

The Policeman Within: Library Access Issues for Children and Young Adults

by Frances Bryant Bradburn

"this is still a great moral republic, and there is plainly such a thing as tempting its pious sentiment too far."

— H. L. Mencken¹

While librarians of all types are far too familiar with our moral republic's pious sentiment on a variety of issues, none appears to trigger the public's zeal and fervor more than access issues for children and young adults. Bible-toting fundamentalists rail that *Daddy's Roommate* will create homosexual six-year-olds; intimidated school boards forbid the teaching of "safer sex" in AIDS education; and terrified parents still blanch as their children search the shelves for another Judy Blume.

These scenarios and others too familiar bring a well-justified fear to all librarians — school, public, and, to a lesser extent, academic. Yet children's and young adults' access to information faces a greater danger from inside the library community than outside it. Those of us most charged with defending our young patrons' rights to information are often the ones most guilty of their sabotage. How? Through architecture and attitude, policy and procedure, and collection development.

Architecture and Attitude

It can be argued that the most subtle of the three categories, yet in many ways the most vital to access, are the architecture of the library and the attitudes of both its professionals and paraprofessionals. Children are very sensitive to nuance, and a building's interior design conveys a message which, even though difficult to verbalize, is blatant and unmistakable. Where is the children's room in relation to the other collections? Is it colorful and planned

with a young person's visual as well as intellectual stimulation in mind? (A new library outside of Atlanta uses neon signage to delineate its YA collection and area.) Are older children and teens relegated to the smaller tables where they are surrounded by young mothers with scrambling toddlers? Although space may be a problem, is there an ambiance about the entire building that says, children and young adults are welcome here?

Even the basics of architecture determine access. Take, for example, doors.² How heavy are the doors to your library? How easy are they for small hands (or elderly hands or handicapped hands or *full* hands) to open? How high or low are the shelves? Where are the computer and CD-ROM stations located? Are these resources networked to the children's room? If you are considering a new building, have you planned a second set of bathrooms within the children's area for parental peace of mind and adult patron peace?

Perhaps the most basic of architectural issues, however, is that of a separate children's room. While many would argue that a separate facility allows children to be treated as individuals with a collection keyed to their specific developmental needs and interests, Kay Vandergrift questions the practice: "If children have a separate room, is a metaphoric, as well as an actual, wall keeping children from total access?"³

The most cramped, low-budget operation can be the most inviting, however, if library staff enjoy or at

least willingly accept children and young adults within their building. Few public libraries have attitude problems with preschoolers. Most feel that service to these children and their parents is a major part of their mission. The challenge arises, however, as children get older and their developmental needs as well as their information needs become more difficult to satisfy. Homework, or at least the semblance of homework, seems to be the lightning rod issue here. Overextended public service staff often resent the 3 p.m. onslaught of young people with the same and/or impossible assignment that should have been completed in the school library. Nothing can discourage a future tax payer more than the knowledge that his or her information needs are seen as irritating or unimportant.

While many schools and public librarians will argue who is at fault here (and I personally will contend that it is the system rather than an individual), the

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essence of the issue is access, *equal* access. Do we treat children and young adults differently from adult patrons? Do we readily answer a "trivial" adult telephone inquiry even though we suspect we're completing a crossword puzzle, while angrily responding or even refusing to respond to a fifth grader's request we assume to be homework-related? Do we give a teen a minimum of assistance, certain that part of his assignment is "to learn to use the resources," while going to the exact book, specific page, and definitive sentence for his adult counterpart? Do we encourage adults to sit where they are comfortable while frowning at a child's presence on the couch in the magazine area?

While public libraries are easy targets for the architecture and attitude issues of access, school libraries are not exempt from scrutiny. School library media centers, while built with children and young adults as their primary focus, are not necessarily inviting. Sterile, colorless environments peopled by rigid media coordinators who view the collection as theirs or who, worse yet, do not even enjoy young people, certainly limit access to their collections and to information in general. However, it is often school policies and procedures that are an additional culprit.

Policy and Procedures

In the January 1966 issue of *The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals*, J.L. Trump declared, "It is difficult to get to the [school] library; it is even more difficult to stay there very long."⁴ Little has changed in twenty-seven years. Flexible scheduling within the school library media center, while the norm in North Carolina high schools, is still a difficult concept to implement in the state's elementary and middle schools in spite of the State Department of Public Instruction's mandate, "A flexible schedule is imperative if students are to learn and practice information-seeking skills without the extended interruptions in time that will require re-teaching of essential skills."⁵ School library media coordinators who have classes scheduled at the same time every week regardless of assignment have little time available to assist individual students with their personal information needs. Since, under a fixed schedule, the media coordinator normally is operating as a classroom teacher, even physical access to the media center itself is limited.

School library access for older students continues to be an issue. With state

mandates for the five and one-half hour instructional day and end-of-course testing, even flexible scheduling cannot assure access to young adult information needs. Study halls or independent study courses which often allowed students the opportunity to use the media center not only for school assignments but also for personal information quests, are now practically nonexistent. Because of an ever-expanding curriculum, classroom teachers are reluctant to sacrifice valuable class time for library instruction and/or exploration. And media center before- and after-school hours are notoriously sparse. While several North Carolina high schools have experimented with late afternoon and evening hours, elementary and middle schools rarely show the commitment to access necessary to use creatively a library assistant or teacher assistant position in order to make these ten to fifteen hour

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days a possibility.

Fees are another area in which policy and procedure affect access to resources. To charge or not to charge overdue fees has long been a question open to debate. Research has proved both the overdue fee's effectiveness and lack thereof for getting materials back on time, but one thing is clear: one unpaid overdue fine has the potential to limit individual access to a library collection, particularly if that individual is a child. A large number of North Carolina schools, particularly elementary and middle schools, no longer charge overdue fees, with SDPI's blessing; but as an interesting public library corollary to this policy, Kay Vandergrift warns that "Youth services librarians may defeat their own purposes if they ask for special privileges for their clients. Why

should children be charged a few pennies for overdue materials when adults are required to pay considerably more?"⁶

Closely aligned with overdue fees are charges for convenience: photocopying, online searches, interlibrary loan transactions, CD-ROM printouts, and the like. If school and public libraries charge their clients, regardless of age, fees for any of the above services, have they limited patron access to information? Dr. Kenneth Marks has posed an interesting question in his article "Libraries: No Longer Free of Fee." "Does 'free' mean without cost, or is the term a replacement for the word 'equal'?"⁷ The argument here is that, as long as children (or any patron) have an equal opportunity to access specific information — the chance to take notes from a book or CD-ROM rather than photocopying or printing out, or the option of getting an ILL resource from a reciprocal agreement institution or waiting for a mailed response rather than an expensive faxed one — then access will not have been denied.

While some might take exception to this justification, few would quibble with the statement that if a parent's signature is required on a child's library card or record before that child can use *all* the resources in the collection, information access potentially will have been denied that child. Likewise, if children are asked to perform certain feats of skill such as writing their names on very small lines before they can check out books, their access to information has been curtailed. Consider also the policy requiring that a person be eighteen

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years old to check out a video. Is it the age or the resource that matters here?

Perhaps the most chilling policy is that of Confidentiality of Library User Records. Many libraries adhere very carefully to confidentiality except in the case of the child. A library policy that states

that "Items charged on a juvenile card may be identified for a parent/guardian upon presentation of the library card or card number"⁸ denies a child's right to privacy and certainly inhibits his access to information. While justifications abound when librarians discuss policies and procedures particularly as they involve young people, it is well to remember Vandergrift's pithy statement, "The more rules, the greater the chance of access being limited; or, more simply stated, fewer rules yield greater access."⁹

Collection Development

While the fewer rules axiom may facilitate materials circulation, librarians will do well to see that collection development practices are backed by carefully thought-through selection policies in order to assure children's and young adult access to information. In a widely disseminated study of materials challenges within U.S. public high school media centers, Wisconsin-Madison library school professor Dianne McAfee Hopkins found that retention of library materials was more likely when a school board-approved district materials selection policy existed and was actively used when library media center material was challenged.¹⁰

It is generally understood that when a well-prepared selection policy is used, a written challenge to materials is necessary to initiate a review. This is important because Hopkins also found that "due process is more likely for challenges that are submitted in writing and that the result of due process is more likely to be retention of LMC materials on open shelves."¹¹ A written challenge policy is particularly important in this age of escalating teacher and principal challenges. In this same study, Hopkins found that teachers and principals "were more likely to have their challenges result in removal than parents,"¹² and that their specific challenges were more likely to be oral than those of individuals or groups outside the school.¹³

This "moral censorship"¹⁴ as Kenneth Donelson so aptly calls it, once seemingly the sole "Achilles heel" of school librarians, has filtered into the public library setting. This is particularly distressing since a young person's access to information is in grave jeopardy if both institutions select from the standpoint of fear and avoidance rather than from the determination to provide an information-rich

environment for all users.

And technology will serve only to open Pandora's box. When resources such as online services, CD-ROMs, and the Internet are introduced into a school media center or an equal-access public library in which the children's room is networked to the entire electronic collection, a world of information is available — and far less accessible to a parent's hovering eye. Consider the high school student who found a sexually-explicit e-mail address on the Internet. When his media coordinator discovered the correspondence, the punishment he meted out was for the young man to create an ethics manual for use of the Internet and the issue was dropped. But librarians are going to be forced to begin to offer more than lip service for young people's right to information, even

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information that makes us uncomfortable, if we are going to retain our ability to provide varied and vital resources for them. While this presumes that patrons of all ages will have complete access to all information in any format within a particular library, it also presupposes that children and young adults will have

"collections with a wide variety of materials and programming in different formats. . . . Such collections must be developed and staffed by people who, through temperament, training and commitment, understand the maturation process, with all its attendant joys and frustrations. In a world shrinking to a village, and with all the pressures implied in a multi-cultural society, the young cannot be expected to

survive as mindless innocents turned out to fend for themselves at age eighteen."¹⁵

It is up to all librarians who work with children and young adults to find the commitment and courage to challenge the policemen within our profession to become facilitators — vocal advocates who respect the abilities and intelligence of our children and young adults — and make their right and access to information our first priority.

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- ¹⁵ Robotham and Shields, 51.