PBS Kids: Ready to Learn Initiative

PBS Kids: Ready to Learn is a federally funded program targeted towards kids ages 2-8 of low-income background as well as their parents, caregivers, and educators. The program aims to narrow the achievement gap between students of differing socioeconomic status through providing free educational resources and services through a variety of programming. Based on surveys showing that 99% of U.S. youth have access to television, Ready to Learn initially provided educational shows on public television (Corporation for Public Broadcasting 2011). Since its inception, however, Ready to Learn has branched out into many new spheres of digital media and learning.

Ready to Learn was initiated in 1992 by the Ready to Learn Act. Several educational children’s programs aired on PBS between 1992 and 2005 and in 2001 the program was authorized by the No Child Left Behind Act. In 2000, the National Ready Panel study was conducted and would greatly influence the approach used by Ready to Learn. In 2005, the Ready to Learn Grant, supported by Congress, was awarded to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB)/Public Broadcasting Services (PBS) Partnership and the Ready to Learn Partnership. During the 2005-2010 lifespan of the grant, the Department of Education has worked in collaboration with CPB and PBS. In 2005, Ready to Learn also adopted the research-based “Literacy 360” approach that literacy tools work best when they complement other resources and tools. The program has now branched out in terms of target audiences, types of programming offered, and academic subject area (Association of Public Television Stations 2011).

In general, Ready to Learn is designed to include the economically disadvantaged in its audience. Ready to Learn programming is clearly targeted to improve the literacy and academic skills of children, but also includes parents, caregivers, and educators as its audience. By including parents in the audience, it is more likely that positive literacy and learning skills will be encouraged and practiced in the home. It makes parents aware of what can be done to improve literacy outside of the classroom as well as give them the means to promote positive academic activities and habits. By working in collaboration with educators and providing free information and materials to teachers, Ready to Learn gets closer to the “Literacy 360” goals. Results from a study done by the Center for Children and Technology also noted that when Ready to Learn was tested in a Head Start classroom, both students and teachers displayed high levels of engagement with the material. Ready to Learn takes into consideration not only making resources available and entertaining to kids, but designing lessons with educators’ perspectives to make the material most effective in the classroom.

Furthermore, the programming not only targets multiple groups of people who work with a child, but also presents information in a variety of formats. In addition to both long-running and new television programs, the Ready to Learn website has various resources for children, parents, and educators. The PBS Kids’ website is searchable by television program as well as type of educational skill. For each television show page, there are interactive computer games, printable worksheets, and videos involving the characters from the show. This approach capitalizes on a child’s connection with television characters to develop cognitive skills through both formal and informal methods. The activities are available to anyone with internet access and worksheets can be printed for use at home, in school, or in extracurricular programs.

The community based programming is another way in which Ready to Learn incorporates the “Literacy 360” approach. One example of a community based program is the Raising Readers Library Corner that has been set up in over 250 public and school libraries. The Library Corner includes educational games, videos, and activities for youth. Other community based programming varies based on location, but includes projects such as a “literacy van” that serves many counties in Southern Illinois, Super Why Reading Camps for 4-6 year olds, and a reading buddies program that pairs 4th and 5th graders with kindergarteners to improve the vocabulary and comprehension skills of both groups.

The Ready to Learn Initiative’s primary educational goal is to improve literacy; in recent years, however, its programming has expanded to include a wider array of educational topics. Resources on the PBS Kids website can be sorted by a focus on Reading, Letters, Numbers, Science, Math, Literacy, Spelling, and Vocabulary. There are also links to find a certain style or topic of game that are highlighted by icons and words. Examples of links to specific topics include healthy eating (icon of vegetables), coloring games (icon of crayons), and estimation (icon of a jar of marbles). When selecting by a topic, each resource displays the show it is affiliated with when the user mouses over the link. Though there is no explicit foreign language help text on the site, the described use of images and multiple means of finding a type of resource to some extent considers a user who may not fluently speak or read English. Though most of the games and resources are entirely in English, there are curricula geared towards English language learners that incorporate the Ready to Learn resources and characters from the show (PBSKids.org).

In addition to providing multiple ways for users to find the type of game or resource they desire, PBS takes measures to make its programming not only usable, but accessible. Though information on accessibility of the website is difficult to locate from the main site pages, PBS does claim that “the site is fully accessible, designed for use with screen reader devices that render text into speech for blind and low-vision Web users.” PBS also provides closed captioning on its television programs (pbs.org).

The Ready to Learn Initiative was re-awarded a five year grant to continue programming from 2005-2010. This continued support is due in part to the continuing development of the program and evaluative research that reflects successes of the program. Evaluation of the program focuses on students’ success in tasks such as word decoding, encoding, reading words, letter sounds, naming letters, knowing sounds of letters, knowing concept of stories and print, and recognizing letter of their own name. Studies of both outreach programs such as SuperWHY! Camp and using Ready to Learn Media on television and the Internet report increases in all the areas described. As technology changes rapidly, the focus on research will help Ready to Learn as well as other educational organizations to understand how to best adapt resources and services to children and families in a way that targets a population of diverse socioeconomic and cultural characteristics (Corporation for Public Broadcasting 2011).

Though the PBS grant is not extensive enough to support programs in every community in the country, the free research based resources can be accessed by educators, caregivers, and families regardless of location or financial ability. Additionally, as the research conducted draws from nationally recognized government institutions, non-profits, and private organizations, findings not only impact the specific PBS program, but have the potential to shape literacy and education endeavors in various sectors.

References:

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