

The Disadvantaged and Discipline in the Public Library: A Case Study

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In a public building on North Tryon Street in Charlotte, North Carolina, a middle-aged woman cries out when she spots a young girl who has moments before stolen her purse in an alley outside. The girl flees, with a young man, knife in hand, in pursuit. She deftly negotiates the turnstiles at the entrance of the building, escaping from her pursuer who is not quite as agile.

In the same building on another occasion, two youths stage a fake fight with one of the youths wielding an open knife. When a staff member orders that the knife be put away, she is ignored. The staff member calls the police. When they come, the youths treat them with the same disdain as they had the staff member.

A fist fight breaks out on the second floor of the building. A guard breaks up the fight and asks those involved to leave. They go outside and finish their fight while a large group looks on.

Four girls become noisy and disturb other people nearby. A guard asks them

to be quiet. He is cursed. They are told to leave. As they do so, they yell obscenities.

All of the above incidents occurred in the Main Library of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in the early months of 1972, not in the local bus station. They reflect a discipline problem of such severity that the entire Main Library was disrupted and its effectiveness as a library unit seriously affected. How this came about and what PLCMC did toward solving the problem are the subjects of this article.

Discipline problems are not new to the PLCMC either in its Main Library or its branches. In fact, it is almost a never-ending problem. What made the situation unique in those early months of 1972 was that almost all of the disrupters were black and disadvantaged. These young people were not in the Library to study, to read, or to use the services in any way which the Library provided. They were in the Library because there weren't enough recreational resources in the community for

them; because it was cold outside and the library offered a warm, inviting atmosphere; because they had been kicked out of other facilities for young people; because the boys wanted to meet girls and vice versa; but mainly because they didn't have any place else to go. Most of the young people were from Earle Village, a public housing center just a few blocks from the Main Library, located in the Model Neighborhood of Charlotte.

When these youths with their cultural background came into contact with the staff at the PLCMC there was a certain amount of friction. The Public Services staff members were experienced in dealing with people who wanted and sought their service, most of whom are from the middle class. Even when they chose to neglect assigned duties in order to reach out to the non-library-oriented youth, most of the staff (also from the middle class) felt inadequate in either helping or helpfully disciplining young people whose life styles and goals were completely different from their own. They were not prepared for the young people who greeted with utter defiance any request that they behave. They were not prepared for the curses or the smoke blown in their faces by these youths. They were not prepared for the complete lack of respect for authority of any kind by these young people. They were not prepared to deal with youths who thrived on playing "people games" designed to throw the staff off balance and to cause them to respond negatively; games which called attention to themselves because they needed attention. They were not prepared for the noise which was generated by these young people who, although talking normally in the context of their own environment, destroyed any semblance of order in a library which is not very strict on noise control. They were not prepared for the large number of youths who banded together in inseparable groups and, therefore, could be approached only as group members, not as individuals. They were not prepared for the anonymity of these groups. Not only were they unprepared to deal with

these young people, they were already overburdened with the normal demands on their time.

When the situation became critical, at the urgent request of the Main Public Services Staff, a meeting of those staff members who were most concerned was called February 7, 1972, to try to find solutions. The Library's administrators and the staff of a special project entitled "In With The People" were involved, as well as public service personnel. The Library's regular security guard was also present. As the meeting progressed it was evident there were two basic approaches advocated. One which we might call the "hard line" approach pushed for stricter discipline and expulsion of all troublemakers. The possibility of adding an off-duty policeman at night was mentioned. The opposite view asked for a more innovative approach to the problem and requested the use of the auditorium for special programming. The latter view prevailed, and the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County was off to a rewarding yet frustrating experience.

To implement the new course of action the Director appointed a committee of staff members who seemed to be especially interested in the fresh approach. Included on this committee were Mrs. Dorothy Waiters Ware, Adult Services Community Librarian and Coordinator of the "In With The People" Project; Miss Vivian Brown, Young Adult Librarian; Mr. Reginald Graham, a young black Acquisitions Department Assistant; and Mr. Richard Rosen, Adult and Young Adult Specialist for the "In With The People" Project.

The Committee met the next afternoon with representatives of the group of young people creating the disturbance. A film on Aretha Franklin was shown first, and then possible solutions to the problem were discussed along with services which the Library had to offer.

The following day was spent buying records and table games, and on Thurs-

day, February 10, the library auditorium was open to the young people for the first night. Films were shown to a group of about twenty teenagers, and the auditorium remained open to 8:30 p.m. with games, music, and dancing. Thus began one of the most unique programs the Library had ever offered.

This approach would not have been possible if it had not been for the additional staff which had been hired for the "In With The People" Project with LSCA funds. This staff had been selected on the basis of their ability to relate to low-income groups, and they were available. With the public services staff already overextended, there just were not enough regular staff members who were equipped and free to work closely with these young people. The effort at the Main Library to deal successfully and positively with the young people fitted into two objectives of the "In With The People" Project. One objective was "to discover in what ways the Main Public Library might modify its services and resources to make them more relevant to the Model Neighborhood resident," and the other was "to make as many Model Neighborhood residents as possible users of the Main Public Library." Inadvertently, it also fell within the scope of a third objective which was "to orient the Main Public Library staff so that they are better able to cope with the disadvantaged library user once he has come into the Library."

Although the "In With The People" staff made the new program possible there were actually more regular staff members involved in the long run. Mrs. Dorothy Ware was the key organizer of the activities in the auditorium. Reginald Graham, a technical services staff member, was given time off from his regular job to supervise two evenings of activities each week. Vivian Brown developed a regular young adult program for Wednesday nights. Katherine McIntyre, Children's Services Community Librarian supervised the activities on several evenings, and James Peters, Assistant to the Adult Services Com-

munity Librarian, worked in the program on many occasions.

The decision to try something different was only the beginning. Making the program work was the hard part, and it did experience its ups and downs. One of the ups was when over forty young people sat through a very worthwhile program on venereal disease. One of the downs was when the program had to be closed down when small children refused to behave and began throwing things in the auditorium. The programming in the auditorium started out basically as films, music, and table games such as checkers and cards under supervision. A place was provided in the Library where the young people could talk in normal tones and meet with one another without interfering with other patrons.

At one point near the end of February the programming came to a halt while certain rules of conduct in the auditorium had to be drawn up. When the activities resumed, there was stricter control and more supervision. Another staff meeting took place in which those most involved in the programming were present. These included Mr. Larry Nix, the Assistant Director; Miss Mae Tucker, Head of Public Services; Mrs. Ruth Osborne, Head of Reference; Miss Brown; Miss Ware; Mr. Graham; Mr. Peters; Sgt. Ray Wehunt, Security Guard; Mrs. McIntyre; Mr. Rosen; Mrs. Joanne Rodgers and Miss Elizabeth Thomas of the "In With The People" staff. In this meeting a certain resentment on the part of those staff members actually engaged in the programs was aired against the rest of the staff. They felt that the public services staff was not as involved as they should be. It was pointed out that many of the staff members had not been informed about what was going on in the auditorium and at what times activities were scheduled. Out of this meeting came decisions to release a printed schedule of activities, to start a young adult program on Wednesday nights with more emphasis on content, and to invite other staff members to see what was going on and to participate.

The schedule of activities which was drawn up for March, and later April, was the most ambitious to date. On Tuesdays and Thursdays from 4:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., a program of supervised activities including music, films, games, and dancing was scheduled. On Wednesday evenings from 7:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., a special young adult program emphasizing content was scheduled, and on Monday from 4:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., a program under the supervision of Mrs. Katherine McIntyre, Children's Services Community Librarian, was to take place. By this time paperback books and magazines of special interest to the young people were also being made available in the auditorium.

One might think that with this innovative approach all was well. In fact, however, it was not. The mere success of the programs created problems. The large number of youths who came to many of the programs made it almost impossible to maintain any order. The gathering of young people in the Library before a program at times created more of a problem than the one which the programs were designed to solve. Staffing was the major problem. With these large groups there was a need for four or five staff members each night to supervise the program. On one occasion when there were only two staff members, the program turned into a disaster. During programs the young people would not stay in the auditorium and would go in and out continuously.

A difficult situation developed in the Children's Room which is located on the second floor as is the auditorium. Young people would gather in the Children's Room and overwhelm it with their numbers. Defacing tables and burning holes in the carpet were samples of their mischief. The Children's Librarian was completely frustrated because of her inability to accomplish anything worthwhile in a situation like this.

In addition to the normal young people who were just creating noise and making disturbances there was a small group of

individuals who were just plain bad and some individuals who were criminals. Pocketbook thefts were not uncommon, and when those individuals responsible could be identified they were barred from the Library.

One of the most fortunate things for the Library in this period was the fact that it had a Security Guard named Sgt. Ray Wehunt. Security guards trained to work in tense situations such as those that developed at the Library are a rarity. The guards were often subjected to bitter cursing and taunts from the young people. One incident with a guard, in which a young man found in the ladies' room was slapped, caused the Library to request that guards no longer carry a gun. The consequences of a guard being provoked into shooting a young troublemaker were too frightening to contemplate. The Library has two guards, one who normally works four days a week and one who works three including the weekend. Sgt. Wehunt is the Library's regular guard and throughout the whole situation handled himself with remarkable tact and restraint as he developed a rapport with the young people. His knowledge and insights into the situation were invaluable and often helped avert a much more serious confrontation.

It became evident after weeks of concentrated effort on our part that we were not going to be able to solve the problems alone. It was a community problem as well as a library problem. From the beginning the Library had sought help from those in the community whom it believed could and should offer help. Officers from the Police Community Relations Unit were called in early and the problem discussed thoroughly. A human relations consulting firm even listened to our problem and offered a proposal. The Parks and Recreation Commission which operates a community center close by was contacted and the problem explained. The Culture and Recreation component of the Model Cities Program was approached, and staff members met with representatives from this group and talked long and hard. United

Community Services was contacted, and the Coordinator of Youth Activities for this agency was apprised of the problem. Even the Mental Health Department was approached. The Library Board also discussed the problem in detail. Very little in tangible help was forthcoming. The Model Cities people did send an observer for a few nights, but were of no real help in solving our problem. The response that we got from almost all of these groups was amazement that we were doing what we were doing and their feeling that the Library should not become involved in recreational activities.

Several factors led to the discontinuance of most of the programming in the later part of April. There were not enough qualified staff members to continue the program. The "In With The People" staff had other duties to perform in the community which were just as important. There was also strong feeling on the part of the staff that the lack of adequate recreational resources in the community was at the root of our problem, and that our taking over the job of recreation was only a temporary solution at best. The warm weather was also causing fewer and fewer young people to come to the Library.

The Library has continued its Young Adult Program on Wednesday evenings. The program had varying amounts of success in the beginning, but has developed into a sound, successful program. The content of the programs has included everything from karate to role playing. The highlight of the program came when over two hundred and fifty people crammed into the Library's auditorium to see a talent show put on by the young people themselves. The Charlotte Drug Education Center has cooperated with Library on this program, and their help has been invaluable.

This entire experience has been a trying one for the staff, but it has had its tangible benefits. This situation has no doubt taught the staff more about the dis-

advantaged than they could ever have learned from a workshop. The young people were shown that the Library does care about them, and some good friends were made along the way. The Library has learned some successful and unsuccessful approaches in serving the disadvantaged. The Library has also learned a great deal about the other community agencies which serve these same young people. Although the Library felt that more aid should have been forthcoming from some of the agencies, it became aware of many of their problems too. The Library is committed to the value of cooperation with these agencies and will continue to seek their help.

The problem, however, is not solved. It has only gone away for awhile. It will probably be back again and when it does we must be ready.

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