Research and Evaluation Needs in Library Adult Education

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A comparison of the brief mention of research in library adult education contained in C. O. Houle’s chapter on “Other Developments,” in a review of adult education research published in 1953, with the section published in the same journal in 1959 gives a measure, admittedly minimal, of recent activity in this area. Although the work reported represents much achievement, it is only a beginning. It is highly probable that a careful roundup of all available research in library adult education would reveal the same gaps and needs for further study.

A swift end to this article could be reached by making the obvious statement that there is at present no aspect of library adult education to which a wide variety of research approaches would not be profitable. In order to bring some focus to this discussion, the author sent to a small group of librarians and other adult educators two lists of suggested areas of need and areas of concern to the researcher in library adult education. The suggestions and comments which follow are based in part on their replies and on their ranking of these areas in order of urgency and importance, and on the work of such groups as the American Library Association Adult Services Division’s committees on Special Projects and Program Policy. In addition, the author has sought to relate library research to that taking place in the whole field of adult education. This was made possible through the use of the recently published study, An Overview of Adult Education Research, by E. deS. Brunner, D. E. Wilder, Corinne Kirchner, and J. S. Newberry, Jr.

The “Overview” is an inventory of research in nonvocational adult education, which was prepared by the Bureau of Applied Social Research.
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search, Columbia University, for the Fund for Adult Education, for the purposes of discovering whether such research has produced any generalizations on which policy could be based, and of indicating areas and problems needing further research. Its first chapters, those devoted to the educatee, which cover adult learning, motivation to learn, attitudes and the relationship between adult interests and education, will serve the librarian chiefly as a summary of available research on a problem common to all adult educators,—how and why an individual learns. Results of the further research which is suggested will similarly be useful to the librarian, no matter what the institutional setting in which it takes place.

The chapter on participation is also concerned with the educatee. However, it has much to say about what is now known as to who is likely to take part in an educational program, and about the need for reaching groups such as those with low educational and socio-economic status, who are not proportionately represented among participants. The information in this chapter will be immediately useful to librarians and will be suggestive of ways in which research in libraries can supplement and contribute to the work of other agencies and institutions in the field of adult education. Similarly, the chapters which follow, on organization and administration in adult education, programs and program planning, methods and techniques, the use of discussion, leaders and leadership, group research, the community and its institutions in adult education, and problems of evaluation research, can be studied in their relation to the library setting. Specific reference to some of the needed research in these areas that the “Overview” suggested will be made in the course of this article. No attempt will be made here, however, to analyze all of the ways in which research in library adult education can further the over-all knowledge of the field in general, although a study of the “Overview” with this purpose could be most fruitful.

The areas of needed research referred to earlier included:

1. Further definition of the library’s purposes, scope, and role.
2. Guidance to the patron (both as an individual and in a group), including analysis of the process, and development of organizational patterns, techniques, and materials.
3. Effects of reading.
4. Evaluation of services.
5. Training of librarians—in-service and academic.
6. Development of library programs in the humanities, physical sciences, and social science.
7. Educational use of mass media.
8. Development of cooperation among librarians, other agencies, and lay citizens for the extension and improvement of services to adults as individuals and in groups.

A paper on the areas of concern in building library adult education programs is longer, and overlaps the above to some extent, and so will not be quoted in full. The topics covered are the scope of library adult education, the community study, the library study, planning the library's program in adult education, use of community resources, relations with other agencies, program planning for groups and organizations, use of library materials, leadership training, the library-sponsored group, serving special groups in the community, using radio, television, and the newspapers, and educational exhibits and displays.

From the correspondence and committee reports, which areas emerge as those in which reporting and evaluation of what has already been accomplished are particularly needed, or in which additional work is required? Although correspondents agreed that all of the topics and areas listed are essential in the consideration of library adult education, it was evident that the first four areas of need—further definition of the library's purposes, scope, and role, guidance to the patron, effects of reading, and evaluation of services—were of the greatest concern. As more than one correspondent pointed out, these four points are closely related, and all have to do with establishing a basic philosophy of library service.

Of the four, the area of need which received greatest stress was guidance to the patron. Ever since the publication of the A.L.A. Adult Education Survey there has been clamor for a study of library service to the individual reader which would be similarly designed, at least in scope and inclusiveness. Although such a study presents problems of definition and of administration which are staggering, one has the feeling that it would serve the valuable purpose of crystallizing much thinking which is at present tentative and amorphous.

Next to this, and scarcely separable, is the need for further study of the effects of reading. As several correspondents remarked, this too presents tremendous problems for the researcher. Since it draws on the knowledge and techniques of the psychologist and reading special-
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ist, and to an extent, of the sociologist, it should not be done independently, but as an interdisciplinary undertaking. It was suggested that a part of the study of the effects of reading might be devoted to the question of what difference specific reading programs make in the reading behavior, thinking, or activities of the individuals or groups directly affected, and that a study similar to the Flexner-Hopkins Readers' Advisers at Work might be considered.

This leads directly to the other two areas of need—the further definition of the library's purposes, scope, and role, and the evaluation of services. There was some division of opinion on the part of correspondents as to which of these should come first, which is, after all, natural when one considers that the two processes are interdependent, one growing constantly out of the other. It is probable, however, that library adult education is reaching a stage of development where a review of objectives as a prelude to evaluation of services is desirable. Some basis for this has been provided in Public Library Service, but criteria for many aspects of service to adults need to be developed in detail, before such an evaluation of services can take place. Some necessary definition and further contribution to such criteria should also come from studies of the processes of guidance to the patron.

It is not surprising that the topic in the list of areas of concern on planning the library's program of adult education was singled out for a high priority. This grows logically out of a concern for the library's concept of its educational purposes. Then, too, the planning and carrying out of the library's adult educational activities is the central idea around which all the others regarding purpose, method, and achievement cluster. As such, research and reporting of planning methods and the operation of programs will always be of major importance.

As one correspondent said, research in the last four areas of need cannot be carried out until a philosophy of library adult education has been established. The importance of a better definition of processes and of the library's role, before evaluation of training takes place, was especially mentioned. Others referred to the body of experience in in-service training through the workshops and institutes which have taken place in the past few years, and hoped for a compilation and evaluation of the results of this experience.

It seems logical that a study of service to the adult patron would raise many questions regarding the use of library materials, and would
therefore include a study of the educational use of mass media. While not all the correspondents commented on this area, some were emphatic on the need for analyzing and evaluating library use of films, in particular. The "Overview" comments on the possible effect that the wearing off of the novelty of films used as an educational tool may have on participation, and recommends new studies to determine the effects of time on the mass media. Libraries might well look at their programming with this in mind. What are the trends in film attendance, in film use? Is it possible to compare film audiences from year to year in relation to age, sex, educational level? Is there carry-over from films to the use of other library materials? What is the library doing to encourage integrated use of library materials? What does it know about the appropriateness of its audio-visual materials for various situations? If there is a decline in film use, are there other factors in programming which may account for it? Answers to these questions, arrived at in cooperation with other agencies using the same media, would be of significance to the whole field of adult education.

The whole question of the development of cooperation among libraries, other agencies, and lay citizens for extension and improvement of services to adults, except as it has been touched on in individual descriptions of library programs, remains to be studied and reported. There is promise of a body of experience which should be analyzed and evaluated in the activities of the Library-Community Project, which will come to a close in 1960, and in the development of regional libraries and of rural service through the Library Services Act.

Up to now, this article has discussed areas of needed research in library adult education, without consideration of appropriate research approaches. M. S. Knowles, formerly executive director of the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., who is editing the new revision of the Handbook of Adult Education, raised this question in correspondence, and made a number of cogent suggestions. Much of what follows is based on the outline he provided.

He observed first that it was necessary to distinguish between basic research, status research, and applied research. The first of these requires the library to go outside itself, e.g., to university sources, to get the research done. The second can be carried out by the library, but would entail costs which might be covered by obtaining foundation grants. Applied research, on the other hand, if properly planned
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and provided for, can be carried out by the library with its own resources in the course of its usual routines.

Under needed basic research, Knowles listed the following areas: the nature of the library's adult clientele, the evaluation of library processes, and the effects of policy and organization. He further suggested that information be sought regarding such characteristics of the adult learners using the library as: their perceptions of the role of the library, (to which one might add their attitudes toward education as a value) their motivations for learning in the library, demographic traits, and needs and purposes vis-a-vis library adult education. To this list he added information on the differences between users and nonusers. Study of the use of nonworking time, with regard to sex, age, educational and socio-economic characteristics of users and nonusers would be especially useful. This reflects the same concern with the nature of the participant which pervaded the "Overview," and points a way in which the library can serve as an arena of research which will be useful to the entire field.

To evaluate library processes, Knowles would look for outcomes in terms of learning from guided reading, unsupervised reading, various group activities, and exhibits and activities aimed at the community as a whole, etc. He would also seek to identify critical learning needs not being presently met by library processes. One can see readily that this is where the study of the effects of reading and the analysis of the guidance of the patron would fall. There is much also that the library could contribute to our knowledge of the impact of the mass media, particularly television, upon reading habits. Here, too, is the place for the analysis of the effectiveness of audio-visual methods which involve and do not involve the group process, which is suggested in the "Overview." Additionally, the library is in a position to provide, out of recent experience with a wide variety of group discussion programs, some of the situations for the "definitive study of a large number of discussion groups of varying purposes" which the "Overview" calls for. The need for suitable tools for evaluation of both processes and programs, which result from such research, is frequently cited.

Research in the effects of policy and organization would include the study of the effects of different library policy and organizational variables on learning consequences, to use Knowles' words. There is much need for more knowledge of the structure within which the adult educational responsibility of the library is carried out, and of
their effectiveness in given institutional situations. Again, although the relationship of policy to program is assumed to be vital, what is known of the positive effects of programs clearly based on carefully arrived-at policy? Closely related to this is the need which is cited by Knowles to know about the attitudes of librarians, trustees, and community toward these policy and organizational variables.

In the area of status research, it seems to the writer that librarianship should seek the aid not only of foundation grants, but of the library schools, and the clear thinkers, observers, and writers in the profession. It is a regrettable fact that library literature which gives a full, objective account of the character and trends of such areas as librarianship training, library adult programs, and library community relations is scanty indeed. Members of the A.L.A. headquarters staff who are called upon to discuss national trends and current practices are at a loss to do so adequately on the basis of what they are able to cull from periodicals, theses, and personal observation. At the same time, library leaders and library school faculty alike are aware of ferment and change and progress in these areas, though they may be put to it to cite chapter and verse. Correspondents placed great emphasis on the need for carefully planned studies of current programs, for case studies, for surveys of practice. References in the “Overview” to lack of effectiveness in such areas as cooperation among adult education agencies and community organizations, where libraries have developed fruitful patterns of operation, are further evidence of the need for surveys and reporting of current practice.

Within the areas of need as stated at the beginning of this article, the specific topics which might be suggested for study, description, and survey, are virtually endless. As long ago as 1954, following the publication of the results of the A.L.A. Adult Education Survey, one of the committees appointed by the A.L.A. Adult Education Board made a careful study of the survey and made many recommendations for further research, growing out of the study. One of these suggestions, for example, was that for each of the thirty-seven services listed in the survey more data be gathered, and tests of these services be conducted, using control groups.

Both status research and Knowles’ third category, needed applied research, are areas in which the state library agencies and library associations have a stake and a responsibility. One tenet of research is concerned with breaking down a study into manageable proportions. Many of the problems already raised, as well as some which re-
main to be mentioned, could well be tackled on a state-by-state basis. The Pacific Northwest's Library Development Project is, of course, a major example of what can be done by a regional group with foundation help. It also provides a pattern which has much to suggest to others. The pattern followed by the A.L.A. Library-Community Project in working with grants to state agencies for the purposes of experimentation along specific lines should also be mentioned. There is room, too, for more localized studies and experiments done on a volunteer basis, but with an eye to their broader application.

Knowles identifies five areas under the heading of needed applied research: refinement of definition of the library's purposes, scope, and role in adult education, experimental testing of techniques and processes of library adult education, experimentation with different strategies of community relations, experimentation with different methods of training of librarians in performing an adult educational role, and experimental testing of new frontiers of program development.

Some of the questions raised by correspondents are appropriately mentioned here. In further defining the library's purposes, scope, and role, do we need to consider the following: are we being too idealistic in trying to be all things to all groups? Do we too frequently assume that we can serve different kinds of groups at the same time in the same way? Should we not think of special "publics," as much as special groups? Is library service really tailored to serve specific groups in many cases? The need for finding effective means for developing an understanding of present definitions of the library's purposes, and motivation for carrying them out, on the part of trustees and librarians, was also cited. What can we do in developing new ways of cooperating between libraries, other agencies, and lay citizens? And in this same area, what are the services the libraries can and should provide to participants in both the formal and informal programs of other agencies? What are the relative merits of providing programs specifically for special groups, such as older people, when compared to providing programs for heterogeneous groups whose content and presentation may be of particular value and interest to them? These are the merest sampling of the kinds of questions that come to mind as one reviews the needs for applied research in the field of library adult education.

In the course of this article, some of the resources for carrying out needed research have been mentioned. Those who took part in the Library-Community Project came to appreciate and value the under-
standing and help available from sociologists and educators whenever they were approached, and were further rewarded in these contacts by the impression they received that this was regarded as profitable interchange. In this project, too, the rich resources and the willingness to experiment which are to be found in the local community were convincingly demonstrated. It is this writer's conviction, however, that the library field is overlooking its greatest resources for research—its own membership. When librarians stop thinking of research as either arcane or a side-line, and begin to think of it as an essential tool which utilizes the skills they already possess, much of the groping of which we are all aware, can come to an end. Constant practice in thinking in terms of objectives and of planning and evaluation in relation to those objectives soon makes this approach a habit. The term “evaluation” loses its mystery when it is expressed as four basic steps in these words, developed by librarians who became experimenters: 13

Before the activity is undertaken:
1. Setting of goals—what specific outcome is expected from this activity?
2. Establishing a baseline—what is true of this situation now?

After the activity has been completed:
3. Noting and recording change—what happened as a result of this activity?
4. Considering the change in the light of the circumstances,—what does it mean and what shall we do about it?

Librarians have always been generous in sharing their knowledge and experience on a face-to-face basis. What is needed now is an extension of this sharing in the form of reporting, of objective analysis, and of a wider habit of evaluation, and as a basis for this, in the form of attention to methods of record-keeping which will make possible good reporting and analysis.

In short, while the areas in which research in library adult education should take place are wide and varied, and the need for much of this research is pressing, if growth is to continue, real progress in research can take place only when the field of librarianship becomes genuinely research-minded. This will involve continual scrutiny of processes, repeated clarification of objectives, development of tools and engaging in routines of evaluation as a matter of course, and publication, publication, publication. It will also entail more active engagement of the library schools in research in cooperation with
practicing librarians, and finally, more initiative on the part of librarianship in working with those of other disciplines to produce research that will result in gains in knowledge of the process and operation of adult education for all.

References