



Materials to Meet Special Needs

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“THE LIBRARY SYSTEM serves individuals and groups with special needs. . . . Service to these individuals and groups requires . . . specialized materials.”¹ That statement in the *Standards for Public Library Systems* reflects professional aims and aspirations; this paper will try to determine to what extent those aims and aspirations are, in turn, reflected in practice, and what problems are encountered by libraries in their effort to fulfill them. The topic, however, must be further limited to be manageable. The theme of this issue of *Library Trends* might seem to suggest the elimination of individuals, but they cannot be banished; they are, in fact implicitly admitted by the issue editor’s broad definition which includes socio-economic as well as organized groups. Since everyone is a member of such a group, and since everyone has at some time a need which seems to him special, an arbitrary choice of categories must be made. The four selected for consideration here are: (1) the disadvantaged, including the functionally illiterate, (2) the reader whose native tongue is not English, (3) the partially sighted, and (4) the older reader.

The composite questionnaire sent to seventy-two libraries to supply information for several papers in this issue (see Phinney, “Trends and Needs” below) could contain only one question from each contributor. Although the question for this paper was stretched to the utmost by use of tabular form, what could be asked was obviously limited and interpretation of replies correspondingly difficult. For example, when a librarian reports no problems in supplying materials for the partially-sighted, does he mean the supply is adequate, that the community has few partially-sighted citizens, or that the library makes no special effort to serve this group? Such questions cannot be answered with certainty, although in some cases the existence of a potential clientele can be deduced from census figures.

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Among the four special needs presented to questionnaire respondents, that of supplying materials for the disadvantaged ranked first as a problem, not only among total responses but even in every population group. Of forty-nine libraries which replied, thirty-nine recognized the problem, and twenty-nine gave it first rank among the four. Furthermore, the largest number (thirty-eight) noted that provision of special materials for the group had increased since 1954. Only five of the libraries reported written policy statements for the selection of such materials, with one other noting that a statement is being prepared. Fifteen noted special budget provision for materials to serve disadvantaged citizens, and fourteen reported separate collections. Two libraries purchased all their materials for this group from special funds and kept them in special collections; others with special collections drew also on general collections, but only two reported using general library resources for over half the materials needed for this service.

In an effort to identify those libraries whose communities might have the largest number of disadvantaged and functionally illiterate citizens to serve, census figures for average number of school years completed have been used. Admittedly, this figure is inadequate, and not only because it is out of date. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that cities which, in 1960, showed an average of less than ten years of school attendance for their adult populations may be faced with serious problems of literacy. Purists may object to the inclusion of the functionally illiterate adult among the disadvantaged. It is true that not all disadvantaged Americans are functionally illiterate, and that not all functional illiterates are disadvantaged. Nevertheless, illiteracy is one of the more important of the disadvantages which, together, are used to identify the multi-problem group.

Ten cities in the sample had, in 1960, an average of less than ten years of education for their adult populations. Of these, all but two had populations of over 250,000, and all but four populations of over 500,000. Seven of the ten ranked supplying materials for disadvantaged and functionally illiterate adults as the most difficult among the categories presented. An eighth gave first place to a combination of two categories—Spanish-speaking illiterates. It is of special interest that respondents from two libraries reported they had encountered no problem. The two also reported no policy statements, no special collections, and no special budget allocations. Only two of the ten libraries have policy statements for the selection of such materials,

although a third statement is in preparation. Four have special collections purchased from special budget allocations.

Like the nation as a whole, libraries have only recently begun to give major emphasis to the needs of the disadvantaged. This is true even of those which have made special efforts to serve inner-city neighborhoods. Lowell Martin has pointed out that, in general, it is the motivated, better-educated, middle-class-oriented who have been the chief users of the service libraries offer.² The new effort to reach a broader group poses problems as staggering as they are complex. In terms of materials, these problems are: availability, criteria for selection, adjustments in policy and practice, and definition and clarification of objectives.

This order appears, and is, illogical. It is, however, roughly chronological in that it reflects the order in which librarians have approached the need. They cried, at first, that there were no easy reading materials at the adult level. When such materials began at last to appear, they began to try to develop criteria for judging them. Many libraries have still, according to questionnaire responses, failed to re-think selection policies to accommodate the new materials or to adjust practices in order to accommodate them physically within the library. And it seems probable that many of these flounderings are related to uncertainty about objectives in the entire effort. How can the profession change policies and adjust practices, develop criteria and communicate needs to publishers and authors, unless it has determined beforehand what it expects and hopes to accomplish?

Some statements and tentative criteria seem to reflect a desire to transform the new adult reader into a full-fledged reader of taste and discrimination; some stress provision of useful factual information about jobs, family life, health, and the like; some emphasize the need to strengthen a proud and healthy self-image among minority readers; some reflect the more modest hope of keeping alive the simple skill of understanding the printed word by providing practice reading for the new or marginal literate; some seek reading instruction materials for library-sponsored literacy classes.

Each of these objectives is, in itself, a valid one. But while they may overlap to a degree they are distinct enough to create confusion when libraries seek materials which will accomplish them all at once. If librarians undertake the ambitious task of trying to encourage real readers, they must look for style which goes beyond mere clarity and simplicity—for wit and imagination of a high order which captures

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the reader at his present level and urges him on. Authors with the skill to write such books, plus the concern to lead them to dedicate their skill to this effort, will be hard to find. If, at the other end of the spectrum, reading instruction or practice is the objective, even comic books will do. Comic books were not, in fact, ruled out in instructions given to a Boston Public Library Committee preparing a list of books for Job Corps use.³

The recent increase in publishers' output of easy reading material for adults has been welcomed by librarians, and has resulted in a good deal of optimism among those who formerly had to scratch among the children's collection for suitable books. Such optimism, however, is not shared by all those closest to the problem. The Committee on Reading Improvement for Adults of the Adult Services Division of ALA has found only about 150 titles worthy of inclusion in its lists of "Books for Adults Beginning to Read."⁴⁻⁶ The chairman of the committee reports that the lists represent "every scrap we could bear to recommend . . . children's books, ephemeral materials, . . . and experimental materials of poor or undeveloped qualities. So, the conclusion is: after four watchful years . . . nowhere near a sufficient supply of materials is available."⁷

Many librarians have participated in evaluation sessions, in which new materials for beginning adult readers were tested by means of the Committee's "Checklist for Evaluating Books for Adults Beginning to Read."⁸ The criteria listed are, *mutatis mutandis*, those traditionally used in library selection: intelligibility to potential reader, clarity and accuracy, interest or appropriateness of content for the intended audience, and format. The checklist makes a point of the need to judge a book in relation to its purpose, and gives special emphasis to vocabulary, sentence length, and the presence or absence of grade-level designations, special questions and exercises.

Librarians who used the checklist—which was itself being evaluated at the sessions, along with the books—experienced great difficulty in putting themselves imaginatively in the place of the hypothetical beginning adult reader. One, commenting unhappily on the experience, noted that members of the test group were more critical than librarians who had actually served beginning readers. The same commentator called many of the items "badly written, condescending, aesthetically repulsive and often irrelevant pap."⁹

A judgment from the user himself is obviously needed. While library experience with, and information from, users is still insufficient

for a valid conclusion, it does present a kinder view than that of the severest critic. The Cleveland Public Library's Reading Centers Project, for example, reports a favorable response from users of many of the special new series and titles. While it is true that this project is concerned with reading instruction, and need not, therefore, eliminate books because of teaching or learning apparatus, the conclusion drawn is that some of the problems which most upset librarians may not bother the intended reader. Nevertheless, the committee is right in being cautious and attempting to encourage better books. As new readers become more sophisticated, they may well see deficiencies they now ignore. Such a reaction, from a group as sensitive as the disadvantaged, could be a disaster.

To summarize, it seems clear that librarians are trying valiantly to deal with a staggering problem. Money is now available for special collections; easy books for adults are now appearing. A good many libraries have plunged into the effort; their experience will provide valuable information which should be pooled to help others. But desperately needed are a clear formulation of objectives and more real information—about the potential users, their needs and desires, the reading process itself in this context, and the kinds of materials which will really do the job. Happily, the University of Wisconsin Library School has announced a four-year study which will address itself to these very problems, to be funded by the U.S. Office of Education and directed by Mrs. Helen H. Lyman.¹⁰ The study will enlist the help of experts in other fields, an example which librarians would do well to follow. Like the problem of poverty itself, this effort is too large and important to be tackled by librarians alone; they need all the help they can get from colleagues in other professions.

Supplying books for foreign-language readers, that is, readers whose native language is not English, ranked second as a recognized problem among the categories presented and among the libraries responding. Again, there was no variation among population groups. Only four libraries gave the problem first rank; on the other hand, even libraries serving populations of under 50,000, which in 1960 had the lowest proportion of foreign-born residents, ranked it second. Nineteen libraries reported a marked increase in the use of such materials since 1954, a significant fact in view of the gradual decrease of the foreign-born in the total population. Of the four categories, this was most frequently singled out for special treatment: six libraries noted special policy statements, fifteen had separate budget allocations, and

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twenty-seven reported special collections. Of the last group, all but four drew more than 80 percent of materials serving foreign-language readers from such collections.

Thirteen of the libraries responding served communities which, in 1960, reported over 10 percent of the population as foreign-born. All were in the over 100,000 population category, with four serving over 1,000,000. Of the thirteen libraries, only one ranked the problem of supplying materials to this group first, six placed it second, two third, and one fourth. Three libraries reported "no problem." Although seven of these libraries noted separate budget allocations and/or collections, none reported a selection policy statement. One did, however, note the coverage of the topic in its general statement. From these figures, one is tempted to draw the conclusion that the libraries which might be expected to be more aware of the needs of the foreign-born are, in fact, no more so than others. But the facts are insufficient and may well be misleading.

Four of the libraries serving populations which, in 1960, included over 10 percent foreign-born also appeared in the list of libraries presumed to serve the largest proportion of disadvantaged. It seems possible that in some cases the problems overlap—that is, that a part of the foreign-born population may also fall into the disadvantaged category, primarily among Spanish-speaking readers. None of the four, however, identified this composite problem, although it was noted by one or two libraries not in this group.

Providing materials for foreign-born readers presents some of the same problems met in connection with the new literate. Identifying materials, evaluating them, and obtaining them are all difficulties which increase as languages become less familiar to the average selector, and as distances from foreign distributors become greater.

In the early years of the present century, librarians could more or less take it for granted that the foreign-language reader was an "immigrant" of the old type—a newcomer with relatively little education in his own language whose foremost aims were to learn English, attain citizenship, become Americanized and assimilated into American society. Assistance to such readers, and provision of appropriate materials is an old story for many libraries, but the materials themselves may take new forms. La Crosse, Wisconsin, Public Library, for example, has used films, filmstrips and recordings in its adult class for newcomers seeking citizenship training.¹¹

Another type of foreign-language reader is less often mentioned in

professional literature. Political refugees and exiles, emigré scholars and writers, foreign-born wives of military personnel, may not constitute a large proportion of the total population, but they are often natural library users. These people have no serious problems in learning English; many could read it before their arrival in this country. Citizenship and naturalization materials of the traditional type are both inappropriate and unnecessary for them. But they do want to read, often at a serious and advanced level, in their own languages as well as in English. Bilingual, they are also cosmopolitan in outlook, wishing to keep up with publications of their home countries, sometimes in special fields.

If the languages involved are French, German, Italian, Spanish, or Portuguese, many of the larger libraries can manage fairly well. Staff-members can read and evaluate new books, bibliographic aids are readily available, dealers can usually be found, reviews can be located and read. The Miami Public Library, faced with the needs of Cuban refugees, established its Foreign Language Division, employed Spanish-speaking librarians, and greatly enlarged its Spanish collection, using also films and records with the newcomers.¹² As was pointed out in the study on *Access to Public Libraries*, however, libraries do not fare so well in their effort to provide materials in the less-known languages.¹³ While that study, in this writer's opinion, erred in its assumption that materials in better-known languages are provided in public libraries primarily for the foreign-born and for students, and therefore erred in its conclusion, it did point up the relative lack of provision for readers of East European and Oriental languages.

The Committee of the Public Library Association of ALA which prepares buying lists in foreign languages for publication in *The Booklist* reports that librarian reviewers, dealers, and bibliographic listings are all difficult to find in the case of Oriental and East European language materials.¹⁴ The committee, furthermore, makes no attempt to list subject materials in any depth, but concentrates on supplying lists of fiction and popular nonfiction for the average collection. Larger libraries with sizable foreign-reading populations who wish fuller coverage must therefore look elsewhere. Some are fortunate enough to have on their staffs representatives of the major language-reading communities they serve. Some depend on local dealers to locate and supply books—even, in some cases, relying fairly heavily on such foreign-publication dealers for help in selection and evaluation. A special

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problem here, especially in the case of East European materials, is that of providing varying viewpoints on current and political topics. Most dealers, and most American refugee readers, are definitely on one side of the ideological fence—sometimes passionately so as a result of bitter experience. The librarian conscientiously attempting to represent the unpopular view not only has trouble obtaining it in East European materials from a local dealer, but is also likely to arouse indignation among the customers.

Lacking regular staff members who can read the less known languages, some libraries have made arrangements, formal or informal, with responsible members of the various ethnic communities to recommend authors and titles. Some take advantage of the occasional exchange or visiting librarian to look over and evaluate the collection and suggest new and fresh materials in his own language. Some enlist the help of a professional colleague who catalogs foreign language materials at a nearby university.

Even with these kinds of assistance, many collections are too heavily weighted with translations into foreign languages of English and American books, simply because it is these alone which the librarians can select with confidence and recommend with assurance. There would appear to be a real need for more cooperation in this field, for a greater sharing of rare language skills among the libraries which attempt to provide more than a smattering of collections in a variety of languages, or which should do so for the benefit of potential clientele. New systems of libraries, adding depth to their resources, would also profit. And would it be too great an imposition to ask the visiting librarians who come annually from all parts of the world under the aegis of the State Department and ALA to provide names of important new writers of their various countries, to be shared by libraries which could use them?

With regard to the partially sighted, libraries responding to the questionnaire tended to be optimistic. A number joyfully announced that the appearance of the new large-type books enabled them to report "no problem." There appears to be a natural tendency among librarians to identify the partially sighted with the elderly, to see the problem through the dimming eyes of long-term customers who seek hopefully for large-print books and find themselves able to read fewer and fewer of the new titles. For such readers, seeking pleasure and stimulation, the new large-print books provided a welcome new lease on reading life.

But there are younger adults whose visual handicaps may shut off not only reading for its own sake but also reading for information and even livelihood. We do not know how many younger readers are partially sighted. In the 1950's, libraries serving the blind increasingly found children among their customers, youngsters who at premature birth were exposed to too much oxygen before it was discovered that a child's sight could be damaged by such exposure. Other children, not legally blind according to the definition then in force, had to be refused service by the regulations governing the service of these special libraries. Quincy Mumford recently estimated that there are 600,000 visually handicapped Americans.¹⁵ Harris C. McClaskey, applying perhaps a different criterion, notes an estimated 4,000,000, of whom approximately 500,000 are children.¹⁶

There is, therefore, and will continue to be, a sizable group of partially sighted people moving into adulthood, finishing their education, marrying and starting homes, beginning careers. For this group, it is inaccurate to speak of "special needs." The needs are precisely those of any other young person in the same circumstances. What is "special" is the difficulty in meeting them. Looked at in this light, the problems of serving the visually handicapped adult can hardly be solved by the new large-type books, welcome though they may be. Even the much wider range of materials for the blind, now made available to a much more liberally defined readership, cannot altogether meet the needs of this group. It is true that other special services are often available, especially for partially sighted students. Volunteers make tapes of needed readings; public and private agencies provide many types of assistance. But there appears to be a special opportunity for public libraries, one which they have as yet recognized only in part.

The library already has the necessary materials, but they are chiefly in unusable form. For the independent young person with partial sight, these resources might be thrown open by provision of optical magnifiers or other devices. The use of tapes for these users might be explored by more libraries. Special funds, public and sometimes private, are available for such expenditures in many cases. Some libraries have begun to take advantage of such opportunities; results will be watched with interest. While the effort should no doubt involve cooperation, it appears that materials and equipment should be closer to the users than are the centers now serving blind readers. Study is clearly needed, and is fortunately under way. The Center for

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Library Studies at Kent State University is now conducting a survey of service to blind, partially sighted and physically handicapped persons, under the direction of John McCrossan, which will report not only the existing situation but also recommend steps to be taken.

The fourth category of needs listed in the questionnaire, that of supplying materials for older readers, ranked last among respondents. No significant variations appeared among population groups served. Only three libraries reported special funds, and only two drew over half the materials used with older readers from special collections. Two had policy statements covering materials for this group, while fourteen noted an increase in demand since 1954.

One need not deduce from these figures that libraries are unaware of the needs of older readers; indeed, they could scarcely have missed the emphasis in professional literature for some years. It appears, however, that materials in regular collections often are found appropriate for the older reader, and that special activities beyond the scope of this paper represent the focus of attention. Where special materials are set aside, or selected for older readers—for example, in selection of deposit collections for nursing homes—there appears to be some difference in philosophy, perhaps reflecting differences in the physical and mental condition of the readers involved. Some libraries stress books and films about accomplishments of older people, useful information about jobs, Medicare, etc., and material about the aging process—the last group also aimed at the group oddly named the “pre-old.” Others provide nostalgic and inspirational books. Still others see their task as helping the older reader to remain intellectually alive and alert, to feel in the mainstream of affairs, and thus vary the books and films they offer. No doubt, circumstances affect the materials provided for individuals and groups, but where libraries have not studied their clientele and developed objectives, there may be need for a closer attention to these matters.

Notable in the foregoing comments about the four selected special needs is a certain amount of overlapping. The Spanish-speaking adult who is also illiterate or semi-literate has already been noted. Help in serving these readers seems just over the horizon through the recently announced Project LEER, or READ (*Libros Elementales Educativos y Recreativos*, in Spanish; *Reading for Education and Diversion*, in English.) Sponsored by Books for the People and the Bro-Dart Foundation, the project will identify appropriate titles published abroad, have them read and reviewed, and publish recommended lists.¹⁷ An-

other overlapping area among the four categories is that of the older reader whose native tongue is not English; experience indicates that these readers tend to cling to, and re-read, the old and familiar. And, as has already been noted, many older readers are partially sighted.

Overlapping problems suggest overlapping solutions. If it is true, as it seems to be, that beginning adult readers require large print, books purchased for the partially sighted may also help the newly literate. Some libraries have already reported that new adult readers have discovered and enjoyed these books. Might the new reader also benefit from talking books and recordings prepared for the visually handicapped? Since newly blind adults, turning to talking books, have been known to find pleasures in the spoken word undiscovered in the printed word during their sighted days, the talking book might provide one kind of bridge to motivate the functionally illiterate. At present, the law would not permit talking books from the Library of Congress to be used for such purposes, but libraries serving the disadvantaged might experiment with commercially produced substitutes. These particular suggestions may not be feasible; they are made not for their own sake but rather in the hope of encouraging imaginative and experimental thinking among librarians, especially those taking advantage of the newly available funds to expand their services.

Although this paper has been, of necessity, about materials, librarians should not—as they are sometimes tempted to do—think of materials first. Awareness of the need, identification of the problem, has to be the first step. Clarification of objectives comes next, and here many libraries may realistically feel that they must curtail their aims because of limited funds. But others, considering the needs, will be stimulated to search for ways to meet them—through cooperation, professional organizations, new legislation, use of volunteers. Only then can appropriate materials be brought into the picture. Whether they will be word-games, comic books, optical magnifiers, tapes or talking books in a dozen languages, libraries cannot determine until they have identified the potential audience and its need, and decided which groups they will serve, and what they hope to accomplish.

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