

# Adult Learner Services at the Pratt Library: An Evaluative Treatment

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AS IT APPROACHES ITS CENTENARY in 1986, the Enoch Pratt Free Library can look back on almost a century in which it has played a leading role in adult education. The character of its learner services has evolved through successive decades, influenced by each administration's interpretation of the role and functions of the public library; financial resources; demographic shifts; and, most compellingly formative of all, the library's responsiveness to community needs.

Directors from Henry Lewis Steiner to Joseph Wheeler to Anna Curry have perceived the library's educational role in different ways, but none has ever questioned its importance. That role has been described in a detailed historical study,<sup>1</sup> which is outlined here to provide the general context for a review of recent activity.

## Historically Speaking

For Dr. Wheeler and his predecessors, commitment to the educational function of the library meant ready, often imaginative assistance and stimulation through programs and services for library users actively interested in self-education. The first director, Henry Lewis Steiner, "possessed an intimate knowledge of the intellectual needs and ambitions of diverse classes of people, and he had attained a degree of prestige which in a measure dispelled the doubts entertained by some Baltimoreans in this new enterprise in popular education."<sup>2</sup> One group eager to use the library's early adult education services was the immi-

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grant population. A Pratt librarian working in an East Baltimore street agency: “strongly believed that her station had a ‘peculiar mission to fulfill’ as it was situated in the heart of the foreign colony. Her credo encompassed the idea that ‘the library has it in its power to help train these young minds in the direction of good American citizenship.’ Indeed, as a custodian, she saw it as more of a duty as ‘they virtually come and beg us to help educate themselves.’”<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Wheeler’s impact on the Pratt Library and its services was distinctive, definitive and lasting, but while he strongly supported the institution’s educational role, his conception and support of “adult education” fluctuated throughout his tenure as director. According to Margaret Monroe:

Wheeler guided the development of a strongly education-oriented library service for adults, sustained a firm vision of its relation to library materials, encouraged an excellence in exhibits, reading lists, and contact with community organizations, and remained both sensitive and resistant to the national adult education movement. He maintained as an unresolved question the proper role of the library in adult education....During Wheeler’s directorship...the combination of director and staff achieved a level of educational service and an awareness of adult education purposes that prepared the library for making its unique contribution to library adult education in the ten years that followed.<sup>4</sup>

It was not until the era of Emerson Greenaway (1945-51) that the position of Director of Central Adult Services was created, with the specific charge, among others, of developing the library’s adult education program. Marion Hawes, the first librarian appointed to this position (and in 1949 to the newly established post of Coordinator of Work with Adults), had a strong, individual view of the library’s educational role. It is Monroe’s assessment that “it was with [Marion] Hawes that the concept of library adult education came to its most careful formulation at the Enoch Pratt Free Library.”<sup>5</sup> From 1933, when Hawes became Pratt’s Readers’ Advisor, to 1960, when she retired, “the record bears the imprint of her leadership in adult education: to such a degree that “[i]t is fair to say that in 1955 the conception of library adult education held by the staff of the Enoch Pratt Free Library was...the result of her leadership”<sup>6</sup> and the support she received from the directors—Wheeler, Greenaway, Amy Winslow, Arthur H. Parsons, Jr., and Edwin Castagna—under whom she served.

Hawes defined library adult education as:

voluntary, informal education, close to the individual’s needs and on his own level of comprehension, at his own convenience, and wher-

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ever he chooses to pursue it. Services in adult education offered by the library included the "reader's advisory service" (preparation of study outlines, the selection and the loan of materials, and referral to formal course study as needed); "informal study or discussion groups" sponsored by and conducted in the library ("libraries then become part of the mainstream of adult education activity"); "demonstration projects" conducted by the library itself and concentrated upon making the community aware of a particular problem; and "cooperating with the programs of other agencies or groups" through stimulating attention to important subjects and advising in the development of programs. She described the library's educational responsibility in two ways: the library is "concerned with the spread of ideas and information as well as the distribution of print"; and "the staff tries in numerous ways to make the community conscious of the need to know and then to supply materials to fill the need."<sup>7</sup>

The declaration of general library objectives included in the Pratt Library's statement of its 1950 book selection policies also gave specific attention to adult education:

Educational service to adults is a primary function, and the Library pursues an active program of stimulation, leadership, and cooperation with other agencies in encouraging the reading of socially significant materials. It accepts also its responsibility for the direct communication of ideas through organization of discussion groups, institutes, film forums and the like, seeking thereby to direct the individual toward a continuous learning process through use of books and related materials.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the Greenaway regime, the library had gone a long way toward achieving his stated goals of integrating "the adult services at the Central Library with others in the system" and developing the library's adult education program. Into the 1960s, the views of Greenaway, Winslow and Hawes provided both the backbone and substance of the Pratt Library's adult education program.

### **Urban Change and a Shift in Focus**

The fact that this issue of *Library Trends* is devoted to "adult learner services" rather than "adult education" reflects more than a simple variation in semantics. It implies specificity, rather than a broad, general approach, and suggests a change in focus. Few members of the Pratt administration questioned the need for modification of the library's organizational structure and services as dramatic forces of social, economic and technological change swept the country in the 1960s and 1970s and placed a heavy strain on the traditional urban

public library. Since then, the most firmly established institutions have been compelled to reexamine their goals and services, and the Enoch Pratt Free Library is no exception.

The most influential factor in shaping the library's new view of its educational role was the change in the character of the population of Baltimore, a change that paralleled demographic shifts in many other urban areas. The creative imagination and professional skill of Pratt librarians in the library's first sixty years had been directed at developing traditional and innovative services appropriate for the independent, self-motivated adult user engaged in casual or formal study. The educated, middle-class patron was the most frequent "consumer" for whom the library's reading lists, discussion groups, lectures, film showing, exhibits, and book collections were designed. Socioeconomic changes which followed World War II and gained complexity and force in the 1960s resulted in the migration of a large segment of the middle class from Baltimore to the developing suburban areas, leaving within the city a more heterogeneous population than the Pratt Library had previously served. Besides the citizens familiar with the public library and accustomed to making use of its services, there also was a new group of patrons, former nonusers who, supported by the federal commitment to equal opportunity and social justice, began to recognize the library as an accessible resource and to bring their information needs to their neighborhood Pratt agencies. The library had to assess its capacity to provide effective service to these new urban users and to decide upon a responsive pattern of service.

Out of this decision-making process came a fresh direction in planning which led to the proliferation of small library centers in storefronts and municipal multipurpose centers, supported by the library's general operating funds; and the federally financed Community Action Program, which offered library services in Community Action agencies throughout the city.

### **Learner-Centered Services**

Two studies commissioned by the Pratt Library Director and Board of Trustees were seminal to the development of learner services in the 1970s and 1980s. These were the widely read *Baltimore Reaches Out: Library Service to the Disadvantaged*<sup>9</sup> and *Adults and the Pratt Library: A Question of the Quality of Life*,<sup>10</sup> both written by consultant Lowell Martin. One response to the recommendations made in these studies was the establishment at the Pratt Library of a variety of learner-

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centered services and activities designed expressly for adult patrons and based on the knowledge that individuals learn best when instruction is geared to their specific needs and abilities. In 1970, while Edwin Castagna was director, Pratt started a GED program at its Pennsylvania Avenue branch with the aid of Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) funds and the Baltimore city schools. Inner-city adults without high school diplomas were the target audience, and their response was overwhelming. To ensure success, enrollment in each class was limited to twenty-five adults. The program was quickly extended to other branches, and since then some two hundred adults have been accepted for instruction each year. Long waiting lists of adults eager to enroll have existed since the program began.

A significant discovery made by the librarians supervising these programs was that they were too difficult for many adults, so pre-GED and Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes were instituted at the central library and eleven branches to serve adults with an eighth-grade reading level or less. A combination of LSCA monies and instructors paid by the city public schools was used to help up to eight hundred adults annually. Again, there were long waiting lists for these classes.

As in all group learning situations, the classes showed variations in growth and progress. Recognition of this, and the availability of Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) funds, led to the introduction in 1976 of a supplementary one-to-one tutoring project using a special force of trained tutors. Called the Community Literacy and Learning (CL&L) Program, it employed training methods designed by Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) and was aimed at adults who needed to acquire functional literacy skills or to learn English as a second language. The program was offered at the central library and twenty-three branches, and attracted some five hundred students a year. The project received a severe blow when CETA funding was cut off in 1981, but has now recovered somewhat with the recruitment of volunteers to replace the CETA tutors. The new cadre of nonsalaried aides also receives LVA training and is large enough so far to serve about two hundred students. Long waiting lists exist. As a complement to this project, funds recently have been secured from ACTION to hire six VISTA workers to recruit more tutors and to attempt to interest community groups in starting their own volunteer literacy programs. This last effort has not been in operation long enough for the results to be evaluated.

In 1976, the Park Heights community in northwest Baltimore was awarded a HUD Block Grant for neighborhood development. Studies

had shown that more than 25 percent of the community's adult residents were functionally illiterate, so the Pratt Library was asked to participate in the HUD project by helping to attack the illiteracy problem. A certified reading specialist was hired to design and direct the program, train and supervise the staff, and recruit clients. As a result, learner services were established in two branch libraries in the target area: Pimlico and Keyworth Avenue.

Today, this program offers an open-ended course of individualized tutoring for all ages and reading levels. Each client is given reading diagnostic tests; has an improvement program devised expressly for him or her by one of the teachers; and remains in the program until his or her goals are achieved. Services also are rendered to any Park Heights resident who has a "one-time" reading need or problem but does not wish to become a regular client, and to community members in need of help with coping skills: for example, parents wishing to learn how to help their children with schoolwork, or citizens needing assistance with filling out income tax or other forms. In the six years of its operation, the Reading Resource Center, as the library project is called, has trained more than one thousand reading tutors and has given tutoring services to over ten thousand individuals.

### **Related Programs and Services**

Mention should also be made of other Pratt learner services which, for reasons that will become apparent, do not quite fit within the framework of those already described. Pratt was one of eleven libraries invited by the Office of Independent Study and Guidance Projects, a division of the College Entrance Examination Board, to participate in a special program for adult independent learners who wished to study at the college level, either to prepare for one of the examinations, such as CLEP, by which college credits can be earned, or simply for the satisfaction of learning and self-development. Pratt established the College Learners Advisory Service (CLAS), under which adult services librarians and subject specialists at the central library and five branches were trained to advise and assist patrons interested in reading guidance to achieve the benefits of the program. Over four hundred adults made use of this service, which was offered until 1979, when staff changes and cutbacks forced its discontinuation.

Motivated adults who lack high school diplomas have been helped by Pratt since 1977 through GED videotapes prepared by KET-TV in Kentucky. These videotapes are used by adults who prefer to study

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independently and at their own pace for high school equivalency examinations. Study guides and audiovisual equipment for these learners are provided by the central library and six to eight branches. About five hundred users a year have taken advantage of this service. Hearing-impaired adults with lower than eighth-grade level reading skills were offered classes in basic reading and mathematics in 1980 with the help of instructors from Baltimore City Public Schools. The program did not reach the anticipated audience—only five learners signed up for the classes; and the project has so far proved to be too expensive to repeat. Beginning in the fall of 1983, a Computer Literacy Project is planned for inner-city adults. With an LSCA grant, the Pennsylvania Avenue branch will provide hands-on experience, instruction, and resource materials for undereducated adults who wish to become familiar with the new technology.

### **Support Services**

The Pratt Library programs and projects described thus far all fall into the category of direct library services to adult learners or potential learners. The library also offers many indirect or support services to this same clientele and to the professionals who work with them. The Literacy Resource Center, opened in 1979 with the aid of an LSCA grant, has as its major objectives the provision of support materials, training and consultation for agencies, organizations and individuals engaged in tutoring adults who are functionally illiterate, wish to improve basic education skills, want to prepare for the GED test, or are foreign born and need to learn English as a second language.

The professional librarian in charge of the center gathers and reviews books, newspapers, pamphlets, films, slides, tapes, filmstrips, and other materials useful to tutors. Of the books in the collection 90 percent are soft-cover. An effort has been made to avoid duplication of materials already in the general Pratt collection, and to acquire specialized materials such as workbooks, teachers' guides and answer keys. To increase access to the center, a core collection of approximately one hundred fifteen representative titles is available for borrowing, and extended loans of materials in quantity (no more than 200 items) are made to organizations, agencies and individual tutors, although not for classroom use. A useful bibliography, *Literacy Resources: An Annotated Check List for Tutors and Librarians*,<sup>11</sup> listing the holdings of the center, is available for purchase from the Pratt Library. Since 1975, an information-oriented collection of print and nonprint materials has

been developed at the Pimlico branch for the use of adults with low-level reading skills. The books, films, slides, tapes, filmstrips, and recordings are available in the center with viewing equipment and teaching machines for persons over sixteen. Some two thousand adults use the collection each year.

INFER (Information for Every Resident), the Pratt Library's information and referral service, links library users with services available from other institutions, organizations and agencies. A file of agencies and services in the Baltimore metropolitan area is maintained, and every effort is made to locate needed information for a questioner, whether it is in the file or not. INFER is accessible by telephone or in person from all Pratt agencies and will become an online service by late 1983 as the library completes the first phase of its automation program.

An adult education need reflecting hard economic times is being addressed by the services of the Job and Career Information Center at the central library. This center is staffed by a full-time librarian with training in vocational counseling who gathers and dispenses information and materials about careers and employment. Additionally, the center provides information about job search strategies, résumé writing, career changes, and interview techniques. Vocational Information Centers operate as satellites of this central unit in five branch libraries.

Adult learners with hearing or vision problems are given special assistance by Pratt's Center for the Visually and Hearing Impaired, located at the central library. Equipped with a Kurzweil reading machine, TTY phones, a Visual-Tek machine, and offering other specialized services, the center is staffed by a full-time professional librarian with part-time help from other staff.

In the fall of 1982, the Pratt Central Library agreed to provide classroom space and backup materials for classes run by the Open University of the University of Maryland. The classes are for adults interested in acquiring college credits in an external degree program that permits a flexible schedule and self-paced study. Course materials provided by the university are made available to the students on library premises.

### **The Administrative Framework**

The assistant director, as head of public service at the Pratt Library, has ultimate responsibility for all adult education services and has direct line authority over staff who share in the development, supervision and delivery of these services. Staff members participate in identifying adult education needs and in recommending appropriate responses.

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The position formerly known as Coordinator of Adult Services is now Adult Services Specialist. Its appointee provides ideas and consultative services to staff working with adults throughout the system. The specialist's expertise in assessing city-wide adult education needs, planning support services and writing grant proposals has had direct impact on the scope and variety of available programs, from ABE classes to one-to-one tutoring. Proposals for new programs and changes in existing services may emerge from any service point in the system, but they are always discussed by the library administration before they are endorsed or implemented.

### **Evaluation of Learner Services**

Some evaluation of Pratt's adult learner services is implicit in the foregoing comments and descriptions, and in the fact that the services are heavily used by the target audience; long waiting lists for participation are common, and the positive evaluation and statistics necessary for continued funding of LSCA- and CETA-supported projects always have been attained. As funding sources were reduced or withdrawn, however, it became necessary to consider the extent to which the new learner services could or should be absorbed into the ongoing budgetary program of the library. Aware of the need for further and more sophisticated evaluative data, the library commissioned a study by Vernon E. Palmour and Marcia C. Bellassai, which was completed in 1980. Through "observation, interviews with administrators, program personnel and clients, and analysis of survey data in relation to background data provided,"<sup>12</sup> the study sought to apply scientific research techniques to an evaluation of the library's adult learner services.

The evaluative survey of tutors and other personnel working with adult learners revealed that "almost three-fifths of respondents felt that the Library did at least as well as other agencies in providing learning programs." More than 75 percent of respondents noted that "some percentage of clients were strongly benefited by the specific learning program" examined. Almost four-fifths of respondents said that Pratt learning programs were "satisfactorily meeting community learning needs."<sup>13</sup> Where failure of the programs to meet needs was noted, it was attributed to the "range of problems of the clients, inadequate class time, need for more publicizing in the community, and the need for better diagnosis of client training needs."<sup>14</sup> No respondent rated overall service at the Pratt Library as poor; 60 percent rated it "excellent or superior."<sup>15</sup> Those surveyed included volunteers, CETA personnel, city

school teachers, Pratt-paid GED and pre-GED teachers, and a few regular Pratt employees.

This study identified no firm cost figures for adult learner services at Pratt. Essentially, grant monies provide program staff, salaries and materials; library costs are primarily the typical "in kind" expenses—space, staff, promotion, custodial service, and utilities. Experience and review have both shown that, for the undereducated adult learner, one-to-one tutoring or learning in small groups ensures that each student receives individual attention and learns as effectively as possible.

Pratt's Reading Resource Center prepares regular reports for officials of the library and other agencies involved in the Park Heights block grant program. Monthly statistics are kept on enrollment, attendance, walk-in services, conferences held with clients, new enrollees, reentry enrollees, and dropouts.

The lengthening waiting lists for admittance to all of the Pratt Library's learner services; the growing number of requests and visits for consultation with administrators of the program; and the countless queries received by letter and telephone from other agencies interested in using Pratt learning projects as models for their own, attest to the effectiveness and success of the library's efforts to provide alternative learning programs for Baltimore adults.

### **The Future**

As an institution that has always recognized the inevitability of change and the need to meet it with professional insight and innovative responsiveness, the Pratt Library is building the future of its learner services on the basis of pragmatism and practical experience. Several problems remain to be solved. One of the most critical is the sensitizing of staff who are accustomed to providing traditional library services to a traditional clientele, and are uncomfortable with the library's more aggressive educational role in helping unskilled adult readers. Unable or unwilling to acquire the empathy and skills required to meet this challenge, some staff members feel that their professional status and the prestige of Pratt is damaged by services of this kind. In *Adults and the Pratt Library*, Lowell Martin said, "Retraining of staff must start with the professional self-image held by librarians. Staff members in Pratt as elsewhere have set conceptions of what properly constitutes library service...."<sup>16</sup> It is important to note, however, that members of the public service staff are never required or expected to serve as instructors or

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tutors unless they choose to do so as volunteers. They are asked to assist with adult learner services by identifying likely clients, referring them to the appropriate program head, and providing a welcoming, nonjudgmental atmosphere conducive to learning. Staff training for work with adults at all levels of sophistication is planned with supervisors through the office of the Adult Services Specialist.

Increasingly important in times of unpredictable financing and reduced staffing has been the development of volunteer services under a full-time, professional Coordinator of Volunteers. Tutorial programs are now dependent almost entirely on the services of volunteers trained as tutors. The VISTA project seeks to underscore this effort by using VISTA workers to recruit and train volunteers the library has not yet reached.

A second problem reflects the collaborative nature of library-based learner services. As the Pratt Library has become more involved in a range of learner services, it has also grown increasingly aware of the need to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort among agencies active in phases of adult education. Improved coordination among concerned organizations and institutions is vital if the needs and interests of the Baltimore population are to be met appropriately and efficiently. Cooperation among the library, public schools, social service agencies, the area university and colleges, and other educational service institutions and agencies must be even closer than it has been in the past.

One step in this direction was taken in 1981 when Mayor William Donald Schaefer appointed a Literacy Commission, a group of twenty-four members drawn from Baltimore business, education, communications, and culture. Community representatives are also on the commission, as are selected city officials, including the director of the Pratt Library. In September 1981, the library joined with the commission and the mayor's office in sponsoring Literacy Awareness Week.

Improved communication with publishers is another need. Selection of low reading level, high-interest materials requires the librarian's best professional skills, because much is being published that is of inferior quality. Librarians need to work individually and through their professional organizations to make publishers more aware of the need for carefully prepared materials for adult learners. The need is so desperate that in 1980, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) funded a two-year development and demonstration literacy project directed by the Literacy Volunteers of America. Writing new materials for unskilled adult readers was the focus and the Pratt Library was one of the nine public libraries involved.

The competition for space within Pratt agencies affects library learner services as well as other programs. Meeting-room space at the central library and branches is shared by staff members planning film showings, lectures, concerts, and other public programs; learner services; and community groups. Other available space does not always provide the quiet and seclusion necessary for effective instruction and learning. Plans for renovation of the central library are under way, and the need for added meeting-room space is a priority item to be discussed with architects.

The most critical problem is also the most familiar one to urban public libraries—funding. Reduced federal support and the resulting impact of the demands upon monies from city and state government sources complicate future planning for library learner services. Since 1971, when the central library was declared a State Library Resource Center for all of Maryland, Pratt has received vigorous support from the Division of Library Development and Services (DLDS) of the Maryland State Department of Education. As detailed above, many of the library's most effective and needed learner services for adults have been started with LSCA funds channeled through DLDS. Through the years, the Pratt Library has, wherever feasible, absorbed into its regular budget the cost of those services it has considered most worthwhile. To what extent it can continue to do so is a question yet to be resolved.

## Conclusion

A new edition of the library's collection development policy and a revision in process of the Pratt Plan of Service underscore the priority given to the goal of providing opportunities, materials and staff to facilitate adult learning. "Serving People—The Public Library Today and Tomorrow" was the theme of the 1983 Public Library Association convention in Baltimore. This theme can be traced through the history of adult learner services at the Pratt Library; it is a theme that will inevitably provoke change in the configuration of services, yet one that is in harmony with the precepts upon which the American public library is founded.

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