Trends In Library Service for Children:

Past, Present and Where Do We Go From Here?*

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When public library service to children in this country began in the late 1800's — more than 80 years ago — I doubt if anyone took the time to ask or answer the question posed for this workshop: "Is There a Future in Library Services for Children?"

It must have been clear to the innovators of this service that there was a "future" since there had been no "past."

You know, of course, that the early planners of public library service did not consider children's needs in their design. They were concerned with the adult reading public. They did not concern themselves with the children because the public school movement which had begun to take shape around the mid-19th century was supposed to provide equal educational opportunity for the young, who — when they had completed their education — would turn to the public library for books and so continue their education. The public library was to be the "capstone" of the educational system.

However, the establishment and growth in number of the public schools made it possible for children to learn to read; a larger and younger reading public was created; and the publishing industry responded by producing a greater variety of reading materials of varying quality and in growing quantity. There was a growth in concern about what children read after they began to read — and the public

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library responded. Library service to children began in response to community need — free access by children to selected books and related materials.

The children themselves opened the doors of the public library. They came into "adult" libraries in larger and larger numbers till they could not be ignored. At first they were allowed in only at certain hours; then an alcove or corridor would be set aside for them (so they wouldn't "annoy" adults); these alcoves overflowed; then the storage room or the basement would be cleared and shelves installed as children demanded more and more space. From 1890 to 1900 children's "rooms" opened, one after the other, across the country.

Two factors in development of public library service contributed to a relatively rapid growth of the new service. When public libraries went from closed to open stacks, the child's search among adult materials for those books he could read undoubtedly annoyed adults and hastened the setting aside of a few shelves for children. And Mr. Carnegie started building branch libraries across the country with a design which included an area for children, an area for adults, and a circulation desk as the island in the moat between.

During the next twenty to thirty years, as service to children developed, there were, according to Harriet G. Long — whose book, *Rich the Treasure,* I have drawn upon for this historical overview — three epochs. During the first, libraries realized the necessity of doing something for children. The need had been expressed even before the children beat down the doors by William Isaac Fletcher (in a special report on public library service for the U.S. Bureau of Education in 1876) — at a time when no children's service existed:

> The lack of appreciation of youthful demands for culture is one of the saddest chapters in the history of the world's comprehending **not** the light which comes to it. Our public libraries will fail in an important part of their mission if they shut out from their treasure minds craving the best and for the best purposes...

During the second epoch, this conviction was expressed in the planning and equipping of space — separate quarters. It was the era of the children's room. In the third period the increasing number of children's rooms made it necessary to systematize and coordinate the administrative work. The head of the department was made responsible to the director for development and conduct of service to children throughout the system.

In some areas of the nation and of North Carolina, particularly in the large city systems, these three epochs occurred rapidly. In many areas it was not until LSA (now LSCA) arrived in the mid-fifties that library service progressed beyond the volunteer woman's club library, if even that existed. But whenever library service did begin it was an accepted fact that there had to be children's materials in a separate alcove, room or space.

Because, however, there was a shortage of trained personnel in the late fifties and early sixties when so many libraries were receiving a financial transfusion with federal and state aid (or were coming into

existence because of it), there were not enough children's librarians to go around. Simultaneously, despite the fact, the undisputed fact, that children's library service has been and remains the greatest success story in public library service in registration, circulation, and program (exploited mercilessly at budget time each year and in publicity year-round), most library education programs continued to produce too many public library directors who believed — still believe — that service to children is a necessary evil, secondary in importance to the "primary goal" (hark back to the founding of public library service) "to serve the adult reading public." Today the catch word is not "capstone," it's "center for continuing education" or "information center." But the primacy of service to adults in the planning and staffing and materials budgets is evident. Despite verbal assurances to the contrary, despite where the cameras go when there's a publicity shot to be made, budgets tell the story.

And that, I think, is why we are asking a ridiculously asinine question that really insults the mentalities of the people assembled:

"Is there a future in library service to children?"

Of course there is. We know there is. As long as there are children there is a future for us in helping them make their futures richer by helping them become literate adults who will want, need, and desire the public library's continuing information or capstone services. It should not be surprising to you that North Carolina colleges and universities have over the years produced so many school librarians and are continuing to produce them. In North Carolina, that has been where the jobs were and, quantitatively, still are. It is only reasonable and certainly appropriate that the higher education institutions responded.

ZPG? I personally hope so. But ZPG does not mean no children. I see no nationwide move toward Shaker societies. Nor does it mean the same number of children in every community. It may mean that we can focus on better quality and quantity in the services we give. Perhaps it will give us a chance to do the catching up we need so desperately to do in order to give good library service to children.

Library service to children is not materials. It is not a room. It is a program headed by a children's librarian, an administrator. That administrator assesses the needs of the children of a community — what they say they need, what their parents, teachers and group leaders say they need, and what his/her knowledge of child development says they need. He/she knows how many children there are, where they are and when, how mobile they are, whether their parents will get them to a library with minimum motivation or whether reaching out to parents must be a major priority. The children's librarian has a staff — not necessarily of MLS professionals — and he/she hopefully with help from the colleges, the state library and the state library association, trains them to present reading, viewing and listening experiences in the library, in community centers, in churches, on playgrounds, wherever children are. It does not take a professional (5th year degree) children's librarian to give a program (tell the stories, give the

puppet show, etc.). Perhaps this is where you need to use some of the talent being produced in the non-accredited programs. But you do need the professional children's librarian to plan, organize and coordinate the total program; to build, with the help of a staff, a materials collection to support the program; and to display it attractively, appealingly, and conveniently.

A children's librarian is an administrator — a planner, a budgeter, a facilitator, a spender. Increased staff takes money. Library service to children takes money. But the money expended in that service is the most productive money spent by a library on behalf of its public. Money spent for a children's service program produces adults who know what library service is, use it and support it with tax dollars for themselves and their children.

If there is a future for public library service in this country, then there is a future for service to children. There'll be no public library service if we don't serve the children.

Library service to children today is in a most interesting period of development. The public library has always been, by its nature, affected in its content and its development by the issues that affect our society nationally and locally.

There has been tremendous experimentation and growth in service to the pre-school child and his/her parents. Why? Because of our growing knowledge, through the work of Piaget and others, of the quantity of knowledge attained in the years before six and the fact that what is learned then shapes and limits all that is learned later. Parents who have never heard of Piaget or Montessori have learned through television or magazines or newspapers more about the need for early childhood education experiences; witness the growth in quantity and the change of nursery schools, day-care centers, and kindergartens. Part of this is due to the number of working women in this country; but non-employed mothers enroll their children too. Why? Because they know the experiences provided will give their children "something more."

Libraries are responding, still all too slowly, by expanding picture book collections, planning and offering more picture book and multi-media programs for preschoolers, training day care center and nursery workers in materials selection and use, expanding collections to include developmental toys and games, and offering storytelling by phone. The list of new ways to reach out to the preschooler grows daily as the knowledge of the interrelated nature of the way in which he/she learns and the richness and variety of experiences he/she needs to have becomes more widely known and appreciated.

The growth of the media center concept in the school library field is an interesting development too. Some members of our profession have seen this development as a threat to children's services in the public library. Others have retreated to the 1800's and have viewed it as the salvation of the public library, permitting the public

library to get out of the business of serving children and get back to the business (hark back to the founding purpose) of being the "capstone." That philosophy developed, you recall, because the public school system was going to take care of "everything" up to the adult level and produce literate adults who'd want to use public libraries. It didn't work. And it works no better today.

Better schools, along with better school library/media services, have produced more literate children who demand and need, both during and beyond school hours, better public library service. Even if all schools met the present media center standards (which, of course, most don't) in personnel, materials and space — it would take years for them to achieve the goal of reaching all the teachers in the school and teaching them to use the library effectively for the benefit of the students. A modern open school building in which the library is the "center" means that it could not be open after school hours without opening the whole building. Most school districts still have no library supervisor or coordinator; no central processing. When the school libraries of this nation can do a good job of the job they're trying to do then we might be able to think seriously about whether their role could appropriately be expanded.

There is, however, a basic reason that the public school library and the public library children's room cannot be "one," so patent as to make its statement almost superfluous, and that is economics. I know of no community in this nation that can afford the cost of keeping all its school libraries open from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., six or seven days a week. Schools serve varying populations: 200, 600, 1000 children. You know what it costs to keep a branch serving that size population open. You'd send a bookmobile, or open a storefront at heavy use hours and rightly so. Well the school library now serves its population at heavy use hours, most economically.

The growing acceptance of the school library media center concept is, it seems to me, an exciting development which has improved, is improving the quality of education and has led the way in introducing the multi-media concept into library service (and, in this respect, pushed public, college and university library service out of the dark ages). But it is neither a threat to nor a saviour for the public library where service to children is necessary and needs vast improvement in quality and quantity.

Finally, I'd like to discuss the effects of the growing "child advocacy" movement upon library service to children. White House Conferences each decade since the early 1900's have identified and brought to national attention children's needs as the society around them changes. In the past two conferences attention has been given increasingly to the rights of children. In 1960 the focus was the rights of children to equal education in a society that would treat them equally and their right to not grow up hungry. Federal funds for education (ESEA), civil rights legislation, and the war on

poverty followed soon after. In the 1970 conference the rights of children to health care, to equal justice and to good care at the pre-school level were the dominant foci. The Juvenile Justice Act was passed this year. Comprehensive health care and comprehensive child development bills have been introduced, are being discussed, and will, I am certain, be fact by this decade's end. Is it so unusual then, at a time when our national government is funding a "Right to Read" program, that libraries too are becoming aware of children's rights?

I would like to close by urging everyone to become advocates for the two and one-half million children of North Carolina who need public library service, who have a right to public library service and who are not getting much except lip service.

Is it because North Carolina children's librarians are sitting on their hands? I don't believe it. Only eighteen public libraries of ninety-five in this state say they have even one full time children's librarian. If all eighteen pairs of hands were put together, they could not support the weight of the administrators of public libraries who do not have a staff position for a children's librarian, much less positions for the supportive staff that children's librarians need to do an effective job of giving good service to all the children of the community, especially those who come to the library least and need it most.

And if you put all the administrators' hands together they could not support the weight of the members of the library boards; the boards, the weight of the commissioners or councilmen; and they, the weight of the citizens who haven't supported library service at the per capita rate.

OK. So where do we start? Let's start somewhere. Let's not start with space. Programs can be held anywhere and room for more books that don't circulate is not the answer. Let's not start with more materials. Everyone here could use more, but you have something to work with now if you just had the personnel to help encourage its more effective use. Let's start with personnel. There'll never be a children's services program without them.