



Young Adult Work in Branch Libraries

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ALTHOUGH A GOOD DEAL has been written about youth work *per se*, a careful search of *Library Literature* and similar sources indicates that very little has been written on youth work in branches. One very obvious reason for this is that, basically, work with youth is the same whether in a branch or in a central building. Therefore, to gather material for this article, a questionnaire was sent to a sample of libraries throughout the country having one or more branches.* The results, as those experienced in youth work would expect, show that there is no fixed pattern. There are still mixed feelings about how teen-agers should be treated which may be reflected in the fact that most libraries refer to these patrons as young people or young adults rather than as teen-agers.

Unadorned statistics would suggest that most young adult service starts at the ninth grade, particularly in large systems. The seventh grade is frequently the starting point where the school system is on a 6-3-3 grade plan. There are, of course, those which start at the eighth grade. College students are more prone to use the central building or a regional branch because of their larger resources and reference centers. Some systems have tried to extend their young adult program to include the early college age, but this is the exception, unless special interest collections (i.e. career materials) are part of the young adult collection. As a by-product of including the upper age levels, most libraries claim to have no restrictions on young adult use of adult materials, particularly in branches. Where any restriction has been indicated, it is usually for a few *risqué* titles, or certain medical books. It is also apparent that, although this age group is often the greatest user of branch library adult departments (including YA area),

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* The questionnaire containing twenty-six questions (some of the yes/no/check type) was sent to over thirty libraries; twenty-two replied.

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it too often has the least planned for it.

When asked about the young adult's attitudes in his use of the library, except for the few socializers and date-makers, words like "respectful," "relaxed," "cooperative," "self-sufficient," "earnest," "studious," and "appreciative" were used by the respondents to the questionnaire.

Although many of the larger systems have full scale young adult departments, a few still do not. Fully two-thirds of the libraries answering the questionnaire do not have youth-trained personnel in their branches. Dallas, which started its young adult department only ten years ago, now has young adult librarians in most of its branches. This was no doubt encouraged by the 1958 Martin report *Branch Library Service for Dallas*,¹ which specifically recommended young adult librarians and enlarged young adult collections in all branches. Oakland, California, after ten years of young adult work in the Main Library only, hoped to have young adult personnel and a core young adult collection in its six regional branches by September 1965.

The librarian of a mid-west community of nearly 150,000 stated that economics was one reason for not having branch YA staff, but "more importantly, we find the requests of young adults are virtually indistinguishable from those of adults. So why separate them in the branches? We do it at Central principally to relieve the pressure in the Adult Information Department." When he came to the question—What changes would you like to see in branch Youth Work?—his answer was, "Eventually a full-time Young Adult librarian in every major branch library."

The location, size and importance of the young adult collection in the branch has resulted in a variety of physical arrangements. There are some branches with Youth Rooms, a number with separate areas or alcoves, and a great many which have only a section of shelves and add to them each day from the adult collection. To some librarians, there would seem to be a stigma attached to the idea of separate quarters, while a few note that their young adult collection is from one-third to one-half of the size of the adult collections. Most systems have a combination of several of these arrangements dependent upon where the branch is situated and how recently it has been built. Here again, several libraries suggested that, should they get the new and larger branches which they need, they would have separate young adult areas.

Reader interest arrangements seem to be reserved for central or special young adult buildings, with only a few systems having the same reader interest classification in most of their buildings.

Over half of the responding libraries went out of their way to stress the fact that the young adult collection is recreationally oriented, and that the adult collection is drawn upon for school assignment needs. On the other hand, many said that they need or are buying more adult fiction and non-fiction to supplement their young adult holdings. The writer suspects that more of this material than librarians care to admit is actually assignment-oriented. Many of those who answered stated unequivocally that they are buying more and more material suitable for school-connected use. One librarian said, "We realize that recreational reading, although still of primary importance, is not enough to satisfy the young adult. We must have special librarians to help them with their school assignments and reference work. The collections must be selected for these two purposes."

Another factor which must be acknowledged is the increasing number of poor readers in this age group. Librarians may say what they want about not buying teen-age novels, but if we want to keep these young people in the library, we cannot expect them to go to the Children's Room for material on their reading level. Boston Public Library noted that it is including high interest-low vocabulary books (like Doubleday's Signal series) in its young adult collections.

No specific note was made of the ability of the young adult to find what he wants, but several communities mentioned a lowering of reading skills and a lack of awareness of how to use library tools. To counteract this, in East Orange, New Jersey, where there are libraries and librarians in most of the public elementary schools, a majority of the seventh and eighth grade classes come to one of the public library buildings six to seven times a year for lessons in using the card catalog, the *Reader's Guide*, and many other reference materials. The parochial school classes also have these lessons.

Answers to the query about the proximity of the branch reference collection to the young adult collection, give one the impression that, where possible, they are adjacent to each other. In fact, in one system with four branches, two of the branches have found it advisable to incorporate the reference materials into the youth area. Inasmuch as the greatest users of reference materials are students, this would seem to be a highly commendable idea. Adults do not mind using the materials wherever they are, and find that the rest of the building is frequently quieter when the reference materials are so placed.

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No. 1 of the Deiches Fund Studies of Public Library Service, by Lowell A. Martin,² states that: "Just over one-half of the individuals using the Enoch Pratt Free Library [of Baltimore] are students engaged in school-related reading." It is evident from everything one reads about teen-age use of the library that the percentage will probably increase and that it is already greater in some communities. The Deiches report goes on to state, "Even with better school libraries, branch units will continue to be heavily used by students."³ It suggests larger regional units of major branches geared to relieve the main or central branch of part of the research load.

In 1959, the Los Angeles Public Library made a one-month survey of student use of the library⁴ and noted that 75.8% of the students from junior high through college indicated that they had not used their school library. Reasons offered included "need to take school bus immediately after classes, school activities, part-time jobs, no opportunity to use library during open hours, public library closer to home, public library a good place to go in the evening." This is evidently true for many communities—even those with extremely fine school libraries.

Although a number of libraries, in discussing their school-public library relationships, used words like "friendly," "cordial," "pleasant," "close," "good," and even "excellent," too many also deplored the lack of real contact and rapport with heads of English and Social Studies departments and with teachers who give assignments with no thought as to whether the material is available to the student. It would seem advisable for the branch librarian, if there is no young adult staff member, to become acquainted with the principals, school librarians, department heads, and teachers at neighboring schools. Lunching at the school cafeteria is one way; advising these people of new books and services which may be of interest to them is another. In fairness, many librarians have tried such an approach only to be rebuffed or ignored by both the school administration, and, unfortunately, the school librarian.

Several libraries noted that they are attempting to work with the socially disadvantaged. Some are admittedly still groping; others are setting up branch reading centers for near-illiterates of all ages. Boston has offered branch library space for tutoring, has made deposit collections available to organizations such as the YMCA which are conducting tutoring programs in disadvantaged sections of the city, has provided review copies of new books to these groups to keep or give

away, as they choose, and has maintained staff membership and attendance in neighborhood agencies serving disadvantaged youth. Other libraries under the various anti-poverty programs have carried on activities using films and reading matter. Several have purchased special materials for young people entering the Job Corps. One rather discouraging answer to the question of what was being done to help the disadvantaged said, "Nothing, unfortunately. Now, we do less than we once did because they steal our auto repair, TV and radio books and magazines, and other 600 books as fast as we supply them. Yet this is subject matter they are interested in apart from school assignments."

Vocational guidance is an area which, though presumably school oriented, demands public library funds and effort. There are not, and probably never will be, sufficient guidance personnel in our schools. Parents frequently want to work with this material. Assignments in this area are commonplace. And then there is always the young person who doesn't seem to know how to find help at school. He is the one the school has pegged as non-academic, a "no-talent" boy, who just has never bothered to mention that he is a woods-lore enthusiast. But, through library books and "bull sessions" with the Youth Librarian, he finds himself and ends up majoring successfully in conservation.

Only one library is known to have special career centers in all of its branches, with factual and fictional career materials, college catalogs, pamphlets, and even guidance-trained people available at its main building. Most of the responding libraries have some of this material and a few even have it gathered together in at least one branch.

Programs for young adults range from Detroit's radio and TV book discussions led by a different young adult branch librarian each week to occasional summer discussion groups, film programs, Great Books discussions, etc. Time is often the deciding factor, with a frequent desire upon the librarian's part to do something, but an inability to schedule anything. With the exception of the larger libraries, most teen-age activities are sporadic affairs with librarians more inclined to devote the time normally consumed in planning and running such events to giving more attention to the individual borrower. Frequently, one was given the impression that a number of those answering the questionnaire were saying what they wish were true rather than what is actually happening.

If one were to attempt to summarize the changes most librarians would like to see in branch library youth work, the list would include

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more book funds, larger branches with specific youth areas, more youth-centered activities, and better relations with neighboring schools. The largest area of agreement was on the need for more professionals genuinely interested in and capable of working with patrons of junior and senior high school age, plus more time to devote to individual guidance of the young patron.

One librarian went so far as to suggest that every professional assigned to a branch should have had some training in work with young adults. To carry this to its ultimate, a valid suggestion might be that every library school student planning to do general adult service work in public libraries should take a course that examines the teenager as an individual and emphasizes how to translate his often garbled, inarticulate requests into his actual needs.

References

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2. Martin, Lowell A. *Students and the Pratt Library: Challenge and Opportunity*. No. 1 in the Deiches Fund Studies of Public Library Service. Baltimore, Enoch Pratt Free Library, 1963, p. 2.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
4. Bishop, Edith, Chairman. *Student Use of the Library*. Report of a Survey conducted March 9, 1959–April 4, 1959. Los Angeles (California) Public Library, February 1960.