

Who will serve the children: recruiting and educating future children's librarians

Virginia A. Walter

University of California, Los Angeles, United States

vwalter@ucla.edu



Copyright © 2013 by Virginia A. Walter. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

Abstract:

The paper identifies some desirable traits for children's librarians and presents strategies for recruiting people to the profession. Library school curriculum is discussed in terms of learning outcomes based on the "Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries" developed by the Association for Library Service to Children. Limitations of current graduate library education in the United States are acknowledged and examples of professional development opportunities for children's librarians are given. Finally, suggestions are made for possible actions to advance the education and ongoing training of children's librarians that the IFLA Section on Libraries for Children and Young Adults could take.

Keywords: Children's librarians, graduate library education, professional development for children's librarians, competencies for children's librarians

Lesson One: Who Should Serve?

Who will serve the children? This is an important question for all of us who are passionate advocates for good library service for every child everywhere. How can we recruit the best and the brightest? What attracts people to our profession? Can we agree on the personal traits for men and women who hold this position? How should they be educated?

I can only attempt to answer these questions from an American perspective. I realize that every nation – maybe even each local library – has different social, economic, and cultural frameworks that would generate different answers. I think the questions are important, however, and may trigger some relevant thinking, no matter where you are from.

In a report to the American Library Association in 1905, Frances Jenkins Olcott, the head of the children's department of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, described the characteristics of the ideal candidate to the training school for children's librarian at her institution:

Sympathy with and respect for children, strength of character, a genial nature, a pleasing personality, an instinct for reading character, adaptability, and last but not least, a strong sense of humor. Her home training and education should have given her a love and knowledge of books, a fund of general information, a quick and accurate mind. These qualities are difficult to find combined in one person (Olcott 1905).

More than one hundred years later, we find this description remarkably appropriate.. Of course we no longer expect that a children's librarians would necessarily be female. We do not concern ourselves with the applicant's home training, but we do consider her prior education. At UCLA, our application procedure provides little opportunity to assess a future student's personality. Fortunately, most people who have chosen to specialize in library service to children seem to have pleasing personalities.

There is at least one desirable characteristic unmentioned by Olcott that is a concern for us in the United States. Our country has moved steadily from its roots in European culture to being a much more diverse and multicultural society. We have always been a nation of immigrants, but increasingly those immigrants are arriving from Asia and Latin America, rather than from Europe. These newcomers often settle in enclaves of families from their native countries, and adults are sometimes slow to learn English. Children's librarians who are able to speak the home language of the families they serve are at a distinct advantage when it comes to marketing and delivering the library's services. Surely new Americans will feel more at home in the public library if they see their own culture reflected in the materials, services, and employees there.

Lesson One, therefore, is a reminder to all of us to be proactive about recruiting the very best people to our profession. Bonus points will be awarded to successful efforts to tell our story to people of color who might not have considered children's librarianship as a career. Latino and Asian students at UCLA have told me that it had been difficult to convince their parents of the value of an MLIS degree. Some of these were young people who were the first college graduates in their families. Their parents expected them to leverage that hard-won bachelor's degree with a more prestigious and higher-paying career in law, medicine, or business.

Lesson Two: How Will We Recruit Them?

I will begin by considering what attracts people to our profession. Let us start by admitting that it is not a particularly glamorous or high-paid profession. Yet every year at UCLA and other library schools throughout the United States, enthusiastic, bright, well-educated people launch their careers as children's librarians. Some of them are starting second careers. In my classes at UCLA, there have been former clowns, attorneys, housewives, flight attendants, accountants, poets, computer programmers, chefs, actors, musicians, and many burned-out schoolteachers. And some arrive at graduate school straight out of undergraduate programs. I asked some of our alumni why they had decided to become children's librarians. Here are their answers:

"I was stuck in a job that was not fulfilling. I wanted something better, and I remembered how much fun I had in libraries when I was a child. I wanted to give back that fun to children today. I've been doing the job for four years and turned down one promotion because I want to stay a children's librarian. "

"I thought I wanted to be a teacher until I started taking courses for a credential. I didn't want to be restricted to a curriculum and state standards. I remembered how important the public library was to me as a child. Going there was the first thing I was allowed to do independently. I wanted to empower children – and this is it for me."

“I was a library kid, the kind who rode his bike to the library to discover what was out there beyond his small suburban world. I never dreamed of being a librarian, but it finally made sense when a few other occupational doors were closed to me. Being a librarian, working with kids and teens, is the best decision I ever made. I need that playful, inquisitive energy around me. I’m all grown up now, but I’m still that library kid at heart.”

“We had a good family friend who was a children’s librarian, and she loved her job. When I started thinking about being a librarian, I heard that they always need people to work with children. So that was why I chose this specialization at first. Now that I’ve been doing this job for nearly ten years, I can see that it’s the most fun and the most important work. “

“I was inspired by my children’s librarian. She found so much joy in her work and passed it on to me and the other children who came to her library. Now I am the one who finds joy in my work and tries to pass it on. “

Do you hear a common theme in their stories? These successful children’s librarians had positive experiences in libraries and with librarians when they were young, and they find their jobs to be not only fulfilling, but joyful. A survey conducted in 2009 by *School Library Journal* showed that most children’s librarians were satisfied with their jobs. Those working in public libraries found that working with young people, assisting customers, and connecting kids to reading and lifelong learning were the top reasons for job satisfaction. Factors that contributed to dissatisfaction were inadequate library funding, low salary, and increased workload. Significantly, 93 percent of those surveyed said they would recommend the profession enthusiastically or with some reservations, and 93 percent said they would do it all over again (Kenney 2009).

The lesson we should learn from both the qualitative and quantitative evidence is that children’s librarians themselves are the best and most obvious recruiters to the profession that they love. Perhaps our national library associations should make buttons for them to wear that proclaim: I LOVE MY JOB. Or ASK ME WHY I LOVE MY JOB. Practicing children’s librarians should be encouraged to talk to their young library patrons about what it takes to do their job. Perhaps recruitment materials could be developed that target children, planting seeds that could flower as they get older and consider their own career goals.

Lesson Three: What Will They Know?

Most of my research lately has involved outcome evaluation. An outcome for library services is defined as “the change in attitude, behavior, skill, knowledge, or status that occurs for users after a purposeful action on the part of the library and library staff” (Dresang, Gross, and Holt 2006, 3). Progressive library managers are increasingly being asked to demonstrate the outcomes of their services. Ideally, outcomes for particular services are determined before they are implemented and derived from a systematic analysis of possible needs for those services. After the needs are established, desired outcomes are developed, and programs or services are planned and implemented to meet those needs.

Can we apply the outcome-based planning and evaluation model to answer the question, “What will future children’s librarians know?” One possible approach might be to look at the list of competencies for children’s librarians developed by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association (ALA). Originally developed in 1989, they were revised in 1999 and again in 2009. These could be considered learning

outcomes for people aspiring to careers as children's librarians. The "Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries" are organized into nine broad categories:

1. Knowledge of client group.
2. Administrative and management skills.
3. Communication skills.
4. Knowledge of materials.
5. User and reference services.
6. Programming skills.
7. Advocacy, public relations, and networking skills.
8. Professionalism and professional development
9. Technology.

Specific skill and knowledge outcomes are listed under each of the broad competency area. To demonstrate competent knowledge of client group, a children's librarian should understand theories of infant, child, and adolescent learning and development and their implications for library service. He or she assesses the diverse needs, preferences, and resources of the community on a regular and systematic basis and maintains regular communication with other agencies, institutions, and organizations serving children in the community. And there is more – five additional outcomes for just the first competency ("Competencies 2009).

The ALSC "Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries" are a powerful statement of the professional expertise needed to do this job. An introduction to the Competencies maintains that a master's degree in Library and Information Science from an ALA-accredited graduate school is the appropriate professional degree for a children's librarian. However, a children's librarian is directed to on-the-job training and continuing education opportunities in addition to their specialized formal coursework in order to achieve and maintain the skills, orientations, and understandings encompassed in the Competencies.

The graduate library and information studies program at UCLA, where I have taught since 1990, is a two-year program with a rigorous six course core curriculum required of all students. The core curriculum provides the broad knowledge and skills needed by any professional librarian or other information professional. Students take an additional 12 courses that either deepen their understanding of the core or enable them to specialize in an area such as youth services. Most students use three of their course credits in their second year to do an internship in one of more than 100 possible libraries or archives in Southern California. By the time a student has completed the core requirements, taken the five electives we regularly offer in the area of children's and young adult librarianship, and interned with experienced librarians, they are highly skilled and dedicated entry-level professionals, ready and eager to serve children and teens. However, it is hard to imagine that any of them have mastered all of the ALSC competencies. The mark of a true professional is that he or she continues to grow and to develop their knowledge and skills as long as they serve. They take classes. They attend workshops and webinars. They attend conferences and tend their professional networks. No professional is "finished" when they graduate from school. Maintaining one's professional expertise really takes lifelong learning.

For most of us in the United States, however, it starts with library school and the MLIS degree. This brings us to Lesson Four.

Lesson Four: Where and How Will They Learn It?

Let us assume now that we have assembled a cadre of bright, enthusiastic, diverse future children's librarians, all with pleasing personalities, of course. If they live in the United States, they will have graduated from four year colleges with a bachelor's degree in any of a variety of areas although English majors will probably be over-represented. There will be some who have graduate degrees in other areas, some who have years of experience working in libraries or elsewhere, and some who are young enough to be my grandchildren.

Graduate programs that offer the master's degree in library and information science in the United States, Puerto Rico and Canada are accredited by the American Library Association through the hard work of the Committee on Accreditation. Sixty-three master's degree programs are currently accredited. The introduction to the Standards for Accreditation states that accreditation assures that an institution or program "(a) has clearly defined and educationally appropriate objectives expressed as student learning outcomes, (b) maintains conditions under which achievement of objectives can reasonably be expected, (c) is in fact accomplishing objectives substantially, and (d) can be expected to continue to do so" (2008, 3).

ALA-accredited master's degree programs must show evidence of systematic planning to review its visions, mission, goals, and objectives, ongoing assessment of its attainment of those goals and objectives, redesign of its activities in response to the results of that assessment, and communication of its efforts to its stakeholders and constituents. Those program objectives should reflect the essential nature of the field of library and information studies, defined broadly as a concern with recordable information and knowledge and the services and technologies that facilitate its management and use. There is no mention of children or library services to children anywhere in the Standards.

Because the Standards do not require any program to offer courses related to library services for young people, a student has no guarantee that he or she will be able to specialize in – or even be taught the basics of – children's librarianship. And no public library can assume that a graduate of an ALA-accredited program has received any relevant training.

A recent editorial in *Library Journal*, "Can We Talk About the MLS?", questions the value of ALA-accredited degree (Kelley 2013). The author, who is the editor-in-chief of the journal, claims that his own master's degree in library science was heavy in theory and light in practical applications. Its only value, according to him, is that it is required for getting a professional job in most American libraries.

This editorial provoked more than 100 comments after it appeared online. Most agreed with Kelley, lamenting the money they had spent on a master's degree that they found irrelevant to the actual duties they were asked to perform. Some of the respondents were clearly bitter because in the current tight job market, they had been unable to recoup their investment in the graduate degree because employment opportunities were few and salaries low. Some complained about the glut of students being produced by rapidly proliferating online programs. Many argued for an undergraduate degree as the basis for entry-level library professionals. Interestingly, one person who argued strongly against the MLS as a requirement for public librarians, did admit that "children's librarians definitely have a whole set of knowledge and skills relating to early literacy and working with kids that the MLS seems vital for" (Kelley, "Comments" 2013).

In a moment, I will suggest some alternative or additional ways that future children's librarians might prepare for their professional careers. However, for those going down the traditional path

of an MLS, there is no guarantee that their master's degree program will offer adequate coursework for their specialization. Another worrisome consequence of the downgrading or elimination of coursework for children's librarianship at the major research universities is that these PhD-granting universities are graduating very few people who are qualified to teach and do research in this area. It is a vicious downward spiral.

Perhaps the most important lesson learned about education for children's librarians is that an ALA-accredited MLS program may not deliver a good foundation for the future development of the ALSC competencies. What innovative alternatives can we suggest to ensure that the best and the brightest future librarians have received the best possible education and training to serve the children?

I have recently been involved in consulting projects for the State Libraries of Pennsylvania and New York. As in the rest of the United States, public libraries are funded by local governmental agencies: townships, cities, and counties. The State Library offers technical support, training, and funding opportunities for special projects. Both New York and Pennsylvania are homes to very small and poorly-resourced rural and small town libraries as well as relatively well-funded and well-established urban and suburban library systems. While the large systems require their professional librarians to have the MLS degree, the smaller libraries tend to be staffed by people with less specialized educational backgrounds. They may even lack a bachelor's degree. Often the only person working at their tiny library with limited hours, they are unable to get away for much training.

New York is currently working on a plan to train children's librarians in the state in best practices for early childhood literacy services. It is going to have to grapple with the problem of reaching those small town and rural library workers. Pennsylvania has already completed an innovative five-year training program called *Preschool Connections* that was conceived as a way to develop capacity to implement quality services to young children and their families and caregivers. The staff at the Commonwealth Library headquarters divided the state into five geographic regions. Targeting one region each year, they invited the smallest libraries to apply to participate in *Preschool Connections*. Each library committed to send from one to three people to four one-day training programs during the year. The attendees could include trustees and volunteers as well as the one person responsible for service to children. The four training workshops were conducted by two experienced children's librarians and covered topics such as collection management, early childhood development, parent education, quality programming, multicultural sensitivity, and public relations. At each workshop, attendees were given books and equipment such as puppets, flannel boards, and educational toys. Each participating library also received furniture and equipment designed to make their public space more appealing and family friendly. More than 100 very small Pennsylvania libraries participated in *Preschool Connections*. All transformed their public areas into a welcoming space for families with young children, and most were able to improve the quality of their programming and early childhood collections.

Early childhood literacy services is a big priority for American public libraries, and other states have offered relevant professional development opportunities through webinars and other online resources. "Utah Kids Ready to Read" is a website for parents as well as librarians. ColoradoLibraries for Early Literacy has created *StoryBlocks*, videos to use in training. The Indiana State Library has mounted a Pinterest page for *Every Child Ready to Read*, an early childhood literacy initiative developed by the Association for Library Service to Children and the Public Library Association.

What Could IFLA Do?

As you can see, the United States does not have a unified approach to educating children's librarians or to training them when they are on the job. National associations such as the Association for Library Service to Children promulgate best practices, but there is no mechanism for enforcing them. Each state develops its own priorities for supporting local libraries. It is all a big patchwork quilt with no coordination. So what is an international organization like IFLA, representing libraries all over the world to do?

The Section on Libraries for Children and Young Adults has actually made a start. Their publications, *Guidelines for Library Services to Babies and Toddlers*, *Guidelines for Children's Library Services*, and *Guidelines for Library Services for Young Adults*, provide clear blueprints for establishing good services for young people. The next step might be to develop training modules for each set of guidelines in both print and online formats that could be translated into many languages and made available through the IFLA website. Perhaps this section could partner with the Sections on Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning to accomplish this.

A partnership between this section and the Section on Education and Training might produce a White Paper that assesses the need for formal educational programs for youth services librarians throughout the world. We librarians have so much to learn from each other.

It is important that we are as well prepared as we can be to serve the children. I have learned so much from all of you as I have attended these IFLA conferences. You have strengthened my belief that good library services are essential to helping the children of the world reach their potential. One of my favorite books for young people is a novel in verse, *The Surrender Tree* by Margarita Engle (2008). It is the story of Cuba's wars for independence from Spain, fought from 1858 to 1899. The dominant voice in the novel is that of Rosa, a slave who escaped to the forest and joined the freedom fighters there. She uses her healing skills and knowledge of medicinal plants to ease the pain and suffering of wounded men on both sides of the fighting. Eventually a young girl joins Rosa and learns from her how to be a healer in her own right. Rosa thinks that she is like the rock-hard wood of the guayacan tree, so heavy that it cannot float, while young people are like the wood of a balsa tree, light and airy.

Young people drift on airy daydreams.
Old folks hold them in place. (113)

I write in my book, *Twenty-First-Century Kids, Twenty-First Century Librarians* (2010) that we adults are the anchors for the next generation's dreamers, not to hold them back but to lift them up. "It is really the children who will claim the future, but we must ensure that they are given the supports and opportunities that will enable them to do so with hope and joy and a sense of their rightful entitlement" (Walter 2010, 87). I would argue today that the children's librarians who are privileged to spend their workdays with young people also must be given the supports and opportunities to do their jobs well.

References

- Colorado Libraries for Early Literacy. 2013. Colorado State Library. www.clel.org Last accessed April 30, 2013.
- “Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries.” 2009. Chicago: Association for Library Service to Children. < <http://www.ala.org/alsc/edcareers/alscorecomps>> Last accessed April 30, 2013.
- Dresang, Eliza T., Melissa Gross, and Leslie Edmonds Holt. 2006. *Dynamic Youth Services through Outcome-Based Planning and Evaluation*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Engle, Margarita. 2008. *The Surrender Tree*. New York: Holt.
- Kelley, Michael. 2013. “Can We Talk About the MLS?” *Library Journal* 138 (8): 8.
- Kelley, Michael. 2013. “Comments: Can We Talk About the MLS?” *Library Journal* online edition. <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2013/04/opinion/editorial/can-we-talk-about-the-mls/> Last accessed April 30, 2013.
- Kenney, Brian. 2009. “Happy Days.” *School Library Journal* 55 (1): 28-31.
- Olcott, Frances Jenkins. 1905. “Rational Library Work With Children and the Preparation For It.” *Proceedings of the American Library Association Conference*, 71-75. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library and Information Studies*. 2008. Chicago: American Library Association.
- “Utah Kids Ready To Read.” 2013. Utah State Library. <http://utahkidsreadytoread.org> Last accessed April 30, 2013.
- Walter, Virginia. 2010. *Twenty-First-Century Kids, Twenty-First Century Librarians*. Chicago: American Library Association.