

From Superstition to Science: The Role of Research in Strengthening Public Library Service to Children

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Superstition. The tendency to assign cause and effect relationships to events because of temporal association or connections that are supposed to exist between them.¹

YOUTH SERVICES IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES are often based on superstition. The psychologist, B.F. Skinner, introduced the term to mean the incorrect assignment of cause-and-effect relationships based on chance occurrences. Particularly if these chance occurrences happen more than once, it is possible to falsely expect these events always to happen together. For instance, the idea that the presence of good literature in the children's department causes children to be more discriminating readers may be better supported by superstition than science. It is likely that chance brings the reader and good literature together or that discriminating readers search out good literature or that the matching of child and book is more controlled by advice from a third person (parent, peer, or librarian) than by simple availability. We simply do not have enough research on choice of reading matter to make scientific judgments.

One might argue that—although most librarians might not admit to being superstitious—this confusion of cause and effect is not particularly bothersome. Superstition, however, can get in the way of effective management of libraries and it can inhibit the ability to adapt to a changing environment. If library personnel believe that good literature in the collection makes good readers, a decision might be made to increase the collection development budget and decrease the number of staff available to do readers' advisory services. If providing good litera-

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ture in the collection plus offering good help in using the collection results in good readers, then the decision to cut down on readers' advisory services will decrease the chance of developing good readers.

Another example of nonscientific behavior can be found in book selection. If one believes that good literature is identified exclusively through reading reviews, it is reasonable to ignore books not reviewed. This behavior can cause a problem particularly when publishers introduce new types of books into the market. Often, there is a lag between a change in the market and skilled reviewing, so the librarian may miss some good books because of the false assumption that reviews are the sole source for identifying good books. Superstition can impede good decision-making. If children's librarians depend on superstition, the profession is prone to attack from those who expect them to be accountable for their actions.

Most librarians try to avoid superstitious behavior, but the profession does not have strong theory, a large body of research, or established facts to protect it from superstition-based library management. Public library service to children is sometimes considered a "classic" success story. Public library service to children is well established and available throughout the United States. There are approximately 10,000 central, public libraries in this country.² It is reasonable to assume that each has individuals serving children. The range of public library service to children is great, from a children's corner in the Sidell (Illinois) Public Library serving a population of 600 and occupying a refurbished Laundromat, to the many suburban public libraries around the country with several professionals, multimedia collections, and extensive programs, summer reading extravaganzas, and teen activities. With all the effort expended on behalf of children's service nationwide, is it really necessary to worry about superstition? One might, in fact, argue that if library practice is superstitious, one need not be too concerned. We are successful so maybe superstition works just fine.

The problem is, however, that fine may not be good enough to keep the profession alive and that if superstition is replaced with a clear understanding of cause-and-effect, both professionals and clients will benefit. Children's services have traditionally depended on the attraction of children to story time, the assumed value of providing material support to students, and the excitement of the child who finds just the right book to take home to enjoy as its *raison d'être*. Many have fallen into the habit of believing that doing anything with kids in libraries is good, or more to the point, that it is good enough. The possibility for doing the *best* for children is ignored.

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This attitude is one of the reasons that research in children's service has been fairly infrequent and often on the periphery. If children's specialists are happy with superstition, they do not want to go to the trouble to look carefully at cause-and-effect and may find research challenging to their beliefs. It is the intention to diminish the role of superstition in children's librarianship and to optimize the contribution to children's lives that is the context for library research. As children's librarians are more and more likely to be asked to justify their work by tangible, identified benefits, research can aid in accountability for services and can be used in problem solving and planning.

Research is beginning to emerge in several areas that may effect improvement of children's service. In these areas, research is the antidote for superstition. A review of this research will be presented with emphasis on issues in librarianship that will shape the profession for the rest of the century. The remainder of the paper will deal with recommendations for improving the research climate in children's librarianship.

Overview

As pointed out by Mary Kingsbury, "librarians need not simply be content with the myriad descriptive reports of successful programs in individual libraries that make up so much of the professional literature."³ There is call for systematic research going back to the 1940s⁴ and it is about this time that research reports on children's service begin to appear. There are two excellent reviews of research in the area of service to children in public libraries and related fields. Readers are referred to an article by Marilyn Shontz in the Winter 1983 issue of *Top of the News* entitled "Selected Research Related to Children's and Young Adult Services in Public Libraries"⁵ and an article by Shirley Fitzgibbons in *Emergency Librarian* also in 1982 entitled "Research on Library Services for Children and Young Adults: Implications for Practice."⁶ These provide a clear review of research done up to the early 1980s. Both *Top of the News* and *School Library Media Quarterly* provide updates on current research through their regular research columns.

Instead of providing a general review of current research, this paper will focus on three areas of particular concern to children's specialists. A review of research in reading can provide implications for library science from an educational point of view. Research in the area of school/public library cooperation offers an example of research that impacts on the management of children's services. Lastly, research

dealing with measurement and evaluation of services and accountability can have significant information for the providers of youth services.

Reading Research

The National Commission on Excellence in Education starts its report by stating "our nation is at risk." The commission goes on to say that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."⁷ The commission recommends that we realign the curriculum, that we set higher standards for student and teacher performance, and that we give more financial support to schooling.⁸ In examining the library's role in serving a nation at risk, the American Library Association formed the Task Force on Excellence in Education. This task force identified four "realities" for libraries. They are: (1) learning begins before schooling, (2) good schools require good school libraries, (3) people in a learning society need libraries throughout their lives, and (4) public support of libraries is an investment in people and communities.⁹ One might change the second point to read "good students need good libraries," but otherwise there is little question about the soundness of these statements. They connect the work in libraries and resource centers to the educational health of the nation.

The promotion of reading and a commitment to producing a literate populace must be central to the provision of library services to children in the coming decade. *Becoming A Nation of Readers*¹⁰ provides an excellent summary of the issues in teaching and promoting reading. This research and its recommendations are a reaction to a decade of "skills" instruction in reading. This may be called the mathematical approach to reading in that it describes reading as a group of integrated skills and facts that need to be memorized and mastered. In this approach there is little or no emphasis on reading as an enjoyable or satisfying activity nor is there emphasis on reading comprehension.

In *Becoming A Nation of Readers* the authors make a number of recommendations that are of interest to librarians. First, they recommend that prereading activities that focus on reading, writing, and oral language are important.¹¹ This suggests that the traditional preschool storytime and other programs for young children do promote good reading habits. Another recommendation is that there should be support for school-aged students' continued growth as readers.¹² Such

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programs as summer reading clubs or reading games and contests help children to become successful readers.

The other area of recommendations relating to libraries is that children should be given time to read independently, that their books be interesting and comprehensible, and that schools should have well-stocked libraries.¹³ Again, these recommendations support good library service—particularly reader's advisory and collection development—and call attention to the link between library services to youth and reading success by students.

In another study of reading behavior, Adele Fasick surveyed children in Canada to determine how the public library met their recreational reading needs. Fasick found that users and nonusers were very similar as groups with the implication that nonusers might be convinced to use the library—and thus to do more reading—without any dramatic changes in library service.¹⁴

The research in reading is often contradictory, complex, and rarely related directly to library services, but the implications are clearly there. Good books help children read, readers' advisory and reading promotion will strengthen reading instruction, and traditional library programs support good academic programs. If Fasick is correct, it may also be assumed that children are liquid in their library use patterns and thus can be influenced to change from being nonusers to users of libraries. Research does suggest then that librarians can help children become better readers through collection development, individual reader's guidance, and library programming.

School/Public Library Cooperation

In 1970, the New York State Education Department issued its *Report of the Commissioner of Education's Committee on Library Development* that recommended that school libraries, not public libraries, should serve children through grade six. Since then, much of the research in this area focused on surveys to determine the level and nature of cooperation between the two types of libraries. Typical of such research was a project done by Shirley Aaron at Florida State University. She was particularly interested in institutional structures that would facilitate cooperation. The structures, as Aaron reported them, were administrative and political rather than service oriented.¹⁵

Most research on school and public library cooperation is like Aaron's work. It is descriptive and deals with specific cooperative activities. Esther Dyer, using a Delphi survey method, asked librarians about

their views on library cooperation. She concluded that "cooperation between school and public library services to children is not expected to be a priority program in either institution....The abstract ideal of cooperation is reinforced, but actual implementation seems implausible."¹⁶

In a study done in a suburban community, this author explored ways to make school/public library cooperation possible and effective.¹⁷ It soon became apparent that the school and the public library had different organizational structures. Because the school's structure involved many more types of individuals, it seemed important to involve staff in addition to the school media center teacher. Emphasis was given to involving the assistant superintendent of the school district, the district level media specialist, the building principal, the building media specialist, and the classroom teacher.

The project was an experiment to measure the effectiveness of classroom teachers in motivating fifth and sixth grade students to use the public library. The activities for teachers, students, and librarians were simple and included book talks, teacher-directed conversation, and self-monitoring by students. Ease of participation was determined to be a key component. Each group—the teachers, students, and librarians—was busy and so to assure ongoing commitment to cooperation the tasks were designed to be relatively easy. Of course, the last key component was that there would be some benefit to the activity, both to the institutions and the individuals involved. In the case of this study, teachers, media specialists, and librarians developed a basis for information exchange and resource sharing, and students did, indeed, use the public library more often and more effectively. The administrators were given data to show that the cooperative activities improved service to students and gave them an opportunity to show the community that the school and library, as institutions, were committed to improving the quality of library services offered to the students.

Research, in this case, indicated that cooperation probably would not happen under normal conditions. If it is determined that it is important for youth specialists to cooperate, a stratified plan must be developed to consider organizational and individual needs. The plan must include relatively simple activities which have a measurable impact on student behavior.

Measurement and Accountability

In the years to come, youth librarians will need to become more adept at justifying the benefits of special service to youth. This is the age of accountability. Children's librarians are particularly ill-equipped to

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meet this challenge as there is not a large body of research to build upon. Mary Jo Lynch points out that children's specialists do not define basic terms such as children's service as compared to young adult service, nor do they use standard measures when collecting statistics.¹⁸ Since funding and support are likely to depend upon output measures and planning process activities, it is important to make sure that these measurement activities are used within children's services and that they accurately reflect children's librarians' responsibilities. The Wisconsin Division for Library Services has taken a step in this direction by funding a pilot project to explore the use of output measures for children's services.¹⁹

The purpose of the Wisconsin project was to see how techniques from the *Output Measures for Public Libraries* could be adapted for children's services, to determine how librarians could use outputs to measure service, and to observe how children respond to such data gathering.²⁰ Only a preliminary report from this project is available, so it is unclear at this time what adaptations of output measures are needed. Zweizig, Braune, and Waity do suggest, however, that separate measurement of children's services is appropriate and that particular effort to measure juvenile outputs during the summer in addition to the school year may be important.²¹

It is important to note that the output measures now available are not the only, nor necessarily the best, way to measure service. More research is needed to develop valid, reliable, efficient ways to measure children's services. It is important to develop a uniform statistical process that is consistent over time and comparable among libraries. It must be recognized that it will be difficult to evaluate any innovative project, no matter the area, if a means is not developed to measure the effects of innovation. Research provides the foundation for change. Without a strong foundation, innovative efforts will be susceptible to collapse and dependent on luck rather than intellect for success.

In an attempt to build the *best* library environment for youth, educational research can be used to sharpen the focus and assist in designing programs that match the needs of children as learners. In managing the library environment, it is important to explore and test ways to cooperate both within and beyond the library so that once built, the best library environment will survive. It is important, too, to encourage a commitment from library educators and practitioners to measure both basic and innovative services so that it will be possible to begin to assert the value of library service to youth. Research is the tool that will help sustain children's specialists through the development of improved services.

Building a Favorable Research Climate

As is demonstrated in the previous section, careful research can relate directly to library practice. Research can diminish the role that superstition plays in providing public library service to children. However, it is still relatively rare that research is undertaken to examine service issues in children's librarianship rather than children's literature. It is perhaps even more unusual for practitioners to be aware of research findings or to use these findings to improve service. To change this situation, a favorable research climate must be developed within the profession. Library services exist in a political arena where information is power. Solid research can help to ensure support for service to youth and help to provide for the fair distribution of information and services to youth. Research can help to sort out which services, both traditional and innovative, are the best to offer. The quality of service offered makes a difference. If usable access points are not provided, if trained and sympathetic youth specialists are not available, and if strong collections are not developed, some children will lose the chance for excellence that is their right. Research will help to identify high quality programs.

There are several specific areas that can be addressed to improve the quantity, quality, and applicability of research in children's services. The first is general and has to do with attitudes toward the profession. The concept that change is possible and desirable must be accepted and children's librarians must be ready to take risks to bring about change. Professionals must be willing to accept responsibility when things go wrong and accept the inconvenience that often goes along with change. In fact, the role of researcher must be accepted with a pioneer spirit. As such, children's librarians are called upon to have individual commitment, versatility, luck, courage, and intellect. As with the original pioneers who formed communities—"coalitions" in eighties' jargon—for health, safety and social context, children's specialists need to work together to endure the current elements of nature: budget cuts, fewer and fewer professional colleagues, and lack of administrative support for children's services. Without this energy and openness, research will remain the domain of doctoral students and library educators and will have little impact on the profession. Cooperation between practitioners and academics will improve the quality of the research done and help ensure that the results of research will be usable.

The second area of concern is that institutions and professional associations give support for research. This, of course, is primarily in the form of financial support but also could include time, space, and consent to take on research as part of library service. There are some

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research grants available from ALA and its youth divisions²² and there are many federal and private foundations that support research activities; however, more support is needed from state agencies and state library associations. Librarians are reasonably successful fund raisers and are dependable in dues support of library associations. Perhaps some funds should be earmarked to support research.

Support, however, goes beyond financial issues. Individual libraries must be willing to sponsor research and individual librarians must be given time and encouraged to do research. Library educators are probably the only people in the profession who have both time to do research and a reward system that supports research. These few library educators provide the backbone of our corps of researchers. Public libraries may allow research but few actually reward or expect it. If public library directors wish to see improvement in children's services, they must encourage research rather than simply tolerate it.

The next area of concern has to do with weaknesses in the technical design of research in children's services. Ten years ago the primary tool of research in libraries was survey research.²³ It has become obvious that there are weaknesses in this method and that there are innovations in data analysis which make it possible to expand research possibilities. The advent of statistical packages for use on microcomputers makes fairly high powered analysis of data possible at a reasonable cost. Survey research will be enhanced through improved access to statistical analysis and experimental work will be more feasible if the problems of data analysis are reduced. It will be necessary to expand horizons to include a multivariuous approach to research.

The weakness in any research technique now available is that the investigator begins with almost no valid, normed, and reliable forms of measurement. At this point it is necessary to coordinate efforts to design instruments that meet a high standard of acceptable performance. It may be wise to borrow from other disciplines (education, psychology, sociology, etc.) and adapt more established questionnaires, inventories, and tests to the library environment. Researchers must take the responsibility to field test and refine surveys and other measurement tools and begin the practice of replication of studies to provide a way to generalize results of research.

Another problem is inherent in doing research with children. When doing research with children as subjects, researchers have particular legal and ethical responsibilities for protecting the rights of children that are different and more stringent than those that are applicable in studying adults. This may be one reason that researchers have chosen to work with children's books rather than with the children themselves.

While federal regulations involving the protection of children as subjects have become less rigorous in the past few years, most universities and school districts expect researchers to obtain parental consent when doing any formal research with children, including survey research. This consent must be informed, and so often the act of consent may alter attitudes and behavior of parents and the children studied. Also, the research must mask results to protect the privacy of the children studied. For instance, if a public library wishes to collect information on children identified through the local schools, no information on individual student behavior can be provided to the cooperating schools or teachers. This can have a dampening effect on cooperation. Librarians have an obligation to provide for confidentiality, and this factor must be considered in research design. In dealing with the issues of instrumentation—research design and research ethics—librarians need to be creative and maintain high standards of performance to produce research that will be useful.

The last area for concern relates to the implementation of research rather than to the design issues addressed earlier. The first concern is to find and nurture skilled researchers in the field. Although this may be the primary responsibility of library educators, it is currently acknowledged that there are relatively few library schools in existence with strong master's programs in children's services. As a result, in many states there is a critical shortage of qualified librarians for children's positions. A similar problem of recruitment exists at the doctoral level. If people are not trained and interested in research in children's service, the research will not be done. It is vital to attract students to Ph.D. programs who use children's services topics for dissertation research and will then provide leadership in the field and continue to design research after their doctoral studies are completed.

The other area of concern related to implementing research projects is the need for researchers to publish and disseminate information on their projects. There are few journals that will accept formal research reports in the area of children's service. Other vehicles must be identified for sharing research ideas and for providing a forum for critical analysis of research results. In addition, all librarians have the responsibility to be intelligent consumers of research reports. Practitioners must react, question, and test reported research results.

In summary, then, there are four areas that can be identified in which there needs to be improvement in the research climate in children's librarianship. First, there must be an energetic and determined demand for research in the field. Financial and job support for research and researchers must be obtained. Efforts must be made to improve the

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experiment process for studying children. Responsible steps must be taken to implement actual research projects. Without careful consideration of these four areas, it is unlikely that research in children's service will be strong enough and varied enough to impact the field.

Conclusion

It is very comfortable to stay the same. Superstition-based librarianship has allowed the profession to establish tradition in the field. It is possible to be good librarians and to provide good library service based on this vague understanding of cause and effect; however, the capability to continue to justify decisions based on traditional values and to provide good library service to children is being questioned from both within and outside the profession. If library service is to be improved, it is necessary to replace superstition with science or at least to determine which aspects of traditional children's service are based upon superstition and which are not. Research is the tool to aid in this sorting out process. The desire to contribute to children's lives and a responsibility to use institutional resources in the most productive way provides the context for library research. Research is a tool to improve public library service to children. The tool must be developed to perfection and then put to use.

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