Halos and Pitchforks: Questions about Librarians Serving Youth

All occupations are worthy of study, a fact documented by many since Robert Park's classic research on the hobo, the taxi-dance-hall girl, and the professional thief. Librarianship, too, has been subjected to in-depth analysis on everything from the personality of the librarian to questions about the attributes of the profession. The subspecialty of work with young people has recently been subjected to much scrutiny, primarily because there is such a need for specialists in schools and public libraries at the entry level.

Some claim that this shortage is due to a failure of professional education. Others point to low pay and lower status accorded to those who work with children. Both factors are undoubtedly significant, but some others, such as job satisfaction, should be considered. Whether sorting clay tablets or entering items onto OCLC, it has always been the librarian's belief that the job being done was important. Preserving the culture, offering the great works of literature to the masses, or organizing the contributions of Fred Rogers have been tasks in which one could take some pride. But now there would appear to be some confusion about those tasks and just how meaningful they are, especially as they relate to young people.

Another consideration may be related to the changing role of women in society at large. Because organizational patterns in schools and public libraries are shifting, fewer managerial positions are provided within the subspecialty. This is occurring at a time when women are selecting more diversified occupational choices within and outside of librarianship.

These and other questions need study as we consider directions that information service to young people might take. It is the purpose of this discussion to explore some of the issues which affect the provision of such service. Are there factors within the profession which are drawing entry
level individuals to other service areas? Is it a crisis at the entry level only or are other aspects of the service also in trouble? What are the social issues beyond those of professional concern affecting this subspecialty?

Other Professional Subspecialties

Career patterns of women in a variety of occupational groups provide interesting but inconclusive evidence about their provision of service to young people. It is predicted that by 1990 at least "75 percent of children will have both parents working outside the home" (Brazelton, 1985, p. xviii). Now the working woman has a choice of occupations far broader than the traditional "feminized professions." Other occupational opportunities may have drawn away potential candidates from a predominately female subspecialty like service to children.

In law, for instance, family law practice draws many women. Of the Family Law Section of the American Bar Association, 26 percent are female, a fact consistent with the "widely held opinion that female lawyers tend to concentrate in those fields of law dealing with the problems of individuals" (Smith, 1983, p. 241). Furthermore, women are more likely to hold positions outside the private practice of law and, therefore, are less likely to be associated with law firms of any size.

In medicine, pediatrics has long been the favored specialty of women medical graduates. In a recent study of specialty preferences at five medical schools, males had higher preferences for high risk procedures and patients at risk while women students scored higher in a preference for handling preventive care and patient responsibility and participation. Of the six major medical subspecialties, the top three choices for women were: (1) ob/gyn, (2) pediatrics, and (3) internal medicine. For men the choices were: (1) internal medicine, (2) family practice, and (3) surgery (Cuca, 1979, p. 429). Implications of these and several other studies suggest that the recent influx of women has not substantially altered career patterns of physicians.

Women in medicine with home and family responsibilities are more likely to choose subspecialties which relate to their identification as nurturer as well as healer. These subspecialties often have distinctions in such areas as hours of service and salary that are markedly different. Pediatricians, for instance, in 1984 earned less than half of what anesthesiologists did. In the years between 1974 and 1984, salaries of psychiatrists doubled while pediatricians showed only about a 5 percent increase in income. The only subspecialty with more patient contact hours per week is family/general practice (Reynolds & Duann, 1985, pp. 60, 70, 123). These differences, however, are true for both male and female pediatricians and may reflect more about the status of the client than the gender of the pediatrician.
In the ministry, the role of women is even more controversial. In an article in the *Journal of Public and International Affairs*, the Rev. Beryl Choi (1983) states unequivocally:

Although female members far outnumber males in the Christian Church, though for thousands of years women have been the nurturing foundation of their people—the very essence of community—they have been, in that community of religious faith, a disenfranchised group. The barriers to power and prestige for women in the Church, though not absolute, are certainly ubiquitous and ancient. (p. 33)

Women in many of the Christian churches have been relegated to the role of educator with little voice in policy and certainly no voice in theology. The role of religious educator is a significant one, but in terms of growth and change, a lack of involvement in policy and theology may restrict development. In the first decade of the twentieth century, 8 million immigrants landed at Ellis Island, many of them Roman Catholics. The education provided for many of these new arrivals was developed by a cadre of religious who were “the sacrificial and hidden asset of the whole system” (Hesburg, 1986, p. 161). The only words more frequently heard than “Look it up in the card catalog” were “but Sister said.” Yet today, vocations in the religious orders are down and many regard church schools as merely a relatively inexpensive private school rather than a religious educational experience.

What do these questions about the role of women in the traditional professions have to do with information services for young people? Perhaps the most significant factor is that librarianship is not alone in wondering where to find new recruits for new services. Many other occupational groups have difficulty identifying entry level professionals for public service jobs dealing with youth. With the choice of careers more diversified for women, there are questions about the value placed on those occupations dealing with children and young people. Even larger questions relate to the value placed on the children themselves, who serves them, and who sets the policies that regulate the services.

The second major factor in the development of a cadre of trained professionals working with young people deals with the nature and philosophy of those agencies providing the service. It is here that school and public library people should be drawing together. Both institutions operate in the public, not-for-profit sector vying with other agencies battling for limited money to provide essential services. Instead, cooperative efforts often go astray. Networks exclude one or the other; territorial squabbles occupy time that would be better spent on work with young people. The current fuss about what age group is served by which division in the American Library Association is an example of such behavior.

The shifts in organizational structure in both schools and public
libraries also affect youth services specialists. The generalist approach provided some children's and young adult librarians with opportunities to advance as "program specialists" or "information managers." The approach, however, often failed to provide the entry-level positions which led to the cadre of specialists able and willing to transfer their skills from dealing with children to dealing with board members or city managers. In schools, many middle managers have also been eliminated. This not only affects programs, creating a situation where there is no direction or planning, but it also means that, to advance, there is no place to go but out of the service.

**Librarians Serving Youth**

Several studies recently have been conducted examining aspects of education and the new professional. Both Fasick (1986, p. 613) and Immroth (1987, p. 210) have considered the entry level professional and found that, in general, most people in library school have some kind of library work experience. While this makes classroom participation lively ("We do it this way in my library"), it may also mean that we are not recruiting widely enough. A typical career pattern follows an individual from page to clerk to library school. Incoming M.L.S. students at the University of Pittsburgh report an average of three years of library work experience before graduate school.

There is another problem in "growing" replacements. The library profession has approximately 12 percent minority professionals in public libraries (Guy, 1986, p. 5). As population shifts occur and minorities become in fact majorities, there are fewer and fewer professionals to serve as role models. Although a study of population growth indicates a strong increase in the number of black and Hispanic children, there is no indication of a similar growth in numbers of black and Hispanic librarians.

On the other hand, there is strong evidence that many people who work with children do not have any professional education. In a survey of children's librarians just released by the Library Research Center at the University of Illinois, 88 percent of the sample had some college education, but only 50 percent had any library education. Less than half of the 50 percent had completed the M.L.S. (Roy, 1986, p. 47). These figures are substantiated by preliminary results of a study of Pennsylvania librarians serving children which indicates that outside of metropolitan systems, it is likely that a volunteer or clerk will be providing service to children.

More than half of the public libraries in the United States serve populations under 10,000. These small rural libraries usually have some kind of service for children and young people but with little quality control. Collections are poorly maintained and "craft programs" abound.
The profession must wrestle with the question of whether to write off such efforts and worry only about "professional service" or take the responsibility for including those who will never get a graduate degree. Continuing education programs that offer only the practice and not one whit of philosophy of service perpetuate the system.

Libraries without youth specialists who have the first professional degree are not confined to rural areas, however. In tight times, administrators often felt they were unable to afford expensive professionals to work with children and young people. College graduates (or even those with less education) were hired to fill vacancies and cut down on personnel costs. Some major city systems have begun to build back their professional staff, but the process is a long one. Advertisements for children's librarians are widely circulated, but the role models aren't there. Neither are the new children's librarians.

Many have voiced concern over the failure of library schools to provide faculty and courses in services to children. It is true that some schools have dropped such specializations. But higher education, especially professional education, is market driven. When the demand for courses is present, the courses are offered. Information is big business and provides a seemingly endless job market for today's pragmatic student. The demand for courses and even a shift in the curriculum from one dominated by public libraries and public schools to one reflecting largely private sector employment is the result of many factors, not the least of which is student demand.

It is unrealistic to assume that higher education administrators are any more altruistic or high minded than their counterparts in the corporate world. Providing the professionals to work with children and young people in schools and public libraries is costly and time consuming, carries little status, and provides few millionaire alumni. Furthermore, it is hard to find qualified faculty to teach, research, and serve the community. There are relatively few children's specialists in doctorate programs around the country. The time is past when one's reputation alone will provide a tenured slot in a school of library and information science. Those individuals who are already a part of faculties need all our help and support. They need to be invited to give formal papers at conferences. They need the cooperation of libraries to act as field sites for their research. They need recognition by their peers in the field because it is lonely in that ivory tower where the only thing that colleagues agree on is a concern over parking.

Conclusion

Being a youth services specialist, however, still has its rewards. The children are responsive, even starved for stories. We have more media and
materials available. Technology can enhance the richness of color in picture books and provide your favorite encyclopedia on a video disc. The job is challenging and exciting—and not very well paid.

Job satisfaction is, of course, tied to more than salary. There is a need for growth in responsibility and scope. For some youth service librarians there is a perceived lack of opportunity, however. Librarians report that they not only view the job as "dead-end" but feel unqualified for further responsibility. This perception is contradicted by reports which indicate that managerial skills are transferable and that controlling preschoolers at a story hour is related to working with a board of trustees, at least to some degree. Furthermore, many middle and upper level administrators in public library systems began as youth services specialists. State librarians, library directors, even university professors and deans began their careers by lighting candles at story hours and designing summer reading certificates and talking to local PTAs.

These problems at the entry level present a challenge to those engaged in this business of putting children and ideas and learning and reading together. There are societal concerns that deal with the status of our group as a female intensive occupation. Internally, the profession is in the midst of a profound realignment. Many are struggling to protect the right of citizens to information access in a society that sees information as a commodity. Children and their needs are often marginalized or so rigidly proscribed that professional growth is stifled. Yet we are intrigued by the potential of our work. Our job satisfaction comes from knowing that the job we do does make a difference. The communication of that satisfaction should be wider than the staff room discussion of what went on at story hour. We need to mount an active, vigorous recruitment effort, directed especially at minorities.

We need to look carefully at the continuing education activities provided by professional associations as well as colleges and universities. Meeting the creators of words and pictures is entertaining, sometimes enlightening, but should not be the extent of our efforts. We must provide opportunities to debate the direction of the service we provide, to consider the philosophy behind what we do.

Finally, it is significant to note that in the Illinois study, 97 percent of the respondents declared that if they had to start over, they would choose the same job again (Roy, 1986, p. 63). Professional problems abound, but interest and commitment is evident. Librarians who work with young people should be awarded halos not pitchforks.
NOTES


