
Performance Measures in Youth Services

Rebecca Sue Taylor

How many times have you been told by colleagues, library school professors, supervisors, and journal articles that you need to talk like, think like, dress like, and act like an administrator in order to get your department's fair share of funds, power, and respect?

How many times have you thought, "I've got more important things to do: plan the storytelling festival; get out the Toddler Time publicity; meet with the school librarians. I don't have time to play administration games."

Is there any reasonable way to balance your *real* work with what you must do to justify that work and ensure its continued funding and support? Here are a few suggestions to bring your life back into balance.

Step One

The first item of business is to stop and make an attitude adjustment. Taking time for study, research, reading, planning, and just plain thinking *is a legitimate use of your time*. You are a manager or supervisor because someone values your knowledge and experience. Taking time to read the current professional literature, attend professional meetings, and talk to colleagues is as much a part of your job as making sure there are enough reading records to last all summer.

A good place to start your reading is Barbara T. Rollock's *Public Library Services for Children*¹ published in 1988. It is probably the most current overview of the functions and methods ascribed to "children's services" since Dorothy Broderick's *Library Work With Children* was published in 1965.² It is interesting that even in the 1977 revision of Broderick's work (the "bible" for many of us now in the management levels of children's services) there is absolutely no mention of management, the planning process, output measures, or evaluation processes.

Rollock's work, on the other hand, focuses considerable attention on the management concerns of a children's librarian. She asserts that the

major responsibility of a manager of public library children's services is to keep in touch with the ideas, concerns, and planning taking place in the entire field of librarianship, not just within youth services.³

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Rollock covers national and state-wide standards as well as the development of performance measures as they apply to children's and youth services. She also presents a succinct and readable chapter on internal and operational management concerns. "Resting too comfortably, perhaps, on a tradition of success, practitioners of services to children have failed to offer objective proof of their techniques for measurement and evaluation."⁴ Rollock discusses funding, staffing, setting goals and objectives, public relations, and concludes with the assertion that children's librarians need to develop goals and objectives, train staff to meet these written standards, and evaluate carefully departmental services in terms of the successful completion of these written goals and objectives. When one has carefully followed these steps one is in a far more effective position to demand an appropriate budget and to spend it effectively.⁵

Step Two

Next you need to take some time to familiarize yourself with the language and processes that your administration is using. Take time to ferret out your library's copy of *A Planning Process For Public Libraries*.⁶ Published in 1980, this work replaced the national standards by which public

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libraries measure and judge their services. It is fairly technical and at times difficult reading, but even if you haven't already been through some part of the "planning process," you will eventually have to understand such terms as "data collection," "community survey," and even the ubiquitous "preschool door to learning."

Once you have at least a general understanding of what the planning process is and how it may involve children's services, take a look at the two manuals that were put out to enhance and supplement the original process. *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries*⁷ provides the tools to begin an actual planning process as well as numerous sample forms to be adapted for local use. The chapter on writing goals and objectives is particularly good, presenting clear and practical methods for creating a framework upon which to hang future methods of evaluation, while accepting the fact that not all libraries or library systems will choose to expend the same amount of time and staff resources on the process.

Even more important is *Output Measures for Public Libraries*.⁸ The chapter on data collection is excellent and should give you numerous ideas for the types of surveys that might be done within a children's services department. Chapter 4, "Interpreting and Using the Results," looks succinctly and rationally at what you may want to do with the statistics you have collected. Numerous types of forms for data collection are appended.

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Step Three

Now that you are familiar with the reasons for internal measurement and the planning process, its structure, and terminology, you need to take some time to explore the types of things that you may be able to measure effectively. In the excellent and thought-provoking article, "Research and Measurement in Library Service to Children,"⁹ Adele M. Fasick asks, "Why have librarians engaged in serving children been put on the defensive about the way in which they evaluate their services, and what can be done to bring children's services back into the mainstream of library thinking?" Her article discusses the problems involved in using conventional quantitative measurement techniques to measure the types of

services provided by a children's services department:

Although some of the reaction against quantitative measurement of children's services may be overly emotional, it is not true, as one of my colleagues once suggested, that "children's librarians are people who love children and hate statistics." There are some good reasons for protesting against the imposition of quantitative standards on children's work. There are problems in the evaluation of library services to children that simply do not exist in other types of library work.¹⁰

Adele Fasick also poses a number of youth-service-specific research questions which need to be measured and evaluated in ways different from the usual systemwide comparative measurements.

Probably the most important single article on measurement and evaluation of children's services is Mary K. Chelton's "Evaluation of Children's Services."¹¹ After an excellent review of the history of prescriptive standards and the development of the planning process, she spends considerable time discussing just what evaluation is and is not. Among her heartening and realistic assertions are:

1. Evaluation is not the way by which one's ultimate worth is measured.
2. Evaluation is not always complicated.
3. Evaluation will not always prove what you want it to.
4. Evaluation is not always quantitative (i.e., counting things) even when the results are presented and analyzed numerically.
5. Evaluation does not solve problems; it only provides the evidence needed to solve problems.¹²

Chelton continues with a detailed summary of specific types of evaluations; appended are sample instruments. The article concludes with the astute and to-the-point statement that: "The fact that a program has clear measurable objectives, valid measures, and sufficient resources to document itself does not ensure a successful evaluation although all those factors must be present in order to do one If the library does not have a capacity for self-criticism and change, an evaluation may only be an exercise in futility."¹³

Two other articles that are worth finding and studying point out some areas for evaluation that are specific to children's services. Diana Young's "Evaluating Children's Services"¹⁴ presents a pertinent survey of questions every youth services administrator should ask and includes questions on facilities, materials, programming, and services.

Lesley S. J. Farmer's "Using Research to Improve Library Services"¹⁵ points up a possible avenue of additional research and reading in

discussing the Dallas Public Library's survey of effectiveness of preschool story hour delivery systems. Some public libraries have used current research in the field of child development to design programs that require the active involvement of parents.¹⁶ The operative phrase here is "current research in the field of child development." Certainly it is an avenue more public library children's librarians need to pursue.

Is there any reasonable way to balance your *real* work with what you must do to justify that work and ensure its continued funding and support?

Step Four

If you are convinced by now that you need to be doing some type of evaluation or statistical measurement of your department's services, you may want to track down *Output Measures for Children's Services in Wisconsin Public Libraries* by Douglas Zweizig and others.¹⁷ This report on the methods and results of a survey of children's services in Wisconsin's public libraries was not widely disseminated. It is well worth the time and effort it may take to obtain it through interlibrary loan from the Wisconsin State Library. The report includes several excellent measurement instruments that can be adapted for local use as well as detailed instructions on specific methods of data collection.

Items such as the "Census Work Form"¹⁸ and the "In-Library Materials Use Log"¹⁹ are well designed and the report's data summaries will give you some basis for comparison. One hopes that, in the near future, other states and library systems will replicate the survey, at least in part, and will begin to publish the results so that additional comparisons can be made.

Step Five

Now it's time to customize and tailor all your reading, research, and thinking to your library's specific needs. Make a list of the things you want your department to accomplish (your goals). Use your library's overall mission statement and goals but take time to think through the specific aims of your special service area as well. Are the activities and projects that your staff spends the most time on clearly reflected in a position of priority in

your goals? Are they the things you want your department to be committed to accomplishing? Can you do them well?

Once you have a list of goals (or statements of the services you want to provide), take a look at the steps you must accomplish. As you list the steps (your objectives), think about how you can measure whether you have successfully achieved each step.

Step Six

Finally, it's time to accumulate some statistics and write some reports. Surprisingly, this may be the easiest part of the process. You may want to replicate parts of the Wisconsin *Output Measures for Children's Services* project, or you may want to use methods presented in *Output Measures for Public Libraries*. Have other systems in your area done surveys that you can adapt or replicate? Is it possible to adapt an instrument or process already in use in another department of your library, such as a reference question fill rate survey, to your needs?

Remember that your instruments don't have to be complicated and exotic to measure something. You may already have access to some of the numbers you need from monthly or annual reports of activities, such as program attendance and circulation statistics.

Do you have access to statistics specific to children's services already accumulated in reports and evaluations you have done in the past? A variety of measurements might be made from information routinely kept on summer reading club membership and reading accomplishments. An analysis of staff time-use patterns might be made from existing evaluations of programs that include a breakdown of the hours spent on planning, publicity, performance, and evaluation.

Don't forget to tailor your measurements to a children's services perspective. For instance, does measuring questions asked (i.e., reference and directional questions) actually show the number of personal contacts your staff had with patrons each day? Would it be better to measure "contacts" that include such interactions as helping a preschooler put together a puzzle or explaining summer reading club rules to a second grader?

Finally, control your evaluation instruments. Don't let them control you. If you wait to be told to do a fill rate survey, you will also probably have to use the form devised by your administrative team for use throughout the system. If you have already designed and made an evaluation that is meaningful to your special service population, you

will have done a better job of representing them and their needs to your administration.

Make the time to explain to your supervisor, director, or administrative team what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how successful you are in doing it. Use numbers, charts, and graphs, but don't forget to include a narrative that compares and summarizes your results. Put your results and conclusions into written reports so that they become part of the official body of information used to make future planning decisions. In the end the thoroughness with which you document your program's activities, needs, and successes will have a direct result on the resources you will have to devote to story times, reading clubs, storytelling festivals, and the rest of your "real" work.

References

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