

Services

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Services of Small Public Libraries

The purpose of this paper is to discuss both state library agency services and children's services in small public libraries. I will present my perspective on some of the realities of these two institutions today and the effect of these realities on library services for children in those communities with small public libraries.

Small is a relative term and, no doubt, everyone has arrived at his/her own concept of a small public library — from personal experience as a library patron, as a practicing librarian, and/or from the literature about the small public library. Elizabeth Gross's study defined small libraries as those serving populations under 35,000.¹ Informal conversations with fellow state library agency children's consultants lead me to define small libraries as those serving populations of less than 20,000 or even 10,000. Of the 597 public libraries in Illinois, 56.4 percent serve populations of less than 5000, as do 54 percent of New York's 737 public libraries.² Therefore, employing the term *small* in reference to libraries serving populations of less than 5000 is very realistic. I will refer primarily to these very small public libraries when discussing services because I believe they deserve some attention and should be remembered when planning for the future. Small libraries do not always indicate rural location — small libraries are also situated in maturing suburban communities.

In all sizes and types of libraries, resources and materials, physical space, staffing patterns and budgets, mold, if not dictate, service patterns. With reference to small public libraries, consider these aspects: (1) a

library that is open only twenty or even twelve hours a week; (2) a librarian who is readers' advisor, reference and interlibrary loan librarian, cataloger, public relations specialist, and children's librarian (the oft-quoted phrases "other duties as assigned" and "total librarian" are certainly applicable here); (3) a library that has a yearly budget of \$300 for juvenile materials; and (4) a library where the children's department is not a physically separate entity, but an alcove or section differentiated from the rest of the library by a sudden shift in the size of the tables and chairs or by the presence of mobiles and children's art work.

It is difficult to describe the attributes of the small public library in detail without creating stereotypes. Hearing about the very limited children's services and programs offered by many small public libraries would be disenchanting to some. While the librarians who keep these libraries operative (often from true community pride) are admirable, the children's services offered in many instances are depressing. However, discussion only of the small public libraries that offer exciting services and programs in spite of their size neglects the truly small public library that operates on a hand-to-mouth existence. It is alternately discouraging and fascinating to talk with library administrators who claim that if there is one aspect of library service alive and thriving, it is children's services. They should be taken on a tour of the small public libraries.

Librarians who work with children are often characterized by their creativity, but even creativity has its limits in the small public library. The persons working in these libraries are isolated — not simply from human contact or from other children's librarians (especially in comparison to the staffs at large urban public libraries), but from other librarians in general. In small libraries, there are several ways in which children's services are provided: (1) by a professionally trained children's librarian with paraprofessional or clerical support staff; (2) by a professionally trained librarian who is the library director and works in every service area as needed, but who delegates certain tasks to paraprofessional staff members on a daily basis; or most commonly (3) by a librarian who is not professionally trained and who works in all areas. Small libraries don't have the luxury of using one staff member for puppetry and another for the preschool story hour or the option of preparing mutual programs with a cadre of professionally trained children's librarians. At the "one-person" library, the librarian may be guilty of not dividing work time equally among all types of services, but as is only human, will tend to concentrate on a single area which seems most rewarding. An even worse situation would be having a librarian who is not comfortable with children. Even in the small public library with a professionally trained children's librarian, it is usually that one person who handles the selection of materials, plans and

implements programs, initiates community outreach efforts, visits schools, and so on. However, there are compensations in that contact with the library director is frequent and the opportunity to be involved in the total library is easier, i.e., there are no layers of bureaucracy to penetrate.

Materials resources also are limited and ingenuity must be used to stretch the budget both for traditional materials and for those designed at the local level to meet a specific need. In the very small library, collections are print-oriented and it is not surprising to find older titles that have been donated and kept on the shelves to "beef up" the volume count or because the titles are still popular. (As methodologies are improved for accessing collections, small public library collections may prove useful as a backup resource to older titles by authors such as Cavanna and Du Jardin.) Ventures into nonprint resources occur most commonly in the areas of disk recordings, cassette, or book bags. It is not that the small public library does not want multiple copies, current nonfiction titles, etc., but budgets, space and staff to acquire and handle the materials are limited.

Programs in the very small public library are traditionally preschool story hours, films, puppets and summer reading clubs. As in so many instances, it is the librarian who makes the difference. They have learned, perhaps sooner than others, to use community resources for special programs and activities, e.g., depending on the local women's club for the preschool story hour series.

While there is much to say about the small public library, it is appropriate at this point to discuss the state library agency with respect to library services for children, particularly as they pertain to the small public libraries. It is those libraries that are most dependent on the state library agency. The role of the children's consultant has become synonymous with state library agency services for children and for children's librarians. Although a state library agency will always provide services to the small public library, it is safe to assume that agency services will prosper under the direction and coordination of a consultant whose specialty and experience is in the area of library services for children.

According to the *ASLA President's Newsletter*,³ there are thirty-one state library agencies which list a children's consultant, but I know of only about fifteen consultants who spend at least 50 percent of their time on children's services. In 1956, Elizabeth Burr, Children's and Young People's Consultant at the Wisconsin Free Library Commission (and former public library consultant), wrote of "looking forward to the day when there is a children's and young people's consultant on every state library agency staff."⁴ That day has not yet arrived, but rather than getting dis-

tracted by numbers, let us look toward improving, expanding and sharing our resources in planning for the future.

Traditionally, if many small libraries do not receive assistance from the state, they receive no assistance at all. Services offered by state library agencies to small public libraries include: booklists (which provide not only a list of resources, but an awareness of topics of concern to librarians working with children — a consciousness-raising technique of sorts); materials examination centers or rotating collections of new materials (an important tool for book selection, especially for librarians with limited budgets); continuing education opportunities in the form of workshops, regional meetings, etc.; statewide summer reading programs; lists, newsletters or manuals of program ideas; rotating collections or displays; core collections of juvenile books and backup resources of children's materials; and the undefinable area of consultant services — advice on collection weeding, remodeling or building a children's section, suggestions for new programs, and visits on-site to serve as a catalyst, reactor, troubleshooter or advisor.

An examination of the reports developed for the June 1977 meeting of the ASLA Consultants for Youth Services yields a partial listing of the following programs, all of which have value for the librarian in the small public library: a workshop on children with special needs; rotating exhibits of children's art; a lecture on the reviewer/critic's point of view by Zena Sutherland, third in a series of lectures sponsored by the juvenile book evaluation center; puppet kits for loan to public libraries; and a "Children's Caravan" that took to the road to present children's programs in seventy communities with the assistance of the state library agency's children's consultant. The last venture is interesting in that the local librarian had to participate in the puppet show segment of the program, thereby reinforcing the state library agency's role of providing continuing education and training for the local librarian. The children's consultant acts as initiator, coordinator, promoter, advisor, and lobbyist for children's services.

The efforts of a state library agency children's consultant, and the efforts of the librarian working with children in a small public library have been, will be, or should have been affected by library networking activities, particularly those with respect to the development of library systems. The configuration of service has been adjusted, and one result is the emergence of a "middleman" both as an organization (a system, regional library or area service organization) and as a human resource in the persona of a children's consultant. Where the state library agency children's consultant had an entire state to cover by direct contact, programs of service can be encouraged and improved by a library system

consultant located in the region. Librarians can then plan programs and share ideas on a regional scale, which is also less threatening.

Training efforts will now be focused on a new group of children's consultants with the expectation that these consultants will work with the local libraries. The state library agency children's consultant will act not only as a resource person for the entire state, but as a mentor and consultant's consultant at the system level. There will be an initial loss of direct contact with all the local libraries, especially in the areas of basic service training and program demonstrations (which now will be facilitated through the regional coordinator). Where there is no regional children's consultant (and some regions will probably prefer to continue with the services from the state library agency without the expenditure of hiring their own consultants) the traditional pattern of service will be retained. However, the state library agency children's consultant can now, more than ever, focus his/her efforts on additional lobbying for children's services both within the state library agency and with other state agencies, as well as through coordination of the efforts of the system staffs. Too often, librarians working with children talk only among themselves and then wonder why no one takes them seriously. It is up to the state library agency children's consultant, and now to the systems consultants, to set the pace.

With the implementation of systems, it will be difficult at first for some to refocus their efforts, but we should not lose our focus completely. The goal of providing and improving library services to children must remain the same. F. William Summers once cautioned: "The children's consultant must have or develop some credibility and clout with the local library director and with key staff members within the local library. This is not likely to happen if the children's consultant is seen as doing exactly the same things and having exactly the same array of skills as the local children's librarian."⁵ Similarly, the state agency's children's consultant is able to offer skills not expected at the system level and to compensate in other areas as needed. Subsequently, it is important for the local librarian responsible for children's services, the system or regional children's consultant, and the state agency children's consultant to define carefully and mutually the areas of responsibility.

Returning again to the subject of library services to children in small public libraries, I will make the following comments. First, it is essential to be concerned about the isolated librarians, particularly those in the rural areas. Many of these libraries will never be able to hire a professionally trained librarian, to say nothing of hiring a children's specialist. The very personal service to children provided in a small public library can offset some of the limitations in staff and resources. However, the child

living in a small community has a right to expect total access to materials and exposure to excellent programs. The small public library need not be a limiting force because of its location. Ways must be devised to demonstrate to librarians and trustees what these libraries can and should provide in the area of children's services; in other words, expectations must be raised. This cannot be accomplished simply through workshops. Continuing education efforts such as workshops are futile when the librarian cannot attend the workshop because there is no one to substitute at the library or no one available to conduct the preschool story hour session that morning.

Secondly, the development of library systems in certain parts of the country will provide services closer to home for the small public library. Many programs traditionally offered at the state agency level can be planned and implemented locally, thereby involving more librarians. Programs attempted at the medium and large public library levels can be adapted with the help of the system and the state agency consultant.

The small public library should be a prime beneficiary of networking activities, including broader access to materials, so that a limited budget will no longer limit access to information and resources, both human and material. The small public library should also be a prime target for cooperative activities, particularly those between school and public libraries. This does not mean that efforts will be any easier, but on a smaller scale with a greater need they can be less inhibiting.

Spencer Shaw has noted that "contrary to some misguided conceptions, children need the most (not the least) qualified service to assure them the maximum use of a library and its resources to satisfy their limited, but ever expanding intellectual, social, and emotional needs."⁶ To paraphrase, the most qualified consultants are needed at the state library agency level to meet the needs of librarians working with children, especially in small public libraries.

It is necessary to take into account both the positive and negative aspects of the very small public library and service to children in future planning. While we have been watching and discussing the plight of children's services in large urban libraries, things have been happening in those small public libraries which serve communities of 40,000-50,000 people in growing suburban areas, college towns, and the settled communities of middle America. Children's librarians — many of whom do not have the benefit of training in a large urban library — have seized the challenge of excellent library service to children. Their programs are not flashy, and the names of the librarians are not always well recognized outside their immediate areas, but they have responded.

There are two types of potential for library service to children in small

public libraries: (1) the untapped potential in libraries which have not realized what can be done despite size, and (2) the potential of library service for children which has been demonstrated by the continually inventive programs of service for children in those small public libraries that have already met the challenge.

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