

LOST AND...FOUND?: Children in the Rural Library

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“A rural library is generally defined as one that serves fewer than 10,000 people in a county having fewer than 150 people per square mile, or one that is located in a county having more than 80 percent of its land taken up by farms (Hennen 1986b).”¹ Rural libraries can be divided into three different types: 1.) rural that is becoming suburban, 2.) rural that is stable in its population base, and 3.) rural that is declining and/or disappearing altogether. Rural libraries, in all three categories, generally receive uneven representation as public libraries. They often lack space, funding, staff, and other resources to provide adequate service to their community. Many times, they are not heard because of a lack of the necessary resources to truly participate in the larger world of urban and suburban public libraries. Local pride and the need for political independence, mainly found in stable or declining rural areas, can prevent team efforts with other libraries. This need for independence is bound to affect programs offered to children, as well as adults, within the community of service.

Preschoolers’ door to learning

“If, in the preschool years, the foundation for learning is not firmly in place, the early school years may serve only to pile despair upon failure until the turbulence of early adolescence completes the destruction of motivation and hope.”²

During the early years, parents and family make an enormous difference in a child’s life. “Touching, holding, talking and reading to the infant seem to be the most effective spurs to later development.”³ Language skills are the basic equipment that need to be developed in the young child.

Preschool Story Hours, offered in varying degrees in rural, as well as urban and suburban areas, are more than just playtime for kids. They are a way to develop the mind through reading, creativity, language and listening skills, and imagination. The basic pattern of the story hour is composed of storytelling, puppetry, and creative drama, and is used to reach 3- to 5-year-olds. Some places even offer classes to 1- to 2-year-olds to help in developing early language, movement, and easy book skills. The

underlying theme in these programs is to encourage "emergent literacy," a concept based on the idea that kids learn written language best by interacting with parents and other adults through reading and writing exercises, exploring print on their own, and by watching mom, dad, and other adults read and write.⁴

Competitors of preschool programs in libraries in America include parks and community recreation programs, video games, videos, and cable television. In rural areas, buying books for children as opposed to having to return them or wait an insurmountable amount of time to receive the book through ILL, add to the list of competitors.⁵ Lack of space, staff, and resources can contribute to the already severely impaired status of the rural library.

Day care programs have been under observation as one possible way to involve more of the rural community in library activities. Some reasons include the need to continue to work with those who can't afford to buy their own books, the economic challenges of working women in rural areas who need and often don't have adequate day care, and the possibilities for potential new customers in the children and parents who use day care, to develop a "library habit."⁶

Major challenges inhibit widespread provision of day care programs in libraries. Librarians in rural libraries resist the idea of providing day care because they are afraid of being hurt by unruly kids or adding babysitting to their already insurmountable list of duties. Conservative rural communities resist change of any kind, especially when there is usually a higher elderly population in these communities. And lack of space to properly house young children is another challenge to be faced.⁷

The best case scenario for all three types of rural libraries include programs that have reached urban areas, but not rural as yet, encouraging preschoolers to form healthy reading relationships with their families and take part in library activities. Helpful collaborations between children's librarians and Head Start, begun in 1992, goes beyond the walls of the library bringing library services to children in the family setting. Some programs that have made a big difference in these areas include "Reach Out and Read" (ROAR), in which a book is carefully picked out by the pediatrician at the six-month-infant clinic visit for the parent to begin reading aloud to her/his child; "Born to Read," helps new moms to see the importance in their role as caregiver and encourager of reading; F.A.T.H.E.R.S. (Fathers as Teachers: Helping, Encouraging, Reading, Supporting) has goals for incarcerated dads in California to break the cycle of incarceration and lack of adequate reading skills, promote conscious, positive role modeling as dads and father figures, educate fathers to become their children's first teachers, and build self-esteem in both

fathers and their children through personal contact between them and sharing positive learning experiences together.⁸

The worst case scenario, in my opinion would be if all libraries and their programs were cloned after one pattern of library, and, in the process, rural libraries that are declining and those that are moving toward becoming suburban were completely swallowed into the large public libraries of our nation. The beauty of the public library as a place to develop personal gifts, along with its mission to serve the individual community according to its unique needs, would be lost. Many people, especially children, would be displaced from library materials and services.⁹ Libraries would be out of reach for them. Besides, what is worse, inadequate service or no service?

The most likely scenario, in my opinion, is that the rural libraries that are becoming suburban will eventually blend into the suburban libraries, the declining rural libraries will disappear, and the rural libraries that are stable will limp along until they either become swallowed up by the larger public library systems or become like the suburbanized rural libraries of today.

Formal Education Support

“What we do for children today has ripple effects far beyond tomorrow”¹⁰ shaping the generations to come. Library goals are to help kids to become literate Americans, instill habits of lifelong learning in them, empower them to meet some of their own information needs, and treat them with the dignity they deserve. Though libraries cannot be all things to all people, they do make a major difference in the cultural outcome of the nation.

In the “New Vision: Beyond ALA Goal 2000,” some of the guiding principles include libraries as upholding democracy by promoting diversity of ideas, freedom to intellectually articulate all points of view, and access to information to all people. Some key action areas discussed were diversity, continuing education, and equity of access. Strategies include promoting ALA’s mission and vision, creating national partnerships with government representatives, museums, and schools, and finding ways to bring the resources of individual members, organizations, and staff together on projects to make a national impact. We, as librarians, must ensure the extension of this representation to rural libraries.

ALA considers itself the voice of the American library and sets high information standards for its members and institutions. Their five-year plan to move libraries and librarians into the 21st century includes becoming more of a public voice representing ALL Americans, regard-

less of age or location, training and updating the skills of library professionals, and defining their role in the emerging information environment.¹¹

In order to be affective, libraries need support at many levels of government to continue present programs and develop new ones that will promote lifelong learning. At the state level, schools and public libraries need to collaborate to build a support system for caregivers, and begin working with home-schoolers, magnet schools, etc. There needs to be intergenerational resource sharing and exchange of information and services. Clear-cut guidelines must be developed for funding libraries and schools to support literacy. And there must be support for continuing education and training of librarians and other professionals working with children to keep skills upgraded, so that our children will be better prepared to face the challenges of adulthood.¹²

At the local level, ongoing partnerships must be developed and encouraged between libraries, with police departments, museums, parks and recreation, Head Start programs, etc. in rural areas, as well as urban and suburban. The quality of library staff must be maintained. And a system must be established where there is ongoing staff, materials, and services evaluation to continue to adequately meet the needs of children both today and tomorrow.¹³ Small public libraries, and the children who use them, need professional librarians even more than large ones do, because there is no room for a mediocre librarian to hide in the stacks. Rural libraries are often slighted due to lack of availability of funds and MLS grads willing to move into a small community.¹⁴

Library services have been cut drastically instead of increased, due to the 'shrinking tax dollars,' and, often, the first programs to go are those serving the smaller population. How can rural libraries overcome the effects of this destructive process? A rural librarian can keep her/his finger on the changing pulse of the community s/he works with and be flexible. S/he can take a proactive stance by reaching out to the community and being aware of both resources and limitations available. S/he can research and apply for grants that will boost library funds. The key is creativity. This makes both regional and local collaborations imperative in order to solidify community cooperation, rather than competition.

Many rural communities are faced with a clash between two cultures, the agricultural segment and the newly emerging business segment. The first segment often is more conservative and slow to change, while the last is built upon the very foundation of continuous evolution. Though changes can create multiple opportunities, there is no guarantee this will be the result. A balance must be created for harmonious survival of both factions that includes creation of a clear vision of the future, exploring

service alternatives of libraries, and adopting a series of goals and objectives making explicit the purpose of the library and its value within the community. The effectiveness of political planning depends on the ability of the planners to see the many facets of the political system within the community, recognize driving factors of the system, develop strategies to cope with these factors, and incorporate the strengths of both the agricultural and business factions of the community.¹⁵

There seems very little hope that any program of the library will escape the effects and influence of the Internet. Oh, I do not say it is all bad, for that would be foolish, but I do say that it is a tool in which the bugs must be worked out as we go along.

The question of learning-as-process over the Internet, as opposed to acquiring information for kids in schools, libraries, and other traditional means, has caused great debate, particularly in rural settings across the country.¹⁶ Who can and will pay the incredible costs to wire the country in between the cities? The rural areas share with urban the problem of obtaining the funding needed to progress with the suburban population. "Catching a revolution in progress can be tricky."¹⁷ Hearing about how wonderful the Internet is can not help but be offset by visions of children lost in the "point-and-click" tutorial jungle as they learn how to dot the proverbial "i" and cross the "t" of each separate program on the Internet. In order to pass on good learning skills to kids, teachers and librarians must be well-trained and have well-developed skills in surfing the Internet. A truly user-friendly technology is a must with kids.¹⁸

The best case scenario, in my opinion, would be combining the educational benefits of schools, libraries, and the Internet. Some examples of rural libraries that appear to be doing this include the following web sites:

Two-Harbors Public Library of Two Harbors, MN: had fun graphics and web links listed for kids.¹⁹

Modoc County Library's Homepage of Modoc County, CA: listed a children's story hour schedule.²⁰

Eccles-Lesher Memorial Library of southern Clarion County, PA: had Head Start, activity time for 6- to 13-year-olds, story time for 2- to 5-year-olds, and summer and holiday readings.²¹

The worst case scenario, in my opinion, would be a widening of the educational opportunity gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" within today's society.²² Budget cuts have affected all libraries, but especially the rural ones as they seem to be, in many cases swallowed by the larger institutions.

The most likely case, in my opinion, is that as rural communities will continue to move toward the suburbs, in this ever-shrinking world,

and libraries will begin to merge in order to gain financial balance. Some of the library services will take on more of a generic quality, rather than being tailored to the individual communities. Competitors and collaborators will begin to blur into each other as materials and services are more provided and distributed by and over the Internet.

Conclusion

Some people believe the strengths in a small library include more personalized service, more reachable staff, and creativity. Others see a myriad of myths that encompass the picture of the small library as a place that provides more personal service, collects only best sellers, serves only farmers and small-town residents, and is valued by the community it serves for its independence. Advocates of including the small library as an equal among public libraries say people must shove selfishness aside and view materials as commonly, rather than individually, owned. The main focus can really only be "...to ensure that all citizens, regardless of where they live, have easy access to quality public library service."²³

- 1 Pungitore, Verna L. *Public Librarianship*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) p. 176.
- 2 Mathews, Virginia H., et.al. "A President's Paper." *ALA 1996-97 Internet*. Date accessed: April 9, 1998. <<http://www.ala.org>>, n.p.
- 3 Mathews, n.p.
- 4 Gertzog, Alice, and Edwin Beckerman. *Administration of the Public Library*. (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994) p. 351.
- 5 Shilto, Carla. "Day Care: a new role for the rural public library." *Rural Libraries* 1993 (v.13, no. 1) p. 69.
- 6 Shilto, p. 71.
- 7 Shilto, p. 77.
- 8 Mathews, n.p.
- 9 DeCandido, GraceAnne Andreassi. "Come, and Bring the Kids." *Wilson Library Bulletin* Nov. 1994. (v. 69) p. 6.
- 10 Mathews, n.p.
- 11 "New Vision: Beyond ALA Goal 2000." revision. *ALA* Feb 25, 1998. Internet. Date accessed: April 9, 1998. <<http://www.ala.org/alagoal2000/beyond2000.html>>
- 12 Mathews, n.p.
- 13 Mathews, n.p.
- 14 White, Herbert S. "Small Public Libraries—Challenges, Opportunities, and Irrelevancies." *Library Journal* April 15, 1994. (v.119) pp. 54.
- 15 Beckerman, Edwin. *Politics and the American Public Library*. (Lanham, MD:

- The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996) p. 71.
- 16 Lohr, Steve. "Weighing Costs of Net Access for Every School and Library." *The New York Times* on the web. Oct. 21, 1996. Date accessed: April 14, 1998. <<http://search.nytimes.com/search/daily>>, n.p.
- 17 Virshup, Amy. "Surfing a Tidal Wave." *The Washington Post*. Feb 2, 1997. Internet. Date accessed: April 8, 1998. <<http://www.dialog.com>>, n.p.
- 18 Virshup, n.p.
- 19 "Two-Harbors Public Library." (Two Harbors, MN) Internet. Date accessed: April 14, 1998. <<http://www.two-harbors.lib.mn.us/kidlinks.htm>>
- 20 "Modoc County Library's Homepage." (Modoc County, CA) Internet. Date accessed: April 14, 1998. <<http://infopeople.berkeley.edu.8000/modoc/index.html>>
- 21 "Eccles-Leshner Memorial Library." (southern Clarion County, PA) Internet. Date accessed: April 14, 1998. <<http://www.csonline.net/ecclesh>>
- 22 Lohr, n.p.
- 23 Pungitore, p. 177.

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