Envisioning a Twenty-First Century Children's Library

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Most children born today will still be alive when the twenty-second century dawns—along with about eleven billion other people[1]—and it's vital that the twenty-first century is dedicated to making sure that they're ready. Libraries play a critical role in that preparation and that nurturing already happens every day in children's libraries around the globe. Indeed, it is the core purpose of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) to "create a better future for children through libraries" and that very future is what the thousands of members of ALSC, and every single person serving children in libraries worldwide, are moving toward together.[2]

In said spirit of moving ahead together, this paper and presentation were crowdsourced with ALSC membership via blogs, online polls, Facebook, and Twitter, and I'm grateful for the feedback my colleagues shared. I'm also grateful to the Filipino community in Chicago for their insight and amazing *adobo* that helped me to prepare for the experience of sharing this vision with you here in the Philippines.

As a professional membership organization, ALSC is working for a vision of the future in which libraries are recognized as vital to all children and the communities that support them. We also call this our Big Hairy Audacious Goal, and it was developed by the ALSC board of directors, who are professionals of all types, as part of our 2012–2017 Strategic Plan. Why is it audacious, or *matapang*? Funding and political issues are always a concern and are always unpredictable, so meeting this goal in the context of an ever-changing world takes lots of bravery, to be sure. But we are guided and reinforced in doing so by our core values of collaboration, excellence, inclusiveness, innovation, integrity and respect, leadership, and responsiveness, and we know that, with these, we will get to that future successfully.

But what, then, does that envisioned future look like? ALSC's Strategic Plan has a very specific Vivid Description of the Desired Future, which is:

> Through free, public, and equal access to library services, children develop a love of reading, and become responsible citizens contributing to a global society. As a result of positive library experiences, children remain library users throughout their lives and pass this engagement on to future generations. Libraries continue to be dynamic, responsive, and inclusive physical and virtual environments that are fully equipped to serve all children and the communities that support them. Libraries are viewed as central and integral partners in maintaining vibrant communities. ALSC is viewed by its members as essential for their success and the growth of their profession. The association is recognized as the definitive source for new and relevant information and resources by

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library workers serving children. The association is politically effective through the active participation of its members, and is acknowledged as a leader in effectively directing the future of library services to children and the communities that support them.[3]

That's a lot to do! So how are we going to get there, and what will we need to have on our journey? I believe that the future is building on our past, rather than neglecting it, and conscientiously evolving it, rather than inflicting drastic immediate change. As John Green said in his 2014 Zena Sutherland Lecture, "We didn't actually get [to where we are now] through radical change. We got there through incremental change . . . all working together."[4] And as part of that change there are questions and answers for all of us dedicated to young people and to the role libraries play in their lives to ask and discuss. What do the next eighty or so years have in store? It's sure to be an adventurous blend of tradition and innovation.

Libraries: What Are They and What Will They Be?

R. David Lankes, professor and Dean's Scholar for the New Librarianship at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies in New York, says in his book, *Expect More: Demanding Better Libraries for Today's Complex World*, that libraries are collective purchasing agents for content that the community values.[5] I agree that this is a wise, responsible, and traditional, yet also forward thinking, perspective. Traditionally, this has meant objects like books and DVDs; today, this includes licenses to digital content and Wi-Fi hotspots. Looking forward, this could come to mean all of this plus whatever human beings come up with to create in the decades to come.

Because communities are exceedingly unlikely to cease valuing content, I am certain that libraries will not become extinct, and very least of all children's libraries. There have been examples bandied about to compare technologies that exist, despite and/or perhaps even *because of* advances in accomplishing the same work. These include the fact that we still have stairs even though we also have elevators, and there are still billions of candles in the world even though lightbulbs have been around for more than one hundred years. Thus computers will not replace librarians, apps will not replace storytimes, and e-books will not replace print books, at least until long after 2100 has come and gone.

How can I be so sure about that last one? Well, monographs made from paper have endured for millennia because they have proven to be resilient and convenient and, again, children's print books, will last the longest. Why? For the grown-ups who buy them a big element is simple nostalgia. The sentimentalizing of childhood will continue forever as adults remember good times and yearn for the simpler times, smells, and feels of their childhood. And while nostalgia can be hazardous to innovation, more importantly it is the tactile experience that children have with these objects.

A trend right now in the United States is Little Free Libraries. The concept of these is to create a small box or display case, fill it with books, and put it in a public place where people can take or leave a book. While these certainly aren't *libraries*, in that they aren't curated collections of materials that the community specifically values, and they aren't necessarily going to be returned for the next person, I'm very encouraged by the concept. Clearly, there is a desire to create something thematic, share content, and have it gathered together in a space. That hasn't—and I argue, won't—change.

Bill Ptacek, a past director of the King County Library System outside of Seattle, encapsulates the vision that before this first quarter of the twenty-first century is up "the library will be more about what it does for people rather than what it has for people. [And that] as society evolves and more content becomes digital . . . library buildings and spaces will be used in different ways . . . the library as a catalyst for civic engagement will facilitate learning and growth for people of all ages."[6]

Children: What's to Become of Them?

Every year, Beloit College in Wisconsin publishes a list of "the cultural touchstones" and experiences that have shaped the worldview of [incoming freshmen] to put the mostly eighteen-year-olds in perspective for their professors, who are mostly much more than eighteen.[7] They call it the Mindset List, and in 2014 it included notes on things like, "When they see wire-rimmed glasses, they think Harry Potter, not John Lennon" and "Bosnia and Herzegovina have always been one nation."[8] Well, let's think about the future of kids and what their worldview and experiences will be and how libraries can take that into perspective:

- Kids in the future will always still go through developmental stages.

- They will always have the challenge of learning to decode shapes and turn them into words.

- Kids in the future will never not have the Internet.

- They will never not have *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.

These are things that we can count on having to work with.

Bringing Together the Institution and the Audience

I believe that much of what the focused institutions of children's libraries will become will have to do with ALSC's and the Public Library Association's (PLA) Every Child Ready to Read @ your library, which encourages children and adults to talk, sing, read, write, and play. (It also encourages families to *conversar, cantar, leer, escribir, jugar* with *Todos los niños listos para leer en tu biblioteca*.) While this important initiative has been developed to

be geared specifically toward early literacy issues, I find in it keys needed across the scope of work with children in their applicability to what twenty-first-century communities value and thus what twenty-first-century libraries must provide: programming, content, and space.

Programming

Play, especially constructive play, is particularly important for the future of programming. The esteemed Mr. Rogers said that play is the work of childhood[9] and just as libraries help adults with workforce development, this is the way we help children with their work. Sue McCleaf Nespeca explains this in the ALSC white paper, "The Importance of Play, Particularly Constructive Play, in Public Library Programming," by saying that "while playing, children learn about their world, acquire skills necessary for critical thinking, discover how to solve problems, and develop self-confidence. Play encourages healthy brain development while fostering exploration skills, language skills, social skills, physical skills, and creativity."[10]

Jenna Nemec-Loise, ALSC's Everyday Advocacy website member content editor (who signs her e-mails as "relationship builder") has this to say, "I think a twenty-first-century children's library must embrace a multigenerational approach to programming. Family engagement is critical to children's success both in school and in life, so let's foster that dynamic through ample opportunities for family members of all ages to read, discover, and create together at the library."[11]

At my hometown library, Chicago Public Library (CPL), our Summer Reading Program has been a hallmark of our programming service to children, as it has been for many others, for decades. It was a very traditional program where school-aged kids would write down what they read over the summer, earn book and toy prizes for the reading, and attend thematically related programming at the library.

In 2013, we started from scratch and reimagined a science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics extravaganza where entire families would come together to thoughtfully read, learn, discover, and create for the cause of having fun and preventing an academic slide backward over the summer months. It still had the traditional elements of being a program during the summer that involved reading, yet it also had the innovative objective of challenging families with members of all ages to spend their summertime learning and writing their reflections of their experiences and earning digital badges. And this Summer Learning Challenge involved tens of thousands of kids who read more than two million books during their summer vacation.

As amazing as CPL's children's librarians are, they couldn't do it alone. This massive futuristic effort was the result of productive relationships with Chicago Public Schools and Park Districts and the Museum of Science and Industry, groups who had access to the children and scientific subject matter expertise, respectively. As this proves, partnerships are key.

An example of partnership, playing, *and* programming is the connection between libraries and major league sports teams. The Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners and the Massachusetts Library System have partnered with the Boston Bruins of the National Hockey League to encourage reading and learning. And the Enoch Pratt (Baltimore) Free Library teams up with their hometown baseball team, the Baltimore Orioles, during the summer baseball season. These are two robust examples of traditional organizations coming together to engage kids and their families around a love of sports and of reading.

Content

As I mentioned earlier, kids' print books will still be on the shelf when the last light is turned off in the last library at the end of time. Yet, as with many areas in life, this is a gray area rather than a black or white one, and by this I mean they will be used *with* electronic books, rather than *instead of*. The adaptability of children is key to the progress of generations over time and their ability to move back and forth between formats is, as far as they're concerned, no big deal.

Audiovisual material will go completely digital first. Already many libraries, such as the District of Columbia Public Library, have stopped buying physical music CDs. The challenge here will be to adapt to this, since such materials are very important to children's development and enjoyment. Digital music and video are an unavoidable aspect of what communities tell us they value, but we can't forget the devices needed to access the content before one can sing along to it.

An important and developing area is the circulation of apps. As these have become significant forms of interacting with content they can't be ignored as a key bit of creating children's futures, and, frankly, their presents. ALSC's Children and Technology committee has done amazing work in this area and plans to continue this focus moving forward. The Skokie Public Library outside of Chicago, for example, addresses this by mounting tablets to tables and walls and loading them with curated collections of apps that kids can interact with right there in their library. More and more libraries are even allowing users to check out the devices themselves.

Circulation of nontraditional materials is a hot topic at many libraries these days, and it is also a perfect example of the blending of old and new. In this case, "nontraditional" meaning pretty much anything that isn't a book, CD, or DVD.

At CPL, we have circulated fishing poles for many years, which began as part of a nature-based program, and which were located in branches that were adjacent to rivers and the lake. And that concept has evolved, thanks to a donation from Google, to providing check-out access to Finch Robots, which

are computer science educational tools (or, shall we say "toys") to support the learning of programming languages.

Basically, at the end of the day, content trumps format. What's on the inside counts more than the package, and that as long as the content is something that the community values, why not make it available?

But don't forget that whatever content we share in whatever formats must represent the full population, and as we move into the future must bring everyone along together. The need for the work of We Need Diverse Books is proof that we still have a long way to go to ensure that the commercial entities producing content understand and help libraries meet this need.

Space

This is an area of especially exciting development. In the cover story of the August 2013 *School Library Journal* titled "Design to Learn By," author Sarah Bayliss talks about a significant move toward the future that she considers a reference to children's museums. She quotes designer and Architecture is Fun President Sharon Exley as saying that "the best way to engage early learners . . . is through 'literacy-rich and play-based pavilions that allow children to explore.'"[12]

Nemec-Loise describes this as "family play areas that invite kids, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and cousins to have active, creative, and messy fun together!"[13] Here are some examples, which run the gamut from the most basic and least expensive to the commitment of an entire additional building:

It can be as simple as using recycled cardboard boxes as blocks and having them available for kids to interact with. We know that this can have a tremendous impact, as described in McCleaf Nespeca's paper for ALSC mentioned earlier and as presented in Read! Build! Play!, an ALSC toolkit that brings reading-focused activities and resources to libraries nationwide. Designed for children five and younger, this LEGO DUPLO Read! Build! Play! project blends early reading with construction play, encouraging youngsters to build along as their parents and/or librarians read age-appropriate books. ALSC and LEGO DUPLO are dedicated to promoting the importance of play in early learning, and of course any other children's toys (or, let's call them "tools") can be added, from the most traditional, like play kitchens, to more technologically advanced, such as app-filled tablets in Skokie and many other places.

The San Francisco Public Library has done fantastic work renovating their Fisher Children's Center inside its Central Library to work these elements into their space with such elements as windows encouraging "Play to Learn"; a manipulative board referencing Lombard Street, the San Francisco street considered the curviest in the world; and the storytime room ("*Sala de Cuentos*") beckoning everyone who enters to "IMAGINE." This has been done with the leadership of children's librarian Christy

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Estrovitz and City Librarian Luis Herrera, who won ALA's Sullivan Award for Public Library Administrators Supporting Services to Children due in large part to this important work.

CPL, which has built or rebuilt dozens of new buildings in the last couple of decades, recently opened a new building in the Albany Park neighborhood with a children's space entirely designed around the concepts in the most recent edition of Every Child Ready to Read. There are areas to the following:

■ Talk: An acoustical speaking tube connects two sides of the space so that kids can talk and listen to each other

■ Sing: The music CDs available to the community number in the thousands, as does access to hoopla, a streaming and downloadable music service

■ Read: There are thousands of books that, in the finest example of melding tradition and innovation, combine a significant brand new opening day collection with the best and most loved titles from the previous well-used building which had stood on the same site for forty years.

■ Write: White board paint on the walls allows—and, indeed, encourages—writing, from the earliest stages of scribbling to elaborate calligraphy

■ Play: Blocks? Yes. Manipulatives? Yes. Puppets? You bet. Much more? Absolutely!

And talk about space! The Ames Free Library, about forty-two kilometers south of Boston, has even purchased an entire house right next door to their library that is used for myriad purposes, including hosting an author-in-residence, most recently children's author Kate Klise. In this way, the Ames Free Library is helping ensure a future filled with even more wonderful books and stories.

The Journey: How Will We Get There?

Creating a better twenty-first- (and twenty-second-) century future for children through libraries is going to take the right vehicles for the job. Vehicles such as the following:

■ **Technology.** Technology is perhaps the most obvious area of change in libraries (and in society) in recent times, as well as the most written about. If Beloit College were study-

ing me, they could say that I very well remember our vinyl record discs in my children's room at the Trotwood Branch of the Dayton Metro Library in Ohio, filing card catalog files in my first job at the central branch of that same library system, sending my first e-mail in college, helping patrons use the Internet for the first time at a branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, and that I now oversee dozens of electronic resources used by millions of people. The point is that being alive today means adapting and, while the rate of that growth over the next eighty-five years is the area least able to be predicted, we can do it.

- **Advocacy.** We can't get there without money and support, and ALSC's Everyday Advocacy project is a vital one to support each of us in our advocacy roles with next door neighbors and national politicians alike.

- **Education.** This involves making sure that library staff serving children are well versed in the traditions of the profession, up-to-date on the latest developments in it, and in many cases creating those developments themselves.

- **Access.** We must make sure users can get to all of this: what they value. This may involve accounting for convenient opening hours, an easy-to-use website, generous loan periods and fine forgiveness, iPads mounted at the correct heights, clear and multilingual signage, natural language cataloging, and attention to many other large and small elements that enable users to connect with what they want.

Ever Onward!

A perfect example of how children's libraries are meeting the future by blending tradition with innovation is the maker space trend that is sweeping the United States as libraries add programs, collections, space, and equipment to enable creation.

The state of Idaho has been doing a lot of work to build what they call a "Maker Culture" and have been doing it with support from the U.S. Government's Institute of Museum and Library Services.[14] Craft projects are a tradition in libraries and making those crafts with maker tools, such as a 3-D print of a double helix, as done in Idaho, can be seen as an extension of that. And what they're seeing there, is just what I think we all want to see, "Patrons are coming in more frequently, meeting with others, staying longer, jumping into more hands-on activities, delving into exploration, teaching others what they've learned, collaborating on projects, using problem-solving skills, working together as families, and showing increased interest in technology."[15]

In other words, they are having free, public, and equal access to positive library experiences that blend the traditional (libraries have long since had craft programs to make things) and innovating (now it can be done with a software program and melted plastic) to create a better future for the twenty-first, twenty-second, and twenty-third centuries and beyond. ↶

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