Reaching All Children: A Public Library Dilemma

ALICE PHOEBE NAYLOR

Introduction

One can describe the child population of interest to the public library in several ways. The first way is to consider those who come to the library individually and voluntarily. Other ways include those who come to the library under group sponsorship such as a school class or day-care center, or to whom the library carries its services outside the library, and those who do not come to the library at all. The population may be described in terms of age. The Association for Library Service to Children officially designates the target population as individuals from "preschool through junior high." Others define child library users by age level—currently birth through twelve years. Often the population of children is described in terms of economic class, race, disability, family status, group membership, or an atypical situation (unwed mothers, juvenile delinquents). This article looks at professional literature and opinion over the past twenty-five years and shows that all these ways of viewing the child population have influenced children's services. Underlying all approaches to creating public library services for children is the strongly held belief that library service is for all children.

One hundred years ago the best of public library administrators opened their doors to children, though to none younger than twelve years old. William I. Fletcher welcomed those "young minds of peculiar gifts and precocious development." William H. Brett took books to children "through the schools...deposit stations in stores, factories,

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settlement houses, churches, fire stations, and telephone stations." For Caroline Burnite, the first director of children's services for the Cleveland Public Library, "the whole concept of library work with children stemmed from her own deep sense of moral and social responsibility toward both the individual and society." The moral fervor of the 1960s at which time this study begins, imbued children's librarians anew with the commitment to reach all populations of children.

In 1986 Carolyn Field writes: "The ideal is to expose every child from birth to the joys of reading at the library, in the schools, day care centers, etc. through personal contact, training of parents and teachers and other adults." The movement toward this concept of population to be served accounts for much of the activity of public library children's librarians over the past twenty-five years.

In general that effort is beset by painful dilemmas. The first is bittersweet. Having made amazing progress toward the goal of reaching all children, children's librarians now find that their parent institutions have coopted them, their services, and their statistics. Worse yet, several library education programs have dropped specialty courses for children's librarians entirely. The second dilemma is complex. Enormous conflict exists for children's librarians who agree with the current emphasis on serving adults who serve children, but are already overworked and overwhelmed serving child users in the library. Is it possible to do both without a radical change in the status, quality, and number of children's librarians? The third dilemma poses an equally profound challenge to public library service. Libraries remain basically purveyors of print media in an age when the typical child spends an average of 2000 hours a year watching television. Is the library prepared to serve a future population of uniform children who would rather view than read?

This article will present data from professional literature and from interviews with key persons in the profession that describe populations of concern to children's services over the past twenty-five years. The data pose the need for a clearer definition of child populations served and suggest the reasons for the earlier described dilemmas.

An Analysis of Professional Literature

Several sources provided information about trends in service to distinctive populations of children during the past twenty-five years. The author conducted a content analysis of entries in Library Literature which referred to children's library services and populations served.
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The percentage of article space devoted to children's services in nine professional journals and the specific populations discussed in those articles during seven of the past twenty-five years is presented. Fifty leading professionals in children's services and public library administration responded to a questionnaire or interview which included three questions: What are ideal goals for children's services and are they being reached? What are the traditional services provided to children, and why are they "traditional"? What barriers to change exist within the public library? A review of the literature helps tie the data and opinions to existing knowledge and theory.

Library Literature: The Index

The appendix displays the number of entries in Library Literature from 1960 to 1985 under the subject headings selected for analysis. The entries for service to specific populations appear in inconsistent fashion in the index, making assessment extremely difficult. Under the heading of Children's Library Services, subheads of GIFTED and PRE-SCHOOL appear, the latter only since 1982. The same subheadings appeared under PUBLIC LIBRARIES—SERVICES TO since 1974. Services to handicapped children are entered under HANDICAPPED, LIBRARY SERVICES FOR and CHILDREN'S READING PROJECT—HANDICAPPED CHILDREN. Most of the entries for specialized populations are entered under the PUBLIC LIBRARIES—SERVICES TO heading. Many of those articles are exclusively about the activities of children's services. Many of the articles under CHILDREN'S LIBRARY SERVICES are about school libraries. Children's services are inextricably bound to those provided by the public library and Library Literature does not make it easy to distinguish the unique contribution of the specialty.

By comparison, measures of the number of articles in the professional literature show professional interest in the general topics of CHILDREN'S LIBRARY SERVICES, CHILDREN'S READING, STORY HOURS AND STORY TELLING, and SUMMER PROJECTS as relatively stable over the years. The count of articles indicates that handicapped children were of concern to writers only since 1967 although the service began long before that date. However, services to handicapped children did not appear as a separate heading in the index until 1980. Services to preschool were not indexed as such in the literature until 1974. Preschool story hours have been a traditional service of the library since the 1930s but articles about them appear under the
more generic headings of STORY HOURS AND STORY TELLING. *Library Literature* does not include "parents" as a subhead until 1978. No subhead, PARENTS, appears under CHILDREN'S LIBRARY SERVICES, yet much of this service emanates from the children's services staff. Early in the 1960s, articles were indexed more frequently by library function than by the population served. Since 1967 only slightly more attention is given to specific populations.

Graph 1 illustrates the number of articles under several subject headings about public libraries and schools. The articles which appeared under the subject heading PUBLIC LIBRARY—SERVICES TO: SCHOOLS reported activities of both young adult and children's librarians. The graph shows that professional writing about schools and public libraries reached its peak in 1960 and then tapered off sharply. The number of articles under the heading PUBLIC LIBRARIES—SERVICES TO: STUDENTS peaked in 1963 and disappeared in 1971. Authors wrote about school and public library relations throughout this period but most heavily during the 1960s.

Discord over public library-school relationships persists in ranking the profession although the issues in conflict change over the years. In the 1960s the "student problem" was how to cope with teenagers (post-war baby boomers) pouring into the library. Neither resources nor policies were in place to meet the demand. One contingent of professionals cheered the increase in public library use; another chastised the schools for not meeting the needs of students and therefore being responsible for the bedlam which reigned in the public library. The late sixties and seventies were the affluent years for school libraries, so public library use by students waned as did interest in the subject.

Even the furore over the 1970 position paper from the New York Commission on Education suggesting the abolishment of public library service to children did not make a large showing in professional periodicals. In the 1980s, SCHOOL AND PUBLIC LIBRARY RELATIONSHIPS is the only subject heading which continues to be used in the index.

Graph 2 compares coverage of specific minority groups and those indexed under MINORITIES. The only extensive coverage occurred during the early 1970s. Articles about Spanish Americans continued throughout the seventies to a lesser degree. As the graph indicates, few articles about service to minority, ethnic, or disadvantaged populations appeared during this period. Some attention was given to services to blacks annually for twenty-five years; however, no more than ten articles
Graph 1. Number of Articles Indexed 1960-85 about Public Libraries and Schools

Libraries and Social and Economic Problems
P.L.S. Schools
P.L.S. Students
School and Public Library Relations
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appeared in any three-year-period despite the national focus on black life in America.

Eight articles appeared between 1958 to 1969 that discussed juvenile delinquency within the library. Eleven years later one article appeared about how best to provide library service to juvenile delinquents—an interesting illustration of change in attitude about populations served.

Trends in interest about specific minority groups, disadvantaged, and the poor are evident throughout the period. Articles about libraries, social, and economic problems peaked during 1967-69 and again in 1974-75 and then disappeared. Although these trends may indicate that librarians are in tune with the times, they may also show a disheartening lack of in-depth analysis of services needed by specific populations. The literature of the profession, in this way, may be comparable to the mass media that uses its limited space to highlight new issues more than to continue coverage of old issues, even unresolved ones.

Graph 3 shows that articles about preschool children appeared in Library Literature in 1974 and were indexed under the headings PUBLIC LIBRARIES—SERVICE TO: PRESCHOOL CHILDREN. In 1982, articles began to appear also under the heading CHILDREN’S LIBRARY SERVICES—PRESCHOOL CHILDREN. A listing for PARENTS, indexed under PUBLIC LIBRARIES—SERVICES TO, has appeared since 1978-79.

Graph 4 compares the number of articles on other topics related to children’s services. Numbers of articles about evaluation and finance of children’s services are minimal. Entries under the heading CHILDREN’S AUDIOVISUAL SERVICES were most numerous during the seventies and then dropped off. CHILDREN’S READING PROJECTS were of interest throughout the period, reaching new heights in the 1980s some feel because of the current criticism of education. Services to handicapped children were rarely discussed.

In summary, professional writing about child populations served by the public library is scarce and when concern is shown for specific populations of children, the concern is a temporary response to outside influences more than it is to any fundamental change in the goals of the library.

It is important to note that because of inconsistencies and lack of specificity in indexing, Library Literature indicates only that children’s services were viewed as part of the total service picture of public libraries. How much of the total picture was painted by children’s services is impossible to ascertain in this way.
Graph 2. Number of Articles Indexed 1960-85 about Specific Minority Groups

WINTER 1987
Graph 3. Number of Articles Indexed 1960-85 about Preschool Children

C.L.S. Preschool Children
P.L.S. Parents
P.L.S. Preschool Children
Graph 4. Number of Articles Indexed 1960-85 about Other Topics Related to Children's Services
Professional Periodicals

Graph 5 illustrates the results of an analysis of School Library Journal, Top of the News, Wilson Library Bulletin, and Public Libraries between 1960 and 1984. The data indicate minimal coverage of any aspect of children’s services. Articles about books and other materials, young adult services, and school libraries were more numerous but not included in this tabulation. Most of the included articles were descriptive of services but not of populations of children being served.

A comparison of the coverage of minority group populations shows that articles on service to the disabled, Hispanic, etc., consisted chiefly of bibliographies. The author also conducted an analysis of five state library association journals from the five bellwether states designated by Naisbett. The percentage of annual coverage by the journals of minority populations served, in most instances, was minor.

The almost nonexistence of articles on individual populations served looms as the important finding of this study. It was hoped that the number of articles published over the two and a half decades would illustrate the changes in service to various populations. Instead, the results show that little was published in the professional literature concerning populations being served by the public library and even less appeared about the specific efforts of children’s specialists.

Regular columns in the journals were not considered in this analysis, although columns are a source of current news about activities primarily in professional organizations. A case in point is Diana Young’s column in Public Libraries which began in 1976 and highlights children’s programs in public libraries on the “cutting edge” across the country.

Discussion of Populations Served

The earlier discussed data and responses from key professionals around the country are used here to discuss trends in services to target populations identified by public library children’s services.

What are ideal goals for children’s services and are they being met? One respondent expressed the belief that no discrepancy existed between ideal and actual services. Another expressed the frustrations of many in this way: “There is too much to do and not enough time and staff to accomplish it all. We are so busy with the immediacies of reference service and programs, that we have difficulty addressing the fundamental tasks of collection building, outreach, planning, and evaluating.”
Graph 5. Percentage of space devoted to children's services

- Public Libraries
- Wilson Library Bulletin
- Top of the News
- School Library Journal


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If Gilles is right—and many agree that she is—the children served are those who come into the library.

Which children do come to the library? “There has been no break in the connection of middle class, white, professional to the library—the habit is handed down from one generation to another.”15 True as this statement may be, other children were drawn into the library during the 1960s. Don Roberts was on the streets of Venice, California and later Minneapolis, Minnesota, attracting all types of children with different kinds of media. Stephen James was walking the streets of Cleveland like the Pied Piper leading young people with questions to the place where they could be answered. The “High John” project in Maryland was an attempt to provide a library “place” for residents of the black community. During the sixties, librarians did try to attract “other” children: blacks, Hispanics, the poor, and other minority groups beyond the “traditional” library users. However, the lasting effect seems to have been minimal.

Few of the respondents to the questionnaire referred to nonwhite, ethnic, or disadvantaged children; however, one reported statement on mission included “to serve diverse population segments equally with a variety of informational and recreational materials that reflect their unique needs.” Another individual stated that the library’s mission was to serve “new populations with different cultural backgrounds [who] desperately need materials from their own culture. We have set aside funds and purchased materials but they are not enough.”16 Milwaukee Public Library’s prime goal is to serve special groups—disabled, ethnic, and minority. Children are designated as a special group and are not mentioned within the goals to reach other special groups.17

Weibel18 attempts to analyze the characteristics of library outreach over this same period of library history and in 1976 stated that “outreach” was no longer in vogue.19 Her analysis, like that of many others,20 gives no mention of children’s services. The question goes unanswered as to whether children’s and adult services fit the same pattern or whether children’s services simply were not given consideration as possibly being distinctive. Note, for example, that Kingsbury21 proposes goals for children’s services and recommends “aggressive outreach” and the need to reach the “nonuser.” Also, Willett22 cites studies that credit children’s services with reaching a more representative population by class and race than do adult services.

The word outreach was used frequently in the responses of children’s specialists. However, the change in priority given to needs assessments of disadvantaged people is also clear in responses such as that of
Gilles mentioned earlier. Weibel quotes Clara Jones, former director of the Detroit Public Library, "libraries can no longer depend on reading guidance as the only major adult activity [emphasis added]." The service needed, she adds, is "securing direction through the maze of agencies and organizations." As children do not direct their own path through the "maze of organizations," children's librarians in the 1980s have assumed an advocacy role in working with persons in those agencies who are responsible for children.

In the 1970s the issue of survival of public library services to children first appeared on the scene. The New York State commissioner of education issued a position paper suggesting that the schools take overall library service to children and leave public libraries for adults. Social responsibility gave way to presumed fiscal responsibility and arguments such as duplication of services and saving money were used to support the commission's position. Pandemonium erupted within the public library. Children's services specialists were challenged to define the value and unique characteristics of their services. The defense of public library children's services rested in large part on the definition of its service to individual child users and the need to begin the lifelong learning process at the youngest possible age. Though a long time in coming, the development of output measures of public library service can be traced partially to this challenge. However, their application to children's services have not provided as yet clear definitions of populations served and unserved.

The New York proposal was successfully defeated. Still, school libraries had developed improved, if not adequate, materials collections and services. Public library interest in school-public library cooperation centered on how schools could help direct children to the public library. Dyer concludes that hope for positive results from cooperative efforts is misplaced, not because school librarians and children's librarians are communicating ineffectively, but rather because of the uncertain future of children's services. "Public library directors are less than enthusiastic about the future of children's services, and they are obviously in positions to influence budget allocations." Gerhardt reports that school superintendents and public library directors have made no attempt to establish lines of communication between themselves nor support others working to provide library services to students.

During the 1980s a process has begun which may succeed in establishing the public library as an agency serving all children. Once again children's services specialists are developing alliances with school librarians. In Long's history of children's services, a report of an edito-
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rial in *Library Journal* in 1895 states that through the school “children may be reached most easily, most directly, and most effectively.”

Today, children’s librarians are continuing to make the traditional school visits and to invite classes to visit the public library, a direct service to children. They are also creating linkages with educators and a wide variety of other professionals who have greater knowledge about child development and who are in direct contact with children on a regular basis. This networking is creating new, adult clientele for children’s services. The purposes for networking include:

— to educate other professionals about the value of incorporating library services with their services;
— to inform children about the existence and services of the public library by communicating through the myriad institutional structures, including the family, under which all children live;
— to extend the knowledge base of librarians by working in consort with other professionals who serve children; and
— to coordinate programs among all agencies serving children.

The need for this association is clear. “[Children’s] librarians have begun to feel confident that they can tackle any kind of problem—teaching reading, bibliotherapy, creative drama, etc.—whether or not they have any formal training. They are responding to needs they perceive in their patrons.”

Another approach to defining populations of children is by age level. “Our concern is that we have no way to measure what goals we should have to reach the various age groups.” Educators and psychologists have posited several developmental theories which have influenced children’s librarians’ selection and programming policies in public libraries. The process of learning to read, never considered relevant to library education before, is now a prime concern of children’s specialists. Connecticut, for example, established a Coalition on Literacy. Hektoen reports that the leaders of the effort had “forgotten” that the public library served children and invited the library to participate only after being reminded of the library and of the literacy needs of children as well as those of adults.

The current widespread public library emphasis on service to preschool children stems from recent information on literacy and early childhood development. Smardo has made a major contribution to the profession through her studies of early childhood development needs and library services. At the Dallas Public Library, Smardo implements
her findings and continues research to improve library service to this age group. Similar efforts are needed for all age groups.

The ideal age at which to begin reading to children is no longer believed to be three to five years but at birth or before. Virtually every response to the questionnaire of this study referred to the necessity to expand public library service to "toddlers" and preschoolers.

Baltimore County Director Charles Robinson states, "Anything preschoolers want they get [from his library]. If it's twenty copies of *Cat in the Hat*, we get it. There is no limit."

Robinson was able to state the percentage of his community which is of preschool age (14 percent), the largest identifiable population group known. He hopes that these favored preschoolers will grow up to be lifelong library users. The critics of Baltimore County are concerned that generalists, not specialists, are providing the service, but no one can quarrel with the priority the library gives to this age group.

The change in age level served and the new process of coalition building prompted many respondents to name parents as a major population to be served. In the 1960s parents were not welcome during story hour. Today librarians see themselves, in part, as role models for parents who have no experience in reading or storytelling to children.

On the other end of the age scale, many children's librarians have cut back their target population from eighth grade to age twelve. The influence of new theories in psychology and education resulting in the middle school concept calls for young adult materials and services to be offered to twelve to fourteen-year-olds.

Other populations mentioned by respondents were the institutionalized, handicapped, homebound, immigrants, migrants, latchkey children, unwed mothers, and children's organizations. The most frequently identified special population of children of the 1980s—in terms of atypical circumstances—was latchkey children. Children's librarians are responding to the needs of these clients by adjusting materials collection, program content, and hours of service. Several respondents, however, reported that latchkey children were described within their libraries as unwanted babysitting charges who were disruptive and noisy. Whatever the new conditions of child welfare, old arguments are
heard about noise and parent's responsibility not being the libraries' responsibility. It seems that service to these populations is assumed by children's services in spite of some resistance from other service areas in the library.

The latchkey child phenomenon is not new. In working class neighborhoods throughout this period of history, children were left on their own while parents worked. Although prior to the 1980s, children in "ghetto" and poor neighborhoods did seek out the public library to pass the time, librarians used other terms to describe them and their after-school activity in children's rooms. Currently, working mothers, or single parents of either gender, are common in middle-class communities, and the latchkey phenomenon has become institutionalized.

It is not clear how children's services librarians discover and draw new populations into the library. Can networking with other public agencies identify populations in need of library service? Are children's librarians, over time, able to identify a group of library users who have characteristics in common? Are the latchkey children using libraries representative of all classes and ethnic groups within the community? More information about this process would help future studies of populations served.

What are the traditional services and what makes them traditional? Respondents concurred on five traditional services for children: story hour, preschool story hour, reference and reader's advisory service, summer reading club, and a quality book collection. Most respondents felt that these services have not changed over the years except for the lowering of age level served.

Most responses defined the traditional services in terms of age level served. One person stated that "traditional" service before 1960 was to the white and middle class, but that after the sixties all classes and races were served. Another added that a more "diversified staff" from multicultural backgrounds helps libraries to come closer to the goal of reaching all children.

The unanimity among professional leaders that the above five services are traditional suggests that the traditional population served is literate. All of these traditional services began as book-related activities.

What are barriers to change within children's services? Some changes have taken place in the populations served over the past two and a half decades. The most lasting are in the age level of children served and the improved and increased networking with adults serving children.

Several respondents felt that children's services were being "used" by administrators to get media attention, political support, and better
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budgets. They felt that the goals of children’s services did not always benefit from serving political goals. Many of the respondents felt that public library administrators created the barriers to change. Limited budget, lack of trained librarians, shortened hours, and poor facilities were mentioned frequently. Several people mentioned the disinterest of library schools in recruiting students to children’s librarianship and their continued lack of recognition of bachelor’s degrees in education.

On the other hand, several strong statements were made in favor of generalists—all library staff being responsible for serving children. The “politicizing” of children’s services may have happened none too soon to save public libraries from oblivion. Some say capitalizing on the service provided to children has maintained and will continue to maintain the public library. Baltimore County Public Library staff have raised book circulation and registration among adults and children, and they feel that the test of good service and survival is to reach a significant percentage of the population. Obtaining better budgets as a consequence of large numbers of users keeps the institution alive, says Robinson.

Conclusions

The last twenty-five years have been turbulent ones for children’s services. Challenges have been made to the very existence of those services—the New York Commission’s position paper to cancel children’s services altogether; budget crises which have led administrators to cut back support; and the elimination of specialized children’s personnel in many libraries and library schools. Several dilemmas continue to face children’s services near the end of the twentieth century.

The first is bittersweet. Children’s librarians have clung to the goal of reaching all children and have made reasonably admirable strides in that direction. Yet, within the institution and the profession, they and children remain second class participants. White presents a feminist view of the situation. “Things pertaining to adults have greater social status than things pertaining to children. (There also may be an element of sexism here. In both education and librarianship those who work with children are more likely to be women than are those who work with adults).”32 White, like Robinson, believes public library directors are making a political (as well as an ethical) mistake in not recognizing the emotional appeal to the public and to politicians of serving children and students.

Children’s librarians continue their efforts but are often flagellated by their own colleagues. Others recognize the reality: “If [children’s]
Librarians were seen as department heads and/or specialists, and the gap between their salaries and the higher administrative ones lessened, we might keep more good people in the profession. But it is partly up to us...3 Still others simply say if you can’t beat them join them and they become adult librarians.

Libraries, of course, are not the only institutions to lag behind in the application of feminist theory to their operations. Harris,34 a scholar of women’s work, states: “Institutional discrimination can stem from the expectations, sometimes unconscious, that employers have of the work force, and culture and ideology can be socially learned. Both can color women’s choices.”35

The second dilemma is complex and related to the first. Several respondents to the questionnaire used in this study were able to state that from 40 to 60 percent of the children in their communities were reached by the public library. As a result of these impressive figures, children’s librarians are overwhelmed with the tasks to be performed. Perhaps the generalist concept is a viable answer. However, is it logical to discard the body of knowledge about child development, along with practices and theories about children’s library services and literature without great consideration, debate, and equally proven alternatives? How do public libraries resolve the discrepancy between expanded services and decreases in numbers of children’s librarians? How do they determine time and resource priorities between services to children in the library and to adults serving children outside the library?

The third dilemma arises from the characteristics of the population of children themselves. Several libraries stand out during this twenty-five-year-period for their exciting innovation and influence on the profession. It is already evident that Baltimore County is one. Hennepin County Public Library (HCPL) is another. However, their practice of giving other media formats equal billing with books has not influenced the rest of the country to the extent that the personnel practices of Baltimore County have. HCPL unquestionably has reached new populations with its media collection.36

Also during this same period mass media have taken over as the major source of story and information for American children. The publicity departments of large public libraries use the media and every popular culture figure available to entice children to come to the library.37 This population of children is a radically different one from the one of twenty-five years ago. Its need for public library service may be as great, but its knowledge of media is far beyond that of their peers of a generation ago. The media reduce differences in values and interests
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among its viewers. Children have much in common as they enter the twenty-first century. The differences in their ability to use and understand media are minimal compared to their differences in economic class and ability to read. What this means to children's services is not clear, but it may be the greatest challenge facing children's specialists at the end of the twentieth century.
# Appendix

*Library Literature* Subject Headings: 1958-1985

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4. Ibid., p. 152.
5. Field, Carolyn, to Alice Naylor, personal communication, 12 Jan 1986.
24. Long, *Public Library Service to Children*, p. 84.