
The purpose of this case study is to explore the use of bookmobile programs as a method of outreach to poor communities by looking closely at one bookmobile program. The researcher used the methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews to gather data about one bookmobile program in the United States. Study findings revealed that cutbacks to the bookmobile program, as well as upcoming budget reductions and the appointment of a new director, have left it in a somewhat transitional stage. This situation presents an opportunity to reflect on the program’s past successes and shortcomings and to plan for an even better future for the program. The case study findings revealed a number of important issues to be considered during this transition time. In response to these issues, the researcher offers a series of recommendations for best practices that will help the program effectively serve its community.

Headings:

Bookmobile services—Public libraries

Librarians—Social responsibilities

Public libraries—Services to low income users and the working poor
BOOKMOBILES AS A METHOD OF OUTREACH TO POOR COMMUNITIES:
A CASE STUDY

By Jill S. Molloy

A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty
of the School of Information and Library Science
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science in
Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
April 2010

Approved by

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Sandra Hughes-Hassel
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INTRODUCTION

A variety of organizations that serve the public have invested in mobile units to gain access to populations they otherwise may not be able to reach. Mobile health units, for example, bring medical testing, care and education to those who cannot access a freestanding clinic. Similarly, mobile library services have long been used to provide access to library collections for those who cannot, or typically do not, visit the library in person, especially the poor. From the circuit-riding librarian in Wyoming during the 1900s who carried books in her saddlebag, to the modern day librarians driving vans that bring reading material to daycare centers and preschools, the concept of taking the library to the people has been in existence for over one hundred years in America.

Increasingly, public library systems in the United States are cutting back on programs like bookmobiles due to budgeting shortfalls brought on by the current recession. In one shocking example, the Free Library of Philadelphia was expected to close all fifty-four of its branches and end its bookmobile services on October 2, 2009, until public outrage mounted and the state legislature was persuaded to pass a new sales tax to fund the libraries (Oder, 2009). At the same time, with unemployment rising and families cutting back on spending, Americans are likely to be relying on public libraries now more than ever (Smith, 2008; Semuels, 2009).

Even though bookmobiles are one important way for libraries to meet the American Library Association’s mandate of serving poor communities, they frequently need to justify their place in the budget. Scant research, however, is available to support
the funding of bookmobiles. Without evidence to support the claim that bookmobile units provide an important, as well as measurable, outreach service to poor communities, it is likely that libraries will find themselves hard pressed to convince politicians and taxpayers to fund them.

The purpose of this case study is to explore the use of bookmobile programs as a method of outreach to poor communities by looking closely at one bookmobile program. As Campbell notes (2009) bookmobile programs are among the outreach services being threatened with cutbacks and complete termination. This is the present situation for the bookmobile program that is the subject of this case study. In order to understand the bookmobile program’s current circumstances, the case study will include a review of its most recent history. It will then describe the current bookmobile program, along with some possible scenarios for its future, as the program faces a second round of budget cuts and the appointment of a new county library director.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first part of this literature review will explore recent research on the current state of American public libraries’ commitment to the poorest in our communities. These articles help frame the topic of bookmobiles within the larger context of the American Library Association’s Policy 61: Library Services for the Poor. They also indicate both the need for a greater awareness around the issue of poverty on the part of public libraries and an increase in outreach services directed toward this population. The idea that bookmobile programs possess some of the necessary qualities to meet the needs of poor communities is considered.
The next section of this literature review will focus on the role that tradition and intuition play in the structure and operation of bookmobile programs. The role of bookmobile staff’s experience in determining the timing and location of stops and collection development decisions is explored. Questions are raised as to whether bookmobile librarians should be relying more on formal policies and standards rather than experience and intuition.

The new directions that are being taken within bookmobile programs are discussed in the subsequent section. Two of the programs that are discussed have incorporated technology into their mobile units in order to bridge the digital divide that exists between wealthy and poor communities. A third program that has combined literacy and recreation programs to reach underserved youth is also explored as a potential model for the future of bookmobile services. In all three cases, there is a discussion of program creation and design in response to the needs of the community being served.

The standards and guidelines by which to establish and evaluate bookmobile programs is examined in the final section. A study of library outreach programs to isolated communities in England provides an example of program construction based on a national set of guidelines and standards. An article about a mobile library program in the United States illustrates ways in which programs can perform internal evaluations to assess their effectiveness. All of the articles in the literature review are brought into the discussion to place the finding of this case study within the context of other mobile library programs and the American Library Association’s mandate for services to the poor.
Public Libraries and the Issue of Poverty

The American Library Association (ALA) acknowledged the need for outreach to economically disadvantaged individuals and communities in 1990 when it established Policy 61: Library Services to the Poor (ALA, 2007). In this policy, the ALA stated the factors that make those living in poverty a special population requiring the attention of our nation’s libraries: “These people are affected by a combination of limitations, including illiteracy, illness, social isolation, homelessness, hunger, and discrimination, which hamper the effectiveness of traditional library services” (ALA, 2007). The policy goes on to recognize that libraries have an important role to play in supporting the poor so that they can be full participants in our democratic society.

Since the ALA issued Policy 61, the organization has formed sub-committees and held conferences to raise awareness around poverty issues (Gieskes, 2009, p. 49). In 2008 the ALA Office for Literary and Outreach Services conducted an online survey to gather information about whether libraries were following mandates set forth in Policy 61, such as ensuring that libraries are “accessible and useful to low-income citizens” (Gieskes, 2009, p. 49). The survey results, according to Gieskes (2009), were statistically invalid, since many of the respondents did not complete all of the questions. The ALA still reviewed the responses they received and were able to detect some interesting and alarming trends. For instance, respondents used various methods of identifying the poor in their community that seemed to show a lack of understanding or knowledge about the issue of poverty (Gieskes, 2009, p. 52). Of the 58% of participants who answered a question about whether their library partnered with other agencies to serve the poor, only slightly more than half responded in the affirmative (Gieskes, 2009, p. 53). Participants
indicated that they wanted the ALA to take a leadership role in educating librarians on how to serve the poor, a role the ALA apparently intended to take when it drew up Policy 61 in 1990 (ALA, 2007). Seeing that more needed to be done, the ALA responded with an action plan that included advocacy and education for librarians around issues of poverty (Gieskes, 2009, p. 55-56).

The ALA’s survey is not the only recent piece of research to suggest that public libraries are falling short in their outreach to the poor. Alexander similarly found in his 2008 study of public library services to the poor and unemployed in Danville, Virginia, that libraries are falling short of meeting the ALA’s recommendations in Policy 61. Alexander (2008) posits that the fact that it took until 1990 for the ALA to create a policy surrounding service to the poor is an indication of public libraries’ sporadic and unsystematic efforts to reach out to this population (p. 112). Alexander’s study of public libraries in Virginia’s Southside region revealed that very few libraries had made a commitment to even identifying, much less serving, the poor and unemployed. Out of the libraries that completed surveys, only four stated that they were attempting to offer any special service to the economically disadvantaged in their communities (Alexander, 2008, p. 125). These findings support those of the ALA survey: most public libraries do not appear to be making a thoughtful, well supported effort to meet the needs of the poor.

One might ask why the economically disadvantaged need to be singled out for special library services, such as a bookmobile program. This is particularly true if one takes the view that the public library is already a great equalizer in our society—a resource that is available to all, free of charge. The fact is that public libraries have a mandate to reach out to the poor and underserved specifically because they are often the
only places that seek to offer equitable programs and services.

A study by Constantino (2005) on children’s access to reading material provides evidence for this point. Constantino (2005) studied children in the greater Los Angeles area from both economically advantaged and disadvantaged communities, focusing on their access to reading material at home, in school, in school libraries and in public libraries. Her study revealed that children from low socio-economic neighborhoods not only had less access to reading material at home when compared to children in more affluent neighborhoods, but they also had significantly less reading material in their school classrooms and school libraries. There was, however, no statistically significant difference in the groups when it came to the number of resources available in their public libraries (Constantino, 2005, p. 22). These results are encouraging in that they suggest equity in the number of public library resources available to various socio-economic groups. The challenge of connecting poor communities with those resources still exists, and bookmobile services are one avenue for making this connection.

Holt’s (2006) suggestions for ways in which public libraries can reach out to the poor seem tailor made for bookmobile programs. He states that libraries must deliver services at convenient times and locations if they want to reach the working poor (2006, p. 184-5). Bookmobiles have the flexibility to meet these requirements, as they are not bound to operate at regular library hours or one location. Holt (2006) also suggests that libraries need to form partnerships with other local agencies (p. 185). Many bookmobile programs already accomplish this, and others easily can, by making stops at daycare centers, pre-schools, Headstart programs, senior centers, food banks, and Boys and Girls Clubs. Holt (2006) states that it is crucial to publicize library services in these
underserved communities (p. 185). A bookmobile can act as a moving billboard, promoting its services right on its sides as it drives through a community.

The Role of Tradition and Intuition in Bookmobile Programs

While Holt’s advice on how to reach out to poor communities appears sensible, it is not based on empirical research. In fact, little empirical research has been done on bookmobile programs, and it is experience and intuition that seem to guide those who operate these programs.

One piece of empirical research that does exist is Abel’s 1986 study of North Carolina bookmobiles. In a report on her study findings, Abel (1986) presents a rosy picture of bookmobile librarians’ “life on the road” (p. 226). While Abel takes a positive tone when relating the results of her survey, the fact is that the responses to her questions contained several disturbing trends. For example, Abel reported a general awareness on the part of bookmobile librarians that weekends and evenings are the best times to reach patrons who are in trailer parks, suburban neighborhoods and rural communities. Despite this fact, nearly all survey respondents reported that their hours were limited to weekday service between nine and five o’clock (Abel, 1986, p. 225). This is in conflict with Holt’s (2006) advice to ensure that service to the poor occurs at convenient locations and hours (p. 184-5).

Another area of concern was the way in which the locations for bookmobile stops were selected and evaluated. Abel (1986) reports that “over ninety per cent [sic] of the people who make these decisions work directly on the bookmobile” (p. 226). While many of the bookmobile drivers who completed Abel’s (1986) survey had a great deal of on-
the-job experience and were referred to as “librarians,” only one held an MLS degree (p. 226). Abel indicated that the process of making decisions about stops was undertaken with little attention to the guidelines set forth by a professional organization such as the ALA. Although bookmobile librarians claimed to use a variety of methods for determining stops, survey results showed that almost half of all these stops were the result of an individual patron request (Abel, 1986, p. 226). Although the professional literature recommends against making single-family stops, Abel (1986) found that this practice is common among the North Carolina bookmobile drivers that she surveyed (p. 227).

Thus it would seem that majority of people charting the direction of bookmobile programs in North Carolina at the time of Abel’s study were not following the guidelines set forth by the American Library Association. Abel (1986) suggests in her conclusion that the professional literature needs to better reflect the experiences of those working in the field (p. 227). An alternate conclusion is that while the experience and intuition of the bookmobile operators is certainly valuable, bookmobile operators need to be more aware of best practices in their field and assess their own programs based on the recommendations made by professional organizations and empirical evidence.

Abel did not report on bookmobile collection development policies in her study. In fact, little recent research is available on this topic, particularly from researchers in the United States. One of the few studies available on bookmobile collection development policies was performed by Davidson and Dorner (2009) using six mobile library units in New Zealand. Davidson and Dorner (2009) interviewed six mobile unit librarians from separate and distinct sites, including both rural and urban areas. Their findings showed
that bookmobile librarians rarely used the collection policy of the main library system or circulation data as ways to make collection development decisions. Similar to Abel’s (1986) findings that patron requests played a large role in determining bookmobile stops, Davidson and Dorner (2009) found that patron wants and needs played a part in collection development decisions (p. 57).

Thus, the studies by Abel (1986) and Davidson and Dorner (2009) both found that the experience, knowledge and intuition of bookmobile librarians play a large part in the operation of the program. Adherence to formal policies and recommendations, and even knowledge of such documents, is often limited.

**New Directions in Mobile Outreach Programs**

As Abel (1986) noted in her study, “there is evidence that tradition—‘the way it’s always been done’—is a strong force in bookmobile practice” (p. 225). Part of this tradition is that bookmobiles are primarily a service to bring books and other print materials to those who cannot access a public library branch; however, many people today visit libraries for computer and Internet service. Public discussion about literacy has come to include the need to bridge the online literacy divide that exists between the wealthy and poor. A 2002 report issued by The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund and The Benton Foundation stated the magnitude of the problem:

> Significant divides still exist between high and low income households, among different racial groups, between northern and southern states, and rural and urban households. For people in these communities, the enormous social, civic, educational and economic opportunities offered by rapid advances in information technology remain out of reach. (p. 3)

A recent report by the ALA indicates that computer and Internet access at public
libraries plays a major role in bridging this gap. Seventy-one percent of public libraries
reported to the ALA that they were the only source of free computer and Internet service
in the community (“Study Shows,” 2009, p. 13). The online services that libraries in this
report ranked as the most crucial they offer to the public – job seeking and government
resources (such as food stamps, tax services and unemployment forms) – suggest that
those relying on computer and Internet service at public libraries are often economically
disadvantaged (“Study Shows,” 2009).

In 2007, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation addressed the need to bridge the
digital divide by offering grant money to fund improvements to computer hardware,
bandwidth and training in public libraries that serve low-income communities (Oder,
2007). Some bookmobile programs are also acknowledging the issue of the digital divide
by adapting their programs to meet the changing needs of patrons. King and Shanks
(2000) reported on new directions taken by the Memphis/Shelby County Public Library
& Information Center to digitalize their bookmobile program. Theirs was not an
empirical study, but rather a descriptive article in the popular publication Library
Journal; yet, it provides an important example of a library system that is looking at the
ways a bookmobile can best serve those with the greatest needs in its community. King
and Shanks (2000) explained that when decisions had to be made about the bookmobile
program’s future, the library faced a critical decision. Would they remain on the same
path or update the bookmobile to meet the needs of a growing immigrant population in
the area? The result was the creation of an InfoBUS that still contained materials from the
library collection, but also offered four computer terminals and full public Internet
access.
When considering whether or not to revamp their bookmobile service, the Memphis/Shelby County Public Library & Information Center came to the conclusion that the old bookmobile program was not serving those most in need of an outreach service. In fact, their traditional bookmobile appeared to be used mostly by those who could access a library branch and did not require bookmobile services (King & Shanks, 2000, p. 14). King and Shanks’s discussion of the Memphis/Shelby bookmobile program illustrates the library system’s willingness to examine an existing program and to adapt it to serve those most in need. The practices and programs that were put into place were targeted toward new immigrants and their children. By reassessing a longstanding program, the library was able to make the necessary changes to keep it relevant. Since King and Shanks (2000) do not explain the library’s methods, such as how they assessed the old program and determined community wants and needs, this article falls short of truly setting a model for other libraries to follow. The authors also did not discuss any opposition to the idea of the InfoBUS. Considering Abel’s comment about tradition being an important part of bookmobile service, it is easy to imagine that attempts to change bookmobile services may be met with resistance from some librarians and bookmobile operators.

Hyatt and Craig’s (2009) article chronicling the creation of the Mobile Outreach Literacy Vehicle for the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenberg County (PLCMC), North Carolina, offers more insight into the challenges of adding a mobile technology unit to a library system’s outreach services. In 2007 the library had excess funding for new technology, and instead of purchasing more computers or other equipment for its freestanding buildings, decided to equip a mobile unit with new technology. They stated
that this investment was a response to a community need. A lack of transportation, time, awareness and English skills were all barriers to the use of in-library technology by patrons in their underserved communities. Through conversations with patrons and patron surveys, they determined what type and quantity of equipment was needed on the mobile unit (p.36).

One critical component of this program appears to be the well-established outreach department in the county library system. PLCMC conducts outreach efforts at the branch level and also has an outreach department with an outreach manager and a staff of twelve that supports the branch-level efforts and performs other targeted outreach services. Their targeted audience is broad; it includes “childcare facilities, teachers and care providers, international populations, older adults, homebound patrons, and other patron groups that are unable to use the library” (p. 36). While they do offer story time, books and crafts through their Mobile Outreach Literacy Vehicle, they also use it to bring Web 2.0 technology to patrons (p. 35).

Hyatt and Craig note that at the inception of the program, there was an obvious need to establish staff buy-in. They acknowledged that outreach staff was already working to capacity and had varying levels of skill and interest in using technology. To work through this issue, they created a series of Learn and Play sessions. The Learn and Play model acknowledges that staff members already have some level of knowledge and comfort using technology, such as photo sharing websites or cellular phone applications. In a Learn and Play session the motto is “Bring it, show it, play it, use it” (p. 37). Each outreach department employee showcased the technology they were familiar with so that other staff members could learn from them. Through these sessions, the staff came up
with a number of practical programs that they could easily reproduce at the different sites they visited, making small changes to adapt them to different skill levels. Staff anxiety over the workload was also reduced by using existing handouts that already existed for computer classes at the library (p. 37).

PLCMC’s outreach department based their decision to bring technology to the underserved on one strong point: The Internet is becoming an essential part of everyday life in our society, and those without the skills or access to it will soon be left behind (p. 37). Whether it is applying for a job or emailing with our children’s teachers, online communication has become ubiquitous. The outreach department based its programs directly on what patrons wanted and needed, rather than investing in new programs just for the sake of using technology. The authors did not reject the mobile unit’s more traditional role of bringing books and children’s story time to patrons, but simply acknowledged that there was also a growing need to offer technology instruction and access as part of outreach to underserved communities (p. 38).

Bookmobile programs targeted at underserved youth are nothing new; however, the range of programs and partnerships included in the After School Mobile Literacy and Recreation Program implemented by Monrovia Public Library, California, make it unique. This mobile unit program is also worth discussing because it went through a process of adaptation as it learned the needs and wants of youth in the community. In her article about the program, Diaz (2009) also illustrates the challenges the Monrovia Public Library faced when attempting to serve youth who live in neighborhoods that pose safety risks to librarians, as well as residents.
In order to reach youth in underserved neighborhoods, the Monrovia Public Library created an after school program that would bring both literacy and recreation activities to the community via a mobile unit. Program staff included librarians and recreation specialists. After launching the after-school program, staff soon discovered that they could not have the same expectations on the mobile unit as they did in the library building. Young people did not voluntarily come to the bookmobile at first, and librarians found themselves going door to door to solicit participants who showed varying levels of interest. They quickly realized that they needed to listen to and observe the youth they were serving in order to tailor the program to patron wants and needs (Diaz, 2009, p. 37).

Many of the young people had negative attitudes toward reading and staff saw that offering books would not be enough to entice them to participate in the program. Understanding that the main goal was to engage their patrons, they included magazines, graphic novels, comics, audiobooks, and paperbacks in their mobile unit collection. Recreation specialists devised games around the need they saw to develop the young people’s gross motor skills. Guest speakers were invited to talk about topics, such as pet care and skateboarding, that were of interest to young participants. The mobile unit partnered with other community organizations to build the program and kept adapting their activities to meet the needs of participants. For example, when library staff realized that the young people were hesitant to take their art projects home, they gave them portfolios that could be used to protect and store the artwork. They also created the opportunity to show participants’ art at community events (Diaz, 2009, p. 38). Diaz (2009) recognized the difficulties of providing this type of service:
Conducting a mobile outreach program is a physically draining job that requires set-up and tear down of tables, chairs, and street barricades, so we saw our share of scrapes and bruises. Further, we had to create a downsized version of our program and use a smaller vehicle for those days when we had mechanical problems. New construction in the area also forced us to relocate our program to a temporary location. Sadly gang activity threatened the safety of our participants and staff; however, after a collaborative response to reassure our participants and their families of their safety, which included knocking on doors, we continued to provide services. (p. 38)

The author (2009) also recorded the numerous benefits and rewards of their program. The number of participants in the program has grown each year, and librarians saw an increased use of the local library branch by these young people. There was also an improvement in participants’ grades and behavior at school, a greater interest in reading, and increased physical exercise (Diaz, 2009, p. 38).

The efforts of mobile units in Memphis/Shelby, Charlotte and Mecklenberg, and Monrovia illustrate possible new directions in mobile library units. There is an emphasis in all three programs on identifying the truly underserved in the community and responding to their expressed needs. These programs, as well as the support they receive from their county library systems, provide a comparison for the bookmobile program in this case study.

**Standards and Measures for Outreach Programs**

Benstead, Spacey and Goulding (2004) reported on similar attempts in England to bring computers and Internet access into bookmobile services. The Derbyshire Mobile Library Project is provided as an example of a mobile library unit that is bringing technology to rural users in an attempt to make library service more relevant and appealing, offer education and information about public services, and provide greater
access to library materials through the online catalog (Benstead, Spacey & Goulding, 2004, p. 402-403). Although Benstead, Spacey and Goulding mention attempts to adapt traditional bookmobiles, their study focuses on alternative programs that libraries in rural England have devised to reach the underserved in their communities. Their work raises questions as to whether we should we look away from mobile units toward other methods for reaching the poor. It also sheds light on the lack of detail included in ALA’s Policy 61. While ALA’s policy offers some guidance for libraries that want to raise awareness about and take action on poverty issues, it does not provide specific standards or strategies for planning, implementing, and evaluating library outreach programs.

In light of the lack of standardization in bookmobile programs that was evident from Abel (1986) and Davidson and Dorner’s (2009) studies, one of the most informative aspects of the Benstead, Spacey, and Goulding (2004) article is their attention to whether government standards and initiatives set forth to ensure quality, as well as equity, have helped to shape new public library outreach programs. Benstead, Spacey, and Goulding (2004) look specifically at whether library programs were influenced by the government’s social inclusion policy, best value standards or public library standards.

England’s “best value” initiative, offers local authorities, including libraries, a set of criteria to assess their services and ensure that they are giving taxpayers the best service possible. These include:

- Challenge whether and why particular services should be delivered, what functions they should deliver, how, by and for whom;
- Compare the performance of the service with that of other local authorities and other relevant bodies;
- Compete. If other more efficient and effective means of delivery can be found, use them; and
- Consult with both users and non-users on service objectives, performances and targets to give the community a voice in the decisions that affect public
Perhaps the criterion most vital to bookmobile programs is the one that challenges authorities to ask themselves whether and why certain services should exist. Those who are attached to traditional library practices may be hesitant to do this because they may be afraid they will find that their current services are not viable. They may also not want to take up the challenge of re-inventing the bookmobile, but clinging to the past may eventually result in programs and services that are outdated and ineffective. Additionally, it will be impossible for librarians to justify the existence of bookmobile programs when there is no data to back up claims that these programs benefit the economically and socially marginalized members of our communities.

England’s social inclusion policy for libraries also provides specific guidelines for libraries. The policy recommends that libraries:

Identify the people who are socially excluded and their geographic distribution, with a view to engaging them and establishing their needs; assess and review the current practice; develop strategic objectives and prioritise resources; develop the services and train staff to provide them; implement the services and publicise them and evaluate the strategy’s success with a view to reviewing and improving upon it. (Benstead, Spacey, & Goulding, 2004, p. 402)

Therefore, both the best value initiative and social inclusion policy initiated by the English government offer a framework for libraries that want to find a meaningful, measurable way to reach out to the poor in their communities. They also provide a lens through which to assess current bookmobile practices in the United States.

One mobile library program in the United States that has based its operations at least in part on research and reflection is the On the Road to Reading program developed by Cleveland Public Library (CPL). Rhonda Fulton (2009), the librarian currently in charge of the program, reported that the program evolved out of the CPL’s strategic plan.
This plan was the result of a study performed by a library consulting firm, as well as input from focus groups and town hall meetings (p. 8). The program has a focused goal: to train adults to teach the six literacy skills to pre-school children. These adults are primarily teachers in early childhood centers and home daycare centers. The program also extends their training efforts to include parents and guardians of children birth to five years old. These adults are approached by the On the Road to Reading staff in medical offices and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) offices throughout Cleveland and are invited to participate in the program (Fulton, 2009, p. 8-9). The On the Road to Reading program routinely collects circulation statistics and performed a survey of its childcare centers and medical sites at the end of its first year of operation in order to improve its programming (Fulton, 2009, p. 11). Fulton’s article illustrates a mobile library unit that was initially based on the results of a study and continues to self-monitor by gathering data through statistics and surveys.

Concluding Thoughts on the Literature

Gieskes (2009) urges libraries to take seriously the call to identify and reach out to the poorest in our communities. She states, “As the United States faces what has been called the worst recession since the Second World War, Policy 61: Library Services to the Poor, now more than ever, needs to be implemented by American libraries” (2009, p. 56). Policy 61 recommends that libraries promote funding for “pro-active library programs that reach beyond traditional service-sites to poor children, adults, and families” (ALA, 2007). Bookmobiles are certainly one way to reach beyond the library walls, yet we need to consider the best practices for these programs. An analysis of the
literature reveals that tradition and experience have played a large part in the direction of bookmobile services in the past. It is time for a critical assessment of these programs, not as a way to devalue their contributions, but as a method of evaluating what we have learned on the roads we have been down and determining the direction we need to take in the future.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Participant Observation**

Two methods of data collection were used in this study: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I selected participant observation as one of my methods because it allowed me to gain an understanding of the day-to-day activities of the bookmobile service and its staff. Participant observation is based on the idea that reality for each individual is constructed within the context of everyday life. In order to understand how people make sense of their lives and their world, the researcher must participate with them in it (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 14). Direct observation is the main method by which the participant observer collects information, and researchers usually record their observations using audio recording devices or written notes (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 22). The goal is to achieve an in-depth description of what has been observed so that a meaningful analysis can later take place. In this case study, all of my participant observation notes were written by hand. In addition to direct observation, researchers are likely to gather data through other methods; in this case, interviews also were performed.

Participant observation is an appropriate method to use in situations where researchers are studying a topic that has not been studied in the past, where there is a
difference of viewpoint between insiders and outsiders, or when the situation being studied cannot be seen by outsiders (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 12). One reason that bookmobiles are an appropriate setting for participant observation is the lack of research on this topic. Although the world of bookmobiles is not clandestine, the word “outsiders” came up several times in my conversations and interviews with bookmobile staff members; they explained that people who work on bookmobiles perform a job that remains unseen by most of the public, as well as other library personnel. Participant observation does not work well when studying large populations or when trying to take specific measurements (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 13). In the case of the bookmobile study, I worked with a small group of librarians and one mobile library unit, and my data collection did not involve gathering quantitative data.

In my study, participant observation provided me with the unique opportunity to observe and participate in the daily operation of the bookmobile. I was able to witness who utilizes bookmobile services and in what numbers. As a volunteer for the library, I was able to interact with patrons and to perform some of the tasks of a bookmobile staff member. My time on the bookmobile also allowed me to observe the role the bookmobile librarians play. I observed the tasks they performed, decisions they made, and interactions they had with patrons.

I also selected participant observation as a method of data collection because it helped prepare me for my interviews with the bookmobile librarians. Through our interactions I was able to see that they were open to speaking freely about their work and would be reliable interviewees. I understood much of the background history of the
bookmobile program from our informal conversations and was able to ask more pertinent, in-depth questions during our interviews.

To arrange my participation on the bookmobile, I contacted the library and was put in touch with one of the bookmobile staff members. I provided her with a proposal for my involvement with the bookmobile, and she approved my participation as a participant observer. We set up a meeting where I was able to share information about my study with the three primary members of the bookmobile staff, and all three agreed to participate the interview process. During a three-week period from late January to early February, I spent fourteen hours riding on the bookmobile and another three and a half hours attending a countywide youth services meeting with the bookmobile staff.

**Ethical Concerns and Challenges of Participant Observations**

The question of whether to keep one’s research activities covert when conducting participant observation presents an ethical dilemma for researchers. Some researchers will reveal their motives and activities to the participants who are being observed, while other researchers will reveal only select information or nothing at all (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 21). The purpose of concealing one’s research activity is to interact naturally with subjects and collect accurate data. Researchers may especially feel the need to present a false identity when dealing with vulnerable (for example, the homeless) or deviant (for example, fringe political groups) populations who would otherwise not allow the researcher into their worlds (Farrington & Robinson, 1999; Lauder, 2003). The justification is that, in the end, the researcher’s work will ultimately help the world to better understand the life circumstances of a marginalized population or the dangers of a
deviant population (Farrington & Robinson, 1999; Lauder, 2003). Although concealed identities and motivations may benefit the researcher, the result is that research subjects do not have the opportunity to provide or withhold their consent. Ultimately, the relationship between the researcher and the subject, which the subject believes to be genuine, is based on deception. In addition, the researcher may become so intent on maintaining a false identity that his or her focus shifts away from the real task of collecting data (Lauder, 2003, p. 187).

In the case of my research, the bookmobile librarians knew that I was there to gather qualitative data for a study of their program. Since I was presenting myself to patrons as a volunteer, I posted a sign on the days that I was present on the bookmobile, announcing that a study of the bookmobile was taking place, no names or identifying traits would be collected, and patrons could speak with me if they had any questions.

Participant observation can provide researchers with a much deeper understanding of the way people make sense of their realities. This benefit is contingent on whether or not the researcher is able to establish the trust and cooperation of those being observed. In my own study of the bookmobile, I needed to keep in mind that members of a culture may not always tell a researcher the truth. Although this cannot be controlled, the researcher must be able to evaluate whether the information that has been provided is reliable. By spending time on the bookmobile and interviewing the librarians privately, I feel that I was able to gather enough information to be able to establish the reliability of their comments.

There is an assumption by some field researchers that participation as an insider will result in richer data; however, being perceived as an insider comes with
disadvantages, as well as advantages. For instance, insiders may be able to interpret community culture more easily, but they may find it more difficult to achieve the emotional distance of an observer (Labaree, 2002, p. 104). In the case of my participation on the bookmobile, for example, I established friendly relationships with the staff members I was studying. Despite this, I feel that I was able to maintain enough objectivity to fairly evaluate the program. It is important to remember that the researcher is constantly balancing the roles of participant and observer.

**Interviews**

Following the three weeks of participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the three primary bookmobile staff members. Cannell and Kahn (as cited in Wildemuth, 2009) define the research interview as “a two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information and focused by him on content specified by research objectives.” The semi-structured interview offers the interviewer the best of both the structured and unstructured interview styles. As in the structured interview, questions are prepared in advance in the form of an interview guide; however, in the semi-structured interview, the interviewer can go off script when appropriate to stay with a fruitful line of questioning or to change courses if current questioning is not producing results. Furthermore, the questions written on the interview guide do not need to be followed sequentially or word for word (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 233-34).

As a novice interviewer, having a set of questions as a guide was very useful for me. With this structure, I was able to ensure that I covered the main topics during the
interview and did not stall out when trying to begin a new line of discussion. Since I was interviewing people I already knew through my observations of the bookmobile, I also wanted the flexibility to stray from my prepared questions, maintain a more natural flow of conversation and probe further into topics that arose during conversation. Deviations from the script occurred during each interview and provided a rich yield of information about the program. Although Wildemuth (2009) suggests that the interview guide be pretested on potential subjects, this was not feasible in the case of the bookmobile study (p. 234). Time did not permit me to meet with people who hold this job in other counties to test out my interview guide.

The interviews with bookmobile librarians took place during a one-week period. The questions asked during the interviews addressed four major topics: the bookmobile program’s foundational goals and objectives; responsiveness to community wants and needs; procedures and policies on collection development and the timing and location of stops; and the bookmobile librarian’s thoughts and feelings about her job. All interviews were held at a branch library, two in a private conference room and one in a private office. Each interview lasted a little more than one hour. The interviews began with a review of the consent form, and all three participants consented to being recorded with a digital recording device. I also took notes during the interviews. The notes and the recordings were destroyed after the interviews were transcribed. The interviewees were given pseudonyms in the transcripts to protect their identities and the names of the state and the county were not used.
**Ethical Concerns and Challenges of Interviews**

Although the librarians were asked to read and sign a consent form before their interviews, there are still ethical concerns with reporting the results of these interviews. The identities of the bookmobile staff were protected by using pseudonyms in place of their real names, yet it was possible that someone familiar with this bookmobile program could link statements they made about each other, their supervisors, or the program itself back to them. It was possible that their statements could have negative repercussions for them professionally; therefore, the name of the state is also not mentioned in this case study. The omission of both staff members’ names and the state where the library system is located provides a reasonable amount of protection for participants.

One of the limitations of these interviews is that there were only a few interviewees from whom to gather data. Another general challenge of interviewing is determining the reliability of interviewee’s responses. Subjects can be motivated by many factors to provide misinformation or leave out crucial information. Having an understanding of what these factors might be, as well as a personal relationship with these participants, made it easier for me to determine the reliability of their responses.

**Analysis of the Data**

The methods of participant observation and interviews complemented each other well in this study. While the interviews provided me with qualitative data about the librarians’ perceptions of the bookmobile program, my participation on the bookmobile allowed me to compare their statements with my own observations. I performed
qualitative content analysis and, in my analysis of the data I collected, I looked for themes. Rubin and Rubin (2004) define themes as “summary statements and explanations of what is going on” (p. 207). Wildemuth (2009) describes the process of coding themes as “looking for the expressions of an idea” (p. 310). My literature review provided information on the need for library outreach services to the poor and some relevant information on mobile library units; therefore, I was able to glean from it several themes to consider when reviewing my data. Most of the themes that I uncovered arose from my own reflections and observations as I obtained firsthand experience in the study setting, as well as from my interviews with the bookmobile librarians. I looked for concepts and events that repeatedly surfaced in data. After identifying some of these themes, concepts and events, I defined what they meant and how they should be identified in the data (Rubin and Rubin, 2004, p. 217). A label was chosen to match each definition so that the text of my field notes and the interview transcripts could easily coded with labels.

After I completed the coding process, I drew inferences from the themes, concepts and events I identified and examined. One important part of this process was to compare the conclusions that I draw from my own observations with the interviews. There were no significant discrepancies to reveal a lack of credibility in one or the other.

**FINDINGS**

The findings related in this section came from both my own observations on the bookmobile and interviews with the three library staff members who compose the primary team that runs the bookmobile program. There is another member of the library
staff who occasionally rides with the bookmobile. She was not contacted or interviewed for this project.

Diane is the supervisor for the program, and my main contact with her was through our interview session, since she does not regularly ride with the bookmobile at this time. We also conducted several casual conversations in the library and by email. She holds her masters degree in library science and has a background in school library services. She was hired into the library system in 2007 to supervise the bookmobile program and did not have previous experience in a public library setting.

Camille is one of the assistants who routinely rides on the bookmobile and has been with the program for approximately four years. She has a college degree and work background in elementary education, as well as experience working with people who have hearing and vision impairments. She worked for the library system for several years before joining the bookmobile staff.

Beverly is the other library assistant who regularly rides on the bookmobile. She has a college degree and work background in early childhood development, having taught in daycares and preschools for ten years before joining the library system. She worked in various roles for the library for well over a decade, gaining experience in children’s services, programming and collection development, before becoming a part of the bookmobile staff ten years ago.

This Bookmobile’s History

A thorough study of the current bookmobile program requires an understanding of its past. Beverly, who has been working with the bookmobile program for approximately
ten years, was able to supply information about the program’s history, spanning back several decades. She stated that the county’s original bookmobile program in the 1950s utilized a car as its delivery vehicle. This program existed until the late 1960s or early 1970s before being discontinued. In the mid 1990s, another bookmobile program was initiated, this time using grant money to purchase larger vehicles. The original plan was to create one bookmobile for adult services and another for children’s services; however, the demand for children’s services was so great that both bookmobiles were designated to serve youth in the county. Morning stops were made at daycare centers and preschools, and afternoon stops were made at housing projects in urban areas and trailer parks in rural areas. Afternoon stops were intended to reach older children during afterschool hours.

Beverly indicated that there were safety concerns with the afternoon stops at the housing projects, and patron flow was unpredictable. On some occasions, only one or two young adults would visit the bookmobile at an afternoon location. The library system was building new branches around the county, and it was believed that most people were within a ten-minute drive of a freestanding library. It was also believed that school age children had sufficient access to books and librarians at their school libraries. All of these factors were thought to reduce the need for a mobile book unit whose priority was serving older children in housing projects and trailer parks.

Meanwhile, the demand for services by the preschools and daycare centers was increasing. Beverly suggested that the increased demand correlated to changes in car seat laws. Before there were laws that required toddlers and older children to ride in car seats, daycare centers and preschools were able to use vans to bring children to public libraries
for story time. New car seat laws ended that practice, and Beverly suggested that many
daycare centers these days cannot afford to install the proper car seats or pay the
insurance on vehicles to take children on field trips.

Thus the county library system’s desire to bring services to previously
underserved children and the rising demand by preschools and daycare centers for library
service led to changes. The bookmobile program discontinued afternoon stops at housing
projects and trailer parks, and a larger number of preschools and daycare centers were
signed on to the bookmobile’s schedule. Visits to these locations were extended and now
occurred throughout the day. By 2009, the bookmobile was visiting 141 daycare centers
and preschools and serving 12,500 children.

At this time, the bookmobile was not part of a branch library. It was run out of the
library administrative building. Diane and Camille indicated that it is unusual for a
bookmobile to be housed at an administrative building and to be completely unaffiliated
with a branch library, but both appeared to see that this unique situation provided the
program with some advantages. Diane explained that the people she and other
bookmobile staff interacted with were the secretaries and the processors at the
administrative building. These employees had entirely separate roles from bookmobile
staff, and there was no overlap in job duties; therefore, bookmobile staff members were
able to focus fully on their own program. Diane also indicated that there are some
drawbacks to a bookmobile program operating in such a way that isolates it from branch
libraries and stated that it takes a certain type of librarian to thrive in an environment
where they are on the peripheries of the main library system. She explained that, overall,
running the bookmobile program out of the administrative building made it effective because the staff could direct all of their energy into their own work.

The library administrative building has a fairly central location, but because the bookmobile was serving preschools and daycare centers that were scattered around the county, drive time was still significant. Diane indicated that another issue was coordinating the bookmobile schedule with that of the centers. The most effective time for visits to daycare centers and preschools is the morning when the children still have the energy to focus, and there is no interference with snacks, naps and other scheduled activities. Afternoons can also be a productive time, as long as bookmobile visits occur before parents begin arriving to pick up their children. The down time comes in the middle of the day, and Diane indicated that this was an issue that gave her concern. Bookmobile staff could take their lunch break during this time and do some work to maintain the vehicle and book collection, but there was often a lull in productivity. It did not always make sense for the bookmobile to return to the administrative building, since they were traveling far and wide around the county, so this limited the work that could be performed during the midday hours. Internet access from the bookmobile is very slow and unpredictable, and employees could not access the local network to do their work. Diane indicated that if the bookmobile service were to return to a full day schedule of visits to preschools and daycare centers, this was one issue that should be resolved.

In addition to their daily stops at daycare centers and preschools, the bookmobile also participated in special weekend events. Diane described one such event at a community center that served as a gathering place for local pre-teenagers and teenagers. During an event being held at the community center, the bookmobile was able to sign up
young people and their parents for library cards. For this event, they made sure to have materials in their collection that would appeal to young adults and invited them to check out books that day. Diane stated that events like these were very gratifying, but the bookmobile staff felt that their greatest value was in the work they did with preschool age children and their teachers.

In 2008 the bookmobile program took on a new challenge when it was awarded a grant that would provide the necessary funding to train preschool and daycare center teachers in emergent literacy skills. The grant allowed them to conduct training workshops at eight childcare centers and had the potential to run for three years, with an assessment process would take place each year to make sure that the program was being implemented successfully. Diane indicated that in such a partnership between a funder and a library system, there is often money allotted for staff salaries; however, this was not the case with the grant the bookmobile received. The library system had to cover the cost of personnel to administer the grant. One staff member was given the role of doing the necessary office work to administer the grant, which Diane estimated to require twenty hours a week of that employee’s time. Camille and Beverly were trained to teach the six emergent literacy skills — vocabulary, print awareness, narrative skills, letter knowledge, phonological sensitivity, and print motivation — identified by the American Library Association’s Every Child Ready to Read program. They used a variety of techniques to teach the skills to teachers, including modeling and props like flannel boards. Diane explained that during the first year that the grant was administered, they worked out many of the wrinkles in the teacher education program. They conducted an assessment
process at the end of first year that yielded positive results, impressed the funders, and ensured that the grant would be renewed for another twelve months.

This bright period for the bookmobile program was followed by a much bleaker one. The economic crisis that hit the United States in 2008 affected the bookmobile’s county library system the same way it affected other library systems across the nation. County officials required the library system to make significant budget cuts. Diane stated that in 2009 the system had to cut around ten percent of their operating budget. She reflected on possible reasons why the bookmobile may have been targeted as one area to make reductions. She mentioned that the bookmobile, not being part of a branch library, did not seem to fit into any specific prototype or region, presumably meaning that its unique status as a stand-alone, transitory unit made it vulnerable to cutbacks. Secondly, it was easy to quantify what money would be saved if the program were reduced. Finally, she mentioned that it was seen as a program that could be revived later when the economy improved.

Through my observations and interview sessions, it became evident that there were other aspects of the bookmobile program that exposed it to cutbacks. One was the fact that the work of bookmobile staff goes largely unseen by other county library employees. Camille mentioned that a regional supervisor once rode with them, but other than that, the upper management had little to no direct experience with the work being done by the bookmobile staff. It is likely that very few people making budgetary decisions knew the details of the outreach work bookmobile staff were doing and of the success they achieved during the first year of the grant’s implementation. During one of my earliest conversations with Camille and Beverly on the bookmobile, they talked about
the fact that county officials had taken note when community members spoke out against the closing of branch libraries. In fact, no branch libraries were closed in the first round of budget cutbacks. They lamented the fact that bookmobile patrons, who frequently expressed to Camille and Beverly how grateful they were for the services they received, did not make phone calls or send emails to county officials lobbying them to preserve bookmobile program. They felt that this might have protected the bookmobile from such severe cutbacks. When reductions were made and patrons expressed their disappointment and frustration at no longer receiving services, Camille and Beverly had to tell them that it was too late to take action. Final decisions by the county had already been made and put in place. Details about the budget cutbacks will be discussed in the following section on the current bookmobile program.

**The Current Bookmobile Program – Fall 2009 to the Present**

The cutbacks to the bookmobile program were substantial and greatly affected its outreach capabilities. In the spring of 2009, they were reduced from five staff members to three. These three staff members were also given additional roles to perform at the branch library. Staff reductions required the bookmobile program to significantly shrink its services. Initially, they had two vehicles that served 141 daycare centers and preschools; they were downsized to a program with only one vehicle serving 32 centers. According to Camille, there was a great deal of discussion about whether the bookmobile would work on a three- or four-week rotation schedule, which determines how often they return to each center, and what time of day they would ride out to their sites. It was finally determined that they would work on a four-week rotation schedule and visit sites
in the morning only, which is the best time to serve preschools and daycare centers. Difficult decisions also had to be made about which daycare centers and preschools would continue to receive bookmobile services. Based on statistics about poverty in the county, upper management decided that the bookmobile would now serve only the eastern region of the county. Even after that decision was made, the list of centers that would receive services in that area still had to be narrowed down.

Camille and Beverly took the lead in deciding which centers would remain on their roster, and they used the state’s Star Rated License system as a guide. These star ratings are provided by the state’s Division of Child Development and are intended to provide parents with information about the quality of childcare facilities in two areas: education and program standards.

Education standards are based on several factors:

1. The education and experience levels of the administrator
2. The number of lead teachers with child care credentials
3. The number of lead teachers with more early childhood education and experience
4. The number of teachers with formal education and/or experience

Centers receive points for program standards based on:

1. The program environment
   - Sufficient space for activities
   - Variety of play materials
   - Clean and comfortable play area
2. The number of staff per child
3. The interactions between
   - Adults and children
   - Children with other children
   - Children with activities and materials

A one-star rating indicates that a program meets the state’s minimum licensing standards for child care. Programs can elect to apply for a two to five star license by

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3 To protect the identity of the librarians who participated in this study, no citation will be provided for the information used to describe the Star Rated License system.
working to meet and exceed the education and program standards outlined above. According to bookmobile staff members, not all of the centers that opt out of this process are low quality. Some well-established centers in the community already have a solid reputation and do not feel the need to participate further in what appears to be a somewhat tedious state licensing process that includes inspections by state officials.

Initially Beverly and Camille were told to select centers with a star rating of two or three. According to bookmobile staff members, however, star ratings are not always a reliable gauge of a center’s quality. Sometimes two star centers are new and have not attempted yet to meet state standards; their low rating is not always an indication that their teachers are of poor quality or that they serve at-risk students. Three star centers are often more in need of help than two star centers because they have entered the system and are trying to improve their score. In addition, some five star centers serve disadvantaged children through Headstart programs. Although their teachers may have stronger educational backgrounds, their students are still at-risk for falling behind in school. Working with five star sites offered bookmobile staff the opportunity to collaborate with more qualified teachers and still reach students who are in serious need of outreach services. For all of these reasons, Camille and Beverly were hesitant to base their site selections solely on the star ratings. Instead, they used the ratings in conjunction with their knowledge and experience to compile a list of daycare centers in the eastern region based on whether or not the center truly served at-risk children. They submitted this list to their supervisors and explained their decision-making process. These centers became the locations that have been served by the bookmobile since last fall.
Another major loss for the bookmobile program was the county’s decision to move the teacher education grant to another department in the organization. This meant that the bookmobile was no longer able to continue training teachers using the ALA’s Every Child Ready to Read program. As far as bookmobile staff knew, this other department is currently implementing the grant, but they stated that they did not know any details about how the program was progressing or whether it was successful.

I probed deeply during my interviews and informal conversations with staff members to uncover why the grant was taken away from their program when it had achieved success in its first year. Diane stated that she did not think that the removal of the grant was part of the cost-saving measures taken by the library, and she gave the library administration credit for attempting to continue the teacher education program in some fashion. Since the grant was moved to another department, it still requires library staff hours. Diane suggested that moving the grant was most likely an afterthought following the other major financial decisions that had to be made. In comparison to the rest of the budget, the grant was a small monetary investment to consider. Diane’s comments suggested that there was a lack of awareness on the part of upper management about bookmobile staff’s work, and the time and effort that had already gone into building a teacher education program with the grant money. She stated, “…basically we were doing this really good work, and I don’t think anyone thought we weren’t doing good work, but they didn’t realize the professionalism and the intensity of the work.”

All three staff members repeatedly spoke about the importance of educating the teachers at the centers that they visit. The county library system recently began focusing on circulation statistics, and the bookmobile program now requires teachers to check out
a minimum of twenty-five books each time they visit. Camille and Beverly seem to have mixed feelings about the twenty-five book check-out requirement. They explained that many of the teachers are not highly educated and some do not understand the value of reading to young children. Requiring them to check out more books at least ensures that there will be books in their classrooms for children to handle and peruse. They know that some teachers will take advantage of using these materials to read aloud to the children and to plan lessons. On the other hand, by putting a set number in teachers’ heads, they seem to automatically reach for twenty-five books as their goal instead of considering checking out thirty or forty books.

Beverly stated that a teacher’s willingness to read to the children and her desire to visit the bookmobile is not always directly related to her education level; however, she later suggested that poverty is part of the problem. She spoke about a vicious cycle of illiteracy that can happen in poor communities and how library outreach services can help break that cycle by educating teachers at daycare centers and preschools about the importance of reading to children:

Just keep plugging at it. That’s the only thing I can keep saying is that I keep plugging at it. And hopefully, even if it’s just one or two, hopefully they’ll transform. Their family from now on will be changed, and they will change. The steps are small but hopefully will eventually change. I guess I’m an early childhood person. I can’t give up on our babies, the children. They’re our future."

Although the teacher education grant has been stripped from their program, bookmobile staff members continue to train teachers in various ways. Each month Beverly puts together a “Tips for Teachers” handout that they provide to teachers when they check out books. These tips include literacy articles, facts and activities that teachers can do in the classroom. Beverly and Camille schedule story times at the centers so that
they can model story times that incorporate strategies to build emergent literacy skills. Bookmobile staff members indicated that they feel this type of modeling is useful, even if they are no longer directly training the teachers. During the story time that I observed, several teachers were present and watched Beverly very closely as she used a wide variety of techniques and props to sustain the children’s attention and to engage them in the stories. I observed Beverly and Camille’s interactions with teachers on the bookmobile and saw them direct teachers to appropriate reading material for their children.

Beverly stated that she tries to get teachers to “think outside the box.” For instance, a teacher may be under the impression that if she is teaching about the five senses, she needs a book specifically on this topic. Beverly explains to them that there are other books that can be used to engage children’s senses, such as a book like *The Doorbell Rang*, where children can participate by saying “ding dong” every time the teacher reads a particular sentence in the book. She still attempts to informally teach the six strategies from the Every Child Ready to Read program. This may be through modeling a story time, helping teachers select books on the van, or by specifically turning to a teacher during a story time and quickly explaining something she is doing.

After they lost the grant, Camille and Beverly were asked to train other staff members on how to teach the six literacy skills to daycare and preschool teachers in the community. Camille explained that she appreciated the praise and the acknowledgement that she and Beverly received after performing the training. She suggested that some people seemed surprised by the high caliber of their workshop. This reinforced for me Diane’s assessment that few outsiders had significant knowledge about the work the
bookmobile was performing before the cutbacks. In addition to not riding with the bookmobile to acquire this information, Camille stated that when it came time to make budgetary decisions, management missed an opportunity to question the people doing the on-the-ground work.

I think this was the thing that was so hard for us. They didn’t know anything about it because they’d never been out on the bookmobile so trying to make decisions for somebody and not really knowing anything about it is a hard thing.

Another major change for the bookmobile program at this time was the decision to move the program from the administrative building to a branch library. Diane took on a new supervisory role in youth services at the branch library, and the bookmobile became just one part of her management duties. After joining the branch library, Camille and Beverly continued to ride on the bookmobile in the morning and to perform their regular bookmobile duties. These duties include: driving and maintaining the vehicle; performing story times at the centers; rotating the collection to meet the needs of patrons; planning the monthly schedule; writing and publishing a monthly literacy tipsheet for teachers; filling teacher book requests; collecting circulation and program attendance data; interacting with teachers and students on the bookmobile; decorating the bookmobile seasonally; promoting other events within the library system; and participating in special events to showcase the bookmobile and serve older children and adults in the community. In addition, they were given duties to perform as members of the branch library during the afternoon and weekend hours that they work. Both currently take shifts at the youth services and circulation desks, lead story time programs, and assist with other special programs at the library, such as running craft clubs and maintaining the Easy Reader and board book collection at the library.
All three staff members indicated that being moved to a branch library and having their job roles change substantially was a big adjustment. For Diane, this was her first experience working in a branch library. From my observations, it appears that she went from managing a relatively small bookmobile staff to a much larger youth services staff. She recognized that by being a part of a branch library, the bookmobile’s work could be seen and understood by other librarians. Several members of the branch library staff have ridden with the bookmobile. She also saw it as a benefit that the bookmobile now had a branch manager who could act as an advocate for the program. Diane stated that being a true member of a branch library requires that bookmobile staff work within the branch, doing tasks such as circulation desk duty. The problem, she said, is that this depletes the energy that can be put into the bookmobile program.

Camille and Beverly both seemed to share the frustration that they can no longer pour all of their effort into bookmobile programming. Through my interviews with and observations of them, it was clear that at this point they have reconciled themselves to being part of a branch library and have formed bonds with other staff members. Camille expressed a sense of respect for the camaraderie at the branch, and she stated that librarians and assistants all pitch in to do menial, as well as important, tasks. Both Camille and Beverly expressed a sense of loss at not being able to continue the grant-funded teacher education program, and they are still working on integrating all of their various roles on the bookmobile and at the branch library. Beverly explained, “It’s a real juggle of time. Getting your stuff done for the bookmobile and trying to blend in with the staff here.” It is unclear why the decision was made to move the bookmobile to the branch library. One possible explanation is that the library is in the eastern region of the
county, thus reducing drive time for the bookmobile now that it is serving only this region. Another reason may be that this branch needed more personnel to work in its youth services division. Camille explained that their hearts were in the bookmobile program and that made it difficult to suddenly move to a branch library and into new job roles.

When they were moved to the branch library, bookmobile staff also had to contend with having a much smaller storage area for their book collection and other materials. The bookmobile requires a significant storage area because items are moved on and off as seasons change; the vehicle itself has limited storage. Books on winter books, for example, were in demand while I was making my observations on the bookmobile. Beverly explained that soon these would go into the storage closet at the branch library and books on insects and gardening, for example, would be brought onto the vehicle. The storage area at the branch library that currently exists for the bookmobile is cramped and requires that books be placed on shelves in stacks that do not allow for spine reading. Beverly and Camille were told that there was no space to store the decorations and other props that they use on the bookmobile. Beverly is now storing most of the tools she uses for story times – puppets, flannel boards, etc. – at her house. She explained that storage is also an issue for the branch libraries. Library staff members are asked to create displays and plan elaborate events for the community, but there is no place to store the materials that are used.

Another area of frustration that arose in each interview involved collection development. In this county, collection development has been centralized. Individual library branches no longer select their own materials; that work is done by one collection
development department. The county has a floating collection which means that a material may originally be housed at one branch, but it can be returned and reshelved anywhere in the system. In other words, the branches do not “own” the materials in their collections. Diane, Camille and Beverly indicated that this situation can be challenging for branch libraries, as well as more specialized programs like the bookmobile. Every library branch has a unique clientele, since this is a large, heterogeneous county; however, the collection development staff selects books for the county overall, not for particular branches. The result is that libraries receive some materials that are not aligned with what their patrons want and miss out on receiving materials that would appeal to their patrons. With a floating collection, patrons do have access to materials that are currently shelved at another branch, but they would need to find these items by using the online catalog or by seeking the assistance of a librarian; they would not see them while browsing the shelves or looking at a display.

For several reasons, bookmobile patrons are even more limited than other library patrons when it comes to accessing the floating collection. There is only one computer on the bookmobile, which is used primarily by library staff to check in and out books. Although Camille and Beverly can search the library catalog from the vehicle, the slow Internet connection makes this task time-consuming and tedious. Teachers who visit the vehicle do not have enough time away from their classrooms to conduct long online searches. If Camille and Beverly cannot immediately fulfill a patron request for a certain material, they make a note of what is needed and bring it at the following visit. The difference for these patrons is that there will be a wait time of four weeks, when the bookmobile once again visits their site. Beverly reflected on this situation by saying,
“...as a librarian you’re always trying to give your patrons what they want and not having what they want can be frustrating so that’s a challenge, definitely a challenge.”

Before the budget crisis, the collection development department would select books for the bookmobile based on reviews of materials appropriate for pre-kindergarten children. They sent the bookmobile four copies of each book (two for each vehicle). Since that time, there have been changes and Diane was not exactly sure what policy the collection development was currently following for bookmobile materials. From her assessment of the situation, there may be a feeling among collection development staff that, according to circulation statistics, the bookmobile has enough materials; however, Diane explained that not all of the materials they receive for the bookmobile are appropriate for their patrons. Camille and Beverly also spoke about this problem in their interviews. Some of the picture books they receive are at too high a reading level for the children they serve. In other cases the content may not be appropriate for the ages or interest levels of these children. They also have to take into consideration the reading levels of the adults they are serving. At least one teacher confided to Camille that her own reading skills are poor, and some of the higher level picture books are challenging for her to read aloud. Camille and Beverly attempt to gather information on what each center will need in the upcoming months. Some centers provide them with a list of the monthly themes they will be focusing on. I witnessed Camille speaking with a teacher on the bookmobile about themes that would be taught at the center in the coming weeks, and she made a list of those themes so that the bookmobile would have the materials ready for the teachers.
The bookmobile staff weeds books out of their collection that they feel are not appropriate for their patrons and passes them on so that they can be used by the whole library system; therefore, a significant number of the books they receive do not remain in the bookmobile collection. The bookmobile staff understands that the decision to move to centralized ordering is based on economics; it simply saves the county money to have a handful of people collecting large quantities of materials for the entire county rather than having staff members at the branches ordering their own materials. Nonetheless, they do feel frustrated that the books they receive do not always fit the needs of their patrons.

From my observations on the bookmobile, their collection is unique. They have distinct sections in the van for books on monthly or seasonal themes, such as dental hygiene, Valentine's Day and black history month. They also have permanent collections of books on topics like community helpers, transportation, and farms. Their selection of board books is very popular with teachers, particularly those who work with infants and children up to three years old. They have a sizable collection of professional development materials for teachers, as well.

When I asked staff members whether the collection was mainly intended for education or entertainment, Diane explained that there was no distinction for this age group. She said, “I think that more than anything we want children to get excited about picking up a book...” As a school librarian, she worked with children from disadvantaged backgrounds who had never been read stories at home. They had not experienced sitting down with an adult to hear a story read aloud. This is the experience that Diane hopes the bookmobile can help to provide for these children.
Camille reiterated the idea that the goal of the collection was both education and entertainment. In her words, “…we also hope that the books that they’re reading are going to be educating them—like if we get books on colors or on the themes that they’re doing—and that they’re going to have a joy for reading. That’s one of the things—we really want them to have books that they really gain a joy for.” Beverly stated that the books the bookmobile receives are not low quality; often they just are not books that appeal to the teachers and children that use the service. All three staff members said that the ideal situation would be for the bookmobile to be able to select materials for its own collection, but they universally acknowledged that this was never going to happen with the current centralized ordering system.

The bookmobile does have some collection policies that differ from those of branch libraries. Diane explained that within the branch library system, librarians are supposed to weed a book when there is a single copy left or when the material is out of print. The bookmobile can decide to keep single copies if they feel that book is in good condition and is in demand.

Unlike the wider system, the bookmobile does not charge fines for late books. Diane stated that this decision was based on the practices of similar bookmobile programs in other places and on the fact that bookmobile patrons cannot control when they are able to return books because the service only comes to them every four weeks. In addition, bookmobile staff members are anxious to get their books in the hands of the children. If they charge fines, schools and individual teachers may decide they cannot afford to pay for late books and will stop using the service. Diane explained that there is a difference between pushing the books out to the people through an outreach service and
having patrons coming to the library to check out materials. Unfortunately, this difference is not always understood by library administrators. She acknowledged that there can be a perception that bookmobile patrons are not being held to the same standard of responsibility as other patrons because they are not charged fines.

Diane also noted that there seems to be the view among some library personnel that bookmobile patrons do not take good care of the books they check out. When I asked where this perception came from, she admitted that bookmobile materials do get more wear and tear because they are not checked out to one person, but to an entire classroom of children. A book may be handled by twenty children during a checkout period, as opposed to by just one child. Punitive fines for late or damaged books would be counterproductive to the goals of the bookmobile program. Diane summed up the situation in this way:

Because there are so many children who are in these preschools and daycares that may not have books at home, they probably do not get read to at home. And many of the preschools are wonderful, but some of them may not spend as much time reading with the kids or giving the kids the opportunity to handle books and that kind of thing and if we were punitive with the teachers, those teachers wouldn’t be putting those books in the children’s hands.

Every year, preschools and daycare centers fill out an application form to remain in the bookmobile program. This provides the bookmobile with information about the size of each center, their hours and the ages of the children. It does not gather other information, such as feedback on how the bookmobile program is working for the center and ideas for how it could be improved. The bookmobile program currently does not have a consistent system of self-evaluation. Diane stated that surveys had been done in the past, but not recently; however, a review of the grant-funded teacher education
program was conducted, as required by the funders. She felt that this was beneficial because it let them know how well the program was being received.

All of the changes that were made to their program in 2009 necessitated a re-assessment of the bookmobile’s mission statement. They previously had five goals:

- to provide library services to young children in childcare centers;
- to provide curriculum centered materials and readers’ advisory services to teachers;
- to provide teacher training workshops to enhance teaching of emergent literacy skills;
- to serve as the face of the library at community events;
- to focus services on the underserved populations in the county, specifically young children and their teachers.

Diane explained that they reduced this to the following goal: to provide high quality programs and enriching literature for young children, as well as provide curriculum centered materials and readers’ advisory to their teachers. It was clear from my observations that the bookmobile staff members still perform parts of their original mission. They participate at special events in the community and attempt to train teachers in emergent literacy skills. The major change appears to be not their mission, but the number of people they are now able to reach.

The Future of the Bookmobile

The need for outreach to underserved communities was apparent from my observations and interview sessions. Camille explained to me that there was once a staff
member who used the bookmobile to bring books to senior citizens, but that program has
since been cut. Branch libraries have been charged with meeting the needs of seniors in
their areas, but she suspected that there is not enough personnel left to carry out this task.
She described a recent scenario where the bookmobile was visiting a daycare center and a
woman from a nearby senior citizen living facility approached her and asked whether
there were any books that the residents in her building could check out. The woman
explained that many of these elderly residents could not get to a branch library. Camille
had nothing to offer this woman, even though she understood that library services to the
elderly are critically needed.

During my interviews, bookmobile staff mentioned the names of individuals
within and beyond the county library system who are interested in creating outreach
programs. Members of the branch library where they are currently housed have
approached them with ideas, such as an incentive program to encourage the parents of the
children the bookmobile serves to come to the branch library. What was not mentioned
was a larger, centrally organized outreach effort being administered by the library system.
The bookmobile clearly acts as an outreach service, but it is not part of a larger outreach
department with a broader mission.

As of the writing of this case study, the library system will be facing another
round of budget cuts within the next few months. Diane, Beverly and Camille were
unsure how this would affect their program, but remained hopeful that they would at least
be able to maintain their current level of services. Diane explained that the amount of
money that went into the bookmobile program was insignificant compared to what the
county needed to cut out of their budget for the following year. It is possible that there
will be staff layoffs, a reduction in library hours, and branch closings, although nothing has been decided at this time. The library system is also currently hiring a new director. Bookmobile staff members understand that this hiring decision will greatly affect the future of their program. They hope that those in charge will select a director who is interested in outreach. The future integrity of the work they do may depend upon this outcome.

**DISCUSSION**

The initial cutbacks to the bookmobile program, as well as the coming budget reductions and appointment of a new director, have left it in a somewhat transitional stage. The positive way of viewing this situation is as an opportunity to reflect on past successes and shortcomings and to plan for an even better future for the program once funding levels are restored and a new county director is appointed. The findings reported in this case study revealed several important issues facing the bookmobile and suggest ways in which these issues can best be resolved so that the bookmobile program can effectively serve its community. In this section, I have included both a detailed explanation of what I feel are the issues and best practice for this bookmobile program, as well as a table that summarizes my recommendations.

After the bookmobile program was narrowed to serve only the eastern region of the county, selection of preschool and daycare sites was based on a range of criteria to determine whether the children at these centers qualified as being "at risk." While it appears that this was a sound decision-making process, ongoing yearly re-evaluation of these sites would further strengthen the program. Each year, bookmobile staff members
could gather information about every preschool and daycare center to ensure that they still meet these criteria. There also should be a standard process by which centers are exited from or entered onto the bookmobile's roster. By using such a formal process to select and re-evaluate sites, staff will be able to justify their decisions and ensure that they continue to serve teachers and children who are most in need of their services.

The bookmobile should also be conducting yearly performance evaluations to assess the quality of their current services and to determine what direction their program should take in the future. The bookmobile staff can be much more effective in lobbying the administration for funding if they gather the necessary evidence to support the need for their program and the benefits it provides to the community. The survey that was performed as part of the grant they received was a good first step, but ongoing program evaluation is critical. Creating surveys and other evaluation measures can be time consuming. For this reason, staff members should look for models of evaluation tools being used by similar programs, such as Cleveland Public Library’s On the Road To Reading program.

The timing of bookmobile stops is an area that could be reassessed and perhaps reworked in the future, if the program returns to a full day schedule. My observations and interviews with staff members revealed that mornings are the best time to visit childcare sites, and this is their current practice. If they return to a full day schedule, they will again have to deal with filling a midday lull before afternoon visits at these sites can resume. One possibility would be to consider other options for afternoon stops. There may be more benefit to working with populations such as elderly people in retirement or assisted living facilities during the midday and even afternoon hours. They may want to consider
equipping one of their vehicles with new technology so that afternoon hours could be spent bringing computer access and technology instruction to youth and adults. The bookmobile programs discussed in the literature review section illustrate that there are a host of options for how a bookmobile might be used in these midday and afternoon hours. Any decisions that are made should be based on the needs and interests of the community. Surveys and focus groups would help bookmobile staff to determine the direction of future changes to the program.

Teacher education appears to be a critical component of this bookmobile program. Although the staff is currently offering teacher education through tipsheets, story time modeling, and one-to-one interactions on the vehicle, the addition of a more comprehensive teacher training program is desirable. The assessment of the grant funded teacher education program showed it to be effective, and bookmobile staff acknowledged that the teachers are key in the reading lives of the children they serve. The ultimate goal in outreach should be empowering the community to carry on the work themselves so that reliance on outside support is reduced to the point that the community becomes self-sufficient. Daycare and preschool centers that continuously rely on bookmobile staff to perform story times will never become truly self-reliant and may not get the best use from the materials they check out. Bookmobile staff members are the best option for teacher trainers. Not only do they already have experience in education and early childhood development, they will also have ongoing interaction with these teachers after training takes place. When the bookmobile makes its monthly visits, staff can continue to answer teachers’ questions, help them select materials, and monitor their progress.
Bookmobile staff members need to possess a wide variety of skills to meet the demands of their jobs. In the case of this bookmobile program, staff were uniquely qualified by their background experiences in working with children of various ages. Having a staff member with experience in early childhood development also appears to be extremely beneficial. Unlike most other library jobs, bookmobile work is incredibly physical. Staff members need to be able to haul heavy crates of books on and off the vehicle. They also must feel comfortable driving a large van through traffic and on country roads, washing the vehicle, and doing other basic servicing tasks.

The isolated nature of bookmobile work makes it imperative that staff members have the chance to share ideas with others who do this type of work. Ongoing staff development should be made available and funded for bookmobile personnel, including opportunities to attend conferences held by professional organizations such as the Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services. Education plays a large part in most bookmobile programs, and staff members would benefit from courses and workshops that enhance their knowledge and skills in areas such as early childhood development, emergent literacy, and English Language Learners. Training staff in data collection and program evaluation would enable them to better assess and improve their services. A commitment to staff development must be backed up by a willingness on the part of the library system to fund these efforts. For example, due to the current budget crisis, the library system in this case study allows staff members time away from work to engage in professional development opportunities, but rarely reimburses them for the cost of the conferences, workshops and other educational events that they attend.
Bookmobiles face specific challenges with collection development and storage. Centralized ordering does not serve the best interests of a specialized outreach program like the bookmobile. The optimal situation would be for bookmobile personnel to select their own materials. If this is not possible, they should at least have a close relationship with one collection development staff member who has an in-depth understanding of their needs and can devote significant time to selecting their material. This person should be required to spend time riding on the bookmobile so that he or she develops a clearer understanding of the community the bookmobile serves, what already exists in the collection, and how the collection is stored and displayed.

The bookmobile program has special storage needs that must be considered. A large part of the collection moves on and off the vehicle seasonally, and staff members need a shelving system that allows them to read the spines of books that are in storage. They also require a place to store decorations, story time props and other materials. These are the tools needed for their job, and it is not efficient for staff members to store these items at home.

It is unclear whether or not the bookmobile should remain affiliated with a branch library. There are both benefits and drawbacks to this arrangement. One of the major drawbacks of this bookmobile’s current situation is that the staff spends a large amount of time working for the branch instead of focusing on their program. If the bookmobile program returned to a fulltime schedule and staff members were released from their duties in the branch, this problem would be solved. Being a part of a branch library does provide the bookmobile with a regional manager who can advocate for their program. To truly support the bookmobile program effectively, this manager needs to be familiar with
the program’s goals, as well as its staff, patrons and daily operations. This requires riding with the bookmobile at least several times each year.

The bigger issue appears to be that the bookmobile program is currently not part of a larger outreach services department in the county. It appears from my findings that the county is in need of a more coordinated outreach effort, as it is not fully meeting the ALA’s mandates in Policy 61 to promote “pro-active library programs that reach beyond traditional service-sites to poor children, adults, and families” (ALA, 2007). Other than the bookmobile, whose schedule has been radically reduced, outreach efforts appear to be scattered among the branches. It would be more efficient and productive if outreach services were guided by a larger vision for reaching underserved populations in the county. This would provide the bookmobile service with an advocate within the library administration and with a community of other professionals within the system who share in their outreach mission.

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<th><strong>Issues</strong></th>
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| Ensuring that the bookmobile is targeting at-risk youth | • Conduct yearly re-evaluation of all sites visited by the bookmobile  
• Institute a standard process by which centers are exited from or entered onto the bookmobile's roster |
| Maintaining high quality services that meet the needs of patrons | • Conduct yearly performance evaluations using tools such as surveys and interviews  
• Study similar programs to find models for evaluation tools |
| Scheduling stop times so that efficiency and effectiveness of bookmobile is maximized | • Continue serving daycare centers and preschools during morning hours  
• Consider using midday and afternoon hours for visits to other sites, if increased funding becomes available  
• Gather data to determine the best use of bookmobile time by evaluating community needs |
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<th>Issues</th>
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| Creating sustainability and self-sufficiency in the childcare community | • Reinstitute a teacher training program  
• Use evaluation tools to continuously measure the effectiveness of this program  
• Develop a program to follow-up on teacher trainees to support them in maintaining their new skills |
| Hiring appropriate staff members                                     | • Select staff members who have experience in both library services and education; experience in early childhood development is particularly helpful  
• Understand the potential of isolation for bookmobile staff members and seek out ways to connect them to the wider community of library personnel  
• Take into consideration the physical nature of bookmobile work |
| Creating opportunities for staff development                          | • Offer staff members the opportunity to attend conferences held by professional organizations  
• Develop staff knowledge and skills in various areas of education (early childhood development, emergent literacy, English Language Learners, etc.)  
• Train staff in data collection and program evaluation  
• Ensure that funding is available to pay for staff development opportunities |
| Collecting and storing materials that are appropriate for bookmobile patrons | • Allow bookmobile personnel to select their own materials, if possible  
• Require a collection development staff member to gain a clear understanding of the bookmobile program, in cases of a centralized ordering system  
• Provide appropriate storage facilities for bookmobile books and other materials |
| Affiliating the bookmobile with a branch library                       | • Release bookmobile staff from performing duties at the branch that do not contribute to the effectiveness of the bookmobile program  
• Ensure that the branch manager rides with the bookmobile on a regular basis, understands the program, and supports its staff members |
| Connecting the bookmobile service with wider outreach efforts in the library system | • Create a department within the library system that is charged with planning, coordinating and executing outreach efforts  
• Develop an overarching vision for how the county library system can meet the needs of the poor and underserved  
• Include the bookmobile program and its staff members as part of this outreach department so that they can play a valued part in its mission |
CONCLUSIONS

It was the aim of this case study to examine one bookmobile program’s efforts at serving poor children in the community. The goal was not to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, but to explore its mission, structure, operations, and the challenges it faces. My suggestions for best practices were based on my observations and the information I received from staff members during our interview sessions. Further research would be needed to test these conclusions.

Through my research for this case study, I became aware of the disturbing reality that in economic times like these, outreach programs aimed at the underserved are among the first library services to experience cutbacks or termination. During the weeks I participated on the bookmobile, I observed that story times, craft clubs, and other programming for children still takes place at the branch libraries in this county. Children who attend these programs are not necessarily those who are most at need of library services or early interventions to promote literacy. They have parents or guardians who bring them to the library, presumably with the understanding that exposure to books and leisure reading are critical to a child’s development. The library system cannot deny that it is choosing to fund programs for these children, while cutting back on services to children who are underserved and at risk.

Before cutbacks, there was a waiting list of daycare centers and preschools all over the county that wanted to receive bookmobile services. From my observations and conversations with staff members, there is also a demand for bookmobile services to senior citizens. Since it appears that the county has not done an assessment to determine what other needs for outreach there are in this diverse community, the possibilities are
endless. The first step must be to seek out this information so that the needs of the poor in the community can be evaluated and prioritized. Then the question is, how can we provide library services in the most efficient, effective way to those who are most in need? Unless the library system commits funding to expand and improve its outreach programs, this question will remain unanswered.
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