

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)

Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Spring 3-26-2018

Serving Teen CoCultures: What Teens Need From Public Libraries (An Overview Through the Lens of the Connected Learning Model)

Alicea Peyton

msaliceapeyton@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Peyton, Alicea, "Serving Teen CoCultures: What Teens Need From Public Libraries (An Overview Through the Lens of the Connected Learning Model)" (2018). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 1881.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/1881>

The terms urban and/or at-risk (teens) appears to be merging as a synonymous profile these days, especially among those who work as public information professionals. Rescuing this population has now become the library stakeholder's priority. Such young adults are those who "face marginalization due to their membership in excluded demographic groups, including: women, indigenous, disabled, LGBTQI, refugee, ethnic minority, migrant, and economically impoverished..."¹ Keep in mind however, that urban youth are not necessarily those who do not frequent the library. Rather, they are sometimes the obscure latch-key kid who grew up hanging around the library for wasted hours and now have become desensitized to its offerings.

Nonetheless, the media has casted society's urban youth as those who are seemingly always in trouble with the law, homeless, dropped-out of school, drug-users, and unwed parents. As a result, these stigmas create an inerascable image in the minds of others who are in position to help. In *Urban Youth and Public Libraries*, library professionals state: "it is important to not allow outward conditions such as dress, speech patterns and other cultural signifiers to shape how educators view and instruct students."² At other times, social organizations find themselves intimidated towards providing outreach services to at-risk teens due to differences in culture, language, fashion, gender identity, race, etc. However, one must not let the "swaddling clothes"³ of today's youth cause us to misjudge them or a situation that in actuality one has been groomed to handle. Indeed, there are those in position to help. As those commissioned with a charge to keep, "school and public libraries, acting as connected learning centers, must support these adolescents who otherwise lack opportunity."⁴

¹ Takahashi, Deborah. 2017. "Libraries as Refuge for Marginalized Youth: Why it's important for library staff to continually advocate for marginalized teens." *Young Adult Library Services* 15, no. 3: 36-39. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2018)

² Carlos B. Crockett, "Urban Youth and Public Libraries," *Public Libraries Online*, September/October 2014, 4, accessed March 22, 2018, <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2015/01/urban-youth-and-public-libraries/>.

³ "Bible Gateway Passage: Luke 2:12 - King James Version," Bible Gateway, accessed March 26, 2018, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+2%3A12&version=KJV>.

⁴ Institute of Museum and Library Services, Young Adult Library Services Association, and Braun, "The Future of..."

During the *Future of Library Services for and with Teens: Call to Action*, a year-long national forum conducted by the Young Adult Library Services Association in 2013, the concept of connected learning was adopted by the *Young Adult Library Services Association*. In a nutshell, “connected learning is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented towards educational, economic, or political opportunity...it is realized when a young person is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success or civic engagement”⁵ In essence, teens depend on organizations who have become a part of the connected learning center movement.

Concept organizations use connected learning to provide engagement that appeal to diverse young audiences. At the core of such learning, each teen feels compelled to participate because of the program’s unique ability to tap into the soul of a young person’s passion releasing them to rise up in the world as resourceful, respected, and interdependent producers. Libraries do this by first providing, 1) support for self-directed, learner-centered inquiry, 2) sanctioned intergenerational contact centered on youth interest discovery, 3) safe public spaces for youth, and 4) strong ties to non-dominant communities/families. After laying such foundation, these organizations can then step in to: 1) bridge the growing digital and knowledge divide, 2) leverage teens’ motivation to learn, 3) provide workforce development training, and 4) serve as the connector between teens and other community agencies.

⁵ Mizuko Ito et al., *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design* (Irvine: The Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, 2013), Google Play Books, 45.

BRIDGING THE GROWING KNOWLEDGE DIVIDE

“Access to technology is really important to kids, but we all know they don’t come in with built-in skills. So, having adult or peer support can help them learn how to use technology to become makers and doer and creators is really, really, important.”⁶

A noted trend involves the realization that “both teen services and teen collections are moving more deeply into the digital world, with a strong emphasis on social media education and services.”⁷ Back in 2013, according to the Young Adult Library Services Association, there were four components a teen needed from public libraries. The first involved bridging the growing knowledge divide. Therefore, staying on top of technology is one of the ways libraries are currently ensuring that teens are equipped to adeptly socialize as an adult in the 21st century. That is, by “providing access”⁸ towards acclimating teens to today’s technological landscape---- particularly through offering hands-on-experience towards developing internet competencies through the medium of relative and real-world simulations.

“According to *Pew Internet Research*, 78% of teens who have Internet access say they believe it helps them with schoolwork, with 71% reporting that they used the internet as the major source for their most recent school project or report.”⁹ For low-income households with teens, utilization of a library’s computer is often necessary. Even urban classrooms most-often are unable to provide a computer for every student, yet in some cases grants are provided to enable the use of laptops, and tablets for inner-city poverty-stricken demographics. In these cases, when access to computer equipment is limited, the local public library acts as a community hub for loaning informational resources. Even still, teens are not

⁶ Institute of Museum and Library Services, Young Adult Library Services Association, and Braun, "The Future of...".

⁷ Denise E. Agosto, "Hey! The Library Is Kind of Awesome! Current Trends in US Public Library Services for Teens," *Public Libraries Online*, September/October 2016, 4, <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2016/11/hey-the-library-is-kind-of-awesome-current-trends-in-us-public-library-services-for-teens/>.

⁸ ALA, "Executive Summary: The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: A Call to Action," American Library Association |, accessed March 26, 2018, http://www.ala.org/yaforum/sites/ala.org.yaforum/files/content/YALSA_nationalforum_ExecutiveSummary_Final_web.pdf.

⁹ Paula Brehm-Heeger, *Serving Urban Teens* ([S.l.]: Libraries Unlimited, 2008), 96.

always at ease towards offered utilization. Lack of motivation often thwarts their good intention to stay positive towards advancement and success.

BUILD ON TEEN'S MOTIVATION TO LEARN

“Families, and particularly non-dominant communities...embrace libraries in a way that provides a tremendous opportunity for us to reach communities of youth who may feel disenfranchised from schools.”¹⁰

Utilization of library resources first begins with motivation, as you can bring a horse to water but you can't make it drink. Teens spend most of their day in school usually under a hard rule of thumb, so when it is time to enter the public library, such environment is often perceived as a breath of fresh air. However, this perception depends on the measures being used and/or how a library's climate and culture adjusts its service to meet the diverse needs of its young community. If a teen lacks motivation to learn in school, there must be a difference in approach to handle such challenges when it comes to instruction in the library or the youth becomes unmotivated. “Spheres of learning --- peers, interests, and academic pursuits --- are often disconnected and fragmented...this separation is often by design, as when we offer young people a wider breadth of choice in afterschool activities compared to the in-school curriculum, or when peer culture is defined as a space of freedom from adult oversight.”¹¹ The concept of connected learning can offer solutions toward increased engagement.

Connected learning uses socialization, passion, and education to foster motivation in young adults. To begin, however, “library staff must connect with teens.”¹²This often involves adults who are unafraid to become friends with teens as opposed to strict overseers. Becoming a friend to a teen has a lot to do

¹⁰ Institute of Museum and Library Services, Young Adult Library Services Association, and Braun, "The Future of..."

¹¹ Mizuko Ito et al., *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design* (Irvine: The Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, 2013), Google Play Books, 75.

¹² Institute of Museum and Library Services, Young Adult Library Services Association, and Braun, "The Future of..."

with using discovery as a way to garner their interest. Practices like staying on top of teen-related current events, technology, mixed with a sincere desire to get to know one's future interests can be used to fuel productive dialogue and engagement. Such dialogue and engagement can then be used to connect a certain teen with specific programs and offerings --- a type of involvement that feels naturally gravitating. "When all library staff start serving teens as customers and not problems, then relationships will flourish...when we form relationships, we help teens succeed, but also help libraries thrive."¹³

Thriving teen programs are suggestive of motivated teens, who in turn, provides its library with opportunities to build upon their motivation to learn.

PROVIDE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT TRAINING

"Teens don't just want makerspaces; they want to know how to make the next step in developing their interest and workforce skills."¹⁴

"Just as urban teens represent various racial and ethnic groups, they also populate the full socioeconomic range, from wealthy to middle class to impoverished...that said, there is no denying that many urban communities have high rates of poverty and unemployment."¹⁵ Although teen spaces such as YOUMedia provides significant opportunities for young adults toward discovering their talents; and providing creative engagement in music, art, and design, the reality is, teens won't be teens forever. Eventually teens will become adults who will be expected to join the workforce. Therefore, "building on teens' motivation to learn also allows school and public libraries to provide needed workforce development training..."¹⁶

¹³ Michele Gorman and Tricia Suellentrop, *Connecting Young Adults and Libraries* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2009), 37.

¹⁴ Institute of Museum and Library Services, Young Adult Library Services Association, and Braun, "The Future of..."

¹⁵ Denise E. Agosto and Sandra Hughes-Hassell, *Urban Teens in the Library: Research and Practice* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2010), 6.

¹⁶ Institute of Museum and Library Services, Young Adult Library Services Association, and Braun, "The Future of..."

Young adults think about their future often, yet they do not always know how to get where they are trying to go in life. The library staff can be instrumental in various ways by offering workforce development training to teens. Some opportunities to learn and/or impart could involve: 1) becoming a youth board member, 2) becoming a volunteer, 3) attending job/career fairs, 4) listening to career/motivational speakers, 5) borrowing library resources, and 6) employment. “Teen advisory boards or teen advisory groups are a very popular way to get teens invested in library services.”¹⁷ Benefits for teens who are offered positions as youth board members include developing skills related to entrepreneurship, marketing/branding, loyalty, and ownership.

“Volunteering gives teens the opportunity to acquire a number of the 40 Developmental Assets, which research has demonstrated helps prevent teens from engaging in high-risk behaviors.”¹⁸ Volunteer opportunities also provide unique workforce development skill training in several future career similitudes. For example, “teen volunteers can be valuable library website maintenance assistants and help with link checking and other maintenance tasks...this kind of technical work can also provide teens with valuable work experience.”¹⁹ Branch managers who offers their library facility as a place to host job fairs and career/motivational speakers can certainly increase employment opportunities for community youth. Hearing lectures from those experienced in various career paths can perhaps spark interest or provide directives to those teens who also aspire to enter such careers. Also, there are myriad resources available in the library such as books that contain information towards how to write resumes and cover letters, salary information, what skills companies are looking for, and how to develop such skills. Additionally, the local library is also privy to summer job information realizing that through obtaining seasonal work, a teen can then begin building their resume towards more gainful, future

¹⁷ Heather Booth and Karen Jensen, *The Whole Library Handbook: Teen Services* (Chicago: ALA, 2014), 152-165.

¹⁸ Booth and Jensen, “*The Whole Library Handbook*,” 191.

¹⁹ Agosto and Hughes-Hassell, *Urban Teens*, 97

employment. Furthermore, the library has resources on outside organizations who provide career assistance for teens as well.²⁰

SERVE AS CONNECTOR BETWEEN TEENS AND OTHER COMMUNITY AGENCIES

“Research show that the teenage years are one of the most vulnerable times for mental illness or disorders...We can provide a place in between work, school, and home and access to resources...we can serve as a buffer zone.”²¹

Libraries more than ever are thinking outside the box to come up with programs and solutions towards handling teen dilemmas such as lack of employment skills among others. “To maximize service impact and efficiency, teen librarians are increasingly looking to offer joint services with other agencies that serve teens, often moving library services outside of library buildings to places where teens can be more easily reached.”²² Information organizations have now begun erecting partnerships between public schools, local park districts, churches, and community service organizations. Realizing that “opportunities to positively affect teens should not be strictly limited to in-house efforts...fostering partnerships with teen-serving organizations within the community is another great way to bolster services and strengthen advocacy efforts for teens outside the walls of the library.”²³

Connecting young adults to public libraries is not a new concept. “In 1926, the *Cleveland Public Library* opened the Stevenson Room under the direction of Jean Carolyn Roos...designed for people ages 14 to 21, the Stevenson Room included staff dedicated to and trained in serving teenagers and included a collection of books that was likely to appeal to teens.”²⁴ However, years later, this idea of library-

²⁰ *Teens and Employment*. Ed. Heidi Watkins. *Issues That Concern You* Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2011. p104-108.

²¹ Institute of Museum and Library Services, Young Adult Library Services Association, and Braun, "The Future of..."

²² Agosto, "Hey! The Library Is," 10.

²³ Tiffany Boeglan and Britni Cherrington-Stoddart, "Advocating for Teens in Public Libraries+: Exploring the ways library staff can advocate for teens in the library," *Young Adult Library Services* 15, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 27, accessed March 22, 2018, <https://dom.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=122869322&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²⁴ Paula Brehm-Heeger, *Serving Urban Teens* ([S.I.]: Libraries Unlimited, 2008), 5.

assisted literacy programs has expanded into more “than a cognitive ability to read and write, but a social act that involves basic modes of participating in the world.”²⁵By combining one’s nurture to teach in a safe environment, we create both a library as place, and a library that is safe.

Overall, through the connected learning model, libraries are expected to dig deep into a teen’s innate desire to naturally be productive citizens by offering 1) understanding towards one’s uniqueness, 2) a safe, welcoming, and motivating space, and 3) a sincere interest in one’s overall development towards the future. It is only after laying such foundation can organizations begin to: 1) bridge the growing digital and knowledge divide, 2) leverage teens’ motivation to learn, 3) provide workforce development training, and 4) serve as the connector between teens and other community agencies --- as suggested by the Young Adult Library Services Association during a year-long national forum (The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: Call to Action) conducted in 2013.

²⁵ Institute of Museum and Library Services, Young Adult Library Services Association, and Braun, "The Future of..."