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# Beyond Books

Carol P. Lachenman

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Nestled amid trees and grassy areas, Wright School is situated on 32 acres in the modest Bragtown neighborhood of Durham. It does not look like an institution, yet it is. As the North Carolina Re-Education Center, Wright School is a state-operated residential treatment center for children with learning and behavior problems. It is funded by the Department of Human Resources: Division of Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Substance Abuse Services. Coming primarily from the north central region of North Carolina, the children live at Wright School from Monday to Friday, year-round. The average residential stay is approximately 5 months, although some children stay as long as one year. Compared to other institutions, Wright School is tiny, serving 24-26 children on a given day.

Who are these children? They are young: 6 to 12 years of age. Almost all are boys. They are not mentally retarded or physically handicapped. Most are academically underachieving despite average or above average estimated intellectual functioning. Many are fighters, tough guys. Some are passive and withdrawn. Most have serious academic and/or behavioral problems in their public schools back home. Many of their families are in crisis. The children come to Wright School because they need a highly structured, supportive setting in which to learn more adaptive ways to handle themselves in response to their families, schools and communities.

The children, typically, are turned off by school. Their history of failure in the academic arena derives from diverse sources such as perceptual problems, attentional deficits, defiance of authority, to name a few. Whatever the cause, however, most of the children approach Wright School in the same way they have approached other settings: expecting failure. In order to break this self-fulfilling, defeatist cycle, educational, therapeutic, and recreational activities are structured throughout the day and evening to ensure success as well as to teach new skills. The enormity of the task—to plan and to implement such

activities—is much reduced through the comprehensive services of the library program.

Library services at Wright School comprise five components: the curriculum library, the professional library, media services, the computer, and the children's library. Coordinated by the Curriculum and Resource Team, each of the components makes its unique contribution to the total Wright School program.

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Educational needs are addressed through the curriculum library containing public school basal materials, remedial programs, and supplementary materials such as kits, flashcards, and audiovisual aids. For many of the children, such multisensory approaches and materials are necessary in order for them to acquire age-appropriate academic skills.

Literature in the areas of residential treatment and special education, as well as current journals and reprints, fill the professional library. This library is used by university interns and Wright School staff. Media services are typical school fare: recorders, projectors, screens, and a modest supply of filmstrips and tape recordings. The Apple II Plus computer is used by children for academic drill, creative writing (using the *Bank Street Writer* program), and computer games. With growing frequency and enthusiasm, teachers utilize the computer for report-writing and record-keeping.

The Children's Library is the heart of the library program. Although its holdings are small (approximately 1750 books), it offers a broad spectrum of subjects, reading levels, and formats. Each group of children has a weekly library schedule permitting selection of books for reading during free time, silent reading activities, or other

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class assignments. Traditionally favored topics are reptiles and spiders, jokes and riddles, picture books, sports, and current heroes of the media (such as Michael Jackson or Kareem-Abdul Jabbar).

Teachers also use the children's library. Materials are selected for introduction and implementation of projects or units of study, e.g., The Solar System, Aquariums. Frequently, fiction and picture books are chosen for daily reading to the children. Often they are read before bed (a routine comforting as well as entertaining). Sometimes books with affective content are selected purposefully, as for example, to introduce the topic of death or adoption. Directed to an individual or a group of children having difficulty talking frankly about an issue, literature can be a non-threatening means to promote discussion. Bullies, the new kid on the block, sibling rivalry, even learning disabilities are just a few of the topics that become accessible to the children through literature.

In addition to the direct benefits of reading and listening experiences, the library at Wright School gives the children regular opportunities to practice proper library decorum. It also sets

parameters of responsibility for the care and return of materials.

Periodic excursions to the main Durham County Public Library provide a larger context for the children to practice appropriate library behavior as well as access to a more extensive selection of materials. Teachers also utilize that library as a resource for ideas and materials on particular themes such as black history, birds, North Carolina. In addition, recreational films are borrowed from DCPL for group showings.

Library space and financial considerations are perennial impediments to the expansion of library services at Wright School. A small LSCA Title I grant for 1984-85 purchased dozens of new children's books as well as mobiles and posters for sprucing up the appearance of library areas. Next year, perhaps LSCA money will be available again. Donations of current books in excellent condition are very welcomed, although infrequent.

Wright School values its library services as an integral part of the total treatment program. To educate, to relax, to entertain: these objectives are achievable when all library components are utilized to their fullest.



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