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Goals of Public Library Services for Children

Some years ago, Lowell Martin wrote an article on cooperation between school and public libraries which he subtitled: "Or, Why Don't We Have Any?" It was not only eye-catching and provocative, but a very reasonable question to ask. A subtitle for this discussion of goals of children's services of public libraries might be: "Are We Sure We Have Any?" However, I would not do that because I believe that when conferees have heard all of the speakers and discussions planned, and when readers later have read all the papers, they will be convinced that, indeed, there are goals. If there were not, we could scarcely now all be so convinced of the importance of children's services that we would be gathered here, and there could not be the strong thread of agreement running through the presentations which, I predict, will be discernible. It is only in individual programs of service to children, perhaps only in the minds of individual librarians, that the question may not be satisfactorily answered. The most painful question is not whether librarianship has goals for public library service to children; it is whether or not each person responsible for providing that service has recognized, measurable, articulated goals for service. I think they do not.

There are several reasons why goals for children's services (and as I use that term throughout, I shall mean children's services in public libraries) are not often discussed. First, no matter how tough the budget crunch, or how minimal or thoughtless the planning of those services, no one ever says, "We are eliminating (or even cutting back) services to children." Instead, one hears, "We have found better delivery systems

for service to the whole community," or "We are cutting out the frills," or "We are reducing the number of staff who don't provide direct service." I do not intend to suggest that all such cuts have bad effects on the service actually given to children. A couple of years ago I asked a children's librarian in a public library system about the problems the system had had regarding the reduction of the number and status of children's consultants. She said, "Well, I'm sorry for those people, of course, but now I think I may be better able to get on with what I'm doing." When I asked why, she said, "Because I won't have to spend all my time preparing reports and getting approvals."

The reply of the children's librarian suggests another reason why we do not consider the goals of children's services often enough. For better or worse, children's librarians are so well recognized for their unique interests and abilities that their judgments on what services to children should be are seldom questioned. Because they tend to work in isolation, they seldom experience the cuts and thrusts, wins and losses, and the special joy of frequent discussions with colleagues who share their same interests and backgrounds. By the same token, they may develop an overly reverential deference to the person in their system or library community recognized as the defender or spokesperson for library service to children. Even I have recently been the object of such deference, and only the memory of my own irreverence for Kahlil Gibran (O, speak to us of children's services, O Prophet; O, speak of filmstrips; O, speak of storytelling, O Prophet) has helped me to keep me sane.

Our rich tradition of leadership in public library service to children has developed because of people of courage and vision from earliest history, but we have too often attempted to adopt rather than adapt their vision. With the idea that we have inherited their courage, we have exercised it as intransigence or just bad temper. Ironically, the respect that librarianship for children has always received has generally allowed us to do these things. The conclusion, "But she's the children's librarian," has been used to compensate for the fact that "she" may be crazy, disorganized, unable to open a window or read a budget; and if she should be unable to work effectively with the children in the community, even that can be excused (because the children have changed) — nevertheless, the collective "we" say, "She certainly knows books!"

In a talk about goals, my emphasis on personality may seem misplaced, but I suggest that almost all the recognized goals for children's services have political bases (and politics is people), and have been accepted not just because of the toughness of their proponents, but because of their charm. It is our latter-day interpretation of the dicta of early leaders that has robbed them of their humanity. I worked once with a

children's librarian who was an excellent storyteller, and who was even able to hold the interest of preschool children with stories like "The Poppy-Seed Cakes" without so much as a book jacket to distract the children from her oral interpretation. I asked her once why she never used picture books and she replied, "Miss God [her library school professor] said not to." Since she had gone to school at a time when the appropriateness and level of art of picture books for children were not as rich as they are today, there was probably good reason for that dictum, but to hold to it in a later era seems not only questionable but probably not at all what Miss God had in mind. In my own experience, I recall an early supervisor who cautioned me never to touch a child. I obeyed that dictum for a long time, or thought I did. But a day came when I glimpsed myself reflected in the door of the library with my arm around a child as he showed me an illustration from a book he had just borrowed. In a flash (or perhaps in a moment crystallized from a long period of growing awareness), I realized that my gesture was natural for me, as my supervisor's restraint was natural for her. This supervisor might still be shocked, but if she taught me well, her dictum should be satisfied in helping me to make my own decisions and to move, work and think in my own way.

It may be that the guidance and firmness which most of us received in generous abundance from training school teachers (later, library science teachers) and early supervisors have inhibited our decision-making and goal-setting skills. It may even be that the tradition of strong leadership among coordinators and supervisors has further inhibited the development of those skills. However, if that were true, or if those were the only inhibitions, we would be seeing today the setting and implementation of excellent goals for children's services in public libraries, because we have moved away from those strong traditions. The fact is that goals are no clearer than they ever were; they are perhaps even less clearly articulated. The tradition of success and continuity has had its effect: in not having to justify initiation of children's services, we have failed to review and revise the goals which brought that service into existence, and we have arrived at what has been described as a mindless time of doing out of habit what we think is good, dropping what is not popular or relevant, and becoming less expert and experienced in the areas where children's librarians of earlier days made their most significant contributions.

Mindlessness — it is a harsh term for a sick condition, and I cringed when I first heard it applied to children's services today. Nevertheless, it has echoed in my mind as I have had several recent experiences with librarians working with children in public libraries. One I will share: I

telephoned one of our branch libraries recently to ask exactly what equipment the children's librarian wanted for a program, why that rental of equipment was necessary, and what the nature of the program was. In the librarian's absence, one of her colleagues informed me coolly that she was a very good children's librarian and that if she said she needed something, she did, and if she planned a program, it would be a good one. Admiring the loyalty but still needing the information, I asked that the children's librarian return my call. When she did, she started out by saying that it certainly had not occurred to her in planning the program that a system like The Chicago Public Library would not have the equipment, and that she should not be blamed for the system's shortcomings. Fair enough; however, she continued by charging that no one in the administration understood what good programming was or how hard people like her worked. Eventually, and I think against her better judgment, she answered my questions and I was able to present enough justification for her request that it could be honored. I found myself thinking again of Frances Clark Sayers's essay, "The Belligerent Profession," in which she praises the intransigence that is vital to innovation and success, and deplors the lackluster air of acceptance which she saw as characteristic of too many librarians.¹ I agree with her, but I do not believe that belligerence must replace tact, reason or competence in order to achieve good results.

While goals have to be personal (in the sense that they should be based on the needs of the people they are intended to serve) and should be developed from the individual commitments and drives of those who will implement them, they are eventually best stated in less personal terms, and need to be measured in some objective ways. Even when formal goals do not exist, the response to questions about why a specific book or series is not in a library collection, or why storytelling is no longer a regular part of the children's library program, cannot be answered satisfactorily by the statement that the children's librarian is competent and therefore should not be questioned.

There are reasons beyond the field of librarianship which have brought us to this time of mindlessness or assurance or fear or assertiveness — or, as Dickens might have seen it, a time of all those things mixed together. Social change is one of them. We always have had and always will have social change, but it has some interesting implications for children's services in public libraries today. Before *outreach* was a word, much less a rallying cry or (later) a cliché, library service reached out to children. Librarians went where the children were — the parks, the schools, the streets, the isolated rural crossroads. And the outreach was warmly and widely directed to children as students, children as the best

links to immigrant families, children as participants in culture, children as people. I have never seen a reference in the literature before World War II to the idea that we should provide service to children because they would become future taxpayers, who could some day control our destinies and our library programs.

In the 1960s, when the idea of outreach was in its liveliest phase, the patterns followed were almost identical to the ones which children's librarians had set decades earlier. I remember reading in a library periodical about ways to win the support and discover the needs of people in a poverty area: get in touch with the teachers and the community leaders, invite them to the library by offering some program or exhibit they want, provide coffee even if you have to do it out of your own pocket, and then speak briefly to them, but allow plenty of time for discussion. Listen to them, said the article, and base your library program on what they say they need and want. It was and is good advice, but it was the same advice I had followed, instinctively, more than a decade earlier — and I was certainly not the first to do so. Service to children was indeed the classic success of the American public library, and its goals, as well as its techniques, were the classic means to achieve success, important not for its own sake but because success means accomplishment of purpose.

As outreach programs flourished, however, a new breed of librarian administered them. These librarians worked with children, yet did not think of themselves as children's librarians, and in many instances were philosophically and administratively separated from the mainstream of children's services. With some notable exceptions, persons responsible for service to children remained aloof from the guidance and supervision of these programs; the results were that the outreach librarians rediscovered goals and reinvented techniques for service and that those goals and techniques were seldom identified with the traditional service provided to children. Am I concerned about who should get the credit for all of this? No, I mention it merely because this is one of several examples where service to children was actually provided and usually provided well, but where that aspect of service was never recognized as being under the traditional rubric of children's services. The recognized goals were usually stated so rigidly that outreach programs often reached around them rather than toward them, and did not openly recognize them at all.

Similarly, some aspects of library service to children have customarily been provided by other parts of the library, yet the goals have seldom acknowledged this. Telephone reference service supplied from a general or adult information area, selection and provision of nonprint media, and administration of the necessary services of registration and circulation

are often dismissed, as though our goals and services were operative within time and space boundaries. I have always been intrigued to know that there are children's librarians who make no secret of their resentment of the occasional incursions into their rooms or use of their collections by librarians from other areas, but who manage to go off duty blithely leaving those rooms and collections unattended or attended only by formerly unwelcome colleagues. It is a puzzlement.

Another puzzlement is the question of the relationship between public library service to children and schools. Here, too, there is a tradition that is cause for pride. It was children's librarians who first concerned themselves with the provision of library service to schools. Ways of doing so ranged from exhaustive programs of registration and either storytelling or providing book-talks throughout every school in the area, to the packing and sending of boxes of books for classroom use, to developing many strong relationships and programs of service for the teachers who became library stalwarts. The pattern became a little more mixed when school libraries began to develop. While children's librarians were among the first to become school librarians and to enrich those libraries with their traditions, ideals, techniques and goals, the loss has been in what the public library's program of children's service has become in relation to the schools.

No one should expect the relationship (or program of service) with a school which has its own library, however meager or grand, to be the same as that with a school which doesn't. Yet children's librarians have tended to go in one of two directions: either they have accepted a role as outside consultants or kibitzers to the work of the school library personnel, or they have simply ignored it and gone about their business as usual, i.e., their business as it used to be. Instead of seeing themselves and their services in relation to the school and its program of curriculum and instruction, they have too often settled for seeing themselves in relation only to the library program of the school. Examples of this are easy to cite. The perennial headaches of school assignments — from the horrors of fruitless searches for information about the green scapular, to the placation of parents who are more concerned than their children about the need for citations in seven different media when the topic is the Panama Canal crisis — have been handed back to the school librarian, often (but seldom realistically) with the expectation that he or she will see that everything is straightened out. It is not that simple. Somewhere, a continuing link of communication needs to exist between the public library and the administration of the school, and to exist at all levels — branch library to neighborhood school, system to system. Schools are important not because they are sites for other libraries which have goals and pro-

grams basically similar to those of the public library, but because they are a place in society where the children whom public libraries are destined to serve receive much of their education.

The problem in regard to schools, as in regard to other aspects of society with which public libraries' children's services must deal, seems to be that when the schools themselves are active in areas which have traditionally been those of the public library, the public library has responded with not dynamism but withdrawal. "There's no need for me to tell stories any more; the kids get them in school," says the children's librarian, adding to sympathetic audiences that the quality of the story or the telling may not be as good — and that is reason enough for dropping a tradition. Thus, children's library programs have focused on day-care centers, nursery schools or camps. It is easier to find a new site than to attract and hold children's interest in the face of competition and distraction. The number of enthusiastic responses to the offerings of service from children's librarians in public libraries is so great and from so many sources — parents, teachers and senior adults, as well as the children themselves — that service to them can be demanding and satisfying enough to cause us to forget that this service may not achieve our goals. Some aspect of the goal-setting process must be concerned with priorities, and priorities must take into account the need to reach as many children as possible to give them an awareness of what libraries are all about. Special services may be devised and offered to children with special needs or those in unusual environments, but the goals should not be set without a clear idea of the need for some broad-based program of information about children's services for the entire public.

The word *information* has become a loaded one for those concerned with library service to children. In this respect, also, we have shrunk back rather than moved forward, as our goals might have us do. Because the provision of information services, data banks, referrals, etc. have tended to make libraries seem lopsidedly but resolutely committed to the presentation of facts rather than the encouragement of pleasure or even the development of culture, we have reacted by eschewing the idea of information as an important product of the public library. As I have said before, I believe the more reasonable approach is to stress that, for children, the provision of pleasure, encouragement of reading, enlargement of vocabulary, and development of a sense of fantasy or even of a sense of humor are informational services which the public library can provide in a unique, nonthreatening environment. We ought to take every opportunity to say this to the information-mongers who need to be reminded that personal development is the most significant kind of information process. Incorporation of this idea into our stated goals would put into perspective the

true and natural relationship between library service to children and the great information programs of our day.

No discussion of goals is complete without reference to some means of measuring their accomplishment. Measurement should be kept in mind throughout the entire goal-setting process. Sometimes, this results in choosing goals that can be measured readily, e.g., presenting a set number of programs or achieving some stated amount of circulation or use, but that at least is better than setting a goal which can then be discussed happily and theoretically because there is no reasonable way to measure progress toward it, much less achievement of it. The goals relating to quality are, of course, the more difficult ones to set and to measure. An interesting example is the incorporation of books of minimal quality into library collections with the intent that they will be used as stepping-stones to something better, with no clear idea of how measurement of that development of taste will be accomplished. In the same way, we need cleaner statements of the success or failure of everything that is tried. Our recent history is strewn with abandoned projects which have been dropped by intuition, just as they were too often begun by intuition.

Having goals and measuring progress toward them are essential to the survival of children's services in public libraries. The development of them is not the esoteric or fanciful activity of people who like to play around with ideas or words. Rather, the development should be personal, in the sense that individuals will have to make the commitment and implement the goals, but social in the sense that the goals need to be stated in broad terms considering the audience. As the song says about peace — goals begin with me, but that is only the beginning.

REFERENCE

1. Sayers, Frances Clark. "The Belligerent Profession." In *American Library Philosophy: An Anthology*. Hamden, Conn., Shoe String Press, 1975.