The Children's Librarian

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The Children's Librarian as Viewed by Adults Served by Children's Services

Who are the adults using, wanting and interested in public library services to children? What proportion of users do they represent today in library children's rooms? Do librarians perceive the effects of present-day stresses, priorities, understanding and indifference of adults on public library services, both in terms of access and support? Are librarians aware that the field of public policy relating to children has reemerged?[1] Answers to questions such as these need to be incorporated in an examination of children's services, present and potential, and of the "ideal" children's librarian.

The adults using children's services in Connecticut public libraries are not unlike adults elsewhere. They are parents, teachers (particularly from early childhood education centers), college students, professional workers from community agencies and service organizations, artists (including commercial artists, writers and film-makers), grandparents, and adults seeking beginning-level information or recollecting childhood joys. Some adults are sophisticated library users while others are unfamiliar with the library environment.

Current community profiles in Connecticut show a continuing trend away from centers of the suburbs and established neighborhoods. In the face of continuing economic and energy problems, planners for library services must look for ways to serve children in the growing outer rings of the suburban population. The exodus from the cities has slowed, but no significant reversals have yet been seen in Connecticut.

An analysis by the staff of the Central Children's Room of the New Britain (Connecticut) Public Library shows that roughly one-half of the questions asked in children's rooms are asked by adult users. Is this normal or unusual? Will it continue? What is the proportion in other libraries? Inquiries to other Connecticut libraries willing to respond will continue to be made, but what implications will the answers have for us?

At my request, Connecticut children's librarians have been sending lists of questions that adults ask in their libraries. This information should be regularly documented for continuing evaluation of services and for assessment of needed change or development. The questions show that adults clearly expect information about a gamut of materials, and want to find these materials available.

Adults want to find books which stress "situational materials" for young children, and for children in school, books which reflect individual interests and special needs. Adults request realia: toys, games, 3-dimensional objects such as puppets, costumes and musical instruments.[2] Requests for such material for young children are accompanied by questions about how to make them, and why and how to purchase them. Queries are made about games for older children, particularly for children who are visually handicapped, retarded or emotionally disturbed. Films, filmstrips and audio recordings are sought for a variety of reasons. Adults want information on child development, such as socialization (i.e., play needs and sibling relationships) and learning to read, as well as the means and materials in many media formats to facilitate these processes. Adults seek data about community and state resources for children's special needs and for generally available entertainment, education (especially nursery schools), and cultural opportunities. Adults ask about library programs for children, and for guidance regarding children's periodicals and literature.

Children's librarians seem to be viewed as media specialists, and as possessing information that satisfies various adult needs. The reference questions mentioned above are only indicators; performance measurements are lacking. Adult expectations obviously reflect existing services, which in turn mirror the impact of continuing education programs and the concern of children's librarians to serve pertinent information needs for and about the child. The state library's continuing education in children's services program emphasizes: (1) identification of children's needs and focus not only on services that meet those needs, but also on providing information to adults concerned with children; (2) community analysis; (3) development of community agency relationships; (4) use of community resources; (5) having an understanding of child development which

enables proper use of appropriate materials and services; and (6) understanding the implications of the reading process.

Moving from the profile of Connecticut adult library users and their questions, I turned to informal conversations with adults. The question "What do you perceive as being the ideal children's librarian's qualities, qualifications, training and performance?" was asked of adult library users who were acquaintances with children of various ages, and colleagues from other professions concerned with children, including child development specialists, educators of teachers, reading consultants, child psychologists, social workers, mental health specialists, early childhood education consultants, pediatricians, and therapists. The libraries which these people use differ in size of community, kind and amount of materials, size and attractiveness of the physical plant, sophistication of services, professional competence and number of children's room staff, and in degree of support and understanding from the library administration.

The universality of the responses was a surprise. Two focal points emerged:

1. Expressions that the "ideal" children's librarian should know both the content and the impact of the library materials. In this regard, the "ideal" children's librarian should resemble the "ideal" teacher.
2. Strong feelings about the attitudes in libraries — that the "ideal" children's librarian needs to "like children"; "respect children and adults"; "be able to interact with different kinds of children, at different ages, and to see sharing and interaction with children as a continuing major priority"; "know personally the excitement of learning, recognize that learning is lifelong, that all children and adults have the capacity to learn"; "be able to see a situation from different points of view"; "use many materials and methods to get children to experience"; "be interested in helping children to think, i.e., to carry through with a thought"; "be able to provide the child with creative experiences"; "care about helping children who cannot read well"; "be nice to parents whose children cannot read and suggest ways to help them"; "make access to the collection always possible while the library is open — that is, no programming activity should limit access to the collection."

Interviewers noted that the "ideal" children's librarian needs to recognize that condescension is implicit as well as explicit — that adults are aware of facial gestures, body stance, lack of interest, inattention to needs, and tones of voice in libraries, as these apply to themselves, their children and others.

Other comments dealt with the performance and planning required

for library services: extend out-of-library services since children usually require adult transportation to the library; develop wider staff resources, such as volunteers (both older children and adults), to augment existing services; develop graphics to cue parents about the acceptability of touching, playing with and enjoying library materials, as well as to indicate that it is normal for a child to want to take out a favorite title many times; determine the real needs and desires of the community and provide a variety of materials (not just books) to fulfill them; broaden the patron's awareness of local resources to encompass the many different agencies in the full range of children's services, and make an effort to develop multiagency cooperation; find ways to effect interlibrary cooperation with materials and programming that involve children's competency in writing, film-making and book discussions, and include parental support program activities.

Adults do perceive the librarian's interest in their children and praise specific helping skills, yet the informal discussions elicited a dichotomy between the way librarians view themselves and the way adults concerned with children perceive librarians that has sobering aspects. These adult perceptions must be confronted. They also indicated that the "ideal" children's librarian needs to know how to write program objectives with regard for effective community public relations, do cost analysis, and put into regular practice interagency relations in program development.

In conclusion, some general implications should be clearly understood. First, it is vital for librarians to know both the content and the impact of library materials. This implies that the "ideal" children's librarian must realize that a child's development of cognitive structure has a direct effect on the child's learning ability, and librarians must know how that cognitive structure is developed. The librarian should know not only the theories of Piaget's stages of development but also the specific implications of these theories in terms of using appropriate materials and activities. Effective performance requires this. It would be a delusion to continue to ignore this training as a requirement for library school graduation. The fact that the child is developing is what makes services for children unique. It is necessary for the "ideal" children's librarian to understand the process of reading in order to be an effective supporter of children and parents. Continuing education is needed for further opportunities to develop content knowledge, and to learn ways of increasing public library effectiveness in designing program services and analyzing their impact. Secondly, the patron clearly needs sound humanistic development in the librarian.

These comments reflect not only on the children's services staff, but on the library staff as a whole. While training can develop skills in

interpersonal relations and in the writing of job descriptions, personnel and performance evaluations, eradication of attitudes reflecting condescension and indifference toward patrons requires more than the mere presence of the "ideal" children's librarian.

The total of adult perceptions indicates roles, goals, services and materials. Children are dependent on adults for a long period of their lives, and they depend on adult perceptions. The children's librarian should strive to be an active, informed supporter of aiding children to become competent readers conversant with ideas and materials. Children should be helped toward an ability to express themselves in various media, enjoying stimulating interaction with adults as well as with their peers.

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