

KIDS ARE THE ISSUE: RURAL LIBRARIES AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Becky Sheller, Youth Services Librarian
Lewis & Clark Library
Helena, Montana

Thanks to the recent census we know that more people moved out of the cities and into rural areas the past decade. This was a reversal of a 160 year long trend of rural-to-urban migration.

These emigrants of the 1970s took with them dreams of a slow paced life style, less congestion, less pollution, less crime - a dream of more of the good things in life. Many of these people also took their children, hoping to find a good place to raise kids.

Many rural communities are growing, others remain stable and still others are dying out. But this sweeping generalization could have been made about any rural community in this country anytime during the past 30 years. It does not mean much, except that as communities change one expects library service to change too, either for better or for worse.

Thirty years ago television was a new frontier to be explored and libraries were not yet in real competition with it. Today's grade school children have never not known television. Not only is TV very present in their lives, but also sophisticated video games and computers and these kids are more comfortable with computers than most of their parents.

One can hardly assume that isolated rural young are unaffected or unaware of these technologies. Do you know of any 10 year old that has never played videogames? Are rural public libraries serving the young? Are they meeting the needs, the wants of children in rural areas? Do librarians even know what the needs and wants are?

In this paper an examination of children's library service in rural areas will be conducted. To do this one must look at several related factors: the role of the children's librarian, the role of the director, the role of a state or regional consultant and the role of other community organizations that deal with or serve children.

*There are problems inherent to rural areas that make library service difficult, such as isolation, lack of resources, lack of professionally trained librarians (although a lot of libraries have been operating without degree bearing librarians and probably will continue to do so).

One of the criteria for defining rural is isolation. People in rural areas are isolated from one another, from a community, from the services provided by a community (such as fire and police protection, hospitals and medical care facilities, and libraries). I do not mean to imply rural areas lack these services, these services are just further away and not as sophisticated as one finds in an urban environment.

Rural communities are also out of the mainstream of academic influences, so they are probably less aware of some of the current trends of thought. For example, marketing in libraries seems to be a hot topic now, particularly if one is familiar with Baltimore County, Maryland. However, it will take a while for marketing ideas to reach small rural libraries through continuing education or conference workshops.

Besides, people in rural areas tend to be more conservative, less subject to changing. Things have to be practical, as pragmatism is another characteristic of rural residents. A Library with a limited budget can hardly experiment with new techniques, so that is best left to larger libraries, who have the time, money and staff to iron out the kinks.

In rural areas people may be further from a public library, or any other type of library, than in a city. For a child this problem is magnified, because if he or she can not walk or ride a bike to the library, then the child is dependent upon an adult for a ride, public transportation being nonexistent in most rural settings. In a study done in Seattle in 1972 it was found that as distance from the library increased the number of users decreased.¹ Seattle is hardly rural, but obviously distance is a factor in library use; remoteness from public services is isolation.

This is a factor that people providing library service to children in rural areas must deal with.

Children's librarians are often characterized by their creativity, yet creativity is often the product of brain-storming. Any librarian in a small library is less likely to have contact with other professionals, less likely to have the chance to exchange ideas and probably less likely to have the time allotted in the work schedule. In the small library lucky enough to have a person on the staff in charge of children's services, that person does selection, programming, outreach, school visitation and probably a multitude of other things.

Who is responsible for children's services in the small library?

In a small library there are several ways in which children's services are provided: (1) by a professionally trained children's librarians with paraprofessional or clerical support staff; (2) by a professional trained librarian who is the library director and works in every service area as needed, but who delegates certain tasks to paraprofessional staff members on a daily basis; or most commonly (3) by a librarian who is not professionally trained and who works in all areas.²

Perhaps now is an appropriate time to define children's librarian as it will be used for this paper. The "children's librarian" is the person primarily responsible for children's services, whether degree bearing or not.

It is important to have the right sort of person in charge of children's services, someone that understands and works well with kids. Ideally the designated children's librarian should have a knowledge of child development and how to plan and implement programs suitable to the different age groups being served. Adults in a rural area, especially if the area has not experienced a recent growth in population, are more homogeneous than in metropolitan areas. However, children, even in rural areas, have different wants, needs and capabilities. An age difference of a few months can make a big difference in a child's reading interests or abilities. The children's librarian must be sensitive to all this in order to provide reader's advisory and reference services.

According to a LAMA publication Serving Children In Small Public Libraries this individual should select and weed materials, develop outreach services, help set goals and carry out library policy concerning children and prepare and maintain a children's materials and program budget.³ Excellent recommendations, but one can not help but wonder how many children's librarians in small libraries actually do this or how many are even aware of guidelines such as this.

Goals of library service for children often include providing children with a variety of experiences through various media, which will assist with his or her emotional and intellectual growth.⁴ In a small library situation these may or may not be formally recognized as goals. If a director has time to produce a policy manual (or the inclination to take time) it might include goals for children's services and selection criteria; hopefully the person responsible for children's services would have input into this.

Only four states have guidelines and standards for children's services; they are California, Illinois, Vermont and Virginia. Two states mention children's services in the general standards, Arizona and North Dakota and three more states, Idaho, Ohio and Wisconsin, are working on standards.⁵ That leaves forty-one states with out standards for children's services. Perhaps lack of a good example from the state library or library association and a lack of guidelines to work from is part of the reason small libraries do not have policies.

Shontz indicated that new goals, new programs in the children's department can be disconcerting to other departments. One of the beauties of a smaller library is the absence of bureaucracy. Each person is more readily aware of what co-workers are doing and each staff member is more likely to be helping with children's services during a special program. With staff performing duties throughout the library there can be a better appreciation and understanding for the importance of the different departments (to use that term loosely).

Yet the perception of the importance of children's services certainly differs from library to library, whether large or small, urban or rural. When budget's are cut, children's services are often the hardest hit. But why is this?

Obviously there is a lack of commitment to children's services on the part of the administration. A commonly held belief is that children's services is play, therefore anyone can do it.⁶ Any professionals, therefore in children's services can be put to better use elsewhere.

But cutting children's services disporportionately is cutting the library's throat. A survey done recently indicates that adults, i.e., parents,

use the library more often when they bring their children to library programs.⁷ Curtailing children's services has an indirect effect on services to adults or to the number of adults served.

Something rather alarming came to light in research done for a Ph.D. dissertation by Margaret Kimmel in 1979. She proposed to determine if librarians who exhibit more striving for professional recognition and status have less regard for lower-class or lower-status clients. One of the conclusions reached was that, generally, the public librarians who want to succeed professionally have less concern for children.⁸ In other words, children are viewed as lower-status patrons. It is no wonder then that in libraries with a professionally trained director budgets for children's services get cut.

If the children's librarian is not in on the planning and development of library goals, is not there as an advocate the budget could be cut without a word of protest. Perhaps the rural libraries are better off without ambitious young professionals around.

If the children's librarians in rural areas do not play an advocate role, who should?

Certainly a library director could, and undoubtedly often do. But a director has a multitude of responsibilities and it is only human nature that energies might be expended elsewhere, i.e., budgeting, fund raising, adult services.

The role of a state or regional consultant for children's services becomes important. Not only can a consultant be an advocate, but can serve in other capacities as well.

"In states with small rural communities, there will always be a need for professional innovative consultants who will incorporate change and respond to

trends."⁹ The consultant can act as an advocate for children's services at the state level, as well as help children's librarians to be advocates in their own libraries.

State library agencies traditionally provide staff training, usually to non-degree holding librarians from small or rural libraries. Other services provided by consultants include sponsoring of state-wide summer reading programs, maintaining a juvenile book examination center, conducting book review sessions, launching publicity campaigns, conducting workshops on programming (like storytelling, use of AV equipment, drama and crafts).

In states with regional library systems, a district consultant performs the duties similar to a state consultant. Hopefully, these people are in personal contact with the librarians they serve more often than the state consultants, who spend fewer than five days a year with their consultees.¹⁰

In New York State, regional library systems organized by the cities were viewed with suspicion and distrust in rural areas. To combat this meetings between local and regional staff and trustees were held to outline some common goals. The following three goals were cited: collections, facilities and staff abilities needed improvement. Children's rooms, or corners, were given a face lift; a team of professional librarians selected 3,500 titles which arrived at the regional libraries classified and processed; weekly book reviews were held and included discussion of criteria. From these review sessions a monthly annotated buying guide was distributed to the libraries.¹¹

Also made available to the rural libraries was Programs for Children, an urban library's publication suggesting programs for story time by topic or theme.¹²

It has been found that children need or want more reader's advisory and rural librarians are not always prepared to handle this. The regional consultant to the libraries in the Northwest Territories of Canada offered a three part solution: a list of fiction books by topic, a list of replacement titles for series fiction and interlibrary loan service to children.¹³

Volunteers are important, especially to a small library. In the children's area they can supplement staff and help carry out programming. In some libraries volunteers produce puppet shows or act out fables and fairy tales periodically during the year, like at the culmination of a summer reading program. Other volunteers work on a more regular basis; their duties can include checking out materials, shelving, repairing materials and equipment or assisting with story time. These volunteers can also help with special programs, refreshments or help publicise events.

Word-of-mouth is such an important source of conveying information in small communities, volunteers should be encouraged to spread the word about library programs. The library volunteer, who is only at the library a few hours a month, can likely have more contact with the public in general than the librarian who works full-time.

Serving Children in Small Public Libraries lists three recommendations for effective volunteer programs:

1. They are adequately trained to perform the tasks assigned.
2. Everyone is aware of their working schedule and that the volunteers feel committed to that schedule.
3. There is some type of compensation - praise, certificate, recognition - for the work and time they are giving to the library.¹⁴

Volunteers, like other staff members, need to feel they are a vital, contributing member of the organization.

Volunteers could be encouraged in other ways, too. For example in New York State, the assembly proposed to reward library volunteers with tax credits. For 150 hours of volunteer work, a \$150 tax credit would be given.¹⁵ It would be nice if more states followed New York's lead.

An often over looked group of potential volunteers are teenagers. One consultant cautioned that they do not like routine things, like shelving books, but many of them can run film projectors and might be willing to show movies to children. Young adults could also assist in story time, puppet shows or other creative ventures.

In Tennessee the state government recognized volunteer work as experience when applicants are evaluated for employment.¹⁶ This could benefit both younger and older volunteers, especially if other states adopted this option.

Another role to be considered, in fact several roles, are other agencies and organizations dealing with children. What is the role of the library and the school?, the library and the day care center?, the library and children's organizations?

It depends, of course, on the size and number of staff, the goals and resources of the library, particularly in the children's department. It is not the purpose of this paper to examine in detail cooperative services, but a cursory look is in order.

The merits of cooperation between the public school and the public library is one of the oldest, and judging from the literature, viable areas of cooperation. Suffice it to say that cooperation works in some cases and not in others.*

*See Ann Wilson's article on public-school libraries in this issue of Rural Libraries.

For example, in Frankfort, Illinois the public library and one public school share a librarian. Frankfort is a rural area experiencing rapid suburban growth. Kay Weiss reported in Illinois Libraries that she is able to better facilitate interlibrary loans from the public to the school library, helped anticipate requests by teachers and provided a greater opportunity to meet with young people in the area. Plus a familiar face at the public library makes it less forbidding, she contends.¹⁷

Another type of cooperation between the school and the public library is found in Basin, Wyoming. The school district does not have the funds, nor the space, to provide a library for grade school students, so the classes visit the public library once or twice a month, hear a story and check out books. On library visitation day a lot of kids show up at the library after school to check out a record or look at something they just did not have time to examine earlier. Admittedly this is a poor substitute for a school library, but it is better than having no library service at all.

Cooperation with day care centers is another task often assumed by librarians, again depending on size of staff and objectives. Libraries work with day care centers by providing picture books, doing flannel board stories or by having the children visit the library. Day care people (and teachers) are also invited to storytelling workshops in the library.

Rural libraries also meet the needs of boys' and girls' organizations, such as the Girl Scouts, Campfire Boys or the 4-H Club. The cooperation can be nothing more than a tour of the library - which even the smallest library does, to having a Girl Scout volunteer in the library, or by providing for a 4-H display.

The state or regional consultant plays a vital role in the cooperative process. A consultant helps stimulate cooperation between libraries, works with other state agencies concerned with all aspects of child welfare and work with people on the state level who are responsible for school library service.

At the beginning of this paper some of the disadvantages of library service in rural areas were listed, but now some of the advantages should be cited. While many rural libraries are inadequately funded, many more are well financed. One suspects that rural libraries that have relied only upon local resources are probably more secure now than urban or suburban libraries that have depended on LSCA funds or other federal grants to provide programming and services. As the population continues to shift from urban to rural areas, an eroding tax base will further hamper the city library.

While the fluxation in population does cause problems, it will also aid the rural communities, and the library. For example in Wyoming six counties have had new libraries built within the past five years - Albany, Carbon, Sweetwater, Fremont, Campbell and Lincoln. With the exception of Albany County these counties underwent a rapid growth in population due to an increase in mining. The tax base was expanded in these counties, allowing for an expansion in county services, including the public library. During this time period the University of Wyoming in Laramie also grew, accounting in part for the new library in Albany County, and an addition to the UW library.

A majority of the people leaving urban areas are white and middle-class, the traditional library users. So the cities are loosing the primary patrons and the country side is gaining them. These newcomers, with sophisticated library expectations, make demands on the rural library; demands the locals,

including the librarians, never considered. While adult emigrants have other expectations, their children do too.

If the library in Metropolis has toys, games, tapes, books, magazines and microcomputers, the child will expect these same things in the Riverside Library. Obviously not all small libraries can afford microcomputers, but children will expect more than books.

Another feature of the small town is the friendly, informal channel of communication which exists to the advantage of the library. It is easier for the children's librarian to know patrons and their parents; there are few to know. Small towns also have a homogeneous quality. These two factors make it easier for librarians to assess their clients needs, to be aware of community issues and to become involved in an organization or serve on a committee.

A children's librarian involved in an organization for personal reasons still represents the library and more importantly can find out what parents in the group are concerned with or interested in and can use this information to better serve parents and children.

The children's librarian might be a parent. His or her child provides a source of contact with other children and other parents.

It is worthwhile to reiterate the lack of a bureaucracy in the smaller libraries. Channels of communication are informal, everyone knows what everyone else is doing (another characteristic of small towns), and cooperation from everyone on the staff is necessary to keep the library running. In small libraries everyone is an important member of the team and perhaps the only member.

Anyone who has recently done a literature search realizes that there is very little being written about libraries in rural areas. Except for the

Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship no other academic institution is examining rural library service routinely.

As Marilyn Shontz pointed out in Top of the News recently, very little research has been done on service to children in public libraries. Many doctoral dissertations have been conducted on children's literature, but not nearly enough research has been done on the various aspects of children's library service.¹⁸

Couple this with the lack of research done on rural libraries and it is clear that library service to children in rural areas needs to be examined.

Some information is available, but one must hunt for it, so drawing further conclusions about service to children in rural areas is difficult.

Rural libraries are not as alike as peas in a pod - they may or may not be readily distinguishable from the other vegetables in the library garden, to continue with the metaphors. Some libraries have new buildings and are well staffed; other are small, one room operations run by dedicated volunteers. Library service to children varies widely in the different types of libraries by the physical nature of the library itself.

Just as libraries are different, so are librarians. As demonstrated previously some hold an MLS degree, others have some training or background while others are the only ones working in the library. The amount of training the children's librarian has, the resources available, the individual's creativity and the support received from co-workers and associates all play a part in determining the librarian's effectiveness.

As illustrated the attitude of the library director is a factor in children's library service in a small library, or in a large one. If the director recognizes the importance of children's services, the program will be

funded and the children's librarian rewarded. The director serves as the library's representative to the community and in this capacity can "talk up" children's services, as well as other services.

Patrick M. O'Brien, director of the Columbus and Franklin County library system, offered a wonderful, insightful thought to children's librarians:

The public library is one of the few (it may even be the only) institutions left in this country where a child can still get one-to-one professional help free and without question. Every other institution I can think of, from museums to schools to counseling agencies, deals only with children in organized groups or by appointment.

It is too bad O'Brien's attitude is not shared by more directors.

As a final note I will add that children's services in rural areas needs more attention. I know there are children in rural areas being served by public and school libraries, and children who are not. Yet there is not enough material to draw more concrete conclusions about who is being served, by whom and what the service is like.

Nor are we as librarians really aware of all the problems of serving the rural young; one can assume some of their information needs are similar to adult patrons, yet they have their own unique needs and wants different than those of kids living in metropolitan and suburban areas.

I suppose it is not good form to end a paper with an unanswered question but after reading, thinking, writing and reviewing my own experiences on the topic I can only conclude that we really do not know the status of children's service in rural libraries in this country, or even in geographical regions of the country. I think it is something that merits more attention.

FOOTNOTES

¹L. Reddy, "Beyond the City: Library Services to Children in Rural and Dispersed Communities" International Library Review 7 (3 July 1975): p. 259.

²Harilyn L. Shontz, "Selected Research Related to Children's and Young Adult Services in Public Libraries" Top of the News 38 (Winter 1982): p. 132.

³Diana Young, Serving Children In Public Libraries (Chicago: Library Administration and Management Association, ALA, 1981): p. 3.

⁴Patricia L. Smith, "Beyond the City" International Library Review 7 (3 July 1975): p. 301.

⁵Ethel Ambrose, "National Survey of Support for Children's Services at the State Level" Public Libraries 20 (Spring 1981): p. 124.

⁶Diana Young, "Library Services to Children - A Job or a Profession?" Public Libraries 20 (Winter 1981): p. 24.

⁷Shontz, p. 132.

⁸Ibid., p. 131.

⁹Young, "Library Services . . ." p. 121.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 121.

¹¹Ibid., p. 122.

¹²Reddy, p. 293

¹³Smith, p. 107.

¹⁴Young, Serving Children . . . p. 5.

¹⁵Library Journal 107 (1 January 1982): p. 126.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁷Kay Weiss, "Work Together . . . Share the Wealth" Illinois Libraries 62 (3 July 1975): p. 15.

¹⁸Shontz, p. 140.

¹⁹Patrick M. O'Brien, "An Administrator Speaks of Services to Youth" Top of the News 37 (Spring 1981): p. 243.

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