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The Right Stuff: Recruitment and Education for Children's and Young Adult Specialists

"There was something ancient, primordial, irresistible about the challenge of this stuff, no matter what a sophisticated and rational age one might think he lived in" (Wolfe, 1984, p. 22). In his exploration of the bonds of fraternity among the military test pilots who achieved heroic status as the early astronauts, Tom Wolfe was fascinated by an almost tangible but undefinable central quality by which its members were ranked. Energy, guts, bravery, idealism, and more seemed obvious traits, but somewhere beyond these lay an "ineffable quality" implicitly understood by the men in this special brotherhood. Theirs was a time of striving for recognition, for pride, and for legitimacy as they tested and extended the limits of their specialized occupation. In time they gained not only glory, but, more importantly, acceptance by their peers. And then the institutional structure in which they worked and the very world itself changed. Having achieved their place as "deserving occupants at the top of the pyramid of the right stuff" (Wolfe, 1984, p. 366), the importance of the fraternity and the ideal began to slip away.

Not long ago a friend and colleague who is the head of children’s services in a public library serving a community of about 40,000 was reflecting on problems of assessing the background and skills of applicants for a position as children’s librarian. She was pointing out that the academic and work experiences listed on the résumé and application are often not very reliable indicators of the actual education or training the individual has been provided. “You simply can’t assume any common set of competencies,” she commented. While the common sense of this seems pretty basic, don’t we usually suppose that if a person has taken the requisite courses in library school, there will be at least a passing acquaintance with some widely understood tenets of children’s literature, say, or school librarianship or young adult services?
A similar but more formal set of statements regarding competencies was developed by Patsy Perritt and Kathleen Heim in an article for the Winter 1987 issue of *Top of the News* on the ALA-accredited master's degree as the basic professional credential for youth services librarians. They observe that: “National standards for youth services in librarianship, except for those in the school setting, have not been developed, utilized, and promoted by members of the profession, and this is one of the reasons educational programs for youth services lack centrality” (Perritt & Heim, 1987, p. 154). One might add that, on an informal level, we do have something of a centrality of belief about the personal and professional characteristics and skills desirable for youth services librarians. We have pretty commonly held ideas about the right stuff for librarians serving children and adolescents, and these tend to be both rooted in long abiding ideals and to have developed some new tenets in response to shifts in management theory and political realities in libraries and schools. We have a strong collegiality based on idealism, pragmatism, and frustration about our status in the larger library profession. It is true that we have not developed structured definitions and programs which might effectively put youth services at the height we believe it deserves on the pyramid of librarianship.

What then is the right stuff? Who has the responsibility for identifying and developing it? How well is this being done? What can we as library educators, youth services librarians, and members of professional organizations do to make sure that it is done better? The following discussion will look at some of the formulations of professional competencies, comment on the relationship of these to curriculum offerings in library schools, examine some current issues and problems in professional education for youth services specialists, and finally suggest some action items for the agenda we hope will emerge from this Allerton conference.

**Professional Qualifications**

What about the contention that we don’t have a set of national youth services standards upon which to construct and evaluate professional education? In the strictest sense this is true, of course, but let us look at the content and similarities in existing documents. The school library/media field, being both the most complex and the most formulated, is the logical place to begin. The national standards published in 1975 and to be replaced in the near future, stipulate that: “The media specialist holds a master’s degree in media from a program that combines library and information science, educational communications and technology, and curriculum.” This academic program is to develop a specified list of competencies, including, among others, planning and administration,
analysis of user characteristics and information needs, media design and production, and interpretation and application of research (American Association of School Librarians, 1975, pp. 22-23).

It is not mandated that the master's degree be from an accredited library school, and, as has been widely noted and discussed, school media specialists are subject to the requirements of certification regulations set by the individual states. From a pragmatic point of view, state regulations, being a condition of employment, generally take precedence over the national standards which lack a structured means of enforcement. Sometimes the national and state requirements are similar or even congruent. As noted in Ann Franklin's 1984 survey of school library media certification requirements in each state, published in the January 1984 School Library Journal, some states include a requirement of an MLS, some levels of certification require a master's degree plus additional hours of study, and in many cases a number of stipulated hours short of a master's degree will suffice (Franklin, 1984, pp. 21-34). Presumably the lack of uniform application of the national standard causes some difficulty for individuals wishing to relocate from one state to another.

Not only do the academic requirements and desired competencies for school library media specialists differ widely among states, but there are distinctly different opinions in the library education field as to whether the accredited library schools are the most appropriate providers of professional education for such specialists. Jane Hannigan, in a wide-ranging examination of library education, has advocated moving "all educational responsibility for this professional to schools of education" (Hannigan, 1984, p. 55). Perritt and Heim (1987), anxious to further the commonalities among youth services in the library schools and in professional practice, admit that one of the most important of the unresolved problems is "professional consensus as to the location of the educational component" (p. 156). In this largest of the youth specialties, and the only one to actually have national standards, there is no centrality as described earlier by these authors.

While there are no functional national standards for children's and young adult services, the widely recognized "Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth," developed by ALA's Young Adult Services Division (YASD), is generally considered prescriptive and useful as a guide for professional education and for the development of library positions. This document does not specify a level of academic achievement but stipulates specific areas of knowledge and skills pertaining to: leadership and professionalism, knowledge of the client group, communication, administration, knowledge of materials, access to information, and services. Competencies involved in knowledge of the client group include applying factual and interpretive information on adolescent psychology, growth
and development, sociology, and popular culture and also knowledge of the reading process in planning for materials and services. The management skills include identification and development of external funding, applying and conducting research, and monitoring legislation. Service capabilities include two that have been particular philosophical tenets of the young adult services field—i.e., crisis intervention counseling and involving young adults in planning and implementing services for their age group (Young Adult Services Division, 1982, p. 51). The Board of Directors of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) (1986) recently adopted recommendations of a long-range planning task force which included the development of a set of competencies for children’s librarians, and the task has been assigned to the division’s education committee.

In the absence of national children’s services standards, many state library agencies and professional associations have developed standards in recent years or are now in the process of doing so. The Standards for Youth Services in Public Libraries of New York State include a list of competencies which are a close adaptation of the YASD competencies. Since the title of the original document designates “youth” rather than “young adults,” the New York task force simply substituted the same term throughout the document wherever “young adults” had been used to designate the client group with a resulting list intended for use with both children’s and young adult librarians. No indication is given of competencies which might be more germane to either one of the services. The YASD list was apparently intended primarily for use in library education since the competencies were all designated for “the student”; the New York list assigns them for “the librarian” (New York Library Association, 1984).

The competencies stated in the standards for school library media centers are not markedly different from the YASD competencies, and although both are probably due for further examination and discussion, there does seem to be enough common ground to develop a central set of skills and characteristics for librarians serving youth, both children and adolescents, whether in a public library setting or a school library media center.

Competencies which are agreed upon and promulgated by national organizations set one sort of standard for professional education. Another useful standard is level of academic achievement. The master’s degree from an ALA accredited library school has been the generally accepted requirement for entry into professional librarianship, but, as previously mentioned, different requirements often apply to a very substantial segment of the field, namely school librarianship. What of children’s and young adult services in public libraries? Several of the state level standards recommend (most do not require) an M.L.S. for the librarian responsible for youth
services at the local library. A number of state surveys of children's services provide interesting information about the academic credentials actually held by children's librarians. A 1978 survey of Illinois public libraries, for example, focused on many aspects of thirty-two libraries selected, among other reasons, for their reputed strength in services to children. It was found that seventeen, or a little better than 50 percent, of the librarians had an M.L.S. Six librarians had bachelor's degrees, and eight (25 percent) had less than a bachelor's degree (Richardson, 1978, pp. 136-137). A more recently published survey of 285 children's librarians in Michigan revealed that 136 (47.7 percent) had an M.L.S. In this instance, sixty-six individuals (23.1 percent) had less than a bachelor's degree, while the remaining eighty-three had bachelor's degrees or other degrees and certificates. In this study, 7.7 percent of the librarians were noted as attending school, but the levels of study were not specified. It was also found that 67 percent of the respondents had earned continuing education units (CEUs) (Todara, et al., 1985, p. 5).

The information from these surveys are important parts of the demographics of our profession—a subject to be explored further in this program—which raise questions about professional competencies and credentials for youth services librarians. Provided we accept the assumption that the M.L.S. is desirable as the entry-level professional requirement, how can we encourage its achievement by more librarians? Is it reasonable to suppose that all public and school libraries could or should have professionally educated librarians? How do we define professional? What are the educational needs and requirements of those youth services librarians who have not earned the professional degree? Clearly, various states have been struggling with some of these questions, though we lack cohesive information about the results of state efforts which we might draw upon for a strong national system on which to plan and promote professional education in youth services.

Just as all states have certification requirements, some states also certify librarians for the public library field—usually on the basis of less complex requirements. The subject of certification is by no means new, but in recent years some writers have suggested that this idea deserves attention in the national scheme of regulating professional credentials. Standards and a mechanism for certification are sometimes advocated—and disputed—as an alternative to the present scheme of the M.L.S. as the preferred basic requirement (see Willett, 1984, pp. 13-23). Certification may also be seen as a system for ensuring competency at various levels of professional responsibility, and this notion ought to be considered at a national level as a potential means of strengthening both the provision of library services to youth and the role of youth services librarianship in the larger professional field.
Aside from philosophical interests and concern about professionalism, there is a very practical matter which lends urgency to the notions of competencies and certification. At the present time the demand for librarians in the youth services specialties outstrips by far the supply of candidates entering the field through library schools. John Berry (1986) strongly stated the shortage of children’s and young adult librarians in a recent *Library Journal* editorial (p. 4). The accompanying report on national placements of library school graduates for 1985 showed more librarians placed in public libraries than in any other type—a situation occurring for the first time since 1977. Moreover, of the 2,887 placements, 313 (13 percent) were in youth services with an almost even split between public and school librarians. The three largest specialties were children’s services in public libraries (113 positions), children’s services in school libraries (112 positions), and business libraries (100 positions). Additionally, there were forty-five placements in youth services in public libraries, forty in youth services in school libraries, and three in children’s services “other” (Learmont & Van Houten, 1986, p. 35). It must be admitted that some large areas of librarianship, such as reference services, were not delineated in the specialty listings, but youth services librarians are nonetheless an impressive population among the recently placed graduates of library schools.

Placements of graduates are only one part of the supply and demand picture. We don’t have an accurate accounting of the total number of professional vacancies nationwide, but, based on records for just one region, one can surmise that there is a very large shortfall. In New England alone there were 771 professional positions posted during 1985. The library school at Simmons—with by far the largest number of placements of any library school—placed only 141 graduates (Learmont & Van Houten, pp. 32-33). Thirteen of the graduates were placed in foreign countries and another 11 went to states outside the region, leaving 123 individuals to fill only about 16 percent of the vacancies. Youth services positions numbered 159 (20.6 percent) of the total (Simmons College, 1986). Much smaller numbers of placements were made by the library schools at Southern Connecticut University and the University of Rhode Island, and presumably a few individuals came into the region from other states. However, the gap is still large, and faculty and administration at Simmons would testify from the numbers of phone calls from desperate library administrators that the crisis is of far greater proportions than indicated in the *Library Journal* survey.

The shortage of library school graduates has several implications for youth services. Some vacant positions—even those offering fine salaries—are going unfilled. Some are being filled by graduates who did not anticipate going into these specialties and had no relevant specialty coursework at all. Some are being filled by so-called preprofessionals, who have widely
divergent amounts and kinds of experience. Some of them will settle in comfortably and perform very competently while others will struggle along at a mediocre level; all can be paid lower salaries than a professional candidate.

The Massachusetts Library Association is busily developing children's services standards which will state competencies and recommend an M.L.S. children's librarian for every library (Massachusetts Library Association, 1988). A large part of the impetus for developing standards in this instance came from library administrators concerned about the current shortage of qualified children's librarians. State certification of children's librarians has been discussed but only tentatively. This is a state and a region that has employed effective recruitment strategies for youth services—e.g., excellent coverage of the shortage in metropolitan and suburban newspapers, a slide-tape presentation to encourage library trustees to support professional levels of children's services, and a brochure on youth services careers for distribution by local libraries to high schools and colleges. Children's librarians have worked with their professional colleagues to pass minimum salary recommendations for the state; while salaries are certainly uneven in the state, there has been a noticeable upward trend since the minimum salary has been advocated (and the level has been raised three times in just a few years). Enrollment in the youth services courses at Simmons is strong and rising but still falls far short of the demand since many of these students already fill professional positions. The complexities of recruitment have received attention in national programs and journals, but the national professional organizations have not moved beyond discussion to a strong, concerted program or projects to address the problem.

Librarians sometimes tend to blame the library schools for failures both in attracting students to the field and in educating them adequately to meet library needs. The general antipathy between practicing professionals and library schools has been variously documented (Conant, 1980) and has certainly been shared in part by youth services librarians. The widespread assumption that library schools don't support youth services was exacerbated in the early 1980s when library schools in several states were closing, declining to fill faculty positions in the youth services specialties, or transferring responsibility for the youth services curriculum to other schools or departments of the parent institution. State professional associations did battle with the library schools in several instances, and the youth divisions of ALA endorsed their efforts and expressed concern to library school deans. Some efforts succeeded in gaining renewed support of youth services in the library schools, but others failed, leaving great gaps in professional education in some parts of the country.

One study was undertaken by this author and Melody Allen, consultant for children's services at the Rhode Island State Library, to document
the alleged deterioration of support for youth services in the library schools. A survey of all the accredited schools was conducted in the spring of 1985 asking about course offerings, faculty, enrollment, continuing education, and other matters. The results were encouraging in many respects but did not provide the desired comprehensive view since just thirty-eight of the sixty-seven schools (56.7 percent) accredited at the time provided usable returns. There was evidence of a good array of regularly offered core courses in children's and young adult services and school librarianship in the majority of schools. Courses tended to be offered by tenured or tenure-track faculty, and the number of these positions was healthy if not large—a fact that seems even more positive when viewed in light of the published placement figures for the individual schools (Allen & Bush, 1987). These would suggest quite small enrollments in youth services specialties in many cases; it was notable that schools often did not provide enrollment information. It was not possible to establish enrollment trends for the three-year period queried. The returns indicated very few students doing advanced level specialization beyond the M.L.S.—a very serious situation in a set of specialties badly in need of deepening and strengthening their theoretical base. The most positive information gleaned in the study was the array of faculty interests, projects, and teaching responsibilities. Several schools known to have strong youth services faculty did not respond to the survey, and, even without these individuals, the pool of talent and leadership reflected in the returns was truly impressive.

The leadership of library school faculty in the youth services fields merits attention since these individuals have been particularly effective in professional associations in recent years. In ALA's Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), three of the past five presidents were library educators, and, during several of these years, faculty have also served as presidents of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and of the Young Adult Services Division (YASD). Many more such individuals have served on the divisions' boards of directors and have chaired committees; some have gone on to major responsibilities in other units of ALA. These individuals continue to provide leadership, to keep our interests very much alive in the library schools, and to contribute significantly to development of professional programs such as this Allerton conference. (The notion of a national conference of children's, school, and young adult librarians to forge a joint agenda for the future was first proposed by Shirley Aaron of Florida State University when she was president of AASL and was further developed by a very active ALSC and YASD member, Leslie Edmonds of the University of Illinois.) Though bonds between a significant number of library educators and other youth services professionals are indeed strong, it probably cannot be said that librarians in these
specialties have any greater trust of library schools than their other librarian colleagues. It may well be, however, that we don't actually suffer the practitioner/educator gap to the degree sometimes noted in parts of the library field. In looking toward a future agenda, there ought to be opportunity for further creative partnerships and collaborations.

In spite of the noted commitment of many library schools to youth services, we still don't have adequate information about the actual quality of professional education in these specialties, and, of course, it is known informally that there is a lack of good course offerings at some schools. As library schools have suffered declining enrollments and some have been closed in recent years, a growing number of writers have suggested that the professional schools ought to become individually more specialized rather than each trying to serve the broad spectrum of librarianship. Ralph Conant, in his well-known study of library education sponsored by ALA and funded by the H. W. Wilson Co., strongly recommended a national plan which would further decrease the number of schools and would "recommend an appropriate distribution of specializations among the surviving library schools" (Conant, 1980, p. 62). Jane Anne Hannigan, long-time library educator and youth services specialist, also raised this possibility in a substantial examination of how excellence might be achieved in library education. "[P]erhaps the time has come for library schools to recognize that they can be qualitatively superior only by limiting the number of specialized programs they offer and thus concentrating limited resources" (Hannigan, 1984, p. 6).

Such suggestions of narrowing the focus of schools and decreasing the specializations of each school are more than a little unsettling to youth services librarians since they suspect that library schools would follow the example of many public libraries and school districts that have cut back support for library services to children and adolescents in bad financial times. This might not be exactly the case since library schools do respond (at least somewhat) to the demands of the marketplace, and there are increased postings and placements in youth services.

The shortage of librarians is widespread, occurring in many parts of the country, and of course many individuals who are potential youth services librarians are women with families who are returning to the work force—most would be unable to go to another state for their professional education. We must continue to provide a basic level of specialization in youth services in every library school. But we must also look more carefully at the proposition of identifying, promoting, and building upon those programs which offer greater depth of specialization. In a recent article on the future of services to young adults, Gerald Hodges (1987), a faculty member at the University of Iowa and long active in the leadership of YASD, proposes that the three ALA youth divisions make it a top priority
to identify several programs and develop funding to support these as models or centers of strong specialization (p. 173).

While the earlier discussion focuses on library schools, these institutions are by no means the sole providers of youth services professional education. Continuing education, in-service training, and self-development are all essential in building the skills and knowledge of youth services librarians. As with the academic programs, there is a lack of comprehensive information and consensus about what needs to be provided and how best to provide it. In some cases there is cooperation between libraries, professional associations, and library schools to plan and provide educational opportunities, but, generally, communication and shared planning are haphazard. This is not to suggest that all education has to be jointly sponsored or conform to some master plan, but it seems obvious that educational opportunity for the individual youth services librarian could be strengthened considerably through the clarifying of roles and increased sharing of assessment and planning. The reporting of good programs is not always as full or widespread as we might like, but, as with the academic offerings, there are very good models upon which to build. A recent example is an Iowa program reported in considerable detail in the *Rural Library Service Newsletter* (Cresap, 1986, p. 14). Planned by Marilyn Nickelsberg of the State Library of Iowa for children's librarians and public library directors responsible for children’s services in rural communities, this program was intended to provide management training for staff who have little or no professional education. The intensive two-day program gave some seventy-five librarians an opportunity to acquire new insights and techniques for planning, developing, and assessing children’s services. In addition to informative content and a stimulating format, this program was exemplary in other ways. The planner was extremely effective in collaborating—she selected a children’s consultant from another state library and a faculty member from a distant library school as her presenters and had them share the program planning from the outset. She also publicized and documented the program carefully, fully intending that other states be encouraged to emulate this effort. Her well-attended, substantial program served both her audience and other education providers very well indeed.

There is a great mass of workshops, programs, and training sessions which provide educational opportunities to youth services librarians each year at the local, state, national, and even international level. Some of these respond to local needs and others to very specialized interests, while others have widespread appeal and may or may not be well publicized. In this so-called information age, it would be wonderful indeed if we had some central mechanism for collecting and disseminating information about educational program offerings; theoretically, at least, this would provide
greater opportunity for individuals to avail themselves of programs and would also enable us to discern the patterns of what is being provided and what might be missing.

There are many issues related to nonacademic educational opportunities which need to be addressed. The previously mentioned survey of library schools included a component on continuing education offerings which indicated programs in a broad range of subject areas. However, the most frequently offered programs and those with the highest attendance were predominantly those concerned with children's books and storytelling. Programs related to computers were also offered somewhat frequently, and there were fewer offerings related to management of youth services (Allen & Bush, 1987). Lacking a strong philosophical and theoretical basis in regard to education and training, program providers generally respond to the marketplace, offering what they believe the clientele wants and/or needs. Needs assessment as part of program planning, motivating youth services staff toward more diverse professional development, and better funding for educational opportunities are all subjects which ought to be on our agenda.

Youth services have been largely driven by idealism and energy. In recent years, with shifting economic, social, and political winds and changes in institutional structures and practices, we've begun to find legitimacy and status in the larger realm of librarianship being tested. The questions of defining, developing, and demonstrating individual competencies are critical. The tasks are challenging, and the climate is excellent for accomplishing them—the current shortage of youth services librarians has created a wide awareness of our value, and our leadership is more widely respected at all levels than we have realized. We must seize the moment and develop an agenda to:

1. Enlarge and strengthen recruitment efforts.
2. Clarify our definition of essential competencies and establish desired levels of competence.
3. Deal with the complex issues of professional credentials and certification.
4. Strengthen youth librarians' theoretical base and support advanced specialization.
5. Develop better communication, coordination, and planning between various categories of education providers.
6. Develop and support model programs in library schools, libraries, and professional associations.
NOTES


Massachusetts Library Association. (1986). *Children's services standards.* Draft, October. [Boston?]: MLA.


ADDITIONAL NOTES


Recruitment and Education


