

2019-2020 WVLS Innovation & Collaboration Literacy Grant Final Report
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It is with deep gratitude that I write this final report summarizing the process which allowed the Tomahawk Public Library and the Rib Lake Public Library to create amazing literacy spaces for our communities as the co-recipients of the 2019-2020 WVLS Innovation & Collaboration Literacy Grant. This report covers our experience at the Tomahawk Public Library.

Requirements and Preparation for Application

In 2012 we received a Mead Witter Foundation Grant to develop what we called the Tomahawk Public Library Early Literacy Activity Center. The vision for the space at that time was to provide a space that contained *educational and manipulative items for parents or caregivers to use to enhance their children's library experience and teach early reading skills through play*. Several items were added to the space and it was very well received, but no physical changes were made at that time. Seven years later, providing a space in the Library that focuses on early literacy practices continues to be of great importance. Knowing this we realized that many of the things we purchased in 2012 needed updating. We also had the desire to make some inviting physical changes to the space that would not have been possible with our budget, so we decided to look into applying for the 2019-2020 WVLS Innovation & Collaboration Literacy Grant.

Throughout the years, bringing attention to the natural world has always been an important facet of our children's programming. The Tomahawk Public Library strives to provide experiences and materials to help children develop a connection with nature and understand the importance of caring for the environment all while encouraging a love of reading and the Library. These concepts were a big part of the brainstorming process that became the vision for the space.

Winters are long, summers can have hot or rainy days, and Tomahawk is a small town without a lot of indoor options for families. Why not create an early literacy space that brings the outdoors indoors? A space where adults and children play together, encouraging the adults to get down to a child's level and truly interact. This became the vision!

As far as the collaboration aspect of the grant goes, I was informed that Krista Blomberg at the Rib Lake Public Library had a similar vision for the children's area in their library as well. That, along with the proximity of Rib Lake to Tomahawk, is what brought us together as collaborators. It was decided that we would partner with the Rib Lake Public Library and apply for the grant. Heidi O'Hare, Director of the Tomahawk Public Library, completed the grant application for our library. She had experience in grant writing where I did not.

The Process: Additions, Changes and Challenges

Once we received the grant, I did a lot of research online looking at other places that had created spaces with a similar vision – indoor nature spaces. Libraries, museums, nature discovery centers, and more. The first decision came after I saw a picture of the children’s area in the Kenosha Public Library – Northside Branch. I knew we needed a bright blue sky and white puffy clouds.



(image from Kenosha Public Library-Northside Branch website)

After this decision, Heidi and I sat down and discussed other features of the space and did some drawings. A large tree in the center of the space and a cabin came next. This meant we needed to find a woodworker and that’s when things truly began to fall into place. While the woodworker started those pieces, we had a painter come and create the bright blue sky. The center tree and cabin were installed. The space still needed a few more things like board book browsing bins that were more easily accessible for little people and beautiful evergreen trees that would be painted with chalkboard paint to add another literacy dimension. We hired another local woodworker to complete those pieces. We still needed to add those white puffy clouds. I thought we would have to make them, but I discovered that you could purchase white puffy clouds on Amazon. Once these larger things were in place, I thought about what additions could be made to make it feel more like being outdoors. What would you see outside of a cabin? A picnic table and a firepit. Inside the cabin? Food and dishes. And, what about the rest of the space? A table and chair set to be used for the literacy kit interaction, a LEGO/DUPLO activity table that features LEGO sets with a nature theme, a park bench to provide seating, and a few other nature-themed toys. When each of the additions were made, it was exciting to see the space coming together.

We purchased the materials needed to create literacy kits that will be exchanged between the two libraries. These kits will provide fun literacy-based activities and offer instruction for parents or caregivers who bring a child to the space. They are based on the five literacy practices of talk, sing, read, write, and play. These practices are the foundation of our literacy

space. What people do not realize is that when they bring their children to the Library to play, they are actually bringing them to the Library to learn. In this space they will learn through play. Remember, as Fred Rogers said, “Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.” (Alice Callahan, Ph.D., 2015) Many of the early literacy practices are covered when using the kits, but a primary practice is highlighted in a written prompt for each one. For example, reading will be required for all, therefore the fourth literacy practice of “read” is covered, but not the primary focus of a particular kit. The Tomahawk Public Library Literacy Kits are as follows:

- Let’s Play! – Wildlife Veterinarian
- Let’s Talk! – Animal Identification
- Let’s Talk! – Butterflies & Dragonflies
- Let’s Talk! – Counting Wildlife
- Let’s Talk! – Insects Close Up
- Let’s Sing! – Frogs
- Let’s Sing! – Tap the Drum
- Let’s Write! – Matching Letters
- Let’s Write! – Chalkboard Tree
- Let’s Play! – Pieces of Wood
- Let’s Play! – Flower Garden

It was interesting to see how some of the decisions that were made at the beginning did not really flow with how the space was evolving so changes had to be made along the way. There were times when I knew I just had to move on to the next thing which sometimes was not easy. There was a point when the process became a bit overwhelming, but that is when I knew I could reach out to Krista or Anne Hamland, who was overseeing the grant process. I am grateful to have gone through the experience with Krista while being guided so well by Anne. This was truly one of the best parts of this experience. Having someone to brainstorm with or look to for inspiration was how I overcame any roadblocks along the way. I received so much encouragement and support. It has helped me to build valuable relationships.

The other challenge, beyond the decision-making, that had an impact on the process was the arrival of the pandemic. What that did was prevent us from coming together, physically, to see the progress at both locations and give each other feedback. We met virtually, and sent emails and messages back and forth, but something is lost when you cannot be in the actual space together. The pandemic also caused the delay of the true completion of the space in the Tomahawk Public Library as the children’s area is closed off and furnishings from other areas of the building are being stored there temporarily. Therefore, we have not been able to set the whole space up as originally planned. Open houses at both locations were in the works and have had to be delayed as well. But, as in all things during this time, we must be patient and prepared for the time when it is safe to open all areas of the building again.

Benefits

There have been and will continue to be many benefits because we received this grant. One of these benefits is that it has allowed us to provide early literacy activities in a safe indoor space

for our community. A space where librarians can talk with caregivers about the importance of early literacy and what that means as they use the space. Emphasizing how playing together with children is so important to their growth and development. If there are times when there isn't an opportunity for a conversation, hopefully we can at least recommend materials for them to check out and take home to share together.

Another benefit of this space is its focus on nature. We would like everyone who spends time in this space to be reminded about the importance of spending time outdoors and helping children learn about the natural world. We hope that this space will inspire children to develop a relationship with nature.

One other benefit, which was mentioned in other parts of this report, is the collaboration aspect of the grant, which resulted in the creation of much-valued relationship between the librarians.

Going Forward

Once the pandemic has passed, we can look forward to opening the space and promoting it to the community for its intended use. The hope is to have open houses at each of the libraries one after the other to showcase the collaboration efforts and allow each library's staff the opportunity to visit the other's location. It is also important that we set up a plan for exchanging the literacy kits between the two libraries, perhaps requesting them, and sending them back and forth via the courier service.

Going forward as it pertains to the space itself, the plan is to continue to add things to keep current with literacy trends and to keep it the beautiful and inviting space that this grant has allowed us to provide for our community.

To see how the process took place, please enjoy the attached *Evolution in Pictures*.

Work Cited

Callahan, Ph.D., Alice. "The Power of Play in Child Development." *Urban Child Institute*, 21 Jan. 2015, www.urbanchildinstitute.org/articles/features/the-power-of-play-in-child-development.