The Role of the Children's Librarian in Serving the Disadvantaged

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All the institutions of a community are part of the child's learning environment. It is, therefore, imperative that responsible agencies continually examine and reexamine the means by which they systematically influence the child's growth processes.

In the most simplified terms, the public library's role has been the selection, collection and dissemination of free literature. Formerly accepted methods of library service to children are being questioned as the illiteracy of the American population becomes a major concern. Statistics in the 1970s show that the majority of the American people have not developed efficiency in reading. The problems of the non-reading are acutely evident in areas with large minority populations—Black, Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Indian. Territories in isolation such as rural communities, mountain areas, migrant camps, and reservations reflect critically low education and reading levels.

Figures compiled by Barrett in the Southwest on the plight of the Mexican-American student in the Southwest show that in 1960 the median for school years completed by Spanish surname individuals of both sexes 14 years of age and over was: 9.0 years in California; 8.6 in Colorado; 8.4 in New Mexico; 7.9 in Arizona; and 6.1 in Texas. (It is interesting to note that the income of the Spanish-Americans, though universally low, shows a relatively higher pattern in California than in Texas where school achievement was lowest.)

In New York City, while one out of every four pupils in elementary schools is of Puerto Rican birth or parentage, Puerto Ricans have less formal education than any other identifiable ethnic group in the city. In 1960 about 87 percent of all Puerto Ricans over 25 in the city had never completed high school. In 1963, of nearly 21,000 academic diplomas granted in New York City, only 331 went to Puerto Ricans.

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The statistics relating to the education of Indian children in this country are even more dismal. As late as 20 years ago, less than half of all school-age Navajo children were in school. The 1960 census figures show that 10 percent of all Indians over 14 years of age have had no formal school at all; nearly 60 percent have less than an eighth grade education and 50 percent of all Indian school children drop out before finishing high school.¹

In 1969, statistics from Los Angeles showed a significant pattern of low scores on reading tests in predominantly Black and Chicano schools. Faced with such evidence, libraries, along with educational systems, are examining the processes which have produced this critical picture. The public library finds itself continuing to serve that minor portion of the community which has developed the facility for and the habit of reading.

Former Commissioner of Education, James Allen, Jr., on the subject of the right to read stated:

It is my hope that in the coming years it will be possible to strengthen our libraries of all types—public, school, academic, research, and special libraries—so that the widest range of services may be extended to the widest range of people.

Our libraries stand as testimony to our belief in the necessity of widespread availability of opportunities for learning. This availability stands only as a cruel mockery, however, for those whose lack of reading skill makes the world of libraries quite literally a closed book.²

An important question to ask then is: What valid function can the public library serve in an essentially non-reading community? Some related questions to be answered include:

1. What is the role of the children's librarian?
2. What are the goals of the public library? How does the children's librarian help to accomplish them?
3. What do librarians know about the children they serve?
4. How can the librarian aid in transmitting and translating knowledge without the ability to communicate?
5. Where should materials be gathered together so as to be conveniently available to children?
6. Can libraries afford to provide materials entirely based on pre-determined needs?

The role of the librarian cannot be separated from the role of the institution. Clear definitions of the job of the children's librarian are in effect determined by the library's goals. Ernest Roe, in discussing the role of school librarians, uses such terminology as "curator and servicer
of materials," "subject specialist," "cultural standard-bearer," "reading counselor," and "manipulator." He finally suggests that "librarians by the thousands with the blessing of both library schools and schools of education, begin to clarify their educational role." Whichever definition or term one chooses seems to indicate reaching out to children with and through information and literature.

In an effort to improve library service to children, many libraries have attempted to reach out through experiments in target communities (see appendices A-C). When initiating programs in areas of acute non-use, the trend has been to label prospective young patrons as "culturally deprived," "disadvantaged," "unreached," etc. Although any and all of these terms may become relevant as the problem is explored, it seems inappropriate to use categorizing and labeling as the method for isolating the institution's problems. If they are not given labels, non-users become defined through the institution's attempts to achieve the goal of service.

In order to clearly state the institutional problem, libraries and librarians must look within. Library statistics, reports, and surveys show an unquestionable pattern of low circulation in minority and low-income communities. There is little service where there is little use. The library, then, which proposes to provide free reading materials for the education and enjoyment of the whole community, is faced with the problem of justifying its existence.

Children's librarians have prided themselves on the collecting of appropriate literature for children. They glibly speak of providing reader guidance, doing reference, giving book talks, and telling stories. Many take pride in their ability to select books that are good for children, without being concerned for those who fail to take advantage of their good offerings. Some view themselves as providing the best for the most when in actuality they offer the most to the best.

Verbalizations about free access become mere rhetoric if many in the community still view the librarian as a "jailer of books." The librarian's image changes only as her or his role changes. There is little freedom where the librarian shelves the books and guards their use, screens those who enter and regulates their appetites, or executes fines for misuse and lateness. Freedom is largely based on knowledge; therefore, the community must be made aware of library services and the librarian must know the community. Florence Field discusses some needed changes in an article on branch libraries: "The Chicago Public Library is in the process of trying to find its bearings in the outside
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world after being shut away from it for many years. . . . With the advice and cooperation of various agencies, groups, and individuals in the community, we started programs which we hoped initially would accomplish two things: first, bring the library to the attention of community residents and agencies to whom we had become all but invisible; and second, change the image of the library to that of an agency more involved in the life of the community.”

Many children’s librarians have little knowledge of the community or children they serve. Courses in the sociology and psychology of childhood are seldom offered in library schools, nor are studies on issues pertinent to minority populations generally required. In establishing the changing role of the librarian, the inclusion of such courses in training programs is of prime importance.

Upon employment in a given community, provisions should be made for the children’s librarian to gain further knowledge of the specific locale. Such information can be gathered through meetings with school personnel, parents, community leaders, recreation directors, and social workers. Still further insight will be gained through direct participation and conversation with children. With this background, the selection of materials for the library hopefully becomes a reflection of community needs. New methods of approaching the total community are indicated through seeing and hearing all of its expressed concerns. The librarian’s role by necessity will then be changed. The following quote by Doris Bass outlines the steps taken at the Brooklyn Public Library in using community involvement and cooperation as a basis for establishing selection criteria:

The definition of a camel is said to be a horse produced by a committee and the selection policy rendered by our committee is camel-like in that it is neither as graceful nor as strong as we wished it to be. It does, however, express a feeling that our changing community offers a challenge to our professional competence which we can meet. An individual’s ability to adapt easily to change is a sign of psychic health and energy; it is equally imperative for an institution’s survival. Finding ways to increase the library’s responsiveness (and thereby its vitality) is an obligation we owe to ourselves as well as to our patrons and communities. If the institution becomes rigid and irrelevant, our public is cheated out of what is rightfully theirs and we are robbed of the opportunity for creative and stimulating work. If and when we learn to cope with—and accept the challenge of—change, we will have done much to insure the success of the marriage of library and community.

As knowledge of the community is gained, institutional handicaps

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become more readily apparent. One such handicap to serving children is often the library building itself. Robert Coles quotes a migrant child’s reaction to his first day at school: "I was pretty scared, going in there. I never saw such a big door, I was scared I couldn’t open it, and then I was scared I wouldn’t be able to get out, because maybe the second time it would be too hard." A library building which is not open and inviting can engender the same response from children. They might never enter that “big door” unless encouraged to do so. The logical person to extend an invitation is the librarian who will meet the child on his visits to the library.

Thus the trend toward more community involvement for librarians becomes increasingly valid. In meeting the children where they freely gather, the librarian helps to overcome many of their fears. Street corners, playgrounds, and such are more appropriate places to visit than the school, since the school and the library suffer from the same negative image. This by no means implies that the traditional school visit is no longer useful. Time has come, however, to consider meeting children in a formal setting as one technique and meeting them at play as another. Experiencing the variations in the child’s attitudes, responses, and language while viewing him in several roles adds to the librarian’s total learning.

In large urban centers, another library handicap is accessibility. If libraries in low income communities are not within walking distance or near public transportation, many children simply cannot get there. In such cases, several alternatives to service can be taken. First, the library could be relocated. Some have opened branches in storefronts, recreation centers, and even empty train cars. Providing for mobility has been one of the most successful alternatives. Small vans, storymobiles, bookmobiles, and converted school buses have been used to transport books to isolated areas. Schenectady County Public Library used taxicabs and shopping carts to take books to children. Vestpocket libraries and book deposits are being used to provide books for children in convenient locations.

New approaches do not always translate into the usual library and patron process. After assuaging the child’s fears and taking the books to him, he still may not check out books. The librarian’s orientation again comes into question. If the librarian’s primary goal is imparting knowledge rather than checking out books, he or she will seek a variety of ways to communicate. Traditional storytelling and book talks are expanded to include other means of communication. Creative writing,
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poetry readings, films, filmstrips, games, magic shows, pet shows, and many other methods are effective (see appendices A-C). These programs are valid as an entity unto themselves, although their success cannot be measured as a book circulation statistic. As Moustakas says, "When situations are arranged as invitations, even if it turns out that the resources become a significant means to self-growth for the other person, the outcome is unknown and unpredictable."8

For the librarian who continues to feel that the function of the library is only to promote books, there are many things to learn about their use with non-readers. For instance, John Holt advances the idea that "the child who just comes in and looks through the books and leaves may be one of those many children not exposed to the reading process. For this child, this is an important step in learning."9

If the librarian insists upon concentrating only on books, it is imperative that the librarian consider helping the child learn to read. The degree of this help will be determined by the librarian's knowledge and ingenuity. For some, aid will be as direct as tutoring. Others will find that a large number of children in minority communities will want to read if new types of material are provided.

Materials which might offer incentive for a non-reader to learn to read might include comic books, informative flyers, bookmarks, etc. All of these can serve as invitations to the book. Use of paperbacks has been widely proclaimed as one method of overcoming the fears some children have of the hardcover book. Educators and librarians alike agree that it is important to provide materials the child can relate to ethnically and socially. As Dunn states: "Materials to be read should be personal, real, and important to the reader—[this] requires that teachers, school and community librarians, youth counselors, and parents join other community leaders in combined attempts to identify materials which have the interest magnitude described."10 The librarian, because of her access to public resources, becomes the prime facilitator for the others aforementioned. This extends her role even further to being able to serve the adult community which influences the child's life.

Many questions including the following remain unanswered as the children's librarian and the rest of the library consider their changing role.

1. How much are attitudes a barrier to opening up communication between library and community? How can the library deal with this?
2. In the case of minorities, are there too few books which speak the
language and provide realistic portrayals to stock a children’s collection truly reflective of the community? Should such collections remain as mere appendages to the traditional well rounded collection?

3. Have we instituted a system of libraries so complex that no matter what books we have, children will become discouraged with the processes of use?

Possibly some answers to the above questions can be found in the following quote:

The resource may be presented without being connected to a goal but simply as an addition to the environment, placed there as a result of cues from the child, to be chosen and encountered or not, just as the child is free to choose any existing reality. Whether it has meaning depends on his own perceptions, on its value to him.

Thus, it is in these ways that the human environment contributes to the development of genuine selfhood: first, through confirming the [infant] young child as a being of incomparable and nonmeasureable worth, in all the individual’s particular ways and as a whole; second, by being a living person, genuine, whole, present, open to encounter, available as a source of learning and enrichment; third, by making available resources based on the growing person’s own interests, directions and patterns of expression, resources which assist in extending and deepening experience, broadening horizons and expanding reality by furthering interest and meaning.

After consideration of all the factors involved, the librarian’s role may be foreseen as that of helping to open the book of life to children and young people while recognizing their different cultural advantages.

References

4. Ibid., p. 69.
7. Coles, Robert. Uprooted Children; The Early Life of Migrant Farm Work-
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SELECTED AND ANNOTATED ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


“When a ghetto resident can truly say, ‘That’s my library—I helped to put it there!’ the library will be able to meet its commitment to the inner city community.” (p. 611.)


5. Moses, Richard B. “Working with Neighborhood Centers,” pp. 142-45. Reprints are available from Children’s Services Division and Young Adult Services Division, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, Illinois 60611.


Owens, Major. “A Model Library for Community Action,” Library Journal, 95:1701-04, May 1, 1970. This article contains more on libraries and the community and presents pertinent questions and ideas about the changing role of the library. For example, “The failure of libraries is a failure to become relevant to the communities and institutions libraries profess to serve.” (p. 1701.)


“If we would recommend anything it would be that funds be found to help the tribe develop materials on their own culture for the use of the young.” (p. 860.)


Stocker, Joseph. “Se Habla Espanol; Help for Spanish-Speaking Youngsters,” American Education, 3:17-18+, May 1967. (Reprints available.) This article emphasizes the need for bilingual education. Other reprints are available on current problems in education and service to minorities.


“The Top,” Top of the News, 27:137, Jan. 1971. This bibliography, including
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articles, presents opinions and suggestions in regard to books for and about minorities.


APPENDIX A

PROGRAM SAMPLES AND SUGGESTIONS: AUDIOVISUALS

Innovations in library service have found that audiovisuals are a major tool for attracting children to libraries and books. Film programs are becoming more popular with public libraries as a means by which literature and information can be communicated to children. Schools are putting much emphasis on the "media specialist." Some public libraries now train librarians in the use of hardware. New courses in the use of audiovisuals are also being offered by library schools.

Articles

Gillespie, John T. "Getting Started with Non-Print Media; Guides to Bibliographies," Top of the News, 25:402-05+, June 1969; and 26:262-64, April 1970. These two articles provide information on basic tools for setting up a non-print collection.

Also useful are the audiovisual sections titled "Screenings" which appear in each issue of School Library Journal. Reviews of films and filmstrips appear in the section titled "Recordings." A useful article on films is:


Suggested Programs

Film Festivals—Feature length films can be rented from several sources. (See above-mentioned articles by Gillespie.) Cartoon programs are offered as a package.

Filmstrips on Parade—Story filmstrips are scheduled at a convenient hour for free viewing.

Film Clubs—These clubs train young people to make 8mm. films and to use related hardware.

Tell It on Tape—Comments on books, poetry, and readings are recorded on cassette tape, and tape players are provided in the library for listening.

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Listening Centers—Listening centers are common in school libraries. Some public libraries are now providing centers for listening to tapes and records. One center can accommodate at least ten children.

APPENDIX B

PROGRAM SAMPLES AND SUGGESTIONS: CREATIVE WRITING AND POETRY

"It seems obvious that the best way to bring people into the library is to bring them in: Bring them in as writers, as thinkers. . . . let me suggest that you offer poetry to students. Poetry and more poetry." This quote is from the following article: Jordan, June M. "Our Eyes Have Grown," School Library Journal, 17:40-43, April 1970.

Many children's librarians have discovered that one of the best ways to relate to children in the inner-city is to allow them a chance to show their creativity through writing. Various techniques for involving children in writing programs have been used. Following is a random sampling of references:

Books


Library Publications

The following library publications are available by writing to the library indicated:
"Chicory"—Enoch Pratt Free Library, 400 Cathedral Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21201
"Kaleidoscope"—Prince George's County Memorial Library, 6532 Adelphi Road, Hyattsville, Maryland 20782
"Scrutinize"—Los Angeles Public Library, Venice Branch, 610 California Ave., Venice, California 90291

Articles

"Libraries and the Arts," Wilson Library Bulletin, 45:744-62, April 1971. This section includes the following four articles:
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3. “Roundup of Art Action in Libraryland,” pp. 758-62. (There is creative writing on p. 760.)

Tate, Binnie. “Creative Play with Poetry”—a demonstration in reading, writing, reciting, and listening to poetry. (Available from Mrs. Johanna Sutton, Federal Project Office, Los Angeles Public Library, 630 W. Fifth St., Los Angeles, California 90017.)

APPENDIX C

A SPECIFIC PROGRAM—“BOOK BAGGERS”

The Junipero Serra Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library is located across the street from an elementary school in a predominantly Black, low income neighborhood. The “Book Baggers” program was planned in an effort to promote school-public library cooperation and to show what public library enrichment programs can do to help the slow reader. An effort was also made to provide cultural enrichment.

Brief Program Outline

1. The librarian consulted with the principal to ask permission for a group of slow readers to visit the library once a week.
2. Upon agreement, a consultation was held with the principal and a special reading teacher who would bring the children.
3. Informality and free exploration were agreed upon as the approach for the program.
4. Each child was provided with a bag to carry paperbacks, thus the name “Book Baggers.” They were allowed to select freely from a random sampling of paperbacks, most of which were scholastic publications.

Evaluation (as submitted by the regular classroom teacher)

The “Book Baggers” were composed of boys and girls from my middle reading group who were reading below grade level. These children met with the librarian, Mrs. Binnie Tate, once a week for approximately 45 minutes.

The purposes of this library period were to stimulate interest in reading and language, to broaden their experiences through exploratory reading, listening to stories, dramatization, creative writing and oral expression.

These purposes were admirably accomplished as shown by the increased number of books which were checked out and read by the children, the enthusiasm engendered at each class session, the carry-over of experiences to the classroom situation and the pride of accomplishment felt when the group wrote a poem with the help of Mrs. Tate and presented it at a school assembly.

Besides the fulfillment of the purposes, there were some extra benefits. These included the opportunity for me, the teacher, to observe my group in
a non-classroom environment, to observe their responses and reactions to the more relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere engendered by Mrs. Tate. I was able to use this extra knowledge in making my plans for them. The growing self-awareness and racial pride were also additional benefits enhancing this program. The cooperation between school and public library is, I feel, an important step in community involvement which is increasingly valuable to the education of our children.

I heartily recommended the continuation and the enlargement of this program. I wish that many more classes could share the benefit of this program.

MRS. SARAH WILLIAMS, Teacher, Vernon Avenue Elementary School

Sample Programs Utilized
1. Filmstrip program
2. Storytelling and acting out
3. Poetry writing session
4. Song festival with guest folk singer
5. African songs and dances