

The Crisis in Youth Services

by Satia Orange and Cal Shepard

There is, indeed, a crisis in librarianship, and, those of us providing library services to children and youth have seen it coming for years! One need not be a futurist to recognize the deteriorating status of an already "bottom of the heap" area of the library: children's service. And yet we hold the keys that can save libraries in the future!

Is Image the Problem?

On one hand, some of us see the crisis in terms of image. Children's librarians have traditionally had a poor image in the larger framework of library service. In 1956, Frances Clarke Sayers noted, "There is a certain condescension toward ... children's librarians in the profession."¹ This is still true in 1990: "Too often librarians working with children have been taken less seriously than those working in other areas of public libraries."² Stuck away in the basement, we timidly attend to our storyhours and bulletin boards. Don't ask us to learn the business of libraries — we are too busy arguing the merits of the latest Caldecott winner. We don't need to justify our budgets because "library service to youth is as American as mom and apple pie."³ Yet recent developments are alarming even to the most sanguine children's professionals.

More and more paraprofessionals are "running" public library programs, schools are not-so-quietly upgrading reading specialists and discarding media coordinators, and youth services curricula are decreasing in availability in our remaining professional library schools. "Many children in this country simply do not have the services of a librarian available to them."⁴ "In one (California school) district a solitary school librarian serves 8,511 students."⁵

Linda Hyde, a children's professional and middle manager at Forsyth County

Public Library, sees the image controversy in another way. She asks how we see ourselves. Assuming that the power to move libraries into the 21st century remains with administration, Hyde cites the overwhelming numbers of North Carolina librarians in children's and youth services, and yet questions our strength. "We can no longer afford to be perceived as the 'extra' in library services, the 'frivolous' part."

If, indeed, image is our problem, what can we do to improve it? We need to get out of the basement and involve ourselves in the total library picture. "Successful children's librarians are skilled in organization, handling funds, and time management," states Hyde. "We must put our skills to work to fight for our needs. We must represent ourselves professionally to all (library) departments and participate in all aspects of planning." Capitalizing on the skills we already have and targeting what is within the realm of possibility for us to learn, we must expand our capabilities toward effective action for the sake of the total library profession. We need a new attitude toward reevaluation, re-education, and continued activism.

Rebecca Taylor, Youth Services Coordinator at the New Hanover County Pub-

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lic Library, documents statistics, accomplishments, needs, and observations in a detailed monthly report. She presents information in a manner that is usable by the library director and sends a powerful message at the same time. Taylor has learned "director-ese," impacting her staff's

ability to solicit informed, targeted support from her administration.

Olga Coneen, Children's Librarian at the Bethlehem (Pennsylvania) Public Library, educated herself about management issues and then utilized output measures and statistics (graphically demonstrating the high level of children's usage in her library) to get herself appointed a member of the library management team. As such, she has the power to be an advocate for her patrons in discussions of library policies and budgets. She is in a position to chart the course of her department and library rather than just going along for the ride.

Libraries are at a crossroads and children's and youth services are at the tail end of the train. Although how we as professionals are perceived, and how we perceive ourselves can dramatically affect our service delivery style, image is still not the real key.

What is Our Service Philosophy?

Many within the profession, along with directors and trustees, see two opposing philosophies of library services to children and youth. Some want us to keep our feet on solid ground and retain our book orientation, while others exhort us to cast away our buns and horn-rimmed glasses and take off on the flight to automated service delivery.

We are in the middle of an automation revolution surrounded by computers, on-line services, and CD-ROMs. Many of our library schools have added the phrase "and Information Services" to their names. Resources and materials for all ages are increasingly available in non-traditional formats. How does this revolution affect toddler and preschool storyhours? What does it have to do with the newest Caldecott winner? Where does juvenile fiction fall in the lineup of priorities? ***What impact does automation have on the traditional library needs of the young?*** Do we, in fact, have opposing teams of children's and youth professionals —

book oriented versus the "new stuff?"

Some of us see the key to solving the crisis as an automated "joyride." The lure of technology is powerful. Libraries are automating at a rapid pace, and we don't want to be left behind. Youth service professionals are dazzled and fighting for their share of the megabytes. On-line catalogs and public access computers are in place in some children's areas, with some libraries featuring their own computer room. Some public libraries include CD-ROMs for their children's departments, and youth have access to on-line services. More and more schools are using on-line services, with middle and high schools accessing more curriculum databases.

On the other hand, there are the contemporary traditionalists who provide on-line catalogs of library holdings, are literate in wordprocessing and desk top publishing, but don't consider automated resources to be in their realm of possibility. The print resources are the old tried-and-true way; they work well, and stay well within budgetary constraints.

Which philosophy is correct? The answer is neither. Both are needed if we are to make sure that the children and youth themselves are not the forgotten factor in the 21st century equation. Yes, the automation blitz is affecting our budgets and our missions. "Rather than depend on sizeable new sums of money and legions of new staff, we must redirect precious resources. Library management will have to make delicate decisions regarding purchases, and library personnel will have to be channeled into new responsibilities."⁶ "Even the most reasoned

arguments must confront these dual realities: budgeting involves making choices; and choices reflect the chooser's values."⁷ But there are success stories.

The gymnasium-size Youth Services area at the Columbus Metropolitan Library is the result of the Board of Trustees determining new building allocations based on circulation figures. The area features a wide range of traditional as well as state of the art service delivery areas for children and youth, with the latest technologies partnered with print materials. Deputy Director Rubye Kyles reports the same quality of services and programs to individual young patrons, with the addition of automated resources.

Cathy Collicutt, the media coordinator at Philo Middle School in Winston-Salem, finds that her students use the media center more often and more effectively now that she has an automated catalog AND online services.

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Where Can We Go from Here?

It is possible to combine traditional service with the latest technology thus providing the best possible service to youth. Blindly adhering to either books or technology is a no-win proposition both for librarians and the public we serve. No single format will serve all the needs of today's library patrons. We must learn the skills necessary to manage the new technologies and integrate them with our traditional service approach.

We need to educate ourselves. We must become familiar, comfortable, and, where possible, linked into the technologies often already available in adult service areas in our libraries, so that we can expand our service expertise, resources, and capabilities in the youth areas.

We must empower ourselves through effective coalitions with other library professionals, our professional organizations and support groups, other agencies in our communities, and our government officials who control our dollars. This is especially true in the wake of the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services, where the Youth Omnibus Bill was selected as the chief priority by the delegates. We need to



New technology creates excitement in the children's computer room at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. Photo by Jean Johnson.

work together on the local, state, and national level to fight for the children's right to the highest quality library services.

What are the Keys to Solving our Crisis?

The keys to solving our true crisis in librarianship are the children and youth we serve today and those yet unborn. In transmitting both informational and cultural resources, we must make library resources available for every child in every school and public library. We must make sure the library environment for our young people is easily accessible, understandable, and relevant. We must use the best tools, from books to on-line services, to meet the needs of our constituents. Children's librarians must be informed of not only good mysteries or adventure books, but also of on-line networks or government documents if these will solve a child's informational need.

Children and youth are our number one priority and serving them is what children's librarians do best. We must remember this as we expand and enhance our skills to embrace the changing technology. We cannot forget books in our headlong rush into the next century, but neither can we ignore the automation revolution.

"The future is not 'out there' in the sense in which America was out there before Columbus went to discover it. The future is not predetermined, nor does it have prescribed boundaries and forms."⁸ It is up to us to help shape the future, for ourselves, our patrons, and our libraries.

References

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- ² Jane Gardner Connor, *Children's Library Services Handbook* (Phoenix: Oryx, 1990), 101.
- ³ Regina Minudri, quoted in Mary Somerville "Slaying Dragons: Overcoming Obstacles to Excellence in Youth Services," *School Library Journal* 35 (May 1989): 33.
- ⁴ GraceAnne A. DeCandido and Alan P. Mahony "Overworked and Underbudgeted: Staff and Funds for School Library Media Centers 1992," *School Library Journal* 38 (June 1992): 25.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Maurice C. Mitchell, Jr. and Laverna M. Sanders, "Libraries and Telecommunications," in *The Evolution of Library Automation: Management Issues and Future Perspectives*, ed. Gary M. Pitkin (Westport: Meckler, 1991), 128.
- ⁷ Robert C. Dickeson, "Reactions from a University President," in *The Evolution of Library Automation: Management Issues and Future Perspectives*, ed. Gary M. Pitkin (Westport: Meckler, 1991), 135.
- ⁸ Pierette Kim Jamison, "Adopting a Critical Stance Toward Technology," in *Information Literacies for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Virgil L.P. Blake and Renee Tjoumas (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990), 364-365.

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Susan K. Martin, "The Care and Feeding of the MARC Format," *American Libraries* 10 (September 1970): 498.
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