voice, and acting appropriately with the librarian.

Control Laundromats Offered a Striking Contrast

Although these interactions may seem like modest improvements, they are strikingly different from what happened in the control sites. In the control laundromats, children were often on their own to amuse themselves as parents were busily engaged in their work. The pictures in Figure 7 best describe the activity in these sites: Children had little to do and would often stare into space, run around, or watch videos. Unlike at the treatment sites, we observed virtually no parent involvement in literacy activity in the control laundromats.

Response From the Community to the Literacy-Related Centers

More than 60% of the families we interviewed had limited resources in the home to support children's early reading; some had fewer than 10 books in their home. Consequently, we were not surprised that the responses to these literacy-related centers were universally positive. Families reported greater loyalty to the laundromat as a result. Examples from the brief interviews follow:

"There are no other places in the community where children have access to books, so the literacy corner has been really good for my kid." (mother, Lavanderia, Bronx, treatment)

Figure 6
Parent-Related Activity in the Laundromat

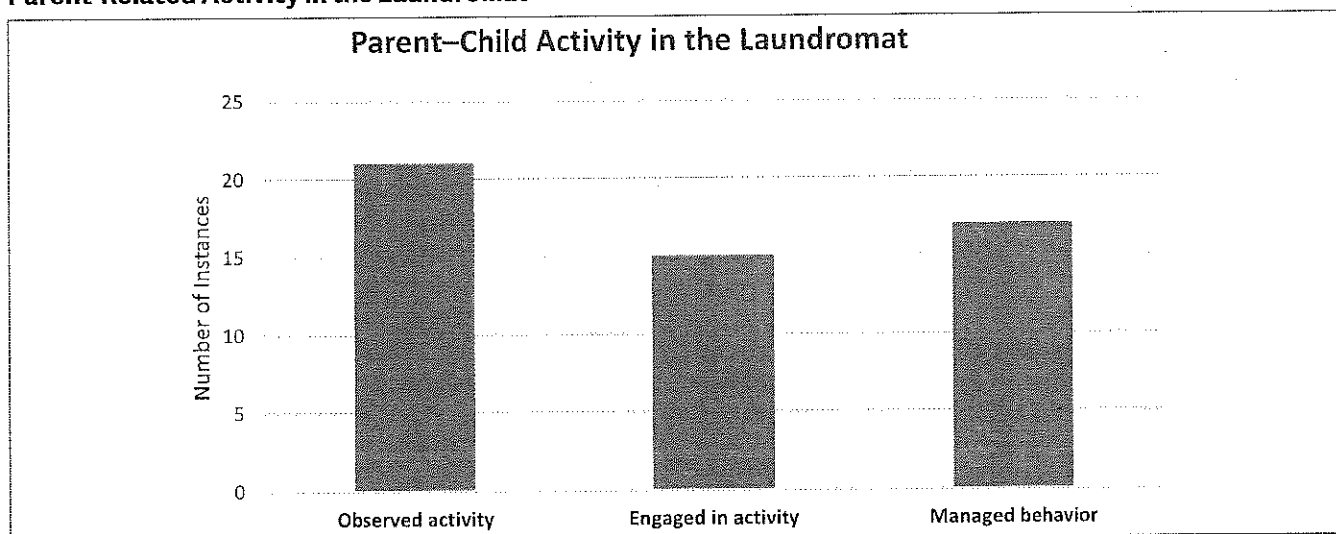


Figure 7
Children's Activity in the Control Sites



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

"This is my fourth time coming to this laundromat. We started coming here because of the literacy corner. I like the laundromat a lot because instead of giving my kid the phone, we can read together. Compared to other laundromats in the area, this one is big and gives access of books to children." (father and mother, Lavanderia, Queens, treatment)

"I started bringing my youngest daughter to this laundromat because of the literacy corner. She loves playing with the puppets. Aside from the library, this is the only place in the community that offers access to books." (mother, Lavanderia, Queens, treatment)

In contrast, families at the control laundromats wished they had such literacy-related resources. For example, one parent found that it was "difficult to amuse my child" when she spent time at the laundromat. Another parent suggested that it was hard to educate her young child with so few resources in the community. Together, these comments indicate the need for books and other resources for families who come from low-income communities.

Conclusions

Our evaluation revealed that infusing these everyday spaces in laundromats with literacy-rich materials and activities provided children and their families with valuable learning opportunities. In a space once dominated by heavy machinery and dull noises, we heard laughter and singing as children met

new friends and enlivened their spaces with reading, writing, and artwork. Parents observed models of active literacy activities, watching their children engage with others in a community of literacy practice and seeing the joys that such practices might bring to their young ones.

Yet, at the same time, there are some larger takeaways from our work in laundromats that may be highly relevant to literacy educators. In recent years, studies have documented a striking rise in income inequality and opportunity gaps for children (Bischoff & Reardon, 2014). Studies have shown that the average income of the top 1% has risen dramatically in the last decade, compared with the bottom 99% (Economic Policy Institute, 2018). Today, there are more zones of concentrated poverty than have ever been recorded before, eclipsing what had been the all-time high in 1990 by 14% to 3,764 census tracts (Jargowsky, 2014; Reardon, Weathers, Fahle, Jang, & Kalogrides, 2019). Unfortunately, such income segregation has tragic consequences for children's achievement. For example, a recent study has shown that it is poverty, not other student factors, that directly accounts for the magnitude of the achievement gap, known to only accelerate throughout a student's schooling (Reardon et al., 2019).

Realistically, then, schools alone are ill equipped to address the myriad of challenges that are associated with poverty. Rather, our study suggests that we need to create hybrid spaces that build

connections across homes, schools, and communities to strengthen children's learning opportunities. In these spaces, literacy learning may be distributed across settings—such as laundromats, hair salons, or grocery stores—for extended time periods, with young learners and their partners in the community playing important roles in assembling resources and establishing connections, involved in learning that is contextualized within settings. This broader conceptualization recognizes that literacy learning occurs in an ecological and sociocultural context and encourages us to consider the interdependencies between children and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It also builds on an asset-based cultural perspective that recognizes the enormous talents and funds of knowledge that non-dominant communities may bring to these social and ecological settings.

New collaborations such as these are beginning to build synergies across school and community. For example, strategies to catalyze cross-setting learning are occurring across WIC centers, doctors' offices, and grocery stores, to name a few. Organizations such as the Education Redesign Lab (<https://edredesign.org>) have launched a network of communities to create collaborative, cross-setting solutions to establish systems of support and opportunity for children from birth through school age. These innovations support network improvement communities (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015), a system of continuous support with groups of stakeholders solving programs together that has begun to take hold and has the potential to scale in underresourced communities.

Consequently, the good news is that intentionally designed community-based programs that build on local support can bridge children's learning across different settings. We have since learned about a host of laundromat-related initiatives across the United States and other organizations such as car dealerships, grocery stores, and barber shops jumping on board, knowing that “doing well by doing good” for businesses builds loyalty from their customers and greater support from their community.

These findings demonstrate that the laundromat, of all places, can serve as an important environment for early literacy development. Children in laundromats outfitted with literacy play centers engaged in 30 times more literacy activities than did children in laundromats that did not have these resources. Our best hope is that this research will spur additional

TAKE ACTION!

1. Help turn your local laundromat into a place of learning. Contact the LaundryCares Foundation at info@laundrycares.org for support in setting up a Family Read, Play, and Learn space.
2. Talk to your local laundromat's owners about creating a literacy corner. Explain that the corners are easy to implement and maintain, are very popular with families, and benefit their businesses.
3. Reach out to local schools, churches, and community groups to round up donations to form a literacy corner in a laundromat. Useful items include children's books, markers and dry-erase board, puzzles, book rack, puppets and puppet stage, and comfortable seating and a rug to encourage families to engage over literacy materials.
4. In your classroom, create a literacy laundry center to spark conversation about this everyday task. Here are some items you might include:
 - Baskets for sorting clothes labeled with different colors (e.g., blue, white) or types (e.g., pants, shirts)
 - A table for folding clothes
 - Empty, clean detergent containers
 - Paper and crayons to make lists of items to purchase
 - Dolls and puppets
 - A comfortable library area with books to read while the “cycle” finishes
 - Signs providing steps on how to use soap
 - Environmental labels

efforts to promote literacy in all the right spaces, those informal, everyday places that meet families where they are.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

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