Ivory Tower or Temple of Doom: Some Questions Concerning the Application of Research

ABSTRACT

The relationship between research and application is explored in the context of the delivery of information service to children and young people in schools and public libraries. The status of research in the field is discussed, and the use of interdisciplinary research is suggested. Finally, obstacles to the implementation of programs for young people are described.

INTRODUCTION

A recent episode of "Star Trek: The Next Generation" begins with Commander Geordie LaForge's excitement over the expected visit of the engineer who designed the new engines of the starship Enterprise. His excitement is enhanced by the fact that he had met the research engineer at a conference, and his admiration extends beyond engine design to the person of the researcher—he thinks she is lovely. On the other hand, when the designer arrives, she is not amused; Geordie has messed with her design. Poor Geordie is puzzled; he only tried to make the design work more effectively.

This episode led me to think about a number of issues related to the relationship between research and application, between researcher and applier, between clinical and theoretical approaches to questions
in our professional lives. I would like to explore some of these issues in the context where I find questions most challenging—the delivery of information services to children and young people in both schools and public libraries. Although there are significant administrative differences in the systems, some overriding issues are strikingly similar.

STATUS OF RESEARCH IN THE FIELD

Interest in what kind of research is being done—and not done—is always keen, at least among us academics whose health and well-being quite literally depend on it. To others, research results are often of marginal importance. A call to a very small sample of public library directors indicated that not one had used a research study as a basis for a decision in the past year. Why not? Answers ranged from “It's dull,” to “Things move too quickly around here to translate what some esoteric study says to what I need to know today.” Such attitudes might shock us, but I doubt that they would make the wider world gasp.

In spite of this attitude, there are three recent developments that have some potential for research. The first is the Treasure Mountain retreats in 1989 and 1991, which have gathered together groups of individuals interested in the research of issues related to school library media centers and their staff. This is a small nucleus of people, and results are hard to estimate after so short a time.

Most of the work so far consists of reviews of the literature—as reasonable a place to begin as any (Woolls, 1990). Yet some of these reviews demonstrate a remarkable lack of understanding of the breadth of an issue. For instance, Loertscher offers a review of literature in reading and school library media centers and makes assertions about the reading process that is not documented in his review of research. He states that “over-the-summer (holiday or break) reading helps retain learning” (Loertscher, 1990, p. 60) and neglects to cite studies by Locke (1988) or Heyns (1978). In fact, much of the review fails to take into account any of the work done in literacy or emergent literacy by such noted scholars as Teale and Sulzby (1986); Heath (1983); Heath, Mangiola, Schecter, and Hull (1991); or Smith (1988).

The second notable addition to the potential for research in this area is the effort to collect baseline data on the service. For many years, this special service has not been broken out of data regularly collected by state or federal agencies. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has attempted to remedy this situation by collecting national, baseline data on library service. Two studies, one for children's services (NCES, 1990) and one for service to young adults (NCES, 1988), looked at staffing patterns, hours open, use by children, young adults, care
providers and other adults, and attempted to identify resources and services provided. It included analysis of cooperation with schools and preschool or daycare centers. Data were collected for individual library buildings rather than for systems, and budget figures were based on book budgets and the percent of that budget allocated to children and young adult resources.

As with any survey of this type, however, there are some limitations. As the final report notes, "American public libraries are tremendously diverse, both in the services they offer and in the communities they serve. Patronage in the libraries in this nationally representative sample ranged from 7 patrons per week to 34,315 patrons per week, with a mean of 1,007 patrons per week" (NCES, 1990, p. xiii). That is a pretty high range of diversity and makes generalizations difficult.

Garland (1990) has added to information about the availability of statistics. Her work, recently distributed to all those teaching in the area of children's and young adult services or school media programs in American Library Association (ALA) accredited schools, identifies the data collected by each of the fifty states. This information is valuable, but it too demonstrates the problems with using these figures for comparative purposes, because there is no consistent pattern of collection. For instance, twelve states collect no information at all about the children's materials or services or staff in public libraries. In the area of school media services, twenty states collect no information at all; two states collect budget information only; four states are in the process of developing some data; and one did not even respond.

A third example in the research of the past several years is part of the Public Library Development Program, the Output Measures for Children's Services in Public Libraries (Walter, 1992). Although it is difficult to categorize the work as research per se, the Output Measures suggests a method for individual libraries or systems to analyze and evaluate the service provided to children and young people.

So what do these three projects indicate about new research ventures? Both the NCES surveys and the Garland compilation do provide a starting point for measurement and evaluation. The picture is certainly not complete, but the Federal-State Cooperative System for Public Library Data (FSCS) may finally begin to include data on service to children and young adults. The project, which is supported by both the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) and NCES, may be what is needed to make the statistical comparisons possible. The work of Dr. Mary Jo Lynch should be recognized in encouraging these efforts.

On the other hand, the existence of such baseline data does not necessarily indicate more meaningful research. As a first step to systematic collection of data, which may be able to give a more
comprehensive picture of the service provided over time, these projects are significant events. Research on a national level, however, is fragmented by the nature of the service it attempts to measure. Most of the research about the "system" is operational, not theoretical, in nature. This statistical approach looks at what is and does not explore the nature of the system or provide for analysis of what focus the service should have.

These efforts have focused on the area of data collection, but examination of other areas indicates that research topics are scattered, researchers isolated, and results rarely reported beyond the dissertation committee or a rather dry journal report. In other words, they are dull. Reviews of the literature by Shontz (1982), Edmonds (1987), or Fitzgibbons (1990) refer again and again to the lack of a theoretical framework. There would appear to be more research in just sheer numbers on the educational end of the spectrum, but it too fails to accumulate evidence in any one area that is significant enough to draw attention beyond the confines of the ALA American Association of School Librarians (AASL).

Another consideration relates to the number of people interested in the area. There is often little critical mass within the individual departments or schools to allow collaborative efforts—or even brainstorming. There is virtually no teamwork and few instances of cooperation across territorial lines. One effort to conduct a study of the service to young people in four states has been on the table for more than three years. The researchers, all with fine minds, powerful understanding, and good intentions, have not had the dedicated time or the burning need to get the project off the ground. One has been promoted to full professor, one to associate, one to chair of a department, and one has changed jobs (and state), all without the necessity of doing more than talking about the study.

**USE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH**

If studies are not being conducted in the field, are there those from outside that could affect service delivery? There is some evidence that documents how other agencies have worked at providing service to children and young people in a viable way. Schorr's *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* (1989) provides an example of what can be done. By analyzing reports and longitudinal studies that followed children's development from earliest infancy to adulthood, and by talking with researchers and people who work on front lines with families in trouble, Schorr studied those projects that successfully helped children and their families. She discovered much was already known
about the delivery of service as well as what that service should be. Schorr says, "I was dismayed at how little of this knowledge was being utilized to change the prospects for children growing up in the shadows" (Schorr, 1989, p. xviii). It may be that this type of analysis, grounded in the anecdotal, descriptive literature that comprises most of our reporting would be a step forward in plotting directions for service.

And consider, for a moment, one scholar's work, which could have a major influence on the development of service. Shirley Brice Heath has studied the way in which communities interact with the young in preparing the children for school. In a three-year ethnographic study in the Carolina Piedmont region, Heath (1983) found that families prepared their children for the ways of the world in a manner that was usually nurturing and loving. Such preparation, however, did not always give the child a background necessary to participate in a complicated social scheme that demanded abstract as well as concrete understanding of ideas related to literacy and literate behavior. In other words, parents who did not value books and reading did not share them automatically with their children. Heath's work has demonstrated that the sharing of stories through reading aloud to young children is the significant factor in preparing the children for school. All parents want their children to succeed. If sharing book reading is the link to literacy, and reading aloud is the key, it is obvious that the library—school and public—unlocks that paralysis we call illiteracy and makes the librarian a major force in the literacy process.

Have we been involved in the application of this rather remarkable study? The answer is yes, to a degree, but usually in scattered "pilot programs," funded on soft money and eliminated from the scene when the funds run out. There are a few exceptions, and Pittsburgh's Beginning with Books is one of them. It is a project that began with soft money in 1983 to distribute books and tips about reading aloud to families in well-baby clinics in Allegheny County. The program now works with more than 38 agencies and has several other components, one of which is a three-year, half million dollar project to work with care providers in homes and daycare centers on the value of, how to, and what to read aloud. Soft money, yes, but the program is an affiliate of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, which covers not only overhead but one full-time staff salary and other assistance.

Yet Heath's work is not widely known or quoted in the library press. Although she has participated in literacy conferences and even an annual meeting of ALA, the work of this MacArthur scholar does not serve as a basis for our planning and development of service. Although her studies provide overwhelming evidence that the emphasis on reader guidance and work with both children and adults is significant, they are ignored by planners and managers.
In our efforts to prove the impact of service with the accumulation of numbers, we too often ignore the theoretical framework. For instance, in a recent issue of Public Libraries, a study reviewing the cost-effectiveness of service to children in the Montgomery County Public Library (MD) is presented (Mielke, 1991). One finding of the study was that a children's literature discussion group (of adults) was too time consuming for staff to justify in terms of adults served. Only an average of seven people attended on a regular basis. The program was cut in favor of a program for those who needed English as a second language. On the one hand, it is an honorable management strategy to take a hard look at matching time and effort against attendance. On the other, the problem of the effectiveness may be more related to focus and design. Certainly there is much evidence that working with the adults who care for and about children may be the most cost-effective way in dealing with not only literacy-related impact, but the service as a whole. Did the planners consider the evidence of research and the experience of the Hennipen County Public Library (MN) and the Orlando (FL) Public Library, for instance? In these two libraries, major service efforts to deliver service to children are aimed at adults working with children, teachers, scout leaders, parents, Sunday school workers, or others. Evidence indicates that placing information about books, videos, puppets, stories—i.e., the resources of the library—in the hands of adults who care for children would provide the most direct and intensive and cost-effective delivery possible.

CONCLUSIONS

Evidence is accumulating slowly that documents the impact of service to young people. There are, however, some significant obstacles in the way. We know, for instance, that the service to children and young people must be provided early, offered consistently and continuously, and that we have effective models of how to operate. Implementation of such a program warrants careful thought and direction. It requires planning by enlightened managers and that may mean changing the behavior of those who deliver the service. We know the impact of reading aloud, the motivation of story. But as one reading specialist said to me, "It is too easy. We've spent millions on machines and studies on different ways of reaching these kids. Now you say, give a teacher a book and tell him to read to the class? The Board (of Education) would have my head."

In another district, Title I families were targeted for reading programs. Parents and kindergarten children were gathered together in the early evening, with the children being read to and playing while
the parents focused on what and how to read to the children. A journal was kept of what happened from week to week, and indeed documented over and over again the results. Kids read better; parents read more; stress in the family was lessened. There was one major problem, however. The school library media director refused to let the groups meet in schools libraries; they would disarray the place, and school librarians would have to straighten things the next day. The planners compromised; what if the instructors—who were reading teachers in the system—checked out materials from the school libraries so that parents could get extra books to take home? No, that simply would not do. What if books were lost? What if they were damaged? What if the books were stolen? The director produced a statement from the school system's legal department forbidding the circulation of library materials for the project.

And there are examples from the public library sector, too. We are slow to move and slower to innovate. Children’s services programs are cut as budgets are reduced. But the research evidence shows, time and time again, that we provoke more problems down the line every time we lose or cut a program for children and their families now. “Excellence costs. But in the long run, mediocrity costs more” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Research is most successfully applied, it seems to me, when it is applied with passion. Research can inspire, if it is creative, the confidence in the decision you as provider need to make when faced with barriers of scorn or skepticism. But it must be applied by those who know of it; it must be sold to those who hold the funds and the power of implementation. It is not easy. If I could wave a magic wand and say, based on research, here is the fact that will impress all the public officials, from mayor and council to local principal, to fund this service that will break the cycle of illiteracy in the United States of America, I would do it. But research itself is not magic; it is a tool. It is the people who wave the wand who provide the magic.

REFERENCES


