

DAY CARE: A NEW ROLE FOR THE RURAL PUBLIC LIBRARY?

by

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INTRODUCTION

New roles for the rural public library might be a way of enticing more residents to utilize the public library and thereby broadening its base of support. Often rather than close public libraries survive in a enfeebled condition. "Death" of a public library can be that it has stopped growing and keeping up with the world and its community. It is not necessary for a public library to close its doors in order to become obsolete. The amount of data available on rural libraries is relatively small. In order to enable the rural public library to be more responsive to its community, a survey was conducted. Because surveys so often concentrate on library users and therefore do not include the views of those individuals who do not use their public library or are dissatisfied with it, this survey includes individuals who are rural residents, regardless of their library use. Question four from the survey is featured in Table 1.1.

The items in question four are either non-traditional or less than universal services or programs in the public library.

Table 1.1

Q-4. If your public library could provide the following services would you be interested in them?

a. computerized information	Yes	No	Somewhat	Available Now
b. books-on-tape	Yes	No	Somewhat	Available Now
c. literacy services	Yes	No	Somewhat	Available Now
d. day care services	Yes	No	Somewhat	Available Now
e. activities/senior citizens	Yes	No	Somewhat	Available Now
f. job training	Yes	No	Somewhat	Available Now

Some of these services/ programs like books-on-tape are already in place in many public libraries. The item of particular interest to this researcher was Item d. day care services. The possibility of day care being a concern to public librarians was brought up at the Pennsylvania Region #14 Governor's Conference in May of 1990 and the reaction of other librarians was largely negative. Due to an interest in re-examination of the role of the public library and the suggestion of a possible new role- involvement in day care, this item on question (Q-4) four was included.

The involvement of public libraries in providing services to day care has been given official impetus by a 1990 amendment to day care has been given official impetus by a 1990 amendment to the LSCA. Contained in section 10, an amendment to Section 101 of Title I, the amendment states that money can be granted for "(6) for assisting libraries in providing mobile library services and programs to child-care providers or child-care centers which are licensed or certified by the State, or otherwise meet the requirements of State Law," (Congress of the United States, 1990). Since LSCA is the only direct source of revenue from the federal government, this amendment is likely to influence the provision of services to day care centers by public libraries.

The interest in day care as a new area of service for public libraries began as a result of an effort to think of new roles. Public libraries have traditionally served children and in this respect day care would not be a departure. Another function that public libraries have often fulfilled is acculturation (Brown 1971, p.14) and day care in the public library would certainly result in some acculturation of the participants. The idea of the public library is a new idea. In practice, a lot of libraries are already providing day care for latchkey children, but as an official service the provision of day care in the public library is new. Rather than reactive stands that might encompass complaining about or resisting the current state of libraries, the development of new roles such as day care would position the public library in a proactive mode. If the public library wishes to control its own destiny, new roles should be seriously considered.

Public libraries in many rural areas of the United States have been hit hard by lack of funds. In some areas the libraries are unable to meet the

standards for State certification or have been forced to close (Quinn and Rogers, 1991, p. 20). Since other community institutions do not seem to be closing as a result of current economic conditions, a need to re-examine the role of the public library was seen.

The traditional role of the public library has been to provide books for "moral and cultural edification rather than useful information or research materials" (deGruyter 1980, p. 515). Even though after World War II the American Library Association began to promote the idea of libraries as an information center and an agent of social change (deGruyter 1980, p. 519-520), the public library's role is still one of managing books (Vavrek, 1990b, p. 23). While the provision of books is a worthwhile service, the changing demographics and lifestyles in the United States do not bode well for this role.

Women are traditionally the heaviest library users and supporters (Vavrek, 1990a, p. 21), but more women are returning to work (Day and Day 1988, p. 57), and therefore have less time for leisure reading (Cutler, 1990, p. 39). Another traditional role for the library has been the provision of books and story telling for children. Statistics show that Americans are reading less (Cutler, 1990, p. 38). Competition for the leisure time of the American public has reached a feverish pitch with sports, video games, video tapes, and cable television being only some of the options available.

Another ominous trend for the public library is the expectation of the American public to want services fast and convenient. It has been a fairly common response on our survey for rural respondents to say that they don't use the library very often because they prefer to buy their books rather than go to the public library and get them and have to return them. Another aspect to this type of respondent's comments deal with the fact that they are not finding current books on topics that interest them in the library and are unwilling to wait for them through interlibrary loan. While these responses do not represent the entire spectrum of views of the rural public toward its library, these responses do indicate a portion of the community which is bypassing the public library in favor of other institutions.

If the public library does need to revitalize its community role and missions would day care be a viable option? In searching for information on

non-traditional programs and services for the rural public library, it was found that public libraries are already lacking in space, staffing and resources (Vavrek 1983, p. 19). From this situation the question arises, do we struggle to maintain the status quo or are we willing to re-orient the rural public library to remain competitive in today's society?

There are three reasons that I believe indicate that the public library would be viable as a day care site or provider of services to day care programs. First, the public library has traditionally served individuals who could not afford to buy their own books. This tradition as an institution with a social conscience is important to maintain and fits in with the involvement of the public library with day care. In recent years other social programs such as literacy have been included as services housed by the public library. Public libraries across America are already dealing with day care in an ancillary way while coping with the problem of latchkey children (Dowd, July 1989, p. 19). If the latchkey problem is dealt with through a day care solution the library might gain by eliminating a social problem and acting as an agent of community and social change.

Another reason that the public library should get involved in day care is economics. Employers in rural areas have trouble retaining trained personnel. Women are often forced to leave employment because of problems with child care. In fact there is a substantial need for day care in rural areas (Shoffner 1986, p. 534). The need for human capital in rural areas to attract or retain businesses is also aided by the presence of adequate day care. Women in rural communities represent a largely unavailable human resource due to the lack of child care.

The third reason that rural public libraries should participate in community day care arrangements is because children and parents who use day care are potential new clients. Such community members should be encouraged by library programs and services to "develop the library habit" (Rome 1990, p. 35). Every child and parent who comes into the library and is treated well and receives a service that he desired is another potential library supporter. Due to financial considerations, local governments are now expecting libraries to justify their existence. What better justification can there be than plenty of

satisfied users? Since the library's traditional role as a source of leisure reading materials may be too limited, and library support may be eroding by changing lifestyles, every opportunity should be taken to situate the library as an active partner in improving the community's welfare.

Resistance to change is a well documented social phenomenon. Management texts discuss techniques to increase acceptance of the necessity for change among personnel. Every profession and institution grapples with how to cope in a changing society. In fact, it has been suggested that librarians as a group may be more resistant to technological and social change than other professional groups (Agada 1984, p. 38). It should come as no surprise that many librarians are opposed to any role that includes day care. The presence of latchkey children in the public library has provoked some librarians to express their opinion that they "are not behavior monitors or child caretakers" (Dowd, March/April 1989, p. 102). While this is true, I believe that it is short-sighted and misplaced to view such children as merely intrusions. Some libraries have responded to the latchkey problem by hiring guards or monitors and are regularly forced to call the police to control unruly young patrons (Rome 1990, p. 36-37). It may be necessary to take some of these steps to protect the librarians and library property, however; without a comprehensive policy on service to minors and participation in a community coordination of a latchkey program, the libraries are being forced to respond in a reactive rather than a proactive manner. Furthermore, the urban libraries with the biggest problems with safety or damage to property (Rome 1990, p. 35-37) have been the ones to institute latchkey programs (Dowd, March/April 1989, p. 105-106). A commitment to day care does not mean that the property will be damaged or librarians assaulted. Rural libraries have an even greater opportunity in this area because their communities are small and safety is less of a concern.

The library may not be the only source of resistance to the acceptance of change (in this case, day care). Rural communities are known for their conservatism and resistance to change (Hanks 1990, p. 13). Rural residents are less inclined than their urban counterparts to "favor further development of social service" (Camasso and Moore 1985, p. 404). In particular, day care may be an unpopular proposition (Camasso and Moore 1985, p. 405). Due to the

demographics of rural areas, a larger percent of the residents are elderly and may oppose such programs simply because they cannot utilize them (Hanks 1990, p. 10-11).

Does the existence of resistance to change obviate the need for public library involvement in day care? I do not believe so. The need is still there and the potential for a more proactive library role is also. It will be assumed that the availability of adequate day care facilities is directly related to the latchkey child problem. Another assumption is that parents who had other options would not leave their children unattended. It may be that parents feel that older children can supervise themselves, but unfortunately the latchkey phenomenon is not limited to teenagers. Libraries have borne the brunt of the lack of a national solution to the latchkey dilemma. Parents assume that the library is a safe place to leave their children (Rome 1990, p. 36).

I have been able to find very little evidence of rural library developments in this area of service. This does not necessarily mean that rural libraries do not have such programs in place, it may be simply a result of the lack of published material about rural libraries (Vavrek, 1983, p. 18). Another one of the reasons for this may be the lack of space (Vavrek, 1990a, p. p. 20). Librarians with adequate facilities can set up activities for unsupervised children in a separate area of the library without disturbing other patrons. Cramped library buildings without adequate seating areas cannot easily make such adjustments.

Some rural libraries have been responding to the need with programs. An example is the pre-school located in the library of Superior, Arizona. In an interview conducted over the telephone, Library Director Beverly Burritt explained that the creation of the pre-school occurred as a response to a perceived need. The local Head Start program had failed and even when it was in operation, there was no preschool for children who did not qualify for the program. The library does support the program which requires only a box of crayons and a donation of the mother's time as tuition. The program has been popular and enrolls 50-100 children each year.

Some librarians see extending the hours of schools as a solution to the latchkey problem (Dowd, March/April 1989, p. 106). In some communities the schools are leaving their facilities open for more hours (Day and Day 1988,

p. 58, 62). Key advisors on day care policy are proposing this solution at a national level (Trotter 1987, p. 34-35). These types of proposals leave the public library out of any solution. Perhaps a lot of librarians would welcome this, given the vandalism and disruption that often accompanies unattended children in the library, but an opportunity for the public library to be a community center would be diminished if not lost. A recent publication by the Bureau of National Affairs lists six possible community resources for a latchkey program; the public library is not one of them. The public library risks being left out of consideration for any role in latchkey program when librarians declare that they are not child caretakers and wish the problem would disappear. A more positive proposal might include the public library as a partner in a community latchkey/day care coalition. Key to this proposal is the library as a provider of services for this group of children, but not necessarily as a site for a day care center. Some librarians are already taking an active community role in dealing with the lack of affordable day care. Sally Barnett of Madison County Public Library (Alabama) represents her library on the local latchkey coalition (Dowd, March/April 1989, p. 105).

Other communities have had Head Start programs in their libraries (Denver) (Dunn 1989, p. 104) and many communities offer outreach to senior citizen centers, hospitals, and an assortment of shelters and special facilities (Philip 1989, p. 35). Many urban communities already have special programs tailored for unattended minors, so all that is missing is an increase in community awareness and networking with other community agencies and local officials.

METHODOLOGY

A survey is currently being conducted of rural residents in the continental United States. This survey attempts to ascertain the information needs of rural Americans. The names, addresses, and telephone numbers of 6500 potential respondents were purchased from Survey Sampling, Inc.. The interviews are conducted over the telephone by student interviewers. The questionnaire consists of 11 single and multi-part questions. A business letter was sent to each potential respondent to inform them about the nature of our endeavor and to let them know that we were going to call. The interviewers

attempt to contact the rural resident 3 times on three different days with two of the phone calls happening after 5:00 p.m. (respondent's time). The interview takes approximately 7 minutes. Of particular interest on this questionnaire was question number four (Q-4). Respondents were asked if they would be interested in six non-traditional or less common services/programs if their public library could provide them. Question four is shown in Table 1.1. Separate from the above survey, the public libraries who serve the three individuals who answered ('Available Now' for day care were telephoned and asked if they provided this service

RESULTS

These results came from 110 completed surveys selected randomly from an estimated 2,200 completed surveys (as of April 17, 1991). The results are contained in Table 1.2 and Table 1.3.

Table 1.2
Percentage of Responses

	YES	NO	SOMEWHAT	AVAILABLE NOW
a. computerized info	46.4	46.4	6.4	0.9
b. books-on-tape	42.76	50.9	2.7	3.6
c. literacy services	26.4	66.4	3.6	3.6
d. day care services	19.1	75.5	2.7	2.7
e. activities/senior citizens	42.7	49.1	6.4	1.8
f. job training	34.6	60	3.6	1.8

The three public libraries telephones about whether day care services were available now responded negatively. Forty-five (40.9) of the 110 surveys were from interviews with men and sixty-five (59.1) were from women. The following table illustrates the response breakdown by age on Item d. day care.

Table 1.3
Positive responses to day care service.

PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL IN CATEGORIES			
AGE	AGE RANGE	YES	SOMEWHAT
17-26	10	4.5	0
27-36	12.7	5.5	0
37-46	24.6	6.4	0.9
47-56	14.5	0.9	0
over 56	37.3	0.9	1.8

Table 1.4
Frequency of Library Use
Q-2. How often do you use your public library or its services?

	%TOTAL (N=110)	%DAY CARE (N=24) ("YES" OR "SOMEWHAT")
a. daily	0.0	0.00
b. weekly	15.4	8.30
*every two weeks	1.8	4.15
c. monthly	20.0	25.00
*5 times a year	0.9	4.15
*3-4 times a year	2.7	4.14
*2 times a year	2.7	0.00
d. once a year	15.4	4.15
e. less than once a year	14.6	12.50
f. don't know/remember	26.4	37.50

*denotes a response that does not fit in a preassigned category

Table 1.5
Breakdown of "yes" or "somewhat" responses by sex and age (N=24)

	FEMALE PERCENTAGE	MALE PERCENTAGE
17-26	16.7	4.2
27-36	12.5	12.5
37-46	8.3	25.0
47-56	4.2	0.0
over 56	<u>8.3</u>	<u>0.0</u>
TOTAL	47.6	52.4

DISCUSSION

Question four on our national telephone survey did not reveal a strong interest in the public library as a provider of day care services. Telephone interviewers were requested to add "for yourself, personally" to Q-4 and this might have accounted for part of the large proportion of negative responses to day care (79.9%). If a person was satisfied with their current day care arrangement or did not have children they should not have answered "Yes" to Item d. Interviewers were instructed to place people who said that "it would be good for someone else" in the "Somewhat" category. Other people responded to their own situation and knowing that their public library was too small and did not have adequate responses for such service, said "No."

It was my hypothesis that the people who were interested in day care might be less frequent library users and therefore belong to a group which did

not have a fixed idea of what a public library should be. Based on a comparison of figures in Table 1.4, this did not appear to be true. There are a few more people who are interested in day care who are infrequent library users (especially the e. Don't know/can't remember group (37.5 versus 26.4 for the group N-110). There also are less people who are interested in day care who use the library less than once a month (12.45% versus 17.2 for the entire group). However these differences do not seem to be significant enough to assume that the group which is interested in day care is any different from the one which isn't.

Table 1.5 allows a comparison by sex and age of the positive or somewhat responses for day care. The percentages of male versus female are similar to those of the total group (110). Women responded "Yes" or "Somewhat" 52.4% of the time and made up 59.1% of the total group. Men responded "Yes" or "Somewhat" 47.6% of the time and were 40.9 of the entire group. Men seemed to respond affirmatively somewhat more often and perhaps this is due to the ambivalence of many women toward day care (Shoffner 1986, p. 533).

It was interesting to note that day care was the least popular service/program suggested in question four. Only 19.1% of the respondents would be interested in day care being offered by their public library. A further note on this negative response is that day care seemed to be singled out for a negative response. Eight people said "No" solely to day care. This was an unusual response. Most people responded negatively to several items or perhaps all of the items, but it was relatively rare for an individual to single out one of the responses for a "no." By way of comparison, only one person said "No" only to e. activities for senior citizens. The reverse was also true. Seldom did a person respond positively to just one item. They usually responded positively to three or four items, or else all of the items. Not one of the individuals interested selected day care as their only positive response. This may reflect the fact that people either feel their library should offer more services or they should not. If they feel that their library is okay the way it is they may respond negatively to a majority of the items and if they think that their library is under developed they may answer affirmatively on most of the items.

My conclusion from this data is that the idea of the public library being involved in the provision of day care is too radical for most people. People may

have responded "No" simply because they couldn't conceive of such a thing, not because it would not be a good idea. If librarians themselves have difficulty perceiving themselves as being involved in day care services, the general public can not be expected to do so. The public's perception of what a library is and what it does comes from the library itself and until the public library sees one of its roles as a day care collaborator, the public won't either.

If the rural public library is going to become a more vital community resource such roles as a partner in the provision of day care should be considered. The provision of books for leisure reading is a worthwhile activity, but perhaps not a large enough role to remain active under current fiscal conditions. The idea of the library as a community center is being advanced in a number of communities and some have even included the library in a municipal/community center. In rural communities that cannot afford to build separate facilities for every community need, I believe the library can function as a site for a variety of activities and still maintain its role as a collector of knowledge.

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