



The professionalization of rural librarians : role modeling, networking and continuing education
by Mary Catherine Bushing

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
Montana State University

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to identify the ways in which rural librarians without the Master of Library Science degree learn to define themselves as librarians. Elements in educational events, consulting encounters, and career circumstances were examined to determine significant factors contributing to the development of professional identity and self-confidence for individuals without the benefit of acculturation into the profession through the graduate school experience. A qualitative multicase investigation was conducted with 26 individuals serving communities of less than 5,000 in six states: Idaho, Iowa, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, and Utah. A purposive sample was used to identify effective rural librarians as potential interviewees. An interview protocol structured the 60 to 120 minute interviews conducted with each librarian. The interviews were audiotaped for later analysis. Three significant career events were identified: the hiring narrative, support from others, and the first library continuing education experience. Five significant education themes were identified: networking, relevancy of topics, characteristics of effective educational events, qualifications of effective educators, and negative educational experiences. The librarian identity is summarized in two schemes. One scheme defines the librarian role in terms of relationships with key others: community, officials, staff users, and other librarians. The other scheme identifies five consistently mentioned attributes for effectiveness. These attributes are: communication and people skills, dedication, organizational skills, self-confidence and assertiveness, and leadership. Conclusions related to each finding are outlined and general conclusions include: (1) the second-class status of librarians without the MLS degree is manifest in behaviors and attitudes of others; (2) the librarian stereotype appears to have particular negative implications for rural librarians; (3) the autonomous and varied state programs for rural librarians appear to be uneven on a number of scales; and (4) the responsiveness of the 26 librarians in this study illustrates their willingness to be involved, and their eagerness to be consulted and to contribute their insights and experiences to the knowledge base of rural librarianship. Recommendations for further research in the area of rural librarianship are provided. A dozen practical applications to change the situation of rural librarians are included in the final chapter.

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CONTINUING EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify the ways in which rural librarians without the Master of Library Science degree learn to define themselves as librarians. Elements in educational events, consulting encounters, and career circumstances were examined to determine significant factors contributing to the development of professional identity and self-confidence for individuals without the benefit of acculturation into the profession through the graduate school experience. A qualitative multicase investigation was conducted with 26 individuals serving communities of less than 5,000 in six states: Idaho, Iowa, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, and Utah. A purposive sample was used to identify effective rural librarians as potential interviewees. An interview protocol structured the 60 to 120 minute interviews conducted with each librarian. The interviews were audiotaped for later analysis. Three significant career events were identified: the hiring narrative, support from others, and the first library continuing education experience. Five significant education themes were identified: networking, relevancy of topics, characteristics of effective educational events, qualifications of effective educators, and negative educational experiences. The librarian identity is summarized in two schemes. One scheme defines the librarian role in terms of relationships with key others: community, officials, staff, users, and other librarians. The other scheme identifies five consistently mentioned attributes for effectiveness. These attributes are: communication and people skills, dedication, organizational skills, self-confidence and assertiveness, and leadership. Conclusions related to each finding are outlined and general conclusions include: (1) the second-class status of librarians without the MLS degree is manifest in behaviors and attitudes of others; (2) the librarian stereotype appears to have particular negative implications for rural librarians; (3) the autonomous and varied state programs for rural librarians appear to be uneven on a number of scales; and (4) the responsiveness of the 26 librarians in this study illustrates their willingness to be involved, and their eagerness to be consulted and to contribute their insights and experiences to the knowledge base of rural librarianship. Recommendations for further research in the area of rural librarianship are provided. A dozen practical applications to change the situation of rural librarians are included in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The library profession is at the center of massive cultural, educational and economic change as the "information society" sorts out the implications of information as commodity, electronics as format, and professional specialization as criterion for excellence. Because libraries are engaged in the diffusion of the information commodity and because the knowledge/power relationship is emphasized in popular paradigms, ever more attention is being focused on libraries and librarians. In addition to providing information and knowledge, libraries increasingly serve as intermediary agencies between the electronic technologies necessary to access information and the end-users of such information. This enabling function has further complicated the library environment and confused the role, function and identity of the librarian. The levels of service demanded by even the least sophisticated client are ever increasing. Librarians in academic, school, special and public libraries in the smallest as well as the largest communities or institutions must have advanced specialized skills and technological knowledge in addition to management and public relations abilities in order to make the most of the resources available to them. Libraries and librarians are at the center of the

information age trying to keep pace with rapid changes in technology and the implications of the information explosion while sorting out their own roles and identities.

The Library Profession

In the midst of this shifting landscape, libraries and the librarians who staff them, have acquired a new prominence both because of the effects of technology and because of the expanding expectations of library users of all ages and educational backgrounds. The National Center for Education Statistics (1994b) reported that public libraries circulated over 1.5 billion items in 1992, the most recent year for which national statistics are available. A large portion of this circulation and the related services were provided by rural libraries. Increasingly, these small libraries are expected to be simply smaller versions of the most sophisticated research libraries and they are no longer viewed as the traditional quiet and convenient popular reading centers they once were believed to be. Questions concerning the quality of services and the ability of staff to provide access to an ever-increasing and ever-changing body of information have arisen along with the increased expectations of the citizens of smaller communities. State libraries, library systems and consortia, the American Library Association (ALA), state and regional library associations, graduate library science program directors, and rural librarians themselves are struggling with continuing education delivery, certification, and quality content for rural librarians. The challenge is to provide continuing education and basic training that will enable rural librarians to develop their personal skills and abilities, along with professional identities, to assure their success in this more demanding

environment. The efforts to improve the quality and delivery of educational opportunities to individuals working as rural librarians have been further complicated by the culture of the profession itself.

The efforts to educate, train and empower individuals working in rural libraries are complicated by the profession because a Master of Library Science (MLS) degree is considered the entry level credential for librarians. This continues to be true despite the fact that according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (1994a) in 1992 there were 5,117 public libraries in the United States staffed only with individuals without such a degree. This means that of the 8,946 central libraries (not bookmobiles or branches), 57% are managed and operated by individuals without the professional entry level credential. In fact, because there are no ALA accredited baccalaureate programs in library science, these individuals not only do not have a masters degree in library or information science, they usually do not have any academic preparation for librarianship except their experiences as library users and possibly as high school or college students.

While ALA has been accrediting library school programs since 1925, importance and control were added to the MLS requirement in 1951 when ALA issued the "Standards for Accreditation of Library Education Programs" and endorsed the Master of Library Science (MLS) degree as the first level of professional credentialing (American Library Association Planning Committee, 1989). Since that time, the term *professional librarian* has meant one with such a degree. This requirement was based upon that of the so-called high professions, e.g., medicine and law, where an extended

period of specialized education at the graduate level has been the accepted educational preparation for practice. It assumes a relatively complete monopoly on the practice of the profession, with entrance into the field being controlled by, among other things, the gate-keeping device of extensive graduate level education. Librarians, similarly to other female dominated occupations, were convinced "that more prestige, more respect, more income would accrue if only they, collectively, could achieve for their activities the status of a profession" (Shera, 1972, p. 73) and that status would be certain to follow upon the model of higher educational preparation for practice. As in many other professions, those individuals actively involved in national and international associations as well as academic faculty in university-based professional schools are among those who have actively worked to define and drive the profession in particular directions. Not surprisingly, these powerful and articulate individuals are also those with the highest levels of education, are predominately male despite the female majority in American librarianship (Smith, V., 1986), and are those furthest removed from the daily practice of librarianship in the majority of public libraries. It was this group of library educators from university graduate programs and academic research library administrators who were influential in establishing the MLS as the basic credential for librarianship (Heim, 1982).

The accrediting structure for the MLS programs established a credentialing system based upon the attainment of a specific level (graduate) and type (library) of university degree. This requirement placed an emphasis upon the formal, theoretical, and specialized knowledge base of the profession rather than upon the practical, on-the-job

knowledge which is what is known and observed by the public. The effect of this emphasis upon the formal graduate preservice model of preparation for librarianship has resulted in a caste system within the profession (Brugh & Beede, 1976) which adversely affects both those with the MLS credential and those without it. The distinctions between those with the MLS degree and those without it have separated the "professional librarians" from the "others" who are often librarians in rural settings. The individuals without the MLS degree report feeling like "second class citizens" within the profession. They are reticent to get involved or to assert themselves within the profession because of the prevailing attitudes despite the fact that they are the only librarians in almost half of the public libraries in the country.

While the profession of librarianship continues to require an MLS as the minimum level of preparation for sanctioned practice and recognition by other librarians, it is not now true, nor has it ever been true in the United States, that the MLS is recognized by society as what distinguishes librarians from others, nor is it recognized outside of the profession that such a degree is what qualifies an individual to practice librarianship (Miller, 1989). As noted by Hanks (1991) when arguing for a new standard for professional entrance into librarianship, accredited MLS librarians did not hold a monopoly in the arena of practice at mid-century when the accreditation standards were implemented, nor have they ever been able to establish such a monopoly (p. 8). Many individuals without the MLS degree practice librarianship in the United States, particularly in schools and public libraries. In 1989, Podolsky reported that 43% (3,187) of the public libraries reported by the National Center for Education Statistics'

Federal-State Cooperative System for Public Library Data were serving populations of 2,500 or fewer persons, and only 4% of the librarians in these libraries held a master's degree (p. 21). For fiscal 1992, the National Center for Education Statistics (1994b) reported the number of libraries in this population category (2,500 or fewer residents) had decreased to 2,656 but the percentage of librarians in these libraries with the MLS degree had increased half a percentage point to 4.5%. The large decline (531) in the number of libraries in this population category (less than 2,500) may partly be due to improvements in the statistical gathering processes as well as to increases in the rural populations resulting in libraries in this category moving into the next higher statistical group. From the 1989 statistical base, Podolsky also reported that in even larger communities with populations up to 25,000, the number of MLS credentialed librarians was still only 14% (1,408). In addition, in two out of five public libraries serving populations of 25,000 or less, the supporting staff and the library director are one and the same (Vavrek, 1992, p. 9). Thus the phenomenon of the one person library still exists in many communities. The individuals in these one-person libraries seldom have the professional credentials recognized by the profession as the minimum qualification for librarianship. These small libraries and the communities they serve cannot afford to pay individuals with a masters degree (Vavrek, 1989a).

Busch, in her 1990 study of recruitment and retention of rural librarians, said that it is necessary for the library and information profession to "increase its knowledge about those among its ranks who practice in the majority of the nation's public libraries" (p. 2), and it is these small libraries that constitute the largest segment of public library

administrative units. Heasley and Preston (1989) note that the fact that more than 57 million people live in non-metropolitan America has helped to make the scope of the "rural librarian problem" more visible to the profession (p. 2). As a result, there has developed a realization that the preparation and education of these librarians must be more comprehensively addressed. The Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, state and national associations, continuing education guidelines, and telecommunications issues have all contributed to a growing awareness within the profession of the need to find practical solutions to the reality of rural librarianship. Weech reported in 1980, when addressing public library standards and rural library services, that the area of adequate staffing for rural libraries was the third most frequently noted area of concern of state library agencies.

The Meaning of Rural

Although rural libraries and librarians have been discussed for decades, agreement has still not been reached about what group of libraries constitute those that are rural. The information about these smaller libraries, until recently, has not been consistently gathered and communicated. Gradually, the national program for the collection of standardized statistics for public libraries through the National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. Office of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement has greatly improved the quality, reliability and comparability of the statistics from all fifty states and the District of Columbia. The statistics generated through this data collection program have made the rural library situation more real and

understandable because of the ability to quantify the situations in libraries of various sizes and to compare the circumstances and resources available to residents of communities of all sizes in all parts of the country.

While this data is extremely valuable, rural libraries along with other rural service entities, have an identity problem because of the difficulty in determining a precise definition for the term *rural*. The difficulty in defining what is meant by the term rural is not unique to this project. "The word rural lacks precision in everyday use because it is so comprehensive yet so imprecise" (Hobbs & Dillman, 1982) and the definitions range across diverse disciplines from agriculture to psychology, and from demographics to social work. In 1982, rural psychologists Bosak and Perlman, reviewed 178 sources in rural psychology and counseling literature in an attempt to determine the prevailing definition of rural. They categorized the use of the term rural into four major categories but concluded that a more precise definition was needed to make the term useful and to make research results comparable. As used in the United States, the word rural has meant "areas of low population density, small absolute size, and relative isolation, where the major economic base was agricultural production and where the way of life was reasonably homogeneous and differentiated from that of other sectors of society" (Bealer, Willits & Kuvlesky, 1978, p. 339). This definition includes a demographic or ecological concept, an occupational component and a sociocultural aspect, but this is not the only definition of rural in use. For some, rural refers to anyplace that is not urban or anyplace with population densities below a specific level. Fitchen (1991) explains the difficulty of defining rural in the following manner:

The official definition assigned to rural America is a definition by exclusion: Essentially, that which is not metropolitan America is rural America. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, a "metropolitan statistical area" is a central city of at least 50,000 people or an urbanized area consisting of 50,000 or more people in a city (or cities) and the surrounding counties that are economically tied to it. Rural technically refers to the "population outside incorporated or unincorporated places with more than 2,500 people and/or outside urbanized areas" (Fuguitt, Brown, and Beale, 1989, p. 6). Rural America, then, is officially just a residual from urban or metropolitan, leaving it less than clear what rural really is. The very existence of a rural America is thus contingent upon an urban America. (p. 247)

Some rural areas are not agricultural in nature but are merely bedroom communities for urban centers where the majority of the residents are employed in non-agricultural enterprises either in the metropolitan center or within smaller communities. As is evident, there are no standard definitions of the term rural and therefore it is important for anyone referring to a rural community to define what is meant specifically by the term in a particular context and for a particular purpose.

Within the public library world, there are two population based definitions commonly used for the term rural library. The first is that used for purposes of the Federal Library Services and Construction Act (Osborn, 1973, p. 9) which defines rural libraries as those serving communities with populations of 10,000 or less. In 1986, Goldhor suggested a further clarification of this definition for a rural library by stating that it is one which "serves fewer than 10,000 people and is located in a county which either has fewer than 150 persons per square mile or has over eighty percent of its land in farms" (p. 15). The second commonly used definition for rural library is that often used by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship and by the American

Library Association. In this definition, a town or service area of 25,000 or less is considered rural. The 25,000 or less definition often used by both the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion University in Pennsylvania and the American Library Association in Chicago, and the 10,000 person delimiter used by the government and refined by Goldhor are both useful and have applications. These definitions, however, serve to illustrate the relativity of any definition of rural that might be used by social scientists.

Libraries serving populations of 25,000 or less still seem to be large to those who live in the 17 (34%) states with population densities of less than 50 people per square mile and with few metropolitan areas. These states are: Arizona, Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming (Bureau of the Census, 1994). The 25,000 designation also does not speak to the situation in another 11 states, i.e., Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin, with higher total population densities but with a large part of their populations spread across hundreds of much smaller communities. According to Public Libraries in the United States: 1992 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994) which divides public libraries into eleven groups by populations served, more than 40% of the public libraries in even these 11 states serve populations of less than 5,000 residents. Libraries serving 5,000 or fewer residents represent almost half of the total public libraries (44.7%) in the United States and are scattered throughout the 50 states.

Thus, in 28 (56%) of the states, either as a function of population density or as a function of population distribution or settlement patterns, there are large numbers of small libraries serving less than 5,000 people. For these states, rural means something smaller than communities of 25,000 or even 10,000 residents. The National Center for Education Statistics (1994a) reported that in 1992 there were 4,000 central libraries with service areas of 5,000 or fewer residents. Because these libraries represent such a high percentage of the total, are a significant proportion of the public libraries in more than half of the states, and are more likely than the next two larger categories (those serving 10,000 or less and those serving up to 25,000 residents) to have librarians without formal graduate library science education, for purposes of this study, a rural public library was defined as one having a service area of 5,000 or fewer residents. These smaller communities are often located at some distance from MSA's (Metropolitan Statistical Area) and at least some of the economic base is agricultural. Less than 9% of the librarians in these libraries have an MLS degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994b) and they have little or no academic preparation for the professional responsibilities and roles they have assumed within the library and the community.

Professionalization of Librarians

Librarianship, whether technically a profession or not, has routinely been referred to as such. Particularly during the thirty years immediately following the 1951 accreditation standards, librarians and sociologists engaged in ongoing debates about whether or not librarianship actually fit the definition of a profession. Some sociologists

argued that it was a semi-profession typical of other semi-professions with more bureaucratic structure and less individual autonomy, a higher percentage of women than men, and a shorter training period along with a less specialized body of knowledge to be learned (Etzioni, 1969). While "the 1960s marked a watershed of sociological writings on the professions" (Freidson, 1994, p. 13), in more recent years, the distinctions concerning the definition of a profession or semi-profession have been less frequently debated in sociological literature. According to Freidson, the definition of the term profession and our understanding of the process by which individuals and occupational groups achieve the status of a profession is becoming more of a phenomenologically defined process rather than a dichotomy which defines an ideal against which to measure occupations. He stresses societal values, personal commitment, and client trust as important aspects of being a professional rather than the economic, political, or educational power structures which have previously been used by sociologists in defining professions.

Increasingly the discussions surrounding professionalism have recognized this dynamic or phenomenological nature of professionalization. Houle (1980), in his landmark book Continuing Learning in the Professions noted that "the professionalizing process is complex" (p. 34) and that the process for the individual is one of *becoming* rather than one of learning how to do something. Defining professionalization as a continuing dynamic process has changed the debates from ones for or against occupations as professions to debates about the extent to which particular individuals are or are not professionals. Sociologists and educators view the process of

professionalization as acculturation. This acceptance of and identification with a set of values and behaviors occurs in subtle ways resulting in a state of mind that is characteristic of a member of a particular profession. Studies on the process of identification or acculturation to a profession stress the importance of any formal pre-service educational period, the continuing education culture and other contacts with the profession (Becker & Carper, 1956; Clark & Corcoran, 1984; Weiss, 1981; White & Macklin, 1970). These illustrate the complexity of the process of professionalization and identification with a profession and its values.

The Nature of the Study

Statement of the Problem

Thus, while the profession continues to use the MLS degree from an ALA accredited program as the minimum qualification to enter the profession, there are thousands of smaller public libraries in the United States with librarians without such a degree. In addition, it is unlikely for a variety of reasons that the percentage of MLS libraries will improve in these libraries in the near future although the demands by the public for ever increasing and more sophisticated services are constantly growing. Many library educators and leaders recognize the need to find the most effective ways to assist these individuals in achieving appropriate levels of professionalization, despite the caste system within the profession. The attainment of a professional identity and the resulting self-confidence within the librarian role may be one of the ways by which rural librarians achieve effectiveness. The problem is to identify the ways in which rural librarians

actually do learn to define themselves as *librarians* and to function within the role of a professional.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the elements in educational events, consulting encounters, or job circumstances that a selected group of rural librarians without MLS degrees believed to be significant factors contributing to the development of their professional identity and self-confidence as librarians. These experiences were examined to identify common factors or patterns that might assist those responsible for the education of rural librarians to design educational events and expend resources in the most effective manner. Four specific areas were addressed in order to bring together the key elements rural librarians might use to define themselves as librarians. These areas were: (a) significant career events; (b) effective continuing education events; (c) characteristics of librarians considered effective; and, (d) the definition of the librarian role.

Study Objectives

The following objectives were used in the study to structure the inquiry and to guide the development of the research procedures and methodologies in order to achieve the research purposes:

1. To identify significant factors in career events that contributed to the acquisition of a professional identity for individuals who are employed as librarians in

rural public libraries and who are without the professional credential of a Master of Library Science degree;

2. To identify significant elements in educational events for rural librarians;
3. To identify the attributes of individuals in rural libraries considered effective and self-confident as librarians; and
4. To describe the elements of "professional identity" that individuals use to define their roles as librarians.

Significance of the Study

The complexity of the library environment and the large number of individuals who have not had the acculturation and professionalization opportunities afforded by graduate library education, make it important for library educators to identify alternate ways of providing models of professional librarianship, of enhancing professional self-confidence, and of assisting individuals in identifying with the profession in a positive manner. Issues about quality assurance for the content and delivery of continuing library education have long been concerns of the profession and the American Library Association. Within ALA, there are now more than 40 committees, round tables and other groups addressing professional education, continuing education and education delivery methods (American Library Association, 1995). Regional and state library associations also devote considerable resources to educational efforts on behalf of their members and would-be members. Although there is a renewed emphasis upon both voluntary and mandatory certification for personnel in libraries of all types and sizes

(Hanks, 1992) and specific competencies are being defined for functions throughout the profession, the content and the operational skills needed for work in libraries are ever changing and evolving. For those without the MLS basic competencies are taught through a variety of programs and delivery mechanisms including conference programs, workshops and week-long resident programs and institutes.

Librarianship has an "event" based continuing education culture and tradition (Smith, D., 1993; Stone, 1974; Weingand, 1992) and continuing education providers usually evaluate these individual educational events as distinct offerings rather than as part of the larger process of professionalization. Further complicating the evaluation process for these continuing education workshops, courses or institutes is the great variation in the educational levels and library experiences of the participants. Although a series of continuing education offerings may be developed as part of a long range plan for a state, regional system or association, evaluation of such events is focused on the delivery of each unit rather than upon the cumulative effect such offerings have had in the professional lives of individuals. Evaluations of the effectiveness of teaching and delivery methods, learning, retention, and concept implementation are sometimes conducted. In most instances, however, good speakers and popular topics and methods are identified by means of the typical one page evaluation form. Specific events or circumstances are evaluated rather than the effect these events have had upon the gradual professionalization process since the identification with the profession occurs through time rather than as a one-time event.

The identification of the elements in educational and career events or circumstances that have been effective in bringing about personal identification with the profession and professional self-confidence for those who do not have the MLS credential could provide library educators with useful information. Such information might be used in the development of educational programs, consulting models and career orientation designed to help rural librarians achieve a sense of belonging to the profession, despite their lack of an MLS. The professionalization process as outlined by Houle (1980) does not consist merely of mastery of content or competencies in operations. Such basic information is not what distinguishes successful professionals from less than successful individuals. While content and the ability to actually perform a job is important, it is the professionalization process as identified by Houle (1980) and others which has long term effects upon the performance, attitudes and ultimate success of individuals. The professionalization process includes, among other things, identification with the values of the profession, critical thinking, reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983, 1987, 1991), and self-enhancement or continuing education and growth (Becker & Carper, 1956; Bucher & Strauss, 1961; Cervero, 1988; Houle, 1980; Sherlock & Morris, 1967). All of these aspects of the professionalization process contribute to the ability of rural librarians to be responsive and effective as leaders and change agents within an ever changing environment.

Regardless of the content, adult education plays an important role in the professionalization process and the development of self-actualizing (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1969) individuals. When one observes or participates in continuing education

and basic certification training for rural librarians, it becomes clear that the most important and powerful thing being learned is often not the factual content of the specific event, but rather the powerful messages, embedded in the belief structure of the teacher (Apps, 1982), about the value and role of the students. It is the affirmation of the individual in their professional role of librarian that may be the most valuable and long lasting outcome of memorable educational events. Therefore, a key aspect of educational offerings for rural librarians might be the manner in which and the degree to which the event contributes to the professional identity of the individuals. While delivering the discipline's content and using technology to solve some of the problems associated with distance and remoteness, education efforts for rural librarians might focus on issues of professional identity and personal empowerment that will have long term effectiveness within the communities they serve and within the profession. The contributions, insights and active involvement of these individual non-MLS librarians is essential to the profession in order for libraries of all sizes and in all geographic locations, to be active players in the evolution of the information society.

Scope of the Study

In order to identify the elements in educational events or other circumstances that might be effectively implemented for rural librarians, one might look to what rural librarians themselves have experienced as professionalizing and important in their efforts to define their roles as librarians. The solutions to the "rural librarian problem" lie not in assuming what might be best for those in rural libraries and rural communities, but in

determining what those who are effective in that role believe to be elements that make a difference. Barron and Curran (1980), when discussing the assessment of the information needs of rural people, expressed ideas that might apply just as well to the library community as it assesses the needs of rural librarians:

Too many of us mistakenly believe we know what the problems are. Too many of us really believe we know a community . . . and through osmosis, learn the needs of its people. We fantasize that all small communities are about the same, just as we are sure that all big cities are about the same and share the same basic characteristics and problems. It is important to repeat that we must d-mythologize [*sic*] views of rural conditions and replace intuitive and impressionistic views with an understanding of real conditions. Librarians and educators are going to have to do some unlearning, some unfreezing of assumptions, if they are ever to understand rural problems. And understanding is just the first step. (p. 630)

How, then, does one understand the rural librarian? How does one attempt to do some unfreezing of assumptions or some unlearning so as to better understand the situation of librarians in rural communities? If the profession is to provide opportunities for rural librarians to learn the theoretical and practical content of librarianship, as well as providing an environment where professionalization and personal empowerment is possible, then the profession must first understand the situation from the viewpoint of those involved. Busch (1990) in her study of rural librarians, suggests that "studies that focus on the use of face-to-face, in-depth interviews or case studies are recommended in order to better address and identify the complexity of factors likely to influence recruitment and retention" (p. 231). Such studies may also provide a better understanding of the process of *becoming* a librarian once one has been recruited. Those who have become effective rural librarians may have insights, experiences, and

observations that could enlighten continuing education providers and trainers such as state library agencies, library associations and graduate library schools responsible for providing opportunities for the professionalization of new rural librarians. Glazier (1992b) reminds researchers that "research is not just a top-down activity, it is also a bottom-up activity. . . . qualitative research is a useful bottom-up approach to research and inquiry in the social sciences" (p. 1).

This study, therefore, used a qualitative or naturalistic approach to solicit the opinions and experiences of 26 individuals working as librarians in six states. The libraries are located in communities of less than 5,000 residents. The librarians were identified as appropriate rural librarians by consultants within the state library agency, by the researcher through contact with the librarians in classes, or through a combination of the two methods. Data collection was done through an interview format, a personal data form and a follow-up mailing to verify major themes in the study. The interviews were analyzed through a constant comparative method with adaptations made as appropriate and as indicated by the emerging data. The National Center for Education Statistics' national public library statistics database (1994a) was used to verify or clarify information obtained from the participants.

Definitions

The following definitions explain the meanings of terms as they are used in this study. Some of these definitions are the same as those used by the National Center for Education Statistics' report (1994b):

1. Continuing education -- a credit or non-credit educational opportunity provided either beyond the formal preservice preparation for a particular function or educational opportunities provided instead of formal preservice education. Continuing education may be a one-time event such as a workshop, a series of offerings to constitute a course, a residential institute, a program within a conference or other educational structure, or individualized instruction. A commitment to continuing education is one of the characteristics of a professional person identified by Houle (1980).
2. Librarian -- person who does paid work and fulfills job responsibilities to provide library services to a client group. Such "work usually requires professional training and skill in the theoretical and scientific aspects of library work, as distinct from its mechanical or clerical aspect" (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994b).
3. Mentoring -- a relationship in which an experienced, trusted person teaches, guides, and develops a novice in an organization or profession.
4. MLS -- Master of Library Science degree considered by the national, state and regional library associations to be the minimum credential for professional librarians in the United States.
5. Networking -- the process of establishing contacts, professional and social, to provide support, information, and friendship in the context of an occupation or function. Established networks may be invoked as needed for many purposes by any member.
6. Population served -- the number of people in the geographic area for which a public library has been established to offer services and from which the library derives income, usually through real estate and personal property tax revenues.

7. Professional identity -- self definition and identification with a particular professional or occupational group with characteristics defined by the group and the individual.

8. Public library -- a local, tax-supported institution established according to state law and organized for the purpose of delivering library and information services to the general public. A public library is an entity that provides at the very least an organized collection of materials, paid staff to provide services, an established schedule by which such services are offered, and facilities to support such collection, staff, and schedule (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994b).

9. Rural -- a community with a population of 5,000 or less, located outside of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). This definition of rural is much more restrictive than the definition usually used to define rural libraries.

10. Stereotype -- learned collective perception used by society to represent and categorize a group of people. Stereotypes may be accurate or inaccurate, complimentary or derogatory. Stereotypes may have some accurate elements within an otherwise exaggerated portrayal. Elements contributing to the development and continuation of a stereotype are difficult to define and isolate.

Assumptions of the Study

The research proposed in this study rests on the following assumptions concerning librarians, librarianship and the research design:

1. The professionalization of rural librarians without an MLS degree is important for the public libraries and the communities where these individuals work, for the

profession as a whole, and for the personal development and professional identity of the individuals themselves.

2. Librarians at the state library agency or the researcher are qualified to judge which rural librarians among those known to them appear to be effectively fulfilling the role of librarian and able to reflect upon and communicate their experiences.

3. The qualitative research design with multicase (26) studies does not assume that the experiences of librarians in this study nor the findings reported here are generalizable to the whole population of rural librarians. While the study reports some of the ways in which these librarians are typical or atypical of the general population of rural librarians, this information is intended to express the degree to which these individuals might be typical or similar to the whole population. It is not intended to imply that they are statistically representative of all rural librarians without an MLS degree in communities of 5,000 or fewer residents.

Limitations of the Study

1. The population -- The population of the study was limited to public librarians without an MLS degree who work in communities of 5,000 or fewer residents. In addition, the population was limited by the selection process for inclusion which relied upon the perceptions of state library personnel in identifying appropriate articulate individuals fitting the other criteria or upon the opportunities presented by the teaching and consulting schedule of the researcher. The six states included were selected because of convenience and because they provide a broad representation of models for

certification, continuing education and commitment to rural librarian training. Because it was not the intention of this study to consider individuals without continuing education and other career experiences upon which they might reflect, no attempt was made to interview individuals judged not to be attempting to develop a professional identity.

2. Gender distribution -- Although the study contained 25 women and only one man, this ratio is fairly representative of the gender distribution for libraries of this size. The gender distribution is primarily a function of the salary typically available in these libraries. Ongoing research by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship suggests from \$15,000 to \$22,000 as the average salary for full-time employment as a rural librarian (Vavrek, 1992, 1989a).

3. Interview self-reporting -- Qualitative interviewing may provide a data memory bias due to the inability of interviewees to provide certain types of information from previous events or to articulate their experiences and opinions.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature in the field of library and information science has strengths in operational functions, information theory, and computer applications rather than in some of the more humanistic and social areas related to the performance of individuals within library organizations. The one exception to this generalization is the literature and research related to the reference interview or interaction of the librarian and the client in an information exchange (Johnson, 1994). Because of the technical emphasis in the library science literature, it is necessary for librarianship to use other subject expertise to inform the practice and the content of librarianship. The relevant research and literature for this project included information and theory from fields such as rural sociology, the sociology of professions, adult education, psychology, management and leadership theory, and library and information science. The literature will be examined as it pertains to the primary elements of this research. Within library and information science literature the following topics were examined: small rural libraries; rural libraries and the MLS degree; librarianship as a profession; image and stereotype; and continuing education. Within the adult educational theory and practice literature these additional topics were examined: networking; mentoring; role modeling; and, empowerment. These topics were used to inform key findings in the research. Many of these topics overlap with related

