

# The Children's Librarian

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## The Children's Librarian as Viewed by Professional Associations

The title prescribed for this presentation seems to imply that professional associations are some sort of monolithic creatures that exist somewhere and are capable of having a "view." My experience, however, suggests that Pogo's observation on the nature of the enemy can be rephrased to describe associations: "We have met the association, and it is us."

Who is a children's librarian? Who are *we*? We have a multiplicity of job titles depending on where and at which level we work. In public libraries, we may serve as branch or regional children's specialists; heads of central children's rooms; coordinators or consultants for a system; branch, general services or bookmobile librarians; associate, assistant, or deputy directors. Some of us are directors of public library systems. In school systems we are the school librarians, library media specialists, instructional resource teachers, reading or language arts curriculum coordinators, and/or district supervisors of libraries, instructional resource centers or media centers. At the state level, we are consultants in children's services, librarians serving the blind and physically handicapped, institutional librarians and coordinators of institutional services. We may coordinate state library development services or school library/media services. Some of us are state librarians. Within state systems of higher education, some of us teach children's literature to child care givers, graduate library school students, potential teachers and teachers renewing their certificates, and to parents via television. We may be curators of special collections of chil-

dren's literature in research institutions or deans of library schools. At the national level, some of us are editing library periodicals or reviewing media. Others are working in national or international research centers, and a few are writing and consulting. Some, like myself, are employed by children's librarians to work for them in our professional association.

One of the most significant achievements in the history of children's librarianship is the recent and continuing establishment of career ladders. It is true that some of the separatist mythology resulting from the early years of this specialization still lingers in the minds of a few administrators (and children's librarians) and continues to create problems. However, the barriers that for so many years denied children's librarians a promotion to branch librarian or district coordinator (without giving up their specialization and becoming an adult services librarian) have, for the most part, been broken down. Most of those drawn to or counseled into this field are women. Societal changes, including increased mobility, changing attitudes toward women and marriage, and an increase in the number of jobs, have made it easier for librarians to move from one geographical region to another. Because of this, horizontal patterns of advancement are now less difficult to pursue in the public library field. In the school library field, while the same changes might have had a similar effect, the tenure system and the often tenuous position of school librarians work against career ladders, except vertical ones.

Formerly, children's librarians were clustered in large cities; today they are found in every state — in small towns as well as cities. Whether there are many children's librarians in a library system or only a few, they are isolated from each other. They see each other only at meetings of the staff, committees or associations to which they belong.

Children's librarians are expected to possess many skills (evaluative, management, programming, etc.) that they often have had neither the education nor apprentice-type experience to develop. The attendance and responsiveness of children's librarians at the growing number of workshops, institutes and seminars on storytelling, puppetry and literature are evidence of their need to develop and refine skills, to share with and learn from one another.

Although each children's librarian brings his/her own unique personality, talents and intellectual capacities to the work, there are several characteristics common to nearly all children's librarians. First of all, they are caring people. They respect children and believe that children should have every opportunity to become literate, thoughtful, caring adults. Second, children's librarians are imaginative people; they have always been ahead, sometimes by decades, of their fellow professionals in finding ways to reach out to their clients. Third, they are well versed in

the literature of their clientele, though unfortunately not as well versed in the nonprint media.

The professional organizations that offer children's librarians membership, from the local level to the national level, often are not meeting their needs, and in some cases are just beginning to develop the programs they would like to participate in and learn from. This is because such a pathetically small number of children's librarians belong and are actively involved in them. Often when they do belong, they carry their local type-of-library "turf" problems with them and structure their organizations in ways that perpetuate rather than eliminate communication barriers.

Unless children's librarians are located in a still-growing suburban area or a relatively small state in which the state library employs a children's consultant, they are unlikely to have any opportunity to preview, review and discuss children's materials with their colleagues. Some of these reviewing groups (e.g., in northwestern Washington state, the Bay area, southern California, or Missouri) have given or are beginning to offer service-oriented institutes and workshops.

Some state library associations have no children's services sections, some have a combined children's and school libraries section, others have combined children's and young adult sections, and a handful have a children's services section. While this pattern is beginning to change in a few states, the usual program offered for children's librarians during state library association annual conventions is a speech by a local or visiting author. While children's librarians are and should be interested in issues and subjects relevant to all librarians, the lack of specific content for children's librarians in state programs is an abysmal situation. That lack of content accounts to a large extent for low membership figures and lower attendance at state meetings by children's librarians. The major identifiable activity of many state children's sections is the management of a popular children's book award program. Two states have publishing programs that include materials for children's librarians.

At the regional level, there is a strong children's librarians' roundtable in New England, built by tradition and remaining viable because of good programs, short travel distances and heavy population concentration in the region. The Southeast, Southwest, and Pacific Northwest regional associations have very small children's sections and hold programs every two years — very much like the state association programs.

At the national level, the American Library Association (ALA) offers a complexity of structure unmatched by any affiliate association. Children's librarians from all types of libraries cluster in the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC). Because ALA's structure provides for "type of library" as well as "type of service" divisions, children's

librarians may also belong to the Public Library Association (PLA), the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Association of State Library Agencies (ASLA). Most school librarians hold joint AASL/ALSC memberships or joint AASL/YASD (Young Adult Services Division) memberships. ALSC's members come from public libraries (41 percent), school libraries (28 percent), students and faculty of library schools (11 percent), publishing (2 percent), state library agencies (1 percent), retired librarians (8 percent), and miscellaneous foreign libraries, federal agencies and college libraries (9 percent).

Primarily because of staff limitations, prior to 1976 ALSC was able to offer members only one or two programs totaling about four hours in addition to the Newbery-Caldecott program during ALA's annual conference. In 1976 and 1977, the number of programs grew, and at least twenty-four hours of programs are scheduled specifically for ALSC members in 1978. ALSC also uses the preconference format every few years to present longer programs, sponsors the annual Arbuthnot lecture in various parts of the country, and is experimenting with regional workshops. The division publishes books, pamphlets, lists, and a quarterly journal (with YASD), and is preparing to publish a newsletter for its members.

Since all of these local, state, regional and national organizations are associations formed by and for librarians and others, why do so many librarians choose not to join, wait until they attain an administrative position before joining, join every two or three years, or join once and drop out permanently? Children's librarians first develop their perceptions of the value of association membership when they are in library school. If they meet faculty members who are active in library associations, who explain organizational goals and structure to students, and who give practical advice about participation, then it is likely that the students will become participants themselves upon taking their first professional position. If they meet faculty members who are anti-association, nonparticipants, and who refer constantly to associations as "they" or "it" rather than "we," then it is quite likely that the student will resist joining any association for as long as possible.

Economic conditions that affect jobs and disposable cash have a direct effect on membership figures in associations, as does any change in dues rates. These factors are offset, however, if a children's librarian perceives association membership and conference attendance as an indirect or direct way of developing contacts which may be of assistance in making job changes — vertically or horizontally.

One's employer (director, supervisor, or coordinator) can exert a great deal of influence, positive or negative, on who joins which associa-

tions. If the employer budgets for conference attendance as in-service educational experience, participates and encourages new as well as experienced employees to attend and participate, introduces them, and gives them support when they assume committee seats and offices, then the predisposition developed from positive library school experiences will be enhanced and the children's librarian will become an active member. The reverse is also true. Employers can and do discourage membership by translating anti-association attitudes into restrictive policies, such as requiring that a staff member be on two committees before expenses will be even partially paid, by sending the same administrative staff member(s) year after year, or by forcing use of vacation time for attendance. Coworkers can also have a positive or negative effect on attitudes.

Another factor affecting membership is whether the programs, activities and publications of the associations are perceived as professionally beneficial. The recurring question "What does it do for me?" is probably difficult to answer in most state and regional associations. In ALA/ALSC, it can be answered voluminously. It is difficult to answer, however, if the person asking expects a response only in terms of individual benefits because the programs, publications and most activities are also available (though at greater cost) to nonmembers.

Whether the association conveys an image of being "closed" or "open" to participation by new members has become an increasing factor in membership recruitment in the last decade. Associations which formally or informally convey an impression of being closed, cliqueish, fun only for the "in group," or "incestuous" in selection of officers, committee chairs and members should not have difficulty determining why they draw and retain so few new members.

The motivation which one would like to think is the major force in drawing members to associations actually ranks last in real effect. This is the idealistic motivation — the concern with the broad issues of librarianship and library service to children beyond the local service area. While one hopes that this motivation would be cultivated and nourished in library schools and in job experiences, it is understandable that immediate concerns (i.e., passing the course, getting the job, reaching the children in the community) are overriding and divert the vision. It is, however, a large factor in membership retention. After the first few years of membership, *if* the member gets involved with conventions, committees, or task force activities, the vision widens and commitment and caring begin to cross boundaries — beyond the library, the system, the county, the state and the nation.

While all of the above-mentioned factors affect children's librarians' decisions about whether or not and when to join a professional associa-

tion, there are some factors beyond the control of association members. Although one may decry the fact that some directors of library systems, library school faculty and other potentially influential librarians are — and probably always will be — anti-association, there is little that can be done about it. Energy can be profitably expended toward ensuring that professional associations are worth the time and monetary support of children's librarians. The purposes for which the time and money is used must be examined critically. Recognizing their isolation and need for professional growth in skills and concepts, children's librarians must find ways to provide and support continuing education experiences at a variety of levels throughout the United States. Effective communications channels must be established during and between meetings in order to keep children's librarians in touch with each other. Bridges must be built between associations so that members see clearly the relationships among local, state, regional and national groups, and their opportunity to participate at all levels. Participation must be encouraged, perhaps even demanded, in committee work, task forces, discussion groups and on programs, via articles, letters and telephone calls. Concomitantly, the associations must be made flexible enough, i.e., less hierarchical, so that everyone *can* participate.

I have learned a good deal about associations since I first paid membership dues twenty years ago in my first month on my first job to the Dade County (Florida) Library Association; the county's Classroom Teachers Association; the National Education Association, and its (then) Department of Audio-Visual Instruction; the Florida Education Association, and its School Librarians Section; and the Florida Library Association, and its School and Children's Section. The past four years at ALA as a staff member have been, sometimes painfully, even more enlightening in that they have provided an opportunity to observe thousands of members giving, growing, learning, dreaming, discussing, deciding, trying, sometimes failing, and trying again. I am convinced as a children's librarian, as an association member and as your employee, that there is only *one* requisite of association membership. It has no name except that which each of us gives it: it is the return for what we give to the association in active, concerned, enthusiastic participation. When we get it we begin to understand and to discuss what children's librarianship is about. The children we serve directly become no more and no less important to us than all the children in our region, our state, our nation and our world. It is through our associations that the clout can be amassed to do everything we can in their behalf.