Library Service to Children

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PUBLIC LIBRARY work with children, as an organized specialization, is little more than half a century old. This length of time is not far in excess of the possible professional lifetime of a single librarian. The significance of this point lies in the fact that children's library work, in the last two decades, has been emerging from the impetus and vigor of the pioneer period. Until the thirties this phase of library work had been under the control of the group of children's librarians who, building on the ideas and inspiration of the real pioneers, established children's work on a departmental basis, developed methods, and formulated objectives. Historical perspective, always important, is essential in this postpioneer era if the present is to be truly evaluated and the future predicted with any validity.

In 1876, the year that the American Library Association was formed, the United States Bureau of Education published a survey, *Public Libraries in the United States of America.* Included was a paper by W. I. Fletcher, "Public Libraries and the Young." This may well be taken as marking the turning point in the conception of the public library as something more than a storehouse of culture, with the ultimate inevitable change of attitude toward the right of children to have access to a public library. Pleading for the abandonment of age restrictions, which in general forbade library privileges to children under twelve, the future president of the A.L.A., and joint editor of *Poole's Index,* wrote:

Who will presume to set the age at which a child may first be stirred with the beginnings of a healthy intellectual appetite on getting a taste of the strong meat of good literature? This point is one of the first importance. No after efforts can accomplish what is done with ease early in life in the way of forming habits either mental or moral, and if there is any truth in the idea that the public library is not merely a storehouse for the supply of the wants of the reading public, but also and especially an educational institution which shall create wants

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where they do not exist, then the library ought to bring its influences to bear on the young as early as possible.[1]

In spite of this argument the recognition of the necessity of service to the children of a community was slow in coming. In 1893 Caroline Hewins reported before the World's Library Congress that out of 152 libraries, 108 restricted borrowing privileges to children of ten or over. However, the seed sown by Fletcher and nourished by the indefatigable persistence of Miss Hewins, Lutie Stearns, and others began to bear fruit in the 1890's. Between 1890 and 1900, from the east coast to the west, libraries opened children's rooms, and accorded children full privileges. At the turn of the century it was generally accepted that library work with children is a vital and distinctive aspect of the American public library movement.

There followed a period of approximately ten years which saw a singularly extensive and constructive development. Building upon the foundation which the pioneers had laid, their successors took over, and established children's work on a departmental basis, extended it into branches, established policies and procedures, determined criteria for the evaluation of children's literature, and developed methods of work. It is perhaps not an accident that this same period constitutes the golden age in the writing of children's literature, in England and in America. There may have been something in the atmosphere of the late 1890's and early 1900's which accounts for the fact that these years produced unsurpassed classics among children's books and simultaneously an extraordinarily vigorous and farsighted organization of work designed to introduce and make accessible these books to children. A study of published papers, talks, and reports reveals the astonishing breadth and permanent values of the conception of library work with children as it was defined and practiced by its organizers. They stated its objectives and these included not only the introduction of good books to the children of any community, but also the reinforcement and enrichment of classwork in the schools and cooperation with agencies for civic and social improvement. In order to attain these objectives, they established the necessity for specialized book collections, specialized training for children's librarians, and specialized methods of work. They built book collections characterized by quality and close relationship to children's reading interests and needs, and they compiled bibliographies as aids to selection. They organized and taught training classes for children's librarians. They perceived clearly that the most far-reaching service a library can give

is service to the individual. At the same time, they recognized that one way to reach the individual is through the group. Consequently they developed group methods of reading guidance, book talks, club work, and storytelling. The fame of the last method seems to have prevented full recognition of the fact that other devices used today to promote and develop reading interests and appreciation were initiated in the early years of the present century. It is also worth noting that these methods were used with integrity in the sense that their primary objective, that of introducing pleasurably wider and increasingly productive reading interests, was never forgotten. The pre-eminence of storytelling is undoubtedly due to the fact that it was, and is, the only method which recreates a bit of literature, and which, by its interpretative power, makes clear the significance of that literature.

The early concept of the variety of services due to the children of a community was in agreement with the expanding vision of the public library as an educational institution. The early children's librarians were concerned with the value of recreational and inspirational reading for children. But this concern was not exclusive. They were fully aware of the necessity of establishing the children's library as an agency cooperative with and supplementary to the schools. Curriculum enrichment, as we call it today, is by no manner of means a new idea, although present teaching methods and the development of school libraries have given it wider scope and renewed importance. The early records are full of references to the importance of collaboration with the schools and to the need for recognition of the value of material supplementary to the curriculums of the schools. This, in turn, led to the stressing of reference service to children and of adequate facilities for such service. The insistent demands of the children themselves played no small part here. They invaded adult reference rooms, as earlier they had invaded the reading rooms supposedly open to adults only, in such numbers that some provision had to be made. The following statement from a report of Miss Hewins is one of many indicating the felt need for reference service:

The use of the reference-room by children steadily increased, until the need of a room for them became evident, both on week-days and Sundays. The *Bulletin* for March 1, 1900, says: "On Sunday, Feb. 25, there were eighty-one children in the small room. . . . They were all quiet and orderly, and some of them read seriously and absorbedly for several hours on 'The twentieth century,' 'The boundaries of the United States,' and 'The comparative greatness of Napoleon and Alexander.'. . ." [2]

Children's librarians of the day met the problem with their characteristic combination of vision and shrewdness. The above report goes on to say that the last straw that produced adequate room for the use of children was a newspaper article illustrated by a photograph of the reference room with one man, one woman, and fifty-one children.

Plentiful evidence exists too of the realization that the children's room, as an integral part of the public library, has a civic and social responsibility. Completely contemporary in tone are the frequent statements naming the schools and the library as essential to a democracy, pointing out the equality of opportunity offered by the same two institutions, and urging the practical and prompt opening of library resources to all groups within a community. The results of this deep-felt conviction were threefold. In the first place, there was the attempt to meet the felt needs of every group of children within a community by building a book collection designed to meet those needs constructively; by introducing books through story hours, clubs, book talks, and exhibits; by educating children in civic and social responsibility through their membership in the civic institution of the free public library. In the second place, there was the emphasis upon the desirability of a first-hand knowledge of the aims and methods of work of all the social and civic forces at work within a given community. In the third place, there was equal emphasis upon the promotion of friendly and cooperative relations with these other institutions; this with two aims in view, the recognition of the library as an essential and interested part of a community, and of the resources of the library as beneficial to the work of other agencies concerned with the welfare of children.

With all these problems occupying their minds, the originators of library work with children still had time to set up the machinery which would provide what one of the pioneers, Mary Wright Plummer, called "thoughtful administration." This included everything from the definition of qualities desirable in a children's librarian and the matter of open shelves to regulations concerning the number of books a child might reasonably borrow and the problems of fines and of clean hands. They even had the time and the foresight to point to the need for special attention to young people in their teens, an aspect of public library work which has developed all too slowly, and which is discussed in another article in this issue of *Library Trends.*

Unless its significance is fully realized, this historical survey may seem overlong. The significance is this—that the developmental phase

of library work with children was all-inclusive. The vision demonstrated was so clear and far-reaching, methods of work so comprehensive and constructive, the potentialities so clearly defined, that by the beginning of the second decade of this century, library service to children deserved the tributes of more recent years—that it is "an innovation that does honor to the sensibility of a people," [3] that it is almost "the classic success of the public library," [4] that it is "one of the truly important specialized branches of professional librarianship, one which has attained a recognition accorded few others in the public library field." [5] It has been said before that sufficient tribute has never been paid to the women who brought this library service to so high a point. It would be pleasant to be able to predict that a future "trend" will be a complete written history of the early years of library work with children. The historical aspect, though important, would be the least of the values of such a work. The greater value would lie in the possibility of bringing to renewed life the conviction, the fineness and integrity of the concept of service which gave such vigor, vitality, and vision to the pioneer period.

It is difficult to draw any distinct line between the period immediately succeeding the pioneer stage and the present. The soundness and completeness of the exploratory stage precluded the breaking of new trails and necessitated only such adaptation and extension of existent methods and services as seemed desirable in view of trends within and without the library. Conditions which presently affect children's work had their beginnings in the 1920's and 1930's. The rise of children's libraries and the insistence of children's librarians upon the right of children to true artistry in books inevitably had effect upon the writing and illustrating of children's books. This effect was intensified by the initiation, in 1918, of informed published criticism of literature for children. Further impetus to children's book production was provided by the establishment of children's departments in publishing houses, a development which began in the 1920's and has grown until, in 1950, fifty publishing houses had such departments. As Ernestine Rose has pointed out in her book *The Public Library in American Life*, the cooperation between writers and illustrators, publishers, and librarians has been most effective. This cooperation has brought not only increased production and improved quality in books, but an intense interest in, and growing awareness of, the values of children's reading on the part of the general adult public. Coincidental with this is a deepening of the characteristic American concern for children, a concern sharpened by domestic social and economic

changes, and by the uncertainty and apprehension aroused by international affairs. As a consequence, the early conception that the children's library has an obligation to all the social, civic, and educational forces within a community has assumed an intensified urgency. Parents, teachers, psychologists, social workers, come to the children's room to use its resources and to seek suggestion and advice in the use of these resources. The children's librarian, if she is to meet effectively this demand, must be able to re-evaluate, at a moment's notice, the books in her collection in line with the peculiar need of the moment. It is also more than ever essential that she be intelligently informed as to the community activities concerned with children, and that she be known in the community as a reliable authority on any phase of the social, educational, or recreational values pertaining to a child's reading life.

This same postpioneer era has seen changes in educational methods which have had inevitable and constructive effects upon book production and book use. Contemporary teaching methods together with rapid changes and continual broadening of information in all fields of knowledge demand and obtain more and better books in all the subject matter fields. Present curriculums demand that children use a wide variety of materials and that a children's librarian be aware of relationships in subject matter and interest among books widely separated in point of physical location by reason of a classification system. This means that reference service to children, early recognized as desirable, has become a major part of the work of a children's room. More importantly, its present nature imposes upon the children's librarian heavy demands in the way of increased knowledge of her resources, of the requirements of local school curriculums, and of development of the specialized technique necessary in reference service to children. And this is true in spite of the altogether desirable development of the elementary school library. There can be no argument, in view of all that is implied in the term "curriculum enrichment," that a school cannot function properly unless there is a fully equipped and adequately staffed library as an integral part of the whole program. In the opinion of many, there can be no distinct dividing line between the functions of the public children's room and the elementary school library. Due to many factors, it is impossible and unrealistic to attempt to say that at this point reading for information stops and reading for pleasure begins. Even if such a distinction could be drawn, it would be destructive to the whole idea of library service to children, whether in school or public library. The truth is, that for the

present and the foreseeable future, neither the public nor the school library can fulfill adequately all their obligations to the children in their community. They should exist side by side, with sympathetic and intelligent cooperation, motivated by the single-minded intention of affording children a balanced reading experience.

At the same time that advisory service to adults and reference service to children have grown to such proportions as to place upon children's librarians heavy requirements, the problems concerned with book selection, for the collection and for the child, and with reading guidance methods, have magnified. The tremendous increase in book production, together with staff shortages, renders difficult the truly critical evaluation of books so necessary to achievement of the fundamental objectives of a children's room. The many demands, within and without a library, upon the children's librarian, and the removal, in many libraries, of supervisory positions, means that reading guidance methods, unsupervised, uncontrolled, and too frequently inadequately planned, are losing their integrity of purpose. Consequently, a great deal of energy is dissipated to no good end since, under various pressures, the temptation is to introduce, through group methods, books of easy appeal which will insure, with a minimum of effort, the success, or what is presumed to be the success, of the activity. Whereas the true purpose and the only valid measure of accomplishment is the introduction of books which need introduction but which are worth the effort, time, and skill genuine reading guidance demands. It is a matter for concern also that there is an apparent lack of realization that the group reading guidance method is only the beginning; that the ultimate desirability is to break through the group to the individual child, since it is in effective service to the individual that the library achieves its unique and primary purpose.

The concentration of attention upon the total welfare of children has brought to the attention of the library the immense possibilities inherent in services to special groups, whether these be age groups or groups characterized by other common characteristics, such as the physically or mentally handicapped, the delinquent, the hospitalized or institutionalized child. In this type of service the greatest progress has been made in work with preschool children. Most large libraries and many smaller ones conduct story-hour programs for this age. Since necessarily the mother must bring the child to the library, a simultaneous program for parents is conducted frequently, with admirable results for the individual and for the library. Work with other types of specialized groups is more spasmodic and less well organized.

This is presumably due to two factors: lack of time due to lack of staff, and a resultant inability to develop the organization, the special techniques, and the special book collections requisite to work with the sick, handicapped, or delinquent child.

The complications of the pioneer age lay for the most part within the work itself. The complications of the present age are outside the environment of the library as well as within it. There is, for example, the easy accessibility of media of recreation such as the moving picture, radio, and television, and the plentitude of organized social activities available to children. There is observable a tendency to think of these as offering competition to the library. There does not seem to be sufficient substantiated data to prove that the movie, the radio, and television have a lasting and universal detrimental effect upon children's interest in reading. If such data should be forthcoming, it would be unfruitful to adopt competitive methods, with all the implications of lowering of standards, of frenzied attempts to equal the easy and shabby appeal of sensational entertainment. The more positive approach would be through the realization of the occasional proven stimulation to reading afforded by these media, and an alert and flexible readiness to seize every opportunity to utilize them to serve the library's and, through the library, the community's best interests.

There are few libraries today which do not include service to children, the larger ones on a departmental basis, the smaller by means of a special room. The book collections are built to meet circulation and reference needs of children and to provide materials for adults personally or professionally interested in children. Programs within the children's room include circulation and reference work, story hours, book talks, club work, and individual reading guidance. Outside the library, the children's librarian cooperates actively with groups of a surprising number and diversity. Among these, she should, by constant study and reading, maintain her position as the authority in the field of children's literature and reading.

In the face of the amount and variety of work carried on within and without the children's room, and of neglected opportunities for service, it is appalling to realize that many children's rooms in small libraries and in the branches of large libraries are staffed by one trained children's librarian. It is even more appalling to discover that some children's rooms are being operated by a nonprofessional staff member. The gap between supply and demand has widened to the point of sheer disaster. Long before the second World War, library schools

were not training enough children's librarians to meet the demand. Ever since, demand has increased steadily, and supply has decreased steadily. This is a fact of which a large section of the general profession seems to be ignorant, if one is to judge from the placement requests which come to the library schools. In many instances one library asks for five or six children's librarians, with no apparent suspicion that, at the best, the total number of such graduates available for placement will rarely be more than ten, and at the more frequent worst, five or less. One library school specializing in library work with children, has graduated sixty-six children's librarians in the last ten years, of whom 20 per cent are available for placement. This brings to light another factor in the shortage, a factor of significance in recruiting and in connection with the future of this aspect of public library work. Children's librarians are not staying in the field for which they trained. This can no longer be blamed on salary; to do so is and has always been an evasion of the true problem. Beginning salaries for children's librarians are commensurate with those offered in other fields. If the experienced children's librarian is limited in salary, it is not primarily a question of financial advancement, but more basically a question of personal and professional advancement, and of the ability to use and develop particular capabilities. In the public library as a whole this is an age of appreciation of the subject specialist and of the person with special talents which may be used to the advantage of the library and of the individual. A children's librarian must be a specialist in children's literature, an administrator, a storyteller, a public speaker, a group leader, a reference librarian, a circulating librarian, a readers' adviser to adults and children, and a person skilled in adapting her service to a varied clientele ranging from the preschool child to the adult. The immediate reaction to this statement will be that it is, in large part, true of any librarian except the subject specialist. The fact remains, however, that in spite of a universal shortage most rooms and divisions serving adults are staffed by more than one professional librarian, whereas the great majority of children's rooms are staffed by one professional or by none. The result is a quantity of work achieved without quality, always a dissatisfaction to the intelligent person. Moreover, the accumulative effect of loss of quality is vicious in its effect upon recruiting and upon an administrator's estimate of the vitality and essentiality of work with children. Its effect upon a children's librarian is stagnation, relieved only by the possibility of change from one position to another of the same type in a different environment. It has been mentioned

that the removal of supervisory positions has caused deterioration through lack of control of specialized techniques and services. The same deficiency has caused a loss of morale among present children's librarians and has rendered futile attempts to recruit new children's librarians. There is no inducement to develop leadership, or specialization in subject or skills, if there is evident no possibility of utilizing such development. An evil by-product of the same situation is that when an administrative or supervisory position does become available, it is too frequently filled by an individual who may be potentially adequate, but is actually inadequate because of lack of experience and training for the position. Miss Rose's argument regarding the need for better qualified personnel is nowhere more applicable than to the children's field:

> One of the most essential directions for public libraries to follow is toward a better qualified personnel. . . . the problem must be attacked with fresh imagination, resource, and determination, by library school educators and library administrators alike before a clear course can be charted toward this desired end. For library personnel and library education must be thought of together, and both must be considered in relation to the library's program of public service. So long as library educators conduct their training in an ivory tower, with only an incidental thought of the field's needs and possibilities, so long as public library administrators offer limited possibilities in their pattern of service for trained workers of varied capacities, just so long will the service itself suffer, and so long will qualified librarians leave this field for more inviting prospects.[6]

The present and the presumable future offer to children's work endless opportunities, since this period is, and for years will be, one of deepened concern for the social, educational, and moral welfare of children, and since there are manifest evidences of a genuine and widespread interest on the part of adults generally in the values of children's books and reading. Children's librarians can win the support, respect, and gratitude of their communities by extension of services to neglected areas, by constructive attack upon new or changing problems, by initiation of sound innovations to meet changing trends in social, educational, and recreational aspects of contemporary life. Whether they can do this depends upon the winning and the training of new recruits. The possibility of this depends upon the willingness of the public library to make such changes as will induce intelligent and able people to enter the field. One thing only is certain. Too much concern has been expended over the question of

whether library work with children will survive in public libraries. The greater concern should be with the manner of its survival.

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