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The Library and the Disadvantaged

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The conscience of America woke to the problems of their 'disadvantaged' in the nineteen-sixties. Our public institutions slowly pulled themselves away from the apathy they found themselves mired in, and began at last to try to serve the people they had so long ignored. The public libraries of our cities looked around them and found, much to their surprise, that the middle-class whites they had so long catered to were no longer there. They had been replaced by a group of peoples that now were lumped under the heading 'disadvantaged.' Cornelius L. Golightly, speaking at a conference on the 'disadvantaged', defines the term in this way:

"They are the Americans who are typically the deprived and segregated lower class. They are Negroes, Indians, Spanish Americans, Appalachian poor whites, migratory workers, slum dwellers - the twenty-five percent of our population who live in or on the outskirts of poverty - who constitute a distinct subculture with values different from the prevailing values of the majority middle-class culture."¹

One of the first public libraries to make a study of the 'disadvantaged' in its area was the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. Writing about the results of the survey, Lowell

¹Golightly, Cornelius L., "Examining Our Attitudes Towards The Unserved", Library Service to the Unserved, Laurence L. Sherrill, editor. New York. Bowker, 1970, p. 12.

Martin says:

"One mark of the disadvantageded person today which came out again and again ... is that he is culturally cut off and isolated. Although he lives in the middle of the urban complex, his contacts are likely to be limited to other disadvantageded persons. ... He does not participated in the education and cultural institutions of the city, even though he lives closer to them than most of those who do."¹

Paul W. Briggs, writing in an article "Trends in Formal Education", reaches the same conclusion. Writing of the slum children of Cleveland, Ohio, he says:

"Nearly one-fifth of our children are now from impoverished homes. Many have never owned a box of crayons, a pencil, or a pad of paper. Their homes are without books or magazines or newspapers. While they live in a city of one hundred bridges and their homes are one mile from Lake Erie, many have yet to cross a bridge or see the lake."²

In areas such as these unemployment is high, and educational level is low. Many families have been on welfare for three generations. The school drop-out rate is high. There is little motivation to go to school, since there are no jobs available anyway. What, if anything, could be done by the public libraries to

¹Martin, Lowell A., Baltimore Reaches Out: Library Services to the Disadvantaged. Baltimore. Enoch Pratt Free Library, 1967, p. 13.

²Carnovsky, Leo, The Public Library in the Urban Setting. Chicago. University of Chicago, 1968, p. 29.

serve this previously unserved segment of society? Could the libraries do their part in helping to pull the 'culturally different' into the twentieth century? Much has been written about attempts by the libraries to do just that. In this paper I intend to review some of the literature that has been written about services to the disadvantaged and offer some ideas on what its implications might be for us in the library field.

In the Enoch Pratt Free Library survey, it was found that the disadvantaged had no idea of the services that were being offered free by the library. It, therefore, stressed the importance of widely publicizing these services over the radio, in the papers, and on flyers that were handed out at grocery stores, etc. From the interviews that were conducted, it was learned that the 'disadvantaged' were fearful of coming into the library. They had no idea how to use its facilities. To them, the library represented a segment of society of which they could never become a part. Since the people would not come to the library, it was reasoned that the library must go to the people. In the survey, it was also noted that in co-operating with the other agencies that worked with the 'disadvantaged', much insight into what was needed in

the way of materials and services could be learned by librarians. But it would be a long time before the libraries understood fully the nature of the problems that had to be dealt with. In fact, there are those who say that the libraries never have learned them.

Now that the public libraries were aware of this neglected segment of society, what next? Federal monies became available in large quantities. Many programs were started. The need for special materials dealing with life familiar to the disadvantaged became apparent. Bookmobiles went out into the streets to show films and distribute books about city life. Audio-visual materials reached new heights in importance. Many 'inner-city' residents are illiterate. To capture their interests, movies were shown. Neighborhood storefront branch libraries were formed. Rock groups were invited to play in the library, drawing in large numbers of adolescents. Poetry evenings were held, with neighborhood poets reading their own poems. Game rooms became a part of the library. Children were encouraged to come after school. Tutors were made available to help them with their homework. Along with the story hour, children were shown how to make their own pup-

pets and encouraged to make scenes of their favorite books. Librarians ventured away from their buildings and showed films in the recreation rooms of large housing complexes. Small libraries of paperbacks were set up in barbershops, taverns and grocery stores. Librarians even ventured to knock on doors with their paper sacks of books, trying to build an interest in reading. With a \$300,000 grant, Vista workers in the inner city were equipped with a knapsack of books along with a detailed pamphlet on how to use them.

As was to be expected, the cities on the Eastern coast with their large numbers of blacks, Puerto Ricans, and other poor people were the first to set up programs for their 'disadvantaged' populations. In Rochester, New York, the public library system there created Genessee, a new inner city branch. In order to avoid the mistakes of other systems and to gain the support of the community, a survey was made of the organizations of the community as to what they would like to see incorporated into this new building. Included in the survey were such groups as the local anti-poverty agency, a local Black Power group (FIGHT), the trainees and staff of the Manpower and Development Training Cen-

ter, the urban minister group and the urban renewal advisory committee. They recommended such things as 1) open spaces easily adaptable to changing demands, 2) a community information center, 3) an all-purpose meeting room, 4) space for independent or group study, 5) face-up shelving of books, and 6) a large versatile children's area. Since the area to be served was a predominantly black one, a black librarian was hired. This librarian brought with him not only knowledge of the community but also the desire to work there.

Lincoln, another inner-city branch in Rochester, was converted into a multimedia center. Much time went into the selection of films, filmstrips, pamphlets, books, and tapes that presented clear uncomplicated answers to everyday problems relating to home, jobs, community organizations, urban renewal and other areas of interest to the community. Great care was taken to relate the materials to specific needs or on-going programs in the community.

If one word could be used to characterize these programs for the disadvantaged, "outreach" would be it. The Dallas Public Library, for instance, sends its bookmobile to 56 stops to show

free films and allow the youngsters to choose books. The Brooklyn Public Library started its Sidewalk Service in 1966 because its well-equipped branches were not being used. They send a huge van rolling into a neighborhood, playing loud music to get attention. It is well-stocked with books, pamphlets and magazines written in Spanish and Italian as well as in English. Paperbacks are heavily relied upon by the program. Many magazines are subscribed to, including less known ones as The High School Free Press, Muhammad Speaks, The Black Panther, Rat and The Guardian.

The Detroit Public Library offered free bus service to the residents in the inner-city to the public library downtown. The library system bought several buses and decorated them. There were few takers. Obviously something more was keeping the residents from using the library than the prior lack of transportation.

The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, on the other hand, began transporting library materials by minibus around the Hill District, a black community. Talented members of the community entertained the children. After the entertainment, the children were encouraged to choose a book. Once again, it was felt this project was successful because community members were involved in

carrying it out.

The success of many of these programs seemed to depend a great deal on the willingness of the public library system to meet these people on their home ground. They offered materials and services that the people of the community wanted and needed, and they used people from the community in the programs. What real success did all these experiments have? Perhaps only time will tell. I do get the impression, however, that as the federal monies ran out, many of these programs were dropped. Further, as the initial enthusiasm wore off, problems arose that never quite got solved. A case in point is the High John experiment.

The idea for the High John experiment originated with Paul Wasserman, dean of the Library School at the University of Maryland, and Mary Lee Bundy, an associate professor at this same school. They hoped the project would fill several needs. First, the library was to serve the needs of the community. Second, it was to serve as a laboratory where student librarians might learn their profession. Third, it was to be a place where the student might devise experimental programs and test them out for effectiveness with their 'disadvantaged' clientele.

A home was found in Fairmount Heights, a community in Prince George County, Maryland. The project was funded by the U. S. Office of Education, with additional support from the Prince George County Library. The project started with high hopes on everyone's part, but was in trouble from the beginning. The white middle-class students, while truly wishing to help their patrons, suffered from what is commonly called 'cultural shock.' They were not prepared for dealing with a people whose values and lives were so foreign to their own. When the money from the federal grant ran out, the University of Maryland dropped the project entirely into the hands of the Prince George County Library System. There was talk of closing the library down. A citizen's group was formed from members of the community. This committee, meeting with the library board, asked not only that the library be kept open but that services be extended. Recriminations were tossed back and forth. The two librarians working at High John went on strike. The reasons they gave for going on strike were ones that were primarily due to physical limitations of the physical plant. Like the citizen's group, they hoped to persuade the public library system to build a much needed larger branch. The

Prince George County Library System closed down the library, ostensibly for the purpose of making major repairs. As of this date, it has not been re-opened.

In an article appearing in the May 1972 issue of Library Journal entitled "Hindsight and High John," Richard Moses, High John's first director, offers us the following ideas for further consideration:

- "1. Learning for a service profession such as librarianship must involve honest on-the-job responsibility, where the 'buck stops here' (not just training or assisting), with the immediate opportunity to discuss and analyze mistakes, failures and triumphs.
2. Library services as we know and live it are far more class oriented than we ever imagined and as such automatically exclude great numbers of potential users. Much more than a library school 'community survey' is needed in order to identify and interact with potential users. Vital tips are available from Saul Alinsky on the business not of studying a community, but of becoming a part of it, learning its language, its grapevines, and its people.
3. Library services must grow up and out of its community, whether it uses a million dollar building or a Volkswagen bus ... Community support, or lack of it, at all levels and stages of development can mean life or death for the library."¹

To emphasize the 'cultural shock' that many of the

¹Moses, Richard, "Hindsight and High John," Library Journal (May, 1972), p. 1897.

white middle-class librarians felt, Moses tells of one young librarian who told him she heard more about 'their' lives than she could often bear, but knew she must listen in order to know their needs. While unwilling to leave her position after one year on the job, she found she had to get away for her own emotional health.

However, while listing the problems of working in a disadvantaged area, Moses does not take that additional step in his article that Ralph Conant did in 1967. In a speech given at a conference for the "unserved", Conant makes the statement that the middle-class white librarian will never be able to serve the disadvantaged, not because he doesn't want to, but because he doesn't know how. He advises them all to keep serving those people that they serve best - the middle-class, white, suburban population of America. Needless to say, this was quite upsetting to the conference participants. In the report of the conference, the editor remarks that this was all that was discussed throughout the rest of the conference. There eventually did come a time when there was felt a need for a community librarian. This person acted as a liaison between the library and the community. He was often

someone from the community itself, chosen because he was more sensitive to the needs of the people that the library hoped to serve.

Major Owens, a black librarian writing in the Library Journal, calls these attempts failures and says:

"...that education and job training is a primary concern of the poverty areas within our big cities."¹

He goes on to say that the branch librarian must identify completely with the community. The community philosophy and mission must be known and understood to be relevant. He felt that the community expected a special contribution from the library which he called 'information power.' In his words,

"knowledge of the right facts at the right time is a form of power."²

As an example, he cites the subject of annual appropriations and budgets. Here, he says, it is important to the community to know when the hearing is to be held, what the appropriations are for the different agencies, the names of the city councilmen, and the

¹Owens, Major, "A Model Library for Community Action," Library Journal (May, 1970), p. 1702.

²Ibid., p. 1703.

names of other officials primarily responsible for the budget and review. Major Owens ends his article with the following observation:

"The library collection and its services must be a natural extension of the philosophy of the mother community. The reference collection should contain reports, proposals, directories and minutes and other records of the local community action agencies.... The book collection should specialize in ethnic history and cultural materials of interest as well as job training and adult education. With the community action program new possibilities for the library as an adult education center are now open ... Too many of us have tried experiments - community coordinators, supermarket libraries, etc. and they all failed a couple of years ago."¹

While much has been written about the public libraries and the 'disadvantaged', comparatively little appears to have been written about programs for school libraries. This may be due in large part to the negative image that the schools have in the ghetto area. In several articles, the authors swept aside the school library as being of any help because they were connected with the idea of 'imposed captivity.' In at least one case, the teacher-author felt that the schools were expected to work miracles on their students. He reached the conclusion that only by changing

¹Ibid., p. 1704.

the child's environment could the child change. In another instance, a different author says that the schools must change to meet the challenge of educating their students so that they can become valued working members of society.

Before continuing, let us look at some of the characteristics of the disadvantaged child and their implications for the library program. Frank Riessman believes that

"the disadvantaged child is typically a physical learner, and the physical learner is usually a slow learner. A child may be slow because he learns in a one-track way and is not flexible or broad, but this does not necessarily mean he is dull. The implication for libraries lies in the use of pictures, games, globes, mobiles, puzzles, illustrative objects associated with books, or any device that will appeal to the physical senses and eventually establish a link with books and libraries. The singing games, songs, art lessons, paper cutting and other physical activities used in outreach movements are better suited to the slow physical learner than direct, first contact with books alone."¹

Eleanor Brown, in her book Library Services To The Disadvantaged, concurs with Riessman. She says:

"Since considerable research indicates that culturally deprived children suffer severe handicaps in not being able to use Standard English,

¹Brown, Eleanor, Library Services to the Disadvantaged. N. J. Scarcrow, 1971, p. 332.

does not this suggest that libraries, as well as classrooms, become places for talking as well as reading? Storytelling, reading aloud dramatizations and discussing books in groups become activities of paramount importance. All types of audio-visual stimulation for talking would seem to precede attempts to motivate reading."¹

Gloria S. Gross, a social worker working with the disadvantaged, says that she, too, would start out by just talking with the children. Ms. Gross would advise talking on any subject, such as the trees or the sky, and then gradually lead up to books. She also recommends that the librarian use throwaway magazines and throwaway pictures, things the children can destroy if they feel the need.

Dr. Marie Hughes, working with Mexican-American children in the Tuscon, Arizona area, says that

"if Mexican-American or slum children are to succeed the school experience must help them develop a positive attitude toward themselves."²

The school librarian is in a unique position to do just this. She has the opportunity to foster pride in their heritage by gathering materials that depict their own way of life by arranging exhibits

¹Ibid., p. 329.

²Silberman, Charles E., Crisis in the Classroom. N. Y. Random House, 1970, p. 312.

of their own famous artists, authors, scientists, and musicians. She can help the teacher gather source material, perhaps from community members, that shows history from the perspective of the black man, the Indian or the Appalachian poor white. Getting to know the community in a ghetto area is important, for the community is a source of information and a source of pride for the students. While Dr. Huges^{SP} agrees that it is essential to expose her children to the world outside the ghetto, she follows the principle that for every trip taken outside the 'barrio', two trips should be taken within it. In her words,

"this is a means of conveying interest in and respect for the children's own background (essential to developing a sense of worth) and also, hopefully of involving parents, grandparents, and other members of the adult community in school activities."¹

Faith Murdoch, discussing some of the programs that have proved successful in the Detroit Public School System, also lists the community visit as one which has wide appeal. In Detroit, they too have found the importance of developing the student's ability to communicate. Often their students will

¹Ibid., p. 315.

perform puppet shows or radio programs in the library. The schools have initiated workshops for parents where the children demonstrate the art of storytelling and the use of records, films and filmstrips, and where they exhibit books they have made containing short stories, poems, riddles, etc. These workshops not only aided in helping to develop writing and speaking skills, but they also helped serve to get the parents involved in seeing what was being done in their children's schools. In order to create enthusiasm for reading, the librarians have encouraged the children to make papier-maché storybook characters and shadow boxes depicting scenes from their favorite books. These were put on display in the library.

While it is essential for all libraries to be bright, attractive and comfortable, it is even more important that these conditions be met for the disadvantaged child. All too often his environment is a drab and grey one. He must feel comfortable in his physical surroundings and with the librarian if he is going to be relaxed enough to learn. While this writer has emphasized the importance of getting the disadvantaged child to talk, there can be no doubt that ultimately his success in school will depend

on his eventual ability to read. Ms. Harriet Brown and Ms. Elinor Sinnette, two black librarians writing of their experiences in a school in Harlem, tell how they stressed the importance of books not only to the children but also to the parents as well. At every opportunity, the two librarians gave speeches about books to the parents, and they urged the teachers to do the same. They also encouraged the parents to build home libraries of paperback books. They held book fairs, and requested the help of parents in setting them up. They worked hand in hand with the public librarians who aided them by compiling lists of books, lists of resource people in the community and lists of pertinent materials that could be obtained free of charge. They, in turn, took every opportunity to tell the parents of the free services that were available to them at the public library.

This writer has talked about the co-operation between the public library and the school library. There is much agitation now for keeping the schools open after hours and on Saturdays. In connection with this, Meredith Bloss, Director of the New Haven Free Public Library, says:

"Every neighborhood needs not branch libraries ser-

ving 40,000 to 50,000 people. ... In the dense cities one is needed every four blocks with a relationship of librarian-group workers to clientele of one to every thirty. Small groups are the key."¹

Why not connect the two, and make branch libraries out of some school libraries? The facilities are there and, particularly in high school libraries, some of the materials that might be needed by adults would also be present. The library could be staffed by a public librarian in the evenings and on Saturdays. Money from the public library could be used to buy the pertinent materials needed for that particular neighborhood branch. Moreover, the resources of the public libraries could be used to answer the questions the neighborhood people might need answered. Parents more familiar with where their children go to school might take more of an interest in education. For the student, school might become more enjoyable, since part of it would touch their parents' lives. In turn, the public and the school librarian would have more than doubled the services that they could have offered alone.

What are some of the recurrent themes that run throughout the literature on the disadvantaged? We find the following:

¹Brown, Eleanor, Library Services to the Disadvantaged. N. J. Scarecrow, 1971, p. 85.

1. The disadvantaged have needs that are quite often different from those of middle-class Americans.
2. The disadvantaged may best be helped by someone from their own community.
3. The disadvantaged child often has special learning problems.
4. In order to reach our disadvantaged population, it is often necessary to go out to meet them on their home ground.

Considering these themes, what are the implications for those of us in the field of library science? This writer suggests the following:

1. There should be an active recruitment for library students in disadvantaged areas. They should be aided by scholarship programs to see them through school.
2. There should also be a push made for training paraprofessionals to work in their own communities.
3. Classes on the problems of the disadvantaged should

be considered mandatory for those wishing to go into that area. A no-nonsense approach should be taken, and all the problems that are involved should be dealt with explicitly and realistically.

4. Source material that might be used in teaching the disadvantaged child should be taught.
5. Every library student should be made aware of the need to work co-operatively with the other agencies in the community.
6. The middle-class white librarian might have to be content with remaining on the sidelines, offering help and encouragement from a distance.

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