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The Forgotten Patron: Children's Knowledge Organization in the Public Library

Children are one of the largest groups that use today's public library system. They also make up the largest computer user group and a good portion of a library's budget and time is spent on development of children's materials and events. However, too often their materials are the least organized and hardest to find for librarians and even more difficult for children to locate. Additionally, online catalogs are too frequently created with the adult patron in mind so children have no way to search to see the depth of the library's materials. Combined both of these issues lead to children's materials to not be circulated and an often unspoken frustration for both librarians and children with the library systems. Focusing on the children's online catalog and shelving, this essay will expand current organization methods to find new ideas for reshaping the children's section of the public library system.

Children have the same rights as adult library patrons to information access. Especially at the public library level, where unlike school libraries have to serve in loco parentis (in the place of a parent) public libraries are not held by the same guidelines. The American Library Association (ALA) has established "equity of access to information and library services" as one of their "Key Action Areas." According to the association's website these "Key Action Areas" are "guiding principles for investment of energies and resources." The equity of access to information means that the ALA "provides opportunities for the professional development and education of all library staff members and trustees; it promotes continuous, lifelong learning for all people through library and

information services of every type.” Every library and librarian should strive to keep the materials housed within findable and accessible. Ultimately, this creates life-long lovers and users of the library system. It should also be mentioned that because the ALA holds equal access as one of their top priorities, this can bring funding directly to ensuring children have appropriate access to materials. In Marian Koren’s article “Children’s Rights, Libraries, Potential and the Information Society,” she opens the debate for equal access rights for children. She writes, “[m]any people, who are in favor of human rights and support them as a minimum moral standard for the relationship between the state and citizens and human beings among each other, hesitate when it comes to apply them to children.” This is the main issue we are facing in the library system. Too often books and materials are taken off the shelves for children’s protection this process results in a breach of the library’s goal of intellectual freedom and equal access.

Not only are books being taken off the shelves, librarians frequently disregard the organization of children’s materials or categorize items in a way that “protects” children from finding the material. In Valerie Thomson’s article “Children’s Rights in the Library,” she calls this common practice of librarians, “self-censorship.” Thomson concludes that:

The major effect the self-censorship can have on children is that they may stop using the collection altogether. If the material that they are seeking is consistently not there many will conclude that the library has nothing that interests them and stop going.

For example, in the library in my neighborhood, the Inwood Branch of the New York Public Library, children’s picture books are placed on one long shelf arranged by the letter of author’s last name only. This results in a big mess of books that is impossible to

browse through; books that have the same author are not placed by each other and even the same exact book could be duplicated multiple times interspersed throughout the same shelf. Another issue within this is in children's picture books both the illustrator and writer are listed on the book, so this leads into mislabeling the two on the shelf. The lack of organization leads to a feeling of overall mismanagement of the materials housed within. For children this practice teaches early on at a picture book level that organization in the library is unimportant.

Establishing a level of order in the children's public library is key for keeping the children, parents, and librarians satisfied with the library environment. To do this in picture books, first the books that are non-fiction should be separated from the fiction. The fiction section should then be organized similarly to the adult system by author's last name, but in alphabetically within the letter so that the breadth of the collection can be understood and then circulated. Doing this helps the librarian understand the collection for development and weeding and teaches children early on alphabetical organization skills. Also, parents will be happy to see that books at the library have a set place to relate toy and book organization at home after the library visit.

The non-fiction picture books should be then placed within the other non-fiction materials for children by the Dewey Decimal system or using the Library of Congress (LC) classification whichever is more prevalent in the library. Creating a guide for the non-fiction section is essential to begin the child's search process. The guide should be placed in multiple areas by the stacks for children to determine where their books may be located at the library. The list would be most helpful to contain the common subjects and interests of children. For example, if a child is looking for a book on snakes in the guide

you can put: Snakes – 597.96 (Dewey) or SF515-515.5 (LC). Giving the key to unlocking the Dewey Decimal or LC system in children's terms is very important to ensuring children continue to use the library throughout their lives.

Subject headings for juveniles are a key form of cataloguing materials for children. But they are often hidden from children when it comes to the search process. The Library of Congress provides a list of juvenile subject headings, but there are other methods for determining what the interests of the children within your specific library. Joseph Sanacore in his article, "Teacher-Librarians, Teachers, and Children as Co-builders of School Library Collections," provides some great tips for school libraries but they can also be applied to the public library. The methods for determining children's preferences in subjects and materials Sanacore recommends include: "observations," "conferences" (conversations with children), "peer sharing" (listening to children's conversations), and a few others that directly apply to school libraries. Taking the time to conduct these methods will ensure that the guides and search resources will be tailored correctly for the children population of the library.

Too often children's librarians complain because they constantly have to field children's questions for materials, this is because the current systems are not developed for children's intellects. Thomson addresses this division of organization in her writing, "...signage, catalogue terms, and library jargon used at the reference desk can hinder a child's access to library services and collections." In the same way the children's books have a child's vocabulary in mind the same should go for the children's librarian and the signage around the library.

The biggest users of computers in a public library are children. Providing access to

educational software and the Internet are necessary tools for children in a library. Today, a trend in many libraries is to switch all catalog computers to public access computer because of the demand for computers. According to the recent “ALA State of Libraries Report, 2007” “Only 21 percent of public library branches say they have enough computer workstations.” Having the search be in the hands of the patron is important so users can have the freedom and power to find what they feel they are exactly looking for. The removal of these computer stations is resulting in more disapproval of the library system amongst patrons, because they either have to enquire much more often with the reference librarian or browse the stacks in hopes of finding their item.

The searchable library computer catalog is an excellent tool for putting the library in the hands of the children users of a library. For children it can teach basic search methods and general library organization and skills. Removing the computer catalog is taking this educational tool away which is ultimately turning children away from the library. Children can be quite talkative on one side and on the other many are shy to talk to the librarian. Forcing a child to have the interaction with the librarian can add a good deal of stress to the entire search process, especially if the librarian is not courteous. In Catherine Sheldrick Ross article, “The Reference Interview: Why It Needs to Be used in Every (Well, Almost Every) Reference Transaction” she details the process of finding a book through a reference librarian:

...[S]ome users are able to ask an initial question that explains exactly what they are looking for, we know from a study conducted by Dewdney and Michell that about 40 percent of users do not-especially those who are unfamiliar with how libraries work. For these novice users especially the reference interview is a crucial tool.

A children's focused computer catalog search has yet to be established in any library. A children's computer catalog search should be automatically set up to search by keyword, because this is the most common method for searching as determined by Carol Kuhlthau in her article "Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User's Perspective." The catalog should also allow for spell checking, simple vocabulary, and have an inviting basic design. Many libraries have children's focused catalog searches examples are: LEO at NYPL, Berkeley Public Library, and the Nashville Public Library; a downside to these searches is that they are only within the juvenile categorized materials. The catalogs do not offer any tailoring for children's vocabulary, search methods or offer tutorials for the system.

The importance of children having access to information cannot be understated, Koren asserts, "A children's information centre can be established in the library in which...information is collected and made understandable for children." Furthermore, children should be able to access all of the holdings of the library through a search. If a child wanted to find all of the biographies of Bill Clinton, for example, there may be a few that have been written specifically for children, but they would not be able to find the autobiography "My Life" which would be placed into the adult section. This item may be above the child's reading level but for expanding learning and equal access these items should be included. The current search does an automatic filter of materials designated for juveniles and that does not seem fair to the possibilities of a children's interest in materials. If a children's catalog included a search of both adult and children's material for children but perhaps placed a symbol (*) next to the items that are for children that would at least allow for the choice. Also, the pagination of materials should be listed in a

search so a child of any age can almost instantly determine if the book is within their level. The public library should offer the opportunity for all of the materials to be available for children. “Libraries have always been great advocates for children’s rights” Thomson supports, but it seems as if now is time to take children’s rights promotion to the next level.

In 1989, The United Nations held a convention on the Rights of the Child and during the convention they stated,

It is the responsibility of libraries to guarantee and facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity, including, those which some elements of society may consider to be unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable... It is the responsibility of libraries to guarantee the right of free expression of by making available all the library’s public facilities and services to all individuals and groups who need them...Libraries should resist all efforts to limit the exercises of these responsibilities while recognizing the right of criticism by individuals and groups.

Sadly, there are only two countries, which chose not to adopt these principles, one being the United States and the second Somalia. So we do not have to abide by these rules, but we should still respect the ideals of this statement, children deserve to have access to all materials in a library. The children’s section of the public library should be organized with guides for children so they can learn the system and also find what they are looking for. Also, computer catalogs deserve a space in the library at minimum one computer in the adult section and one computer in the children’s section should be solely operating for catalog searching. Giving children the respect of proper knowledge organization will empower them in their future within the library and in the world.

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