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Library Work With Children

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The development of library work with children during recent years is one of the most striking features of modern library progress both in Great Britain and America.

In the early days of the library movement it was not recognised that provision for children was desirable. In some libraries juvenile books and periodicals were provided, but as a rule, children were either excluded altogether, or admitted under conditions that did not allow of their using the libraries to any great extent. As time went on this attitude had to be modified. The ability to read, which every child acquires under modern educational systems, created a demand for books which had to be met.

The power to read, which had been imparted to the children, was found to be a power for evil as well as a power for good. The absence of children's libraries and the difficulty of obtaining good books in attractive form in sufficient number, led to the wide circulation of poor, worthless, and often pernicious juvenile literature. It became necessary, therefore, to make it as easy for children to obtain good books as it was for them to obtain bad books.

Librarians and others interested in children began to consider the whole subject in the light of modern conditions. Steps were taken to lower and abolish the age limit in libraries, and to encourage children to use them. Special juvenile sections were provided in the lending libraries, and special juvenile departments in the reading rooms.

But as soon as children began to frequent the libraries in large numbers, difficulties arose with adult readers. It is impossible to suppress the animal spirits of children altogether, and the average adult reader, if he is to read in comfort, requires greater quiet than can be secured when children are present in large numbers. Nor does he care to be surrounded by swarms of children when he is selecting his books for home reading. If adults are not to be driven from the libraries, separate provision must be made for the children.

Experiments in the direction of providing separate libraries for children were made, but they were few and isolated. While a separate reading room for children is essential in a public library, there is no real need to incur the extra expense of erecting and maintaining separate buildings, except where special endowments or bequests are available for the purpose. In many ways it is better to have all the activities of the libraries grouped together. The whole trend of modern library practice is to make separate provision for the children in the public libraries and public schools, and not in separate buildings.

As library work with children developed, librarians began to get into closer touch with the teachers in the public schools. The views of teachers and educationists were ascertained, and it was found that many teachers had realised the aid to teaching which might be derived from a well-selected library of good books. By obtaining subscriptions, and other means, they had established libraries in their schools, but could only maintain them with difficulty. They welcomed the co-operation of the libraries, realising that stability and continuity would be given to the school libraries if they were provided by a public authority.

Ultimately conferences were held on the subject of the relations of public libraries and public education, and the lines upon which the best results can be expected have been laid down.

The essentials of a children's library system are:—

(1) The provision of libraries in the public schools for children during school life.

(2) The provision of separate reading rooms, or halls, in the libraries for children.

(3) The provision of juvenile sections in the libraries for older children after school life.

In the organisation of children's libraries on an adequate scale, there can be no two opinions as to the fundamental importance of

School Libraries,

and the principle that children can be best introduced to books and taught to use them intelligently in the public schools is now well established. Both from an educational and library point of view it is of the greatest advantage to provide libraries in the schools for home-reading. No public library system, however adequate, could hope to reach more than a small proportion of the children, and no librarian could influence children anything like so effectively as the teachers.

The educational systems of the various countries provide a means whereby children's libraries can be organised and administered with ease, and by which all children can be reached, instead of the small percentage attracted to the public libraries. At a small cost every school department can be supplied with a library of books covering the wants of children of all ages, from infants to upper classes, till they are old enough to benefit from the use of a public library.

School libraries should be recreative, and not educational. Though, indirectly, they are of great educational value, their main objects is to promote the love of good books ; and for this and other reasons, it is most desirable that the reading of children should be largely under the control and guidance of the teachers in the public schools. They know the characters and capabilities of the children in their charge, and are able to influence them in their reading. They know the books which are suitable for the children in their particular districts, and in no two districts are these quite the same. They touch the life of the children at many points and in many ways that a librarian cannot hope to do.

On the other hand, the expert knowledge of a librarian is

very desirable in the purchase and oversight of the library stock. Where it is possible for the library and educational authorities to co-operate, the educational authority providing the funds and undertaking the distribution of the books to the children, and the library authority undertaking the preparation of the books for circulation and the supervision, and general maintenance of the stock, the best results will be attained.

School libraries are of great moral and eductional value. To place at the disposal of children well-selected libraries containing good, wholesome literature, is the best means of cultivating a taste for good reading. If no attempt were made to provide children with good books, they would turn to inferior books, and to books which are frequently of a debasing nature. Where efficient school library systems exist and children are fully supplied with good books, the circulation of poor and harmful books is practically non-existent. They are effectual auxiliaries of educational systems. They strengthen and extend the foundations of education, and give the best beginnings of that self-education which is all-important for subsequent success in life.

The Board of Education itself recognises this, emphasises the great aid they render to efficient teaching, and advocates their establishment wherever possible. Children who read books become more intelligent, and are easier to teach than children who do not read. They become familiar with the meaning and use of words, thus increasing their vocabulary. They enlarge their mental outlook and acquire an interest in things which they would otherwise ignore.

After all, the greatest single benefit conferred upon a child by school education is his introduction to books. To learn to love books, and to use books, the child must have a plentiful and varied supply. For the average boy and girl this can only be secured through the school library. The reading habit formed at school is likely to be a source of ceaseless blessing throughout life.

Children's Reading Rooms

are another essential feature of a children's library system.

Formerly regarded as of minor importance, the provision usually consisted of a few tables set apart in the main reading room, in which the children's periodicals were available. They were supervised by the library caretaker or attendant, or else left to take care of themselves, subject to the intermittent supervision of the library assistants. Administered in this unsympathetic spirit, and on lines which are quite out of touch with the spirit of children's library work, they entirely failed to reach and influence the children.

But this type has now been superseded, and in modern library buildings, children's reading rooms should be provided of at least equal importance to the adults' reading room and made one of the principal departments of the library. The new type of children's reading room consists of a lofty, well-lighted hall, as large as the general reading room. Its walls are lined with book-cases of a height suitable for children, well-stocked with good books. Part of the wall space is reserved for picture show-cases with sliding glass fronts; while higher up are hung well-selected colour prints. Every detail is carefully thought out to make the room attractive. Cleanliness is insisted on, and a lavatory is provided for children to wash if necessary. In charge of the hall should be a lady superintendent, or, as she is known in America, a « children's librarian ». For this position a sympathetic, specially qualified woman is required. The influence for good of an enthusiastic superintendent can hardly be exaggerated, and her work is one of the highest forms of social service. The halls should be open to the children after school hours, and may be used at other times for the various branches of school and library work. Any child should be admitted who is able to write out an application for a book. So great is the importance of children's reading halls on these lines that no library service should be regarded as complete without them.

It is an open question whether books should be only read in the hall. Where an efficient school library system exists it is better to keep the hall for reading purposes only. Whether books are lent from the children's halls or not, it is desirable that children, when about to leave school, should be

introduced to the wider choice of books available at the public lending libraries.

Juvenile Sections

at the public lending libraries supplement and carry on the work of the school libraries. The uses of the two are quite distinct. School libraries serve the younger children and provide for them in the elementary stages of reading. The juvenile sections serve older boys and girls, and provide for them more advanced books till they are able to read widely and seriously.

Enrolling Children as Readers.

One of the great objects of interesting children in libraries and implanting in them a taste for good books is to enable them to use libraries intelligently and as a matter of course in after life. Some link is needed to connect the schools with the libraries, so that when children reach the upper classes in school they may become readers at the libraries with as little difficulty as possible. One method, which has been largely adopted by libraries working in close co-operation with the schools, is to admit children as readers on the recommandation of the head-teachers, either when the children are leaving school or before. No liability for loss of or damage to books should be attached to the recommendation. In practice it is found that the privilege is not abused, little loss to the libraries results, and a great boon is conferred upon the children.

Advertising.

Many American libraries go further and seek to attract children as readers by advertising in schools and elsewhere. General notices such as this:

« BOYS' NOTICE.

Do you like {
Fairy tales
Cowboy stories
Pirate Stories
Railway stories
Athletic stories
War stories

Would you like a *free* library card? Come to the Young People's Department of the Public Library and ask for one. This will entitle you to borrow books free of charge ».

or special notices such as this :—

« The ———— Public Library is prepared to give special attention to pupils in this class who desire to consult books of reference in connection with their scheduled class work.

« Pupils in this class are especially invited to use the Library. They will find many attractive books of particular interest to boys and girls that may be borrowed for their use at home, and also books for their parents ».

are printed and posted in school class-rooms, and must have a considerable influence in attracting children to the libraries. Such enterprising methods are not unknown in British libraries, but they have only occasionally been adopted. They are really

Extension Work.

The question may be asked: Are these methods to be commended? Ought not the staffs of public libraries in their work with children to confine themselves to handing out books actually asked for, and not seek to create a demand by the various activities which have come to be known as library extension work?

We must consider this question in its relation to present day library conditions. The aim of the modern librarian is not only to provide books for all classes of readers, but to circulate them as freely as possible. He is face to face with an entirely new situation, which requires to be met by new methods. The result of the adoption of compulsory education has been to create in vast numbers readers unaccustomed to the use of books and libraries, who have been taught to read, but not how to read or what to read.

A passive attitude on the part of librarians and library authorities is no longer possible if libraries are to to be a factor in national progress. Various activities have, therefore, come to be associated with them, all of which are undertaken

with a view to making known their contents, and to promote a more intelligent use of their resources. British libraries, though heavily handicapped by their financial restrictions, have tried many experiments and adopted many new methods. In America new methods have been more fully developed and more systematically applied.

It is only intended here to consider such methods as have been adopted in connection with library work with children. If they are to benefit from books and libraries in after life, it is essential that they should be familiarised with them and taught how to use them intelligently during their most impressionable age. One of the most effective means of doing this is the library lesson.

Library Lessons.

The educational value of lessons to classes of school children given in the libraries is undoubted; but, so far, few British public libraries have systematically taken up this work. Where the work is done the lessons are given either by the library staff or by the teachers. In some cases lessons are given by the librarian, and are devoted to explanations of how to use the library, how to consult books of reference, and so forth. Occasionally lessons on books and general subjects, illustrated by books in the libraries, have also been successfully given. In other cases the lessons are given by teachers, who bring their classes to the libraries and draw upon the library stock for books, pictures, and other illustrations of the subjects that are being studied in the schools. The children are thus enabled to get a far better grasp of the subject than is possible by means of the ordinary oral instruction. The bringing of the classes to the libraries familiarises children with these institutions, and encourages them to use the libraries and to turn to them habitually for information.

Where children's halls or children's reading rooms form a distinct part of a library system in charge of a lady superintendent, this work can be easily and effectively carried on. The superintendent visits the schools regularly,

arranges with the teachers for the visits of the classes, and sees that the illustrations required are provided. The lessons can be given either by the school teachers or the superintendents of the halls.

At Cardiff last year, 151 classes visited our two halls, comprising 6,172 scholars. One of our superintendents gave a series of illustrated talks on the « History of Cardiff », and this year the same superintendent is taking as her subject « King Edward VII ». These illustrated talks meet with the greatest success, and are much appreciated by the children.

Not only can illustrations be used for library lessons, they can also be used for illustrating lessons in the schools.

Loan of Illustrations.

This is a common feature of American library work, but few British libraries have attempted it. Why it has not been adopted more extensively it is difficult to understand, Collections of groups of illustrations can be got together very easily and inexpensively. When they have accumulated, it is a simple matter to print a list and circulate it amongst the head-teachers of the public schools with an intimation that the groups are at their service. Such a system has been built up in Cardiff within the last three years, and is now working successfully as part of the ordinary routine work of the libraries. The groups are regularly used and greatly appreciated by teachers as aids to school work. The illustrations are drawn from a variety of sources. Coloured and other supplements to periodicals and illustrated papers, disused periodicals and magazines, book prospectuses, discarded press photographs, &c., furnish a mine of illustrations, which can be supplemented by the purchase of special sets, if required. Cut and mounted on special mounts of a uniform size, with descriptive labels, they are sorted into classified groups of from 12 to 25 pictures. The most useful groups are those illustrating natural history and nature study, history and geography, and they are used by teachers to illustrate lessons in the schools on these subjects. Special groups illustrating special subjects are made up as required.

Children's Lectures.

Another important and popular branch of children's library work is the children's lecture. The duty of providing lectures for adults is admitted, and many of the more important libraries engage in this popular form of library extension work. A few only have attempted to meet the needs of the children in this direction. When it is considered that the children in our elementary schools are growing up in ignorance, not only of foreign and classical literature, but of the literature of their native tongue, every argument that can be used in favour of lectures for adults can be urged with far greater force on behalf of the children. While school libraries are a potent means of interesting children in good books, they should be supplemented wherever possible by the library lecture It widens the range of children's reading, broadens their sympathies, and excites their imaginations. We have had an extensive experience at Cardiff. Every winter some dozen children's lectures are arranged in connection with our children's halls, illustrated with lantern slides. Some lectures are for the older children, and some for the younger. For the older children the lectures deal in a simple way with such subjects as birds, animals, flowers, books, astronomy, hygiene, travel, heroes, and the like. For the younger children the subjects are mainly illustrated stories, such as « Alice in Wonderland », « The Christmas Carol », « Fairy Tales », « Peter Pan », and other classical child stories. The lecture halls are invariably crowded with children who are very keen to gain admittance. As the object in giving these lectures is to widen the children's knowledge of books and to lead them to read and study for themselves, lists of books on the subjects of the lectures are printed and distributed, and the books referred to are always in great demand. Books are introduced to children which otherwise they might never think of reading. For instance, last winter one of our children's lectures dealt with Ruskin's « King of the Golden River ». Hundreds of children listened spell-bound as this beautiful legend, with its deep moral significance, was

unfolded to them by a gifted story-teller, and illustrated by pictures on the lantern screen. The probability is that few, if any, of the children would ever have become acquainted with this story if it had not been made known to them in this way.

Such lectures as the last are really only a slightly different form of that popular feature of library work with children in America, the

Story Hour,

which has practically no place in Bristish library work. The reason, no doubt, is that few British libraries have children's halls or children's reading rooms on the American plan, superintended by women specially trained for the work. These superintendents, known as children's librarians, have to pass through one of the training schools for children's librarians, and amongst other things they are trained to tell stories to children. The object is, of course, to interest children in the great stories of the world's literature, myths, legends, romance, and history. The scale on which this work is carried on, and the great influence it must exert, can be judged from the fact that in connection with one typical American library over 80,000 children listened to stories told in the libraries, schools, and playgrounds in one year.

Reading Circles

may also be organised for children in connection with the libraries. The National Home-Reading Union is a British organisation which exists to promote and foster reading circles and to give guidance in reading. The public libraries are in entire sympathy with the objects of the Union, and give every assistance they can to its work. The junior courses of reading are specially adapted for children's reading circles, which could very well be formed in connection with children's halls and reading rooms. But it is not essential to work in connection with any organisation. Our experience is that reading circles are more easily formed and more successfully carried on in connection with the libraries than with any outside organisation.

Other Activities.

It is unnecessary to deal with other activities which form part of the ordinary routine work of most libraries, such as the preparation of children's catalogues, reading lists, and so forth. Sufficient has been said to show the

Trend of Modern Library Practice,

with regard to library work with children. American libraries are undoubtedly in advance of British libraries in this department of library work, the full significance of which we do not seem to have grasped. Some American methods have not found favour with British librarians, and may not be suitable to the different conditions which exist in Great Britain. We cannot but admire, however, the energy and enthusiasm which is characteristic of the children's work of the best American libraries. It is true the more liberal financial support which they receive has enabled them to experiment and initiate developments more freely than has been possible with us. More conservative methods of administration no doubt prevail in British libraries, but this is not the real obstacle to library progress. Many British librarians are alive to the necessity of developing their work with children. They are, however, unable to move owing to the limited expenditure allowed by the British Libraries Acts. Except in the larger and more progressive towns, where special measures have been taken to increase the library income, the library movement in Great Britain is practically marking time.

Importance of Children's Work.

Let, me in conclusion, emphasise the importance of this work with children. It is a necessity of the times. It is a factor in social and educational progress, which will have the most far-reaching results. The child of to-day is the citizen of to-morrow. It depends largely upon us whether he is to become a responsible and enlightened citizen, or whether he is to be ignorant and irresponsible. Libraries are steadily advancing

in public estimation. Wherever a public library exists it makes for the welfare and culture of the people. Free from political or religious bias, it appeals to, and is used by, all classes of the community. It attracts all sorts and conditions of children as no other institution can, and our reponsibilities to them cannot be evaded. We ought to be able to command the interest and support of all that is best in public life in this work, and public support will follow public appreciation. It is for this fuller measure of public appreciation and support we must appeal. If we pursue an enlightened policy, if our administration is public-spirited, progressive, open to ideas and touched with idealism, ultimate sucess is certain.