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The Challenges of Youth in the Modern Library

“Deep follow-up and follow-through conversations around books, teen topics, and library activities matter to teenagers, preparing them for civic life and for thinking ahead to their ongoing lives” which is important for both the future of libraries as well as communities at large (Evans 58). The issues that impede this progress in including the communities surrounding the library and the subsequent success of a library is the discrimination that affects teens and other demographics that now need and desire library services. The stereotypes and assumptions that still dictate how a patron might be treated at different libraries that, while currently under study, are not always unfounded, but are a large barrier to community unity as well as a hindrance to library success as they change how the library is perceived by non-patrons.

With representing gender, race, financial, and other differences between peoples, there comes an inherent bias towards those who fit with one’s own demographic. In both the public and academic fields “diversity [is] an evolutionary process demanding vigilance and ongoing commitment” which includes library staff (Poole et al 262). The challenge with integrating diversity in a library space is that librarian’s “roles depend on their credibility for providing insight [and appearing] unbiased” to all patrons, which for some require that librarian to appear to align with their values. “By appreciating diverse cultural backgrounds via authentic interaction, and by integrating diverse groups’ cultures into both institutions” and public spaces

can better serve their communities as well as improve the atmosphere of the library itself (Williams 38). However, “the pressure to represent all minorities” (Poole et al 268) at all times is also a danger, as even if “removing bias doesn’t require costly efforts” a library also risks alienating their community if the librarians, in an effort to represent the world, fail to accurately reflect their area (Williams 39). In this way, librarians inspiring those in their community to become librarians themselves or otherwise working to increase the diversity of the library can aid in bringing in patrons that would otherwise feel uncomfortable attending programs or browsing for books. Even if those staff members are merely temporary interns.

Libraries today strive to “offer the resources and the environment that foster positive intellectual, emotional, and social development of tomorrow’s adults. All of these factors contribute to the need for distinct teen spaces, both in-library and virtually” thus the Young Adult Library Services Association strives to aid libraries in developing more teen-driven spaces (Skuenn). They, like many libraries that work to help others connect with the teens in their community, stress how “teens must be actively involved in decisions regarding collections, services, and programs intended for them” which “ensures that the evolving needs and interests of teens are being addressed” (Skuenn). The specific desire of teens that is repeatedly touched upon throughout the guidelines is the importance of insuring that teens see their space in the library as “uniquely their own,” a space where they can connect to one another and enjoy being themselves (Skuenn). Ultimately, many teens want “the ability to select and engage in communities of their choice based on interest and identification” of those interests as they develop throughout their lives (Skuenn). Respecting teens enough to not only know what they want but to then also be aware of what they need is a delicate balance, but by simply providing the “materials that support the educational and leisure needs of teens” in various formats a

library can demonstrate their desire for a thriving community as well as attract new patrons (Skuenn).

One aspect of the assumptions about youth in libraries is that they are unappreciative, or at the very least unaware of the history and importance behind what adults do, and while in some instances that might be the case, at other times there is a clear reasoning behind that notion. In his talk about redesigning New York City school libraries Micheal Bierut explains that the consensus was that “kids were bored with old libraries, musty old libraries. They were tired of them” and that the “kids have never really seen a library” (Bierut 4:52-4:57). This statement is loaded with assumptions on several fronts. The people behind this project decided to assume that because the school libraries were “so dilapidated” that no students ever went in them, that those same students never went to the public library instead, despite the library being, in Bierut’s own words “the heart and soul of the school” since “all the students have to pass through the library. That’s where the books are” (Bierut 1:45-1:49). Thus, the assumptions were that students were not only ignoring the library at school, but libraries in general, and that the students had never actually seen either library before, yet were simultaneously tired of them. While that may be the case for some, as dealing with an incorrectly maintained building of any age becomes tiresome after a time, to assume that a student does not appreciate the aesthetics of a library when, by their own admission, there was nothing to be had with these spaces is somewhat accusatory. The solution in the end was to put the children themselves in the libraries; pictures, paintings and pictures of the students, student interviews, words that the students came up with etc. The result was that by making the students a part of the library the room itself was greatly improved, not because students were now using it, but because students were a part of it and because the care and time that needed to be put into the space was finally put there. The assumption had been that

students did not use the library because they were bored by libraries, when students ignored the library because everyone ignored it.

This is not to say that every librarian or adult in a child's life assumes they are disrespectful and problematic. However, these types of kids do exist, though ironically "major problem students [that teachers speak about] are the students that [librarians often] enjoy having come into the library" the most, as those are the students that they "engage [with and] talk [with] every day" (Way 3:08-3:15). Communicating with and helping these students is an aspect of librarianship, and some resources are careful to highlight that this is not the case for every student who walks through the door of the library, and that these instances of acting out in the library do not purely stem from personality or attitudes. A lot of these "pesky teens are just bored" and struggle when placed in an unchallenging environment that they cannot leave (Way 3:29-3:32). Thus, these teens stuck in a school library can often get loud or become otherwise distracting to other patrons when they are not allowed to leave, though an argument can be made that today many teens and other children have plenty of devices to keep them occupied quietly should they be allowed to have such things in school libraries. One must still acknowledge that a problem teen is not a problem in all spaces.

While many articles and videos talk about involving teens in decisions about their section of libraries, one study by Vivian Howard decided to conduct a questionnaire "investigating the attitude of twelve- to fifteen-year-old" children towards their local libraries in Canada (Howard 321). Through said study, the predominant issues included "the perception that the library offered nothing relevant or appealing in its collection or equipment and that library staff were unfriendly or disapproving, often treating them as children rather than as adults" (Howard 323). However, "none of the teens in this study expressed the desire to participate in planning library services

and programs for their age group” leaving the libraries in question at a disadvantage in moving further with inclusive teen-driven programs (Howard 334). Another issue that some teens brought up was the lack of advertising and information for them from the library, explaining that “in elementary the whole class would go there at least once a year but that’s stopped in junior high, so we don’t really hear much about it anymore” and that “library programs are promoted on the library Web site and in the library’s seasonal print in-house newsletter” rather than at places outside the library space, thus those not already in said space were not informed of library events (Howard 335). These issues that teens raise can be addressed on a library-to-library basis, since just as a community changes, so does the library, and thus asking teens and other patrons their opinions should be a consistent learning experience more so than a single event.

Part of the issue is the change in what might be expected of librarians in the modern age. According to Pam Sandlian Smith, “Libraries are places that support creativity, community, innovation, and entrepreneurialism” and are thus have a duty to “treat everyone with the same respect and dignity, whether you are a millionaire, whether you are . . . homeless” and while some may say that that has been the ethical and moral obligation of library staff since the beginning of public libraries, how those goals are met have changed over time (Sandlian 10:22-10:46). In relation to teens and younger people, the specific tools and services that are offered at libraries have been changed, now instead of simply free access to books, things like a “3D printer [and] community gardens at” the disposal of most patrons, “all over the world, libraries are adapting to meet their communities' needs, and they are different in different communities” so librarians are working to make libraries into more than just a place to hold books, now they are a place “where people could come in, have a cup of coffee, take a class, or shop for an idea” (Sandlian 3:15-6:30). That is not to say that every library will have the resources to offer every

option that might appeal to their community, but focusing on what a community needs most is a strong first step.

For many, the developing landscape of libraries in relation to youth services are both helped and hindered by advancing technology. Many a researcher has “emphasized the need for librarians to be culturally competent and to create inclusive libraries that are welcoming to all youth” but offered little advisement in how a library, regardless of their access to resources, might do so (Braun, “The Future of Library Services to Teens” 52). One solution was to implement courses centered on the technology itself, mainly “issues surrounding access to and use of technology and [that] examines the role of adults—in particular librarians, classroom teachers, and parents or guardians—in shaping how youth interact with technology” (Braun, “The Future of Library Services to Teens” 52). Through programs that encourage interaction between teens and adults, the bridge between the ideas about teenagers and how modern teenagers behave and why can come to light, aiding in both the relationship between teens and professionals as well as the outlook on youth overall. If children are not given the proper support or “programming content [that is] focused on their interests and needs” then one cannot expect said children to grow or develop as desired (Braun, “The Future of Library Services to Teens” 53). Technology in this way can be used to connect with children and students who enter the library, as well as a cheap way to improve public libraries that may lack other resources.

When examining library use by age group, one section of youth tends to be forgotten; older teens and young adults, specifically between 17 and 19, tend to get lost in the shuffle. While still technically teens, this demographic can struggle to attend the library “because their parents or guardians had stopped taking them, they had less free time,” or “recounted past negative experiences with librarians and other staff, which led them to develop unpleasant

associations with libraries” (Agosto 258, 262). This issue is compounded in rural areas, where “attending a school without a librarian on staff is more common than attending a school with an employed librarian” thus leading to fewer programs and amenities being offered to students at a young age, which then fails to inspire them to attend a library later in life (Agosto 254). In addition, today’s ease of access to information through the internet makes the library seem even less necessary to these types of people, as libraries today need to focus “less on providing materials and technology access and more on teaching how to search and evaluate information housed outside of libraries’ physical and virtual boundaries” to engage students and young adults (Agosto 248). A student who loved the library in youth is more likely to come back in adulthood, thus a negative library experiences for teenage patrons result in fewer returns and less interest in bringing future children into the library space.

When it comes to teens and young adults, most libraries have “embraced information technologies, striving to ameliorate the digital divide by providing free access to the internet through desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and, recently, Wi-Fi hotspots that can be checked out and brought into the home” (Evans 49). However, this is not the only factor in making the library accessible and appealing to teens, many “studies confirm two important aspects of library services for adolescents” including “not only the materials that libraries provide, but also the opportunities for discourse around these texts with both peers and knowledgeable adults” (Evans 45). The aspect that some libraries struggle with more so than their collections is their staff, since some staff might “not [be] accustomed to high volumes of teenage patrons” leading to them being “less patient with adolescent behaviors, resulting in a less comfortable environment for the teens” and a subsequent “unpleasant reality in which libraries do not provide solid levels of funding and staffing for teen services” because they do not want teens in their spaces (Evans 56).

This later amplifies into larger issues regarding library funding, future patronage, and even outlooks on library staffing. Embracing technology in this regard is not enough, the people are the heart of a library just as much as the books and information are.

One misstep that many libraries take is setting up a “teen advisory board” and leaving their young adult outreach at that. Rather than having a “teen-driven” program, they have a “teen centered” set up where teens are considered, but not directly involved in their own programs (Braun, “Give Teens the Lead”). The issue with any program that does not include the demographic it centers around is that the information the group then has can be outdated, incomplete, or even incorrect. One solution that gets recommended is to not “merely ask what teens are interested in... [but to] talk with teens about what they find challenging in the world and what problems they would like to solve” which will allow for a more in-depth understanding of where the current generation is and what support they need (Braun, “Give Teens the Lead”). Ultimately, it can be difficult for people relinquish control to a demographic that is stereotyped as irresponsible, immature, and “pesky” (Way 3:29-3:32), but “a library is the perfect community space for teens to engage in this sort of learning and growth” which can lead to not only great change, but also a stronger bond between the generations of a community (Braun, “Give Teens the Lead”). “It’s not a small challenge to make this transition, but it’s invaluable to give teens a voice” in their own programs and lives, as well as to give them the respect as both individuals and as future adults (Braun, “Give Teens the Lead”). If a library is meant to respect anyone who walks in their door, then a teenager should not receive any less respect than an adult.

The underlying problem for most libraries, as stated in a 2015 study, is that “Libraries create spaces in which youth are told “no” for doing or wanting things that may be entirely appropriate for young people, such as sitting convivially in small groups, and they variously

enforce a wide variety of prohibitions: one-to-a-chair policies, snacks, “saggy” pants, baseball caps, cell phone use, and certain other modes of expression” fundamentally disrespecting an entire section of the library patronage (Bernier 167). “Young people as a demographic are widely feared and excluded from public spaces, and in portrayals by the news media, by interest groups, and even by commentators in library publications, they are subjected to relentlessly negative publicity, segregation, and” are forced into harsher punishments for small instances as a result, leading to many a child avoiding certain areas of their community, such as the library (Bernier 170). However, this does not have to be the case in the modern day as “libraries hold the potential to improve library services to this broadly marginalized population and to contribute to better integration of youth as citizens in the public sphere” but “rather than adopting inaccurate understandings of young people as problematic” they should strive to understand and accommodate the teens who are still dedicated to interacting at the library and wish to improve it (Bernier 170, 177). In fact, many libraries in the same study found that youth “presence and participation in the library were also the most likely to report relaxation—not increased enforcement—of rules concerning surveillance and discipline” meaning that problem students were not a large enough issue to discriminate against all teens who entered the library (Bernier 176). This was accomplished in the libraries, regardless of size, that allowed and encouraged teens to personalize the library for themselves. “In several dozen libraries, youth participation proved pivotal in establishing funding, influencing space design,” and growing the teen and young adult patronage of their libraries (Bernier 175). This insinuates that the reason teenagers do not go to or avoid the library do so because they cannot see the space as one that welcomes them, that in fact, the library is not for them.

Libraries are a place where everyone should feel welcome regardless of age, race, or any other significant difference, “especially now, as the institution transitions from its historic role as a place to house printed collections to a far more uncertain future in which libraries become spaces for producing social experience and incorporating user meanings” (Bernier 178). As a mirror of community, a library is set to change with its audience over time, and despite some challenges that come with the sped-up life of the modern technological era, many libraries are finding their footing in support of their younger patrons as they find their way to adulthood through communication and cooperation. Through embracing new technology and new ideas, public and academic libraries will continue to grow and thrive as their patrons do, sidestepping issues of generational abandonment of libraries and community spaces.

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