



Before There Were Children's Librarians:

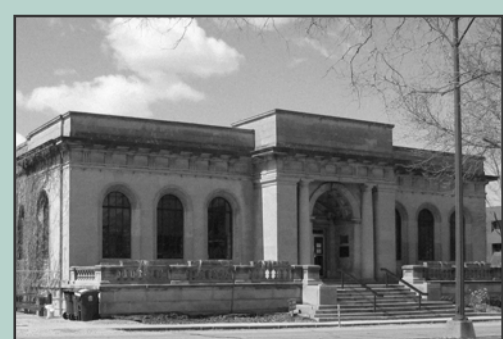
Surveys of Youth Services Methods and Emerging Professional Specialization Before 1900



Kate McDowell

Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Before There Were Children's Librarians



1900 is the usual date chosen to mark the emergence of children's librarianship as an accepted specialty in public libraries. However, as early as 1879 there were calls for action and experiments in guiding children's reading. These early experiments created the foundation for the establishment of youth services as a professional specialty.

Furthermore, these early experiments in services to children were characterized by planning processes that exhibited professional rigor. Although in *Apostles of Culture*, Dee Garrison characterizes library work with children as "sentimental," in fact primary source historical evidence confirms that librarians doing this early work relied on more than sentimentality to plan youth services; they administered surveys of librarians to ascertain methods for working with children as well as surveying children themselves. Through these surveys, librarians tracked the emerging techniques and knowledge base that would lead to professional specialization in youth services librarianship.

1879 ALA Boston Conference

The reading of the young was a topic of special focus at the 1879 ALA conference in Boston, and some of these librarians acknowledged that libraries must "interest and be attractive" to young people, while others focused more extensively on the questions of what books constitute a "good direction" for children's reading, debating issues of fiction and sensationalism in libraries. In all cases, there was a sense of urgency about the need to influence and guide children's reading.

Surveys of Methods for Guiding Children's Reading



In 1882, Caroline Hewins surveyed 25 libraries, asking: "What are you doing to encourage a love of good reading in boys and girls?" This first survey began a tradition of reports on "Reading of the Young," repeated by various librarians in 1883, 1885, 1889, 1890, 1894, and by Hewins herself in 1898. Each of the women who undertook these surveys (listed in the timeline below) modified the questions asked and the number of survey recipients. Numbers of questions ranged from Hewins' initial one to Hewins' 1898 survey of 17 questions. Numbers of libraries surveyed ranged from 25 to approximately 150. Although most of the surveying librarians were based in the northeast, the responding libraries were geographically dispersed across more than 24 states in the Northeast, Midwest, West, South, including one library in Canada.

In 1897, Mary Wright Plummer (Brooklyn, NY) surveyed 100 children, "boys and girls who were regularly using the library," for their opinions on how to improve the library. The children had many ideas, and results of this survey lead to the development of new events and programs in the children's department. As such, this survey formally implemented the growing professional understanding that librarians must gain children's trust. Plummer's survey demonstrates that librarians were not only taking children's needs and wishes seriously, but they were also collecting them systematically.

These reports on "Reading of the Young" offer snapshots of local methods as well as emerging attitudes about guiding children's reading. Answering the 1879 call for librarians to guide reading were an array of methods, beginning with locally produced lists of good books and culminating in the development of exhibits, library clubs, and storytelling.

Professional Specialization of Children's Librarians

The formation of training programs for children's librarianship at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn (1898) and at the Carnegie Pittsburgh Training School (1901) marks the end of the formative period and beginning of professional youth services as a specialty of public librarianship.

Further Research Directions



Although Garrison argues that "sentimentality overruled any attempt at a realistic assessment of the work being accomplished in the children's department," and that the activities of children's librarians "did not exceed the Victorian stereotype of the female," (*Apostles of Culture*, p. 180) these earliest librarians serving children were not merely reproducing Victorian-era domestic-based female gender roles. The use of professional surveys suggests that stereotypes of the "natural, maternal" children's librarian are suspect. From the earliest days, librarians were making systematic attempts to cultivate new practices in service to youth by continually assessing the state of this emerging professional specialization.

Hewins was both the instigator of the "Reading of the Young" surveys and the only librarian to administer multiple surveys. However, from 1882 to 1898, multiple librarians shared responsibility for these surveys, both in their administration and as respondents. More information about these earliest professional networks of youth services librarians—following on Christine Jenkins' comprehensive dissertation on ALA youth services networks from 1939 to 1955 and Betsy Hearne's research on the interrelated worlds of children's librarianship and children's book publishing in the early twentieth century—would shed further light on the development of collaborative approaches that continue to be a hallmark of youth services librarians' work.

These surveys are particularly important because they provide an unusual series of snapshots during a time of emerging professional specialization. By situating local data about methods and attitudes as elements in the national emergence of library service to children, these surveys give valuable information about shifting library practices and philosophies during a time of intense change in the history of childhood. By offering one historical model for how professional specialization emerged, these surveys may also offer valuable insights into the emergence of other professions and specializations.

