

## Services

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# Services of Large Public Libraries

This paper is intended to trace the influences that affect children's services and to indicate what is and might be included in services to children in large metropolitan libraries. Children are defined here not as a separate species, a breed apart, but as young human beings with whom adults share their lives and whose prime differences from adults are their age, size and political inactivity.

In spite of concern about the status of children in today's society — the battered child, the unwanted child, the exceptional child, the institutionalized child, and so on — there is no "child power." The very best that can be said for children's librarians is that their actions are motivated primarily by their genuine liking for children and their dedication to sharing the child's sense of wonder at discovering the world through ideas recorded and expressed in various media. Through service to children librarians are afforded the chance to reach the child as an individual developing his or her own potential.

The management of large public libraries has been significantly affected by the continuing changes in the economic and social climate in urban areas. Administrators, in direct competition with other city agencies for the shrinking budget dollar, must strive to convince officials in municipal government that libraries deserve high priority among public community services. A recent report of library services in New York City is a case in point. The Budget Bureau of the City of New York critically evaluated the practices of three large municipal libraries in terms of man-

agement, costs, decline of circulation, underutilization of buildings, schedules or hours of public service, the number and use of paraprofessionals on the staff, general staffing patterns, library reporting methods, inventory and loss of material, and the use of computerization in circulation systems.<sup>1</sup>

It is little wonder that, in the effort to survive, a succession of internal changes is taking place in many urban libraries in the form of reexamination and restatement of library goals, and a general redesigning of the management structure. With more fiscal control being centered in local communities, the administrative shift has been toward decentralization, with most large libraries favoring organizational patterns which accommodate local needs.

Contrary to recent reports,<sup>2</sup> in many large libraries the current casualty of management restructuring has been children's services. The "1975 Directory of Coordinators of Children's Services and Young Adult Services in Public Library Systems Serving at Least 100,000 People,"<sup>3</sup> published by the American Library Association, revealed that in a 5-year period there was an increase of 109 library systems, and a concomitant decrease (40 percent) in the number of children's coordinators. An informal survey of nineteen of the largest libraries from California to the east coast showed that one-third of the libraries responding had downgraded the position of children's coordinator. Ten of the nineteen libraries had children's coordinators with advisory rather than line responsibilities. Children's programming or personnel training of children's specialists was transferred to another administrative office, which was generally newly created and higher on the management ladder. The move to regional systems often means that children's librarians are further removed from the supervisory role as head of children's services. Diminution of the authority or leadership role in children's services seriously threatens the growth of these services.

Two major developments which abruptly propelled large libraries into reorganization and self-examination within the last two decades have been: (1) the migration of population from rural areas to the cities, and (2) the unparalleled response to the social consciousness aroused by the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Attempts at accountability began when the relevancy of institutions such as libraries was challenged. The various interpretations of "relevance" resulted in a myriad of experiments, pilot projects and redefinition of the library's function in relation to its patrons.

These changes in library philosophy were also reflected in services to children. Although the idea of the serene children's librarian surrounded by a few attentive, cherubic faces was never the true one, the rapid growth of cities contributed to a frenetic pace of library services extending be-

yond the traditional walls of the library. Library programs for children took place in hospitals, playgrounds, museums, street fairs, community centers and even in department stores. The new emphasis on community outreach meant that children could enjoy storytelling over the telephone as in San Francisco or the Queens Borough Public Library, through "Dial-A-Story." Federal funding made it possible to launch such highly visible programs as the Queens Borough Public Library's "Operation Headstart," which focused on the youngest potential library reader, the preschooler. The Chicago Public Library was able to use a grant to transport 9000 children from 10 schools to its local branch libraries. This library also located information centers in storefronts where children could study in an informal environment.<sup>4</sup>

Schools were, and still are, important in the history of public library cooperation. The Philadelphia Project,<sup>5</sup> an experiment involving the staff of the Free Library of Philadelphia, educators in the school community and students of target schools, helped to call attention to the effects of library use at various stages in the development of school children.

Today, however, the schools have become as fiscally vulnerable as the large public libraries. The early growth of media centers in the schools was dramatic. In New York State, media centers were mandated for every elementary school — but the position of the media specialist was not! The problem with this state of affairs was never more evident than during the period of New York City's imminent bankruptcy.

In 1975 the New York Public Library applied for and received an ESEA Title II Special Purpose grant of \$60,000 for use in its George Bruce branch.<sup>6</sup> The branch and three schools in District 5 (Manhattan) were to be part of a project demonstrating an exemplary program of school and public library cooperation in which children would have access to information and materials both related to their school curriculum and for enriching it in their free time after school hours. Actually PS 125, the only public school in the project, already had one of the best-equipped media centers in the area, housing a large selection of non-print media and equipment. The strength of the library branch in the area was its good book collection. The grant money enabled the library to enlarge its meager nonprint collection and to add materials geared to the curriculum needs of the students.

Also in 1975 budget cuts were made which affected all public agencies in New York City. The three schools involved in the project lost vital personnel. Both the public school's media specialist and the branch library's children's librarian were removed from their jobs and the school media center was closed. The public library administration felt a commit-

ment to the project, however, and despite curtailed service hours, provided sufficient staff support to enable a continuing dialogue between the children's librarians and school teachers, and ensured access to library materials for the children in the schools. Today, with the help of CETA and other government funding, the children's librarian position has been reinstated, the media specialist has returned to open the school's media center, and the resource-sharing project progresses with some continuity.

In urban areas the children's librarian works closely with a variety of agencies. Brooklyn Public Library's recent publication, "Get Ready to Read," illustrates one area of cooperation large libraries are increasingly interested in exploring: the business community. The printing of this simple but helpful brochure was financed by a local bank, thus making it possible for the library to distribute thousands to parents of preschool children. The schools played a part, too, by supplying original art work of students from one of the Brooklyn school districts.

National awareness of the needs of children with mental, emotional or physical handicaps has influenced library services in the urban centers. The Free Library of Philadelphia, for example, is engaged in a LSCA project for service to the deaf, and Philadelphia branch libraries now have children's books about deafness and stories in signed English.<sup>7</sup>

What really distinguishes the children's department in large public libraries from its counterpart in smaller systems is the diversity of its users. The population shift to the cities mentioned earlier meant a new constituency for the urban library, many of which were poor, economically and educationally disadvantaged and from minority groups: blacks, Hispanics and poor rural whites. Most of the adults in these groups viewed traditional institutions with suspicion since they found little representation or reflection of their own cultural patterns in them. One-third of the library users from these groups were identified as school children, and two-thirds were nineteen years of age or younger. Children's specialists discovered that adults in these groups are best approached through their children.

Bibliographies of bilingual materials have grown out of work with the large Spanish-speaking population in the south Bronx of New York City, as have bibliographies on the black experience from work with children in Harlem and Chicago, who had a dearth of material about their own people. Libraries in the west and southwest have developed similar materials for their large Chicano population, and encouraged use of materials that promote intercultural understanding among the various groups living in their communities.

The information explosion has, however, added another responsibility to the children's specialist. The various forms in which information

now comes — films, filmstrips, cassettes, audiovisual kits, and toys — add another dimension to the duties of the children's specialist, who must now develop areas of expertise in judging framed prints, posters, and so on for selection and use with children. The view of the library's administration regarding the importance of these materials helps to determine the budgeting for their acquisition.

Mention should be made of another of the effects of the large libraries' thrust to reach the "unserved." As more projects developed and increasing emphasis was placed on "new directions," it became apparent that the supply of professional staff was not infinite. In fact, long before the erosion of leadership in the services was noticeable, there was a shortage of children's librarians in the urban libraries. This meant that in these libraries, which often served as training centers for the profession, there was a steady exodus of personnel within given periods, and the continuity and stability of service rested at the leadership level. In-service training programs became an important factor in the total program of services to children. The complexities brought about by the new social consciousness of the 1960s and the later diminishing budget resulted in a more comprehensive definition of the responsibilities of the children's librarian and the emergence of the paraprofessional.

In some cities, it was discovered that a paraprofessional worked well when he or she was a member of the community or ethnic group being served. They helped to ease the institutional barrier while interpreting the library to the community. While some worked especially well with children, they lacked the specialized training and background to assume the full responsibilities of the trained librarian. But in times of fiscal crisis, paraprofessionals have been left in charge of small units and have assumed responsibilities long before adequate training and definitions of duties are given. This further diminishes service not only to children but to adults, teachers, students of children's literature, and parents.

The new direction indicated, then, is simply this: How sacrosanct is storytelling, for example, as part of the librarian's duties? Is it really *de rigueur* that a librarian tell stories when her forte may be informing the local PTA about the trends in children's literature? In one library, long before labor union contracts carefully delineated those activities which the professional or nonprofessional may perform within their respective job classifications, at least two of its notable storytellers were in the clerical or paraprofessional category. Continuing examination of the nature of the professional librarian, the generalist and the paraprofessional now consumes the "trainer's" time in large public libraries. Implications may be drawn for the old-line children's specialists who are sometimes unresponsive to the support roles of this new and emerging personnel phenomenon in library services to children, the paraprofessional.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In many large libraries, service to children has kept pace with the expanding services being offered to adults, and the unique demands of the diversified groups in the cities have confirmed the need for trained professionals with background in the literature and program needs of children and their parents. Weakening of children's services weakens the totality of the library program.

Large libraries may well have to develop a mechanism for securing funding for surveys of library functions if libraries are continually to compete with other municipal services. Cost analysis for children's services would form an important component in such studies and, vital to such an analysis would be a comprehensive user survey involving both children and their parents.

Networking and resource-sharing are important trends in the delivery of library services. Children are too often limited to the media resources of one agency or one department within an agency. In spite of the generally limited mobility of children, they should be allowed the option of access to materials which several cooperative projects have demonstrated as possible. Children do have vast information needs.

Children's librarians should become involved in literacy programs, become more knowledgeable about how children learn to read, and explore ways in which public library resources can be used or shared in the school community to combat the growing problem of illiteracy. Children's specialists and other library specialists might form a partnership with other educators to fight illiteracy. Parent education should also become an important component of work with children in approaching literacy problems. Parents are often unaware of their primary role in the educational process.

The potential for community support of services to children is seen by the growth of "friends" groups. The business community and other community sources should be encouraged as advocates for library services. Some administrators have pointed out that the cost-inefficient story hour program should be weighed against programs supported and supplied by volunteers. These volunteers are generally professionals such as performers, authors, artists or local residents with special skills.

Children's specialists need to develop political sophistication and to take the initiative in maintaining communication with administrators. Budget-making decisions which affect children's services are not beneficial to the service or the library without the involvement of the children's library specialist.

Attendance at conferences and institutes such as this suggests the

rightful preoccupation of children's specialists with the need for communication and continuing education. Children's specialists/consultants of metropolitan libraries around the country have for years felt the need to meet informally to exchange ideas, even though their systems and administrative styles differ. It is indeed true that services to children in large libraries reflect all the current forces of change which affect library services to children everywhere.

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