

Pratt

History of Children's Library Services at Pratt Institute

By Sydni Meyer, MSLIS student, Fall 2019

As the first public library in Brooklyn, the Pratt Institute Free Library was no stranger to innovation when construction began on the new Ryerson Street Library. While designers from Tiffany and Company set out designing the interior, recently appointed Library Director Mary Wright Plummer was in a unique position to create an inviting library for all Brooklyn patrons, including thousands of curious Brooklyn children. Her foresight changed the face of public libraries, forging them into the lively places of learning we know today.

Conversations among librarians about the possibilities of library work with children were just beginning to move from the realm of private collegial musings to professional conferences in the early to mid-1890s. A few public libraries in the Boston area had repurposed existing library floorplans to create a designated space for children's books. The idea of creating a separate space for children's works intrigued Plummer. A children's room would ease tensions in the Pratt Institute Free Library, which functioned simultaneously as a public library for area residents, an academic library for the Institute, and a training ground for students of the Pratt Institute Library School. The children's area would sequester excitable young patrons away from studious adult researchers, while providing an experimental space for Pratt Institute Library students to begin practicing this burgeoning field.



“Children’s Room Looking East, Pratt Institute Free Library” 1897 from Pratt Institute Archives Images Collection

The Children’s Room at the Pratt Institute Free Library was introduced to the Brooklyn area at the May 1896 grand opening on Ryerson Street. With its opening, the room already achieved the distinction of being the first children’s room in America to be included in an architectural plan for a library and realized through construction (Stone, 1977, p.182-183). While initially driven by pragmatic noise concerns, some of Plummer’s letters and speeches around the opening of the library indicate that she had more ambitious designs on the Children’s room. Speaking at a conference before the opening of the library, Plummer described the ideal children’s library room as being complete with “suitable books, plenty of room, plenty of assistance, and thoughtful administration” (Stone, 1977, p.184). To helm the room, Plummer hired recent Pratt Institute Library School graduate Anne Carroll Moore.

Anne Carroll Moore approached the shelves of children's books with the same critical eye she was trained to exact on adult literature. For Moore, children's librarians were meant to provide reference guidance to young patrons, assisting them in choosing the best quality book to suit their needs and interests (Moore, 1898, C81). Plummer's foundational vision and Moore's careful application of literary criticism to children's books were warmly received by the Brooklyn community. Within the first year, 1,753 library patrons under the age of 14 had registered for library access, and 39,007 of the 255,277 books circulating that year were borrowed by children (Pratt Institute, 1897, p. 3-4).

The staff in the Children's Room initially received educational assistance from students in the Kindergarten department. Students from the Kindergarten department would travel from Pratt's Astral Campus in Greenpoint to engage library patrons with readings and illustrations. By 1897, Pratt Library students were also staffing the library, attending to young patrons and assisting Kindergarten students in their educational work (Pratt Institute, 1898, p.10). These library students had received no formal classroom training in children's librarianship prior to working in the Children's Room. Library education at the turn of the 20th century focused heavily on experiential learning. In many library schools, hands-on training in libraries was favored over classroom instruction. This hands-on pedagogy was certainly consistent with Charles Pratt's vision of applied education, and Pratt offered additional courses in Literature and languages to promote a more informed and nuanced library practice.

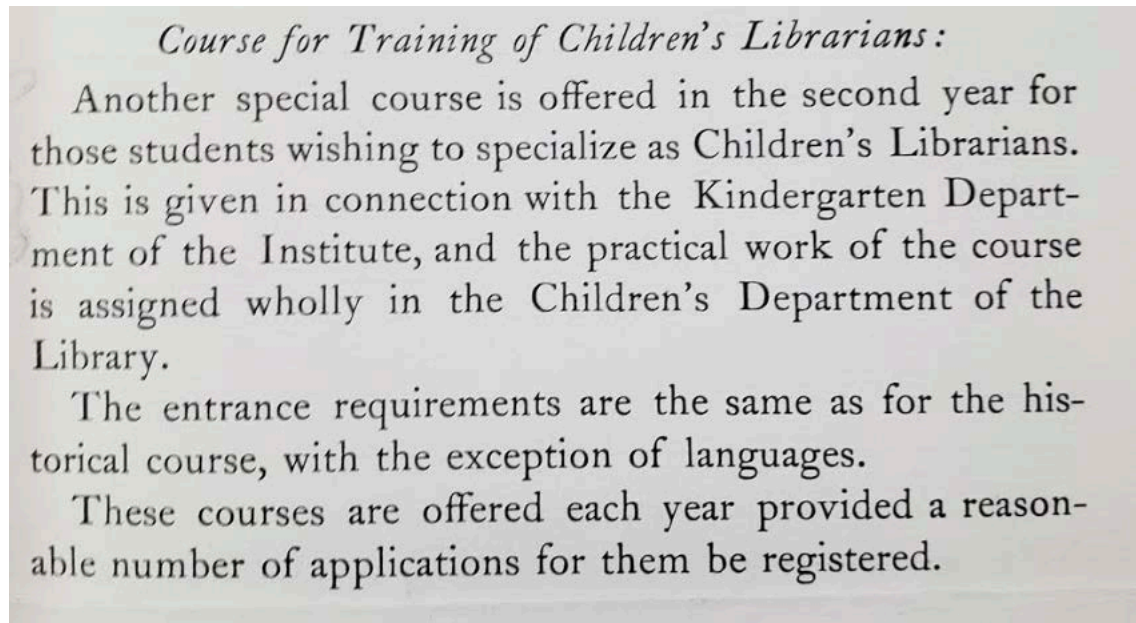


"Children's Room Looking West" 1914 March. From Pratt Institute Archives Images Collection

With the increased presence of library students in the Children's Room, a campaign launched for Pratt to join the State Normal School at Albany (now the University of Albany) in spearheading formal training for children's librarians. Addressing members of American Library Association at an 1898 conference, Moore outlined that the ideal training course for children's librarianship should include "training in clear thinking on the subjects of children, books, and pictures, in the perception of their interrelationship, rather than in imitation and dependence on the letter of what has been taught or on mechanical devices" (Moore, 1898, C81). Moore proved to be persuasive, as Plummer announced in June 1899 that a children's library courses would be introduced in the fall semester. Coursework for children's librarianship would be taught in an additional year after completing the standard one-year

library school training. With this course offering, children's library work became the first specialization in library training at Pratt.

Pratt's Fall 1899 Course Outline included an entry for the Children's Library course:



(Pratt Institute School of Library Training, 1899, p. 5)

For the three students who commenced their second-year training, children's librarianship was presented as an interdisciplinary endeavor. Working closely with the Kindergarten department, students received training in the natural sciences to inspire scientific curiosity in their young patrons. Anne Carroll Moore lectured the students on "picture-work for children," using book illustrations to help children develop an appreciation for art and aesthetics.



Pratt Institute Free Library Children's Room, 1900. Anne Carroll Moore pictured in the center of the photos background, framed by a large plant. (From Pratt Institute Archives Images Collection. Retrieved from https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS7729432_7729432_8606691)

The Library School curriculum was revised in 1902 to reflect changes to the rapidly-professionalizing library field. Perhaps because of increased efforts in library building by the late Charles Pratt's industrialist rival Andrew Carnegie, more library workers were required at a faster rate. To accommodate this pace, the course in children's librarianship became a specialization of the one-year library course. The library school eventually extended curriculum to a mandatory two-year program, increasing specializations to reflect contemporary roles of library professionals. Though instruction in library education has taken various forms, the 2019 Fall semester marks 120 continuous years of training in

children's librarianship at Pratt Institute, a milestone shared with few other Library School programs.

The work inside the Children's Room at the Pratt Institute Free library shaped children's librarianship as it is practiced today. After ten years of molding the Children's Room, Anne Carroll Moore accepted a position with the New York Public Library. As the Superintendent of the New York Public Libraries Department of Work with Children, she was instrumental in shaping public children's librarianship. Moore planned the children's collection of the flagship Bryant Park library, opening in 1911. Behind the Bryant Park library's storied lions, Moore headed children's library services until 1941. Through her book criticism, writing, and training for New York Public Library's children's librarians, she virtually created modern children's librarianship as it is practiced today.

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