

Before There Were Children's Librarians: Surveys of Youth Services Methods and Emerging Professional Specialization Before 1900

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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.

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. These surveys show that the librarians who opened public library doors to children were thoughtfully rigorous in collecting both quantitative and qualitative data regarding services to youth.

Professional Collaboration

The administration of these surveys was passed from librarian to librarian in a cooperative effort that presaged the collaborative spirit that would come to characterize youth services as a professional specialty. The early dates of these surveys also open questions regarding whether 1900 should be understood as the beginning of youth services work or as the culmination of several decades of librarian's collaborations, experiments, and surveys that lead to the formalization of youth services training.

Broader Implications

Broader implications of this research extend into the present day, when we have a burgeoning number of new and emerging professional specializations in the field of library and information science. These surveys provide an historical model for how professional specializations are formed, which may offer insights into establishing best practices in emerging fields and specializations. Historically, this research also raises important questions about gender roles and the formation of feminized service professions in the Progressive era. Finally, the philosophies of service reflected in these surveys offer insight into the formation of modern institutions and concepts of childhood.

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Select Major Works Referenced:

Jenkins, Christine. The strength of the inconspicuous [microform] : youth services librarians, the American Library Association, and intellectual freedom for the young, 1939-1955. Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1996.

Garrison, Dee. Apostles of culture : the public librarian and American society, 1876-1920. New York, NY: Macmillan Information, 1979.

Thomas, Fannette Henrietta. The genesis of children's services in the American public library, 1875-1906 [microform]. Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1982. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1982.

Jagusch, Sybille A. First among equals, Caroline M. Hewins and Anne C. Moore [microform] : foundations of library work with children. Diss. University of Maryland, 1990. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1990.

Timeline:

1878—Caroline M. Hewins (librarian at Hartford, CT) compiled list of books for boys and girls, published in the “Library notes” newsletter.

1879—The ALA conference in Boston took up the two topics of “Fiction in Libraries and the Reading of Children.”

1882—Hewins’ “Books for the young, a guide for parents and children” was published.

1882—Hewins created the first survey of 25 libraries, undertaken to ascertain their methods for guiding children’s reading.

1883—Mary A. Bean (Brookline, MA) expanded Hewins’ survey to include 50 libraries in her “Report on the Reading of the Young.”

1885—Hannah P. James (Newton, MA) expanded both the questions asked and the number of libraries surveyed; James’ “Yearly Report on the Reading of the Young” compiled replies from 75 libraries.

1889—Following the tradition started by Hewins and continued by Bean and James, Mary Sargent (Lowell, MA) surveyed of 49 libraries regarding “Reading for the Young”

1890—Minerva A. Sanders (Pawtucket, RI) continues survey tradition with a poetic flare in “Report on Reading for the Young.”

1893—Hewins’ “Reading of the Young” offers her esteemed opinions on the best answers to the 11 survey questions which she sent to 152 libraries.

1894—Lutie E. Stearns (Milwaukee, WI) surveyed 145 libraries for her “Report on Reading for the Young”

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. Plummer lists lectures, experiments, reading clubs, and original stories among the methods to be tried as a result of this survey.

1898—Hewins surveyed 125 libraries to ascertain their services in 17 areas, and presented her findings in a diagram indicating whether each library had implemented or intended to implement each of 17 aspects of children’s library work.

1898—Pratt Institute Training School

1901—Carnegie Pittsburgh Training School