

Introduction

ANN CARLSON WEEKS

IT HAS BEEN ALMOST twenty-five years since an issue of *Library Trends* last focused on services to children in public libraries. In those twenty-five years, radical changes have occurred in society. In the 1960s, the American educational system reeled from the effects of Sputnik and the space race. As a result, local, state, and federal money was freely spent on education and social programs. By the mid-1970s the money was beginning to diminish. Proposition 13 in California and similar legislation in other states severely curtailed social and educational programs, and services for children were among those most severely affected.

The Vietnam era resulted in a generation of young people who openly and vehemently criticized the nation's government. At the end of the conflict, significant numbers of refugees from Southeast Asia joined those from other nations immigrating to the United States. These waves of new Americans resulted in dramatic changes in the demographics of many major cities. The women's movement changed the structure and norms of the American family as increasing numbers of women entered the work force. Rising inflation coupled with new opportunities for women ensured that this trend continued into the 1980s and further changed society. This decade has seen a resurgence of emphasis on education and an increasingly conservative political climate.

The authors of papers in this issue of *Library Trends* discuss public library service to children within the context of this period. They

Ann Carlson Weeks is Executive Director, American Association of School Librarians, American Library Association, Chicago, Illinois.

address the question of how services to children have changed as a result of societal influences and further speculate on how children's services must change to meet the new demands of the information age in the next century.

Jill Locke and Margaret Kimmel of the University of Pittsburgh introduce the issue through a description of the period in a demographic study. These writers outline the changes in society that have affected children and those that will continue to affect them in the next century. They raise questions such as "In a nation in which 55 percent of all children have working mothers and 40 percent of all children born between 1970 and 1980 will spend at least part of their childhood in a one-parent home, are traditional library services for preschool and school-age children still appropriate and viable? What is the role of the public library in communities where one out of three female-headed families lives in poverty?"

The articles by Alice Naylor of Appalachian State University and Dorothy Anderson of UCLA address the issue of the role of the public library in the community. How have changes in the perception of this role affected library services to children? Naylor examined the literature of the library profession and surveyed practitioners and educators to identify trends and specific factors that have resulted in changes to service. Anderson collected the opinions of current library administrators on library services to children and compared them to those expressed by leading administrators more than 100 years ago. Not surprisingly, she found similarities in the responses to the questions by the two groups, especially in the area of social outreach. Although the mandate for outreach was seen as a moral obligation in the past, administrators today see it as a factor for survival. The development of a literate middle-class public is critical for the continuance of the public library.

Many children's librarians today view their role differently from that of their predecessors. The children's specialist of the 1980s is often a department head and a member of the management team. Barbara Ivy of Texas Woman's University discusses the importance of this role and offers suggestions as to how these management skills can be more fully developed.

Services to children with special needs have taken on added importance in many public libraries. Judith Rovenger, children's consultant for the Westchester (New York) Library System, is considered a leader in the development of library services for children with learning disabilities. Rovenger describes her work with experts from the Foundation for

Introduction

Children with Learning Disabilities in creating materials and programs to help children's librarians work with these individuals with special needs.

Although the focus of this issue is on services, it seemed appropriate to include an article describing how literature for children has changed during this tumultuous period. Barbara Elleman, children's book review editor for *Booklist*, published by the American Library Association, traces the changes in subject matter and markets for children's books. She speculates on how changes in society have influenced the materials children read.

Children's librarians are faced by a "seemingly endless stream of new technology" reports Linda Ward-Callaghan, youth services department head at the Deerfield (Illinois) Public Library. The author has chosen to discuss three technologies—microcomputers, video, and television—in terms of their effects on library services for children. Ward-Callaghan concludes that the future of library services to children may be influenced by the manner in which children's librarians incorporate these technologies into their services.

How does one evaluate the quality and significance of children's services? For many years these services were simply considered a "common good." Mary K. Chelton of the Virginia Beach (Virginia) Public Library System challenges this traditional position with her paper on evaluation. Chelton provides rationale for the importance of evaluation and suggests means of collecting, analyzing, and using data appropriately to improve services.

Among the concerns of professionals in the children's field is the perceived shortage of individuals entering the specialty. Anecdotal information indicates that library schools are deemphasizing course offerings in the children and young adult specialties and shifting resources and personnel to other areas. A 1985 survey of ALA-accredited library schools conducted by Margaret Bush of Simmons College and Melody Allen of the Rhode Island State Library suggests that these fears may not be justified. Among the findings described in their paper were that 88 percent of faculty in the youth areas were either tenured or tenure-track professors and that there was a significant increase in the number of continuing education offerings in the youth areas during the period of the study.

Finally, what do we really need to know about public library service to children as we approach the twenty-first century? Leslie Edmonds of the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign) suggests that many aspects of library service to children are based on superstition. Edmonds

calls for a careful examination of relevant research in reading to serve as the basis for the development of improved library services. Furthermore, she calls for a commitment by library educators and practitioners to measure both basic and innovative services to children to determine their relevance.

Clearly the past twenty-five years have been turbulent ones in this country. The authors of papers in this issue indicate that many public libraries have had limited success in offering services and materials that reflect the changes that have occurred in society. The proficiency with which children's specialists meet the continuing changes during the remainder of this century may well shape the future of the public library in the twenty-first century.