
Public Library Service to Children and Teens: A Research Agenda

VIRGINIA A. WALTER

ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER DEALS WITH FOUR SIGNIFICANT UNANSWERED QUESTIONS related to children's and young adult services in public libraries: 1. How have public library services to children and young adults developed over time? 2. How and why do young people use public libraries? 3. How can we evaluate the effectiveness of public library service for young people? 4. Why should policymakers fund public library services for children and young adults? After reviewing the existing knowledge base that can serve as scaffolding for the needed research, the author suggests strategies for refining and implementing this research agenda.

INTRODUCTION

On a typical day in a typical mid-sized public library, up to 60 percent of its users will be under the age of eighteen. Toddlers come for storytimes. Teachers and day care providers bring groups of children to find books and information, to be instructed in information literacy skills, and to hear stories. Schoolchildren drop in for after-school programming or homework assistance. They browse the shelves and participate in book discussion groups. Children of all ages cluster around the computer workstations where they look for information about their current sports and music idols as well as for materials for school reports. They play games, do e-mail, and chat with friends from school and around the world. Teens show up to see and be seen, to check out CDs and magazines, and to do their homework. They advise library staff on collection development and services; they also provide some of those services as paid workers or volunteers. Even babies

Virginia A. Walter, Associate Professor, UCLA, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, 220 GSE & IS Building, Mailbox 951520, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1520

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are now legitimate library users in their own right, not just cargo for parents and caregivers who must bring the little ones along on their library visits. Infants have their own story programs and library materials—lapsits and board books. Their parents may attend educational sessions that disseminate the latest research findings about early childhood literacy and instruct them in techniques for encouraging the reading skills in their own preschool children.

A surprising amount of this activity remains unexamined by the research community. Children's and young adult librarians, while they are often reflective practitioners, are usually too busy to conduct research studies themselves, and academics have often found children to be less interesting or somehow less legitimate subjects than adults. There are, therefore, many gaps in what we know about library services to people in their first two decades of life. This paper identifies four significant unanswered research questions related to children's and young library services. It outlines the existing knowledge base that can serve as scaffolding for the needed research and suggests strategies for implementing this research agenda.

THE BIG FOUR: QUESTIONS NEEDING ANSWERS

The major gaps in research about public library services for children and young adults can be summarized as four questions:

- How have public library services to children and young adults developed over the years?
- How and why do young people use public libraries?
- How can we evaluate the effectiveness of public library service for young people?
- Why should policymakers fund public library services for children and young adults?

Note that these questions fall into four traditional areas of scholarship: historical research, user studies, evaluation research, and policy studies. The sections that follow provide a brief rationale for the significance of each of the four major research questions and an overview of the theoretical and empirical foundations on which to build the scaffolding for continuing scholarship.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH: HOW HAVE PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS DEVELOPED OVER THE YEARS?

Public library service to children began a little more than 100 years ago. It was created by a small band of determined women who persisted in spite of the opposition or lack of interest of many of the most influential library leaders of the time. The record of their achievements has considerable relevance today as we try to redefine the role of public libraries in the lives

of children in a vastly changed society. What can we learn from the past that can inform our future?

A single historical study of the genesis and development of library services for children has not yet been written. However, Christine Jenkins (1994, 1996) and Anne Lundin (1996, 1998) have contributed important pieces of feminist scholarship about the women whose leadership was so critical in the early years. Walter (2001) relied on Jenkins and Lundin as well as other documentation and primary sources for the first chapter of *Children and Libraries: Getting It Right* (2001) in which she traces the historical roots that influence the library services of today. The writings of influential early children's library leaders such as Anne Carroll Moore (1969) and Frances Clarke Sayers (1965) are sources from which we can tease out the philosophy and values that guided the emergence of the field.

It is sometimes necessary to look beyond the books and articles devoted to children's services in order to ferret out important scholarship relevant to the field. Abigail A. Van Slyck's study of Carnegie libraries, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890–1920* (1995), for example, offers fascinating insight on the interplay between space and the services provided for children in libraries. General histories of public libraries such as *Civic Space/cyberspace? The American Public Library in the Information Age* by Redmond Kathleen Molz and Phyllis Dain (1999) help to contextualize the role of children's services in the parent institution.

Unfortunately, whole decades of public library service to children remain undocumented except through scattered journalistic accounts in the popular library press. While we have fairly good documentation of the early years, we know much less about the period of diffusion in which children's services became institutionalized in public libraries of all sizes throughout the U.S. What happened to children's services during World Wars I and II? How did public libraries respond to the changes in children's lives caused by Sputnik and introduction of television? What were the contributions of extraordinary African-American children's library leaders, such as Augusta Baker, Effie Lee Morris, and Charlemae Rollins? What was the impact of the War on Poverty and the outreach movement on library services to children? How have libraries served immigrant children over time?

Library service for young adults is even more lacking in rigorous historical analysis and documentation. As with children's services, one can deduce the ideas that were held in good currency at various times by reading the words of leaders in the field. Perhaps the most influential is Margaret A. Edwards whose treatise on library services to teens, *The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts; The Library and the Young Adult* (1969) was revised and reprinted in 1974 and again with a new foreword by Patty Campbell in 1994.

There is one exemplary historical study of young adult services. Miriam Braverman (1979) researched the early years of young adult library services in three urban settings—Cleveland, New York, and Baltimore. Her mono-

graph, *Youth, Society, and the Public Library*, is a fascinating chronicle of what seems to have been a golden age in young adult services in the 1930s and 1940s. The book also contributes to our understanding of the dimensions of leadership, politics, and economics in public library service innovations.

What is largely missing from the history of young adult services is an understanding of its development since the 1940s. Why did public libraries apparently retreat from targeting high school students at precisely the moment in American history when teenagers were being defined? Why was there an apparent resurgence of interest in young adult services within the American Library Association in the mid-1980s? What is the significance of contributions of more recent young adult advocates and spokespeople such as Mary Kay Chelton, Elaine Meyers, Patrick Jones, and Deborah Taylor?

USER STUDIES: HOW AND WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE PUBLIC LIBRARIES?

Most studies show that as many as 50 to 60 percent of all public library users are young people. In a 1995 survey by the National Center for Educational Statistics, for example, librarians estimated that 35 percent of their users were children under eleven years of age, while 23 percent were twelve- to eighteen-year-olds (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). However, we have limited data about what those young people were doing at the library. The 1995 survey indicated that as many as 86 percent of the libraries responding offered programs for preschool and kindergarten children while 79 percent had programs for school-age children. Almost all librarians reported that they provide reference services to young people, while only one in seven offered homework assistance.

National data-gathering efforts such as the one summarized above use broad brush strokes to paint the landscape of library services to children and teenagers. What they fail to do is give us a finer-grained picture and deeper understanding of exactly how and why young people of different ages use the public library.

Marketing Studies

Commercial organizations rely on marketing studies to learn about their current and potential customers. To some degree, public libraries do the same through environmental scans and community analyses conducted as part of their strategic planning efforts. Few of these local studies are ever published, however, and even fewer give any particular attention to children and teens. The few marketing studies that are available offer some interesting insights.

Walter and Markey (1997) conducted an action research study of the parent perceptions of the traditional summer reading program provided by the Los Angeles County Library. The analysis of data from parent surveys and focus groups indicated that it was the parents who are already high-

ly involved with their children's care and education who choose to enroll their children in the reading program. These parents see the benefits of the reading program as being primarily educational. Parents who do not register their children in the reading program cited three reasons: their own discomfort with a program that seems to foster competitiveness about reading, lack of time or bad timing, and perceived lack of needs. As a direct consequence of this study, the library made some changes in the way it designed and marketed the program in future years.

Before the Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund launched the Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development (PLPYD) demonstration project, it commissioned a marketing study to determine what teens think about the public library. What the data gatherers learned from talking to teens in ten communities around the country is instructive. Teens said that libraries are not cool; the library staff is not helpful or friendly; their service hours are inconvenient. They wanted more welcoming space, more access to higher-end technology, more help with their homework, and better books and magazines. They wanted less restrictive rules and fees. And most importantly, they claimed that they could help libraries become better places for teens (Meyers, 1999).

The nine libraries that ultimately participated in the PLPYD developed new services and ongoing programs for teens based on the findings of this marketing study and on basic principles of youth development. They used a variety of strategies to support basic adolescent developmental outcomes while striving to be "cool." The Washoe County Library in Nevada developed Teen Action Teams that provide outreach services to children in low-income neighborhoods. Teens at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in North Carolina operate a computer design and copy store at the library. Oakland Public Library in California is one of several locations that developed a teen employment program; their teens serve as homework helpers to younger children. In King County, Washington, Techno Teens are paid to assist patrons with the library's computer systems (Urban Libraries Council, 2002). The point here is that these programs were not created out of thin air; they were based on marketing research and sound principles of youth development. This kind of theory and research base could reasonably inform other aspects of library service to children and young adults.

Information-Seeking Behavior of Children and Young Adults

The scholarly domain that has contributed the most to our foundational knowledge about young people's library use is the field of information-seeking behavior, a broad area of study encompassing the identification of information needs, the ways in which people seek or search for information to meet those needs, the resources that meet those needs, and the ways in which people use the information after they have found it. The only

subtopic within this area to have yielded a significant body of cumulative research relevant to children and teenagers deals with the ways in which young people search for information in electronic resources. This research will be discussed in some detail later.

Much less attention has been given to other aspects of young people's information-seeking behavior. The resulting body of knowledge is therefore somewhat asymmetrical and fragmented. There is one interesting study on the cognitive utilization of heroin information by teenage girls in Australia (Todd, 1999). There are two studies related to various aspects of career information for teens (Julien, 1999; Poston-Anderson, 1993). There is surprisingly little research on the information needs of children and young adults, although that is presumably the stimulus that instigates the information-seeking process. The following section looks more closely at the small body of knowledge in this area.

Research on the Information Needs of Children and Young Adults

Walter's (1994) research on the information needs of children remains one of the few studies to look specifically at what children need to know and how they meet those needs. Beginning with the assumption that children's information needs are largely imposed on them by adults, she surveyed a broad range of key informants, adults who work with children in a variety of ways, from teachers and child care providers to recreation leaders, soccer coaches, and social workers. She found that children's information needs correspond to the hierarchy of needs identified by Abraham Maslow, with the adult informants identifying the most unmet needs at the lower levels—safety and physiological needs. The informants identified appropriate sources of information for children but felt that many of the potential information providers either lacked good resources themselves or the ability to communicate information effectively. As a result, too many children received a disproportionate amount of information—or misinformation—from the media and from peers.

Walter and Gross extended the general 1994 study with a more focused look at the domain of HIV/AIDS information for children. They developed a model of children's information needs about HIV/AIDS that takes into account both the child's developmental stage and the child's particular situation in relation to HIV/AIDS. Thus, a preschool child would not ordinarily need basic HIV/AIDS information. However, if the child has a friend or relative with AIDS or if the child is HIV-positive, then developmentally appropriate information about HIV/AIDS should be offered, preferably by the child's parents with health or child care providers and preschool teachers as secondary information providers. Children in the upper elementary grades, from the age of nine to eleven, on the other hand, all require basic HIV/AIDS information, with an emphasis on causes of AIDS, modes of transmission, and the value of social acceptance of people with AIDS (Walter & Gross, 1996).

The initial research on children's information needs described here needs to be extended to include children at different developmental stages and to other knowledge domains that are relevant to children. Many interesting questions arise. What are the information needs of two-year-olds? Are the information needs of an urban African-American eight-year-old girl different from those of an eight-year-old Swedish-American boy living on a farm in Minnesota? What are the information needs of children at different ages pertaining to civic or economic issues? What are the information needs of American children about children in other parts of the world?

Research on Young People's Use of Electronic Resources

The earliest research in this area focused on children's use of automated library catalogs. If adult library users had difficulties using these new tools, what problems might children have? Keyboarding and spelling proved to be the most obvious barriers, as Paul Solomon demonstrated in his dissertation research (Solomon, 1993).

A more extended study of children's online catalog use, the Science Library Catalog project, was conducted by researchers at UCLA in the early 1990s. Funded by the Sloan Foundation, this project was designed to discover how children search automated library catalogs. Children were tested on the Science Library Catalog, a prototype of an effective, child-friendly retrieval system for library catalog information, and on conventional online catalogs.

The fourth and sixth graders who participated in the study were able to use browsing modes and keyword systems quite successfully, showing great persistence in their search strategies. Search topics affected their success, however. The only topics that were consistently easy for the children to find were concrete subjects that were easy to spell, such as "chemistry" and "farming." The graphical user interface of the prototype Science Library Catalog helped children overcome some of the searching features that are difficult for children in typical keyword OPAC systems: typing skills, spelling, vocabulary, and Boolean logic. Topics that were located deeper in the Dewey hierarchy were easier to find on keyword systems. However, the focus group data from this study indicated that children would rather not use any library catalog at all; their preferred search strategy was to go directly to the shelves to find books, or to ask a friend or a librarian for help. The catalog is the search aid of last resort (Walter & Borgman, 1991; Borgman et al., 1995; Walter, Borgman, & Hirsh, 1996). The commercial product, *Kid's Catalog*, was built on some of the findings from the Science Library Catalog project (Busey & Doerr, 1993).

The introduction of the Internet into schools, public libraries, and private homes has been so rapid that it is difficult to accurately report how many young people now have access to this electronic resource. However, a recent national study funded by the Pew Charitable Trust estimated that at least 78 percent of all children between the ages of twelve and seventeen

regularly go online for school or personal use. A resounding 94 percent of these online kids report that they prefer to use the Internet over all other sources for school research. Thirty to forty percent of all teenagers can be considered "heavy Internet users."

The Pew study looked more closely at how this group of technically savvy teens use the Internet for school assignments. The students reported that the Internet enables them to juggle school assignments and extracurricular activities more efficiently. For the most part, they used the Internet as a virtual textbook and reference library. Some confessed to using the Internet as a shortcut, as a way to minimize their effort or even to cheat by plagiarizing material. These confident users also used the Internet as a way to collaborate on projects with their colleagues and as a "virtual locker, backpack, and notebook" where they could store their important school-related materials.

Many of the barriers reported by the young people in the Pew study are more relevant to schools than to public libraries, dealing with varying policies and educational strategies. They want higher-quality access to the Internet, fewer filtering restrictions, and more instruction in keyboarding, computer, and information literacy skills. However, one finding that has considerable relevance for public libraries is the students' insistence that the "digital divide" is a serious issue that creates subtle inequities among teenagers (Levin & Arafah, 2002).

There have been several studies that look at the ways in which children and young people search for information on the Internet and in other electronic resources, such as online catalogs. The results are remarkably consistent.

The youngest children to be subjects in such a study are the seven-year-olds who participated in Linda Z. Cooper's investigation of the ways in which these beginning readers cope with textual information (2002). Using video cameras to record children's hand movements as they searched an online encyclopedia designed for the early elementary grades, in addition to field observations, the researcher found that emotional responses were important to the children's experience. These young children seemed to need the assurance of an adult in order to move through the research process. This is consistent with developmental theories such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978) and with Carol Kuhlthau's research on the importance of affective states in the information-seeking process (1988, 1993).

Two studies point out the difficulty that elementary school children have evaluating the information they find on the Web (Kafai & Bates, 1997; Schacter, Chung, & Dorr, 1997). Sandra Hirsh's exploratory study of the relevance criteria used by a small group of fifth graders is helpful for understanding why children have problems with this element of information literacy. Her subjects came from a computer-rich environment with access to computers and the Internet at home as well as at their school and public

library. They were comfortable using a variety of platforms as sources for information.

When asked to talk about how they determined the usefulness of a document needed to fulfill a particular school assignment, the children in Hirsh's study listed four criteria: topicality, novelty, authority, and whether it appeared "interesting." The topicality criterion served to limit the time students spent with a particular information source; they scanned quickly to see if the data it contained matched up to a particular information need. Novelty was the criterion that helped them decide if a source told them anything new. Their ability to determine authority was often naïve, but they did understand that this was an important element in using information. They liked the electronic encyclopedia, for example, because they felt they could rely on the authority of its contents. Their desire for "interesting" materials often led them on tangents that hampered their searching efficiency (Hirsh, 1999).

Dania Bilal's research has focused on the use of the Yahoigans search engine by seventh graders looking for science information. Her methodology involved the capture of search strategies by Lotus ScreenCam and one-on-one interviews with the young people as they completed their search. She found that the more effective children used more systematic search strategies and relied less on looped searches and hyperlinks than their less successful peers (Bilal, 2000). When the search task was more complex and required critical thinking to determine the relevance of information and to construct new meaning from resources, these young people were often unable to apply existing domain knowledge to this effort. Bilal concluded that they were lacking the information literacy or research skills that would have enabled them to make the link between what they already knew and what they needed to discover (Bilal, 2001).

One study of the Web-searching behavior of older high school students invoked an interesting metaphor. "Searching the World Wide Web is like visiting a shopping mall the size of Seattle: Innumerable types of information, in a large variety of containers and in many different locations, are all available in one place" (Fidel et al., 1999, p. 24). The teens in this small study all had some experience using the computer and the Internet but had not received any formal training in Web searching. They proved to be very naïve about the information available on the Web, many thinking that it had been placed there by one mammoth clearinghouse, possibly Microsoft. They had little knowledge of search engines, evaluation criteria, or search strategies, relying on past experience and the assistance of their peers to locate new information. Yet, like the teens in the Pew study discussed earlier, they preferred the Internet to their school library as a source of information for homework; they liked its immediacy, convenience, and interactivity.

This relatively large body of research about children's interaction with electronic resources suggests several implications for public library practice.

It points out the need for increased and enhanced training in information literacy skills for all ages. While this is ordinarily considered the responsibility of school librarians working with classroom teachers, the evidence suggests that a more comprehensive approach is needed. Public libraries, particularly those offering after-school homework assistance programs, need to consider augmenting the training that young students get in school. They might also want to consider the importance of the adults who help young people find information in the library as supportive confidence builders as well as guides to the complex environment of online information. Public librarians are not ordinarily expected to be familiar with educational theory and research, but perhaps youth-serving staff need to understand principles such as Vygotsky's learning theories in order to be more effective mentors.

The research also suggests that more needs to be known about how librarians can build collections for young people using both print and electronic resources effectively. Academic libraries have looked extensively at this issue; however, it is hardly on the radar screens of children's and young adult librarians.

Research on Use of Other Library Resources and Services by Children and Teens

While scholars are increasingly doing research related to young people and their use of digital resources, they have rarely looked at other aspects of library use by young people. However, IMLS has just funded a three-year research project in which researchers from Drexel's College of Information Science and Technology will collaborate with staff from the Free Library of Philadelphia to investigate the everyday information seeking behavior of urban young adults (College of Information Science and Technology, 2002). Presumably this study will yield a broader picture of the ways in which teens use libraries.

The more general topic of public library reference service to children and teens has hardly been touched by the research community. Melissa Gross (1999, 2000) has contributed the model of "the imposed query," the question that is not self-generated but rather is imposed on the information-seeker by some external party. Children's homework assignments are an obvious example of the imposed query. Gross suggests that reference librarians need to restructure their approach to the reference interview when the patrons in front of them did not actually formulate the questions they are asking. Cindy Mediavilla (2001) is also building a good foundation of knowledge about homework assistance programs in public libraries.

Librarians continue to offer reference services to children, of course, in spite of the lack of research underpinnings. They also conduct summer reading programs, provide book discussion opportunities, market their services through flyers and personal visits to schools—all without much questioning of the value of these services or understanding of what best practices might be. It is likely that many good children's librarians are ac-

tually rethinking and refining services on the basis of clinical observations and the kind of “thinking in action” that Donald Schon (1983) finds pervasive in professional work. However, one area of children’s library services is getting increased emphasis in the field and deserves special mention as a research gap. This is library service to preschool children and the important adults in their lives—parents and caregivers.

We have almost no good data about library services to very young children and their families and caregivers in spite of the fact that this is a growing element in public library services, with more and more public libraries entering the early childhood arena. A recent issue of *School Library Journal*, for example, featured a cover story on the emergent literacy initiative, “It’s Never Too Early,” that is being offered in all twenty-seven public library systems in the state of Maryland (Minkel, 2002, pp. 38–42). A sidebar points to other early childhood programs being offered by libraries in Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Hennepin County, Minnesota; and Pasadena, California.

We know that public libraries are providing more and more services to preschool children. The policy briefs by Walter and by Herb and Willoughby-Herb discussed later in this paper provide insight into the theoretical underpinnings for such services. Research from the fields of human development and cognitive science have alerted us to the importance of the early years to future educational success. Perhaps the most influential compilation of this research is the publication from the National Research Council, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al., 1998). Lynne McKechnie (2000) notes that the conventional methods used in public library user research—interviews and surveys—are not appropriate for use with young children whose oral and written language skills are still developing. She proposes using ethnographic methods to discover what preschoolers do when they visit the library.

There is, therefore, a foundation to build on, or at least a framework for further research. We are just lacking the bricks and mortar, the studies that will help us understand how young children and the adults in their lives interact with library services. We need to know how choices are made about whether or not to make use of these library services. We still do not have evidence about the effectiveness of our early childhood interventions, what works and what does not. Therefore, we are uncertain about what comprises best practices in library service to very young children. We certainly do not know what difference these services make in their lives.

EVALUATION RESEARCH: HOW CAN WE EVALUATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

The original impetus for reliable evaluation tools for public library services came not from scholars but from elected officials. During the 1980s,

economic recession and taxpayer revolts resulted in serious budgetary shortfalls for local government throughout the country. Policymakers responded by requiring heads of public agencies, including libraries, to document their productivity and provide an accounting of the benefits of their services. Library directors were forced to look beyond their traditional circulation and reference counts for more reliable ways to describe and document their services.

The Public Library Association (PLA) responded to the need for more detailed and comprehensive measurement techniques with *Output Measures for Public Libraries* (Van House et al., 1987). The authors of this manual did not offer any specific measures for library service to young people other than those associated with the service role labeled "Preschoolers' Door to Learning." That gap was rectified by the publication of *Output Measures for Public Library Service to Children* (Walter, 1992) and *Output Measures and More: Planning and Evaluating Public Library Services for Young Adults* (Walter, 1995). The two follow-up manuals provided standardized procedures for collecting, interpreting, and using quantitative data to measure the outputs of library services for children and teens.

Unfortunately, the publication of the output measures manuals did not generate an outpouring of published research that would help to advance the knowledge base. It is likely that they were used to produce data for internal decision-making and budget justifications by individual library jurisdictions, however.

More recently, policymakers and funding sources have started to request a more sophisticated form of evaluation measures. No longer satisfied with the presentation of documented outputs, they are asking for *outcome* measures. Outputs are the quantifiable service products, such as numbers of books circulated or questions answered, the number of children attending storytimes, the number of young adults participating in volunteer efforts. Outcomes are the quantifiable results of those services. They attempt to measure the differences made to an individual as a result of checking out a book or attending a storytime or volunteering at the library.

A number of initiatives to develop usable outcome measures and measurement techniques for public library services in general are currently in progress. The Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) has funded the Counting on Results project that aims to develop and test standardized tools for collecting outcome data from public library patrons. The principal investigators are basing their work on nine of the thirteen service responses included in the PLA *New Planning for Results* document (Nelson, 2001). Using postage-paid surveys, patrons are asked to respond to a series of statements about how the library's services had helped them (Steffan et al., 2002). While the early reports of the Counting on Results study appear to focus on adult services, there is potential here for data and methodologies that could be used for children as well.

There are at least three projects underway that are designed to yield outcome information about library services to young people. The IMLS-funded Project CATE (Children and Technology Evaluation) is a collaboration between staff at the Saint Louis Public Library and researchers from Florida State University. This study uses outcome measures to assess school-age children's use of technology at the library. So far, the project has yielded a model that will be tested in the next phase of research (Dresang et al., 2003).

A second important effort to develop outcome measures was funded by ALA through its Research Award that is administered by the Committee on Research and Statistics. Two UCLA researchers, Virginia Walter and Cindy Mediavilla, are developing measures that link the use of homework centers by teens to developmental outcomes. Their work should be disseminated in early 2003.

Finally, the PLA/ALSC Early Childhood Literacy task force is using outcome measures to test a research-based curriculum for training parents and child care providers in the most effective ways to develop the emergent literacy skills of the preschool children in their care. The results of a national pilot test are expected in early 2003 with a follow-up study commissioned for the following summer.

POLICY STUDIES: WHY SHOULD POLICYMAKERS FUND PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS?

Public libraries exist in a highly political environment, with most of their revenue coming from local government jurisdictions. It is surprising, therefore, that more policy studies have not been generated that address the role of the public library in supporting young people and families. The few studies that are produced tend to generate a lot of discussion and controversy. One such study is *Buildings, Books, and Bytes; Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age*, a publication of the Benton Foundation (Benton Foundation, 1996).

This study used key informant interviews, a public opinion survey, and one focus group to compare the public's preferences for public library services with the vision of public library leaders. The report states that library leaders envision the library of the future as a hybrid institution providing both digital and print resources with librarians helping patrons navigate the complex new world of information, while the public has a more conservative view. They hold libraries in high esteem, but place them on the fringes of modern life. They do not see libraries as leading the digital revolution, and they are unwilling to pay more for increased technological services.

Most worrisome to many readers of the report was the finding that the youngest Americans surveyed—those who are between eighteen and twenty-four—expressed the weakest support for the digital services of public libraries and for library buildings. Children's librarians may take heart, howev-

er, from the finding that the business of "providing reading hours and other programs for children" topped the rankings of library services; 83 percent of the survey participants rated it "very important" with another 12 percent rating it "moderately important." Approval ratings don't get much better than this.

The Benton Report was not received with complete approval within the library community, however. The entire summer, 1997, issue of *Library Trends* was devoted to responses to the report. Contributors to this issue were asked to "critique" the report, and critique it they did (Goldhor, 1997). Many of the writers had reservations about the methodology used to produce the report. Zweizig (1997) criticized it as naïve; Allen (1997) found the statistical analysis and subsequent interpretations to be faulty. Holt (1997) and McCook (1997) were particularly critical of the unrepresentative sample used in the focus group. And yet, almost all of the cities found that the report at least served the purpose of generating discussion, within the public library community if not in the broader policy arena.

As part of the PLPYD project discussed earlier, the funding agency commissioned the creation of a policy map that would clarify the public library's potential role in the landscape of youth development programs. Chapin Hall Center for Children, a social policy research institute at the University of Chicago, undertook this policy study. Some of their initial findings have been published in the library press (Costello et al., 2001). The researchers paint a normative picture of community agencies interlocking to create a web of primary supports for adolescents who need healthy relationships with other peers and with responsible, caring adults in order to make an effective transition from childhood to adulthood. They go on to ask whether or not libraries can be one of those agencies providing primary support for youth development. They find some barriers. Adolescent culture is not always compatible with library culture. Few public libraries have the kind of space that welcomes and nurtures teens. The needs of other patron groups are sometimes in conflict with the needs of young adults.

In spite of these obstacles, the Chapin Hall team find that some public libraries have been successful in developing effective strategies for engaging young people at risk. Initiatives that involved teens as technology assistants and homework helpers were promising. Some libraries have found creative ways to develop times and places that serve as havens for teens. Many public libraries have also developed mechanisms for meaningful participation by teens in planning and delivering young adult services. Finally, the Chapin Hall report encourages public libraries to partner with other community organizations and to do a better job of communicating their changing role to the public.

The Chapin Hall policy map meshes neatly with a recent report of the National Research Council, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Eccles & Goodman, 2002). This report documents the weakening of in-

formal community supports that were once available to young people in the United States. It urges a new direction in public policy that would place children and adolescents at the center of community life, where they can engage meaningfully with nurturing adults and develop the values, knowledge, and skills necessary to become healthy adults. The authors challenge organizations, including libraries, to design programs for youth that support this shift in policy. Both the rhetoric and the evidence presented in this report are convincing; it will be interesting to see if public libraries leverage the findings in meaningful ways.

Two policy briefs have outlined the library's role in early childhood education. One, by Steven Herb and Sara Willoughby-Herb (2001), presents the rationale for the library's claims to making contributions to helping to prepare young children for formal schooling. A second brief was commissioned by the Los Angeles County Department of Health to help inform policy-makers about emerging research in the area of emergent literacy. This document makes a strong case for the central role of the public library in helping very young children take the first steps to literacy (Walter, Armbruster, and Welsing, 2002).

One of the more troublesome policy issues for public libraries in the past decade has been in the area of Internet filtering for young people. It is clear that children's access to information has become much more problematical in the digital age. Whatever the final outcome of the legal challenges to the Children's Internet Protection Act, we will continue to need good policy studies that would untangle the competing claims for children's rights and children's protection as they relate to Internet filtering. Narrative policy analysis (Roe, 1994), a methodology developed to reconcile contentious and polarizing policy issues, is a promising approach to the problem. Perhaps the library community could look for opportunities to collaborate with other stakeholder organizations such as the Children's Partnership, the Children's Defense Fund, or the Electronic Frontier Foundation to produce research that would inform more rational policy responses than we have seen to date.

There are other gaps in the policy literature, of course. Some of the issues suited to further policy study include:

- The role of the public library as an educational resource for children and teens; and
- The role of the public library as a support for families.

SETTING AND IMPLEMENTING A NATIONAL RESEARCH AGENDA FOR PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

This paper has presented a picture of peaks and valleys in the landscape of research about public library services to children and young adults. It is

a picture painted by one person with more than twenty years experience as a public library practitioner and more than twelve years as a library educator. Now it is time to expand the vision.

The profession—and ultimately the children and teens we serve—would be well-served by the creation of a national forum to discuss these issues. The American Library Association is a likely sponsor. The Institute for Museum and Library Services, as the major funding source for library research in the U.S., is a key stakeholder in such a forum. I propose a series of colloquia or institutes held throughout the country, bringing together the researchers and the librarians who are the ultimate consumers of their work and perhaps even the children and teens who presumably benefit from it. Participants in these regional gatherings would learn from each other; and out of that learning, the priorities for basic and applied research about the important interaction between libraries and young people would surely emerge.

It is encouraging that IMLS is funding relevant research and that prestigious scholarly journals are publishing it. It is also encouraging that with the possible funding of Laura Bush's initiative to recruit librarians, we have the prospect of increased funding for doctoral education in the field. As the research agenda grows, so does the need for scholars to do the research.

Many events of the recent past—from the attacks on the World Trade Center to the anthrax scare to the recent sniper activity in the Washington, D.C. area—have led to a feeling of unprecedented anxiety in the U.S. If ever parents and other adult caregivers needed supports within their community to help them respond to the concerns of the youngest Americans, it is now. If ever library directors and youth services librarians needed research-based knowledge to help them do their important job better, it is now.

This paper opened with a narrative about a typical day in a typical mid-sized public library, bustling with the activity generated by young users from infancy through adolescence. We know they are there, those eager young people in the first two decades of human life. Research could tell us so much more about why they have come to the library, what they are doing there, and what difference it will make in their lives.

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