
Realizing the Reading and Information Needs of Youth

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AS LIBRARIANS SEEKING to provide materials and services which meet the constantly changing reading, listening, viewing, and information needs of young adults, we are often hampered by a society that does not believe library services can make a positive difference in the lives of these clients. The result is lack of support for funding and staff, limited or restricted access to information, and censorship efforts from various interest groups.

If change is to occur it is necessary for all library professionals to first understand, then accept, and finally, communicate to society the reading and information needs and interests of young adults.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF YOUTH

To much of our society, teenagers are an anomaly. They are too old to be treated as children and too young to be treated as adults. Teenagers are trapped in a body and mind more suited to their primitive ancestors in a society which forces them to contain their energies and enthusiasms at a stage in their lives when it is least physically possible or appropriate. As Mibaly Csikszentmihalui states in his article "The Pressured World of Adolescence, "many adolescents feel they have been put on hold, forced to listen to pre-programmed Muzak while their best years slowly drift by....At present, we have little use for the strength, the brains, the sexuality of adolescents...the vitality of youth gets bottled up for future use (Csikszentmihalui 1987, p. 104)." Fortunately, educators, psychologists, and young adult authors have recognized the need to identify how young people feel about their lives. Csikszentmihalui describes a project at the University of Chicago in which teenagers were asked to wear an electronic pager for several weeks. When the pager beeped, each high school student was instructed to fill out pages in a

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booklet describing where they were, what they were doing, and how they felt. The feelings of loneliness and isolation and the lack of adult contact were striking (Csikszentmihalui). Research projects at Pennsylvania State University (Petersen 1987) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Steinberg 1987) focus on early adolescents' feelings about themselves and their relationships with their peers and parents.

In 1967, G. Robert Carlsen stated that: "If books are to have any meaning, they must be related to the young person's personal and social needs (Carlsen 1971, p. 10)." While these needs have certainly changed since Carlsen made this profound statement, the basic premise is just as true today. In 1953, Robert J. Havighurst delineated these needs which he referred to as developmental tasks. Havighurst, like Carlsen, has much to offer librarians in the areas of both reading interests and bibliotherapy because he addresses the developmental tasks necessary for adolescents to reach their potentials. These ten tasks identified by Havighurst are:

1. Achieving new and more mature relations with age-mates of both sexes.
2. Achieving a masculine or feminine social role.
3. Accepting one's physique and using the body effectively.
4. Achieving emotional independence of parents and other adults.
5. Achieving assurance of economic independence.
6. Selecting and preparing for an occupation.
7. Preparing for marriage and family life.
8. Developing intellectual skills and concepts necessary for civic competence.
9. Desiring and achieving responsible behavior.
10. Acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior (Nilsen 1985, p. 578).

To these Richard F. Abrahamson has added an eleventh developmental task—i.e., exposure to someone's death (Abrahamson 1979, p. 3). Clearly there is much that librarians and libraries can offer young people to help them achieve these necessary tasks.

Noted young adult author Sue Ellen Bridgers describes her role and that of all authors of young adult literature:

They [young people] need books that reflect both the confusion and the calm, books that speak to the basic human need for companionship, books that portray family life in such a way that young people see the possibility of commitments to it that can sustain rather than destroy them.

I hope that the characters in my books portray such a commitment. I believe they are responsive to the collective well-being as well as to their individual goals and accomplishments. They face their days knowing how often rain will fall, how frail we all are and yet how resilient (Bridgers 1986, pp. 55, 61).

The point at which young people take on the full responsibilities of adulthood is later in life in our society than it ever has been. As the average educational level has risen (twelve grades in the secondary level

and a larger percentage of people pursuing higher education), adolescence has extended into what The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship has called a "custodial/learning and preparation period" or a "youth-to-adulthood transition...which for many youths lasts well into their mid-twenties and longer (William T. Grant Commission 1988, p. 12)." Indeed, the commission reports that the percentage of eighteen-to-nineteen-year-olds in high school increased from 39 to 51 percent for whites and from 35 to 44 percent for blacks between 1960 and 1985. The commission goes on to suggest that: "Developmentally, adolescence provides a time of delay or 'moratorium' during which the young can experiment with and prepare for adult roles without assuming the full range of adult responsibilities (William T. Grant Commission, p. 12)." In their January 1988 report *The Forgotten Half: Non-College Youth in America*, the commission notes that 25 percent of ten-to-seventeen-year-old youth are "in jeopardy of suffering the negative effects of some combination of school failure, premature parenthood, substance abuse, crime or delinquency. Of these, one in ten is in dire straits (William T. Grant Commission, p. 13)."

It is all too obvious, both from these statistics and from our own observations and experiences, that society is not adequately meeting the needs of this age group. This is a dismal situation in a day in which we have a wealth of resources and research to draw on to help young adults reach their potential. In actual practice, an understanding of the nature of adolescent concerns requires awareness, education, and communication with young adults in a specific library setting.

ACCEPTING THE NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF YOUTH

Libraries must attempt to meet three major categories of young adult needs: (1) research needs (for both school and personal explorations), (2) recreational materials (reading, listening, and viewing collections), and (3) informational needs (family planning, personal care, etc. resources). In meeting these needs, adults often have "less understanding of the differences in learning styles and aptitudes that the young adults may display, and we are less skillful in adapting our institutions to serve them (William T. Grant Commission, p. 13)."

This lack of understanding and reluctance is echoed by James Liesener's admonishment that "national information policy discussions cannot continue to ignore children and youth (Liesener 1987, p. 20)." A multitude of professional position papers, articles, and statements from the American Library Association (ALA) all support the rights of young people to access information and yet the actions of governments, schools, and libraries continue to restrict youth from equal participation in and access to adult resources. Examples of this restriction include the recent Hazelwood case in which the Supreme Court upheld the rights of school administrators to censor student

publications (not only an example of restricted participation, but also a case of hampering and watering down an educational experience) and the appallingly limited use of interlibrary loan by the primary provider of library services to young adults—school library media centers.

Perhaps one of the most difficult facets of accepting the library needs of young adults is that those needs are every bit as complex, broad, and deep as those of adults and yet, as echoed earlier in this discussion by the Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, we have difficulty adapting institutions and libraries to serve them. As a profession, we have long realized that access is a priority in library services. Indeed, in identifying its priorities as a profession, the American Library Association has stated as "Priority Area A" this area: "ALA will promote efforts to ensure that every individual has access to needed information at the time needed and in a format the individual can utilize through provision of library and information services (American Library Association 1986, p. 216)." In its list of seven goals which led to achievement of this priority, the association has identified as goal one: "All individuals have equal access to libraries and information services (American Library Association, p. 216)."

This professional dedication to equal access for youth was recently reaffirmed by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) in a landmark document "Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Media Program: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights." The AASL interpretation includes these two powerful sentences: "Students and educators served by the school library media program have access to resources and services free of constraints resulting from personal, partisan, or doctrinal disapproval. School library media professionals resist efforts by individuals to define what is appropriate for all students or teachers to read, view, or hear (American Association of School Librarians 1986)."

Working from the defined ALA priority of access and from other ALA statements, Mary K. Chelton has provided a definitive compilation of librarians' shortfalls in a 1984 speech which was reproduced in the Fall 1985 issue of *School Library Media Quarterly*. Chelton very rightly pointed out that most librarians have a preconceived notion of what constitutes the "ideal" young adult (YA) patron and that they feel uncomfortable with young adults who do not conform with their ideas. Another area in which Chelton notes that we fail in serving young adults is through public library telephone reference policies. Since more and more single parent and two parent working families exist, libraries "should probably be expanding telephone reference service to kids, not getting them off the phone and into the library as fast as possible (Chelton 1985)."

In the area of reading interests, Chelton points out that we lament the fact that more girls than boys seem to use the library, but we ourselves fail to read and promote one of the major areas of male reading interest—i.e., science fiction (young adult females also read science

fiction, but not as widely as their male counterparts). Along the same lines Chelton defines the "Law of Literary Merit, which says that concern over literary quality rises in direct proportion to alarm over content (Chelton, p. 23)." As an illustration of this phenomenon, Chelton notices that: "Most of the teenage romances are no more poorly written than the average 'realistic' teen novel, but objections to the girl-gets-boy stereotypic formula are far more frequent in professional literature than objections to first person problem novels filled with inept adults (Chelton p. 23)."

Another barrier to reading observed by Chelton is the librarian's fondness for hard-cover books. "We prefer hard-back books to any other kind of format, and we have institutionalized a reviewing system which makes it easy for us to maintain that bias (Chelton, p. 23)." Chelton goes on to note that young adults prefer paper backs, and as a profession we should clamor for library reviewing/purchasing mechanisms which facilitate that desire. Chelton further observes that these barriers to reading have a chilling end result for young adult library patrons: "less access for kids to needed materials which happen to be controversial with adults (Chelton, p. 23)."

In meeting the reading interests of adolescents, librarians would do well to attempt to supply the books that young adults like to read. This brings to mind the old advertising maxim, "know your audience." A 1987 article by Betty Carter, "What Are Young Adults Reading?" points out the fact that series books attract teens. Carter observed that teens do not stay at the series books stage forever but will move on to other interests. At the moving on stage, Carter says "the trick, of course is recognizing what trait or feature in a particular book" triggers a feeling or identification in the reader with the characters or emotions in books they like (Carter 1987). Unfortunately, when librarians fail to know their audience or their reading interests, they cannot sell their product. A 1982 survey of 3399 students in grades four through twelve conducted by Donald R. Gallo showed that youth in grades seven through twelve sought librarians as the last place to turn for reading advice (Gallo 1985, p. 736).

Chelton notes that the psychological walls put up by library staff who do not like young adult patrons represent a huge barrier to effective YA library services. Another barrier is space planning which does not take into account what Sue Rosenzweig (quoted in Chelton's article) has defined as space "to absorb the fatigue that often accompanies growth. In a library, this means having a place where talking quietly with friends is allowed, where one can sprawl out with a good book..., and where wiggling and moving around is not frowned upon (Chelton 1985, p. 24)." Library policies as fundamental as opening hours pose significant barriers to youth access. How can young adults have adequate access to the library if it is closed or thinly staffed when they are able to get to it (e.g., after school)? Chelton also points out that providing bike racks will make the library an easier place for young adults to utilize. Yet

another barrier is the unwillingness of librarians to offer interlibrary loans or reserves to young adults. Chelton (1985) pointed this out in her speech. It is an even greater problem in today's library when online database searching results in numerous citations which school and small- and medium-sized public libraries may not hold. The continually decreasing purchasing powers of today's library budgets further compounds this negative effect.

Jody Charter noted in a 1987 study of access in secondary school library media centers that "variables such as school rules, library media center rules, inadequate collections, personality of the library media specialist, teaching style, and teenage psychology all appear to impede student access to needed information. Some students may never again choose to enter a library (Charter 1987)." Charter concluded his study by observing that students who have personal and/or educational information needs are being sadly cheated when access is blocked (Charter 1987, p. 160).

These research studies demonstrate that very significant problems exist in both realizing and meeting the needs of young adults in libraries. The needs and interests of young adults not only are diverse within the population subgroup itself, but they also are distinct from those of other client groups and must be recognized and programmed for accordingly.

MEETING THE NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF YOUTH

One of the most telling documents in the history of young adult services has to be *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries: A Manual of Operations and Procedures*. This document, a guideline for public library planning instituted by the Public Library Association, identifies specific roles for public libraries; the identified roles are: popular materials library, reference library, independent learning center, formal education support center, preschoolers' door to learning, community information center, community activities center, and the research center (McClure et al. 1987). It is ironic that each and every one of these is an essential component of effective library services to young adults (yes, even preschoolers' door to learning because many young adults are, perhaps sadly, already the parents of preschoolers). However, in communicating the needs of young adults to library administrators and parents, YA librarians tend to focus only on reading interests and easy, noncontroversial programming such as babysitting workshops.

Librarians who serve young adults—whether in a public or school library setting—have a responsibility to be advocates for their patrons' needs in all the roles identified by the Public Library Association. This responsibility is painfully obvious if for no other reason than that there is simply no one else in society charged with meeting the broad informational needs of adolescents. It is not enough just to assist adolescents nor

is it enough just to like them; we must believe in their right to arm themselves with any information which will enhance their growth.

Meeting the informational needs of and providing popular reading materials for young adults is a difficult and often unappreciated (if not nonexistent) function in public libraries. For example, in 1965, forty-five full-time and nineteen half-time YA librarians held positions in sixty-four branches of the Los Angeles Public Library. Through budget cuts made from 1977 to 1983, that force was reduced to twenty-five full-time and thirty-four half-time YA librarians. Also eliminated was an essential YA services office (including a young adult coordinator position) (Holmes 1987). The tragedy of such an example is the mass hysteria which would have resulted if childrens' services or reference services had been cut in such high staff numbers and eliminated totally from the coordination level of such a large public library system. All too often library services to young adults are viewed as frills and not as necessities.

Perhaps the single best example of a program which not only meets the needs of adolescents but also communicates those needs to parents and other authority figures is one begun in the late 1970s by Pat Scales, media specialist at Greenville Middle School in Greenville, South Carolina. Scales's program offers librarians a chance to explain to other adults what we perceive to be the needs of their children. Though aware that censors in the guise of parents could attempt to wipe out large portions of her fiction collection, Scales nevertheless bravely began a YA book discussion group for parents. Once a month Scales invited parents to the school's library for a program she had planned. Her program, "Communicate Through Literature," had three primary objectives: "(1) to develop positive communication between parents and their children through the use of literature; (2) to encourage a better relationship between the school and community by involving the parents in the school program; and (3) to create a supportive atmosphere for intellectual freedom by providing parents with the opportunity to study and analyze young adult literature (Scales 1981)."

Scales would choose a topic such as peer pressure, parents, teenage sexuality, or coping with death, and select several young adult books which dealt with the issue. She would tell a small bit about each book and send parents off to read a representative sample over the next few weeks. At the next meeting, Scales and the school's guidance counselor helped the group understand how young people deal with the specific issues they had read about and how the YA books help teenagers learn how to cope with each situation. Inherent to the discussion was the awareness that these materials were not only portraying a realistic segment of life as our children know it (whether we like it or not), but they were also helping these youngsters to see ways of coping with the various situations depicted. Scales reported that one "mother who noted the negative portrayal of parents in many of the young adult novels

commented, 'I certainly hope that my son doesn't view me this way. He probably does. Maybe I should think about this (Scales 1981, p. 10).'

Scales further reported that books which have been banned or questioned in many libraries were openly discussed in these meetings and that the parents accepted these books with enthusiasm. Not only has Scales's program provided improved communication between the library and parent, but it also has improved communication between parents and adolescents. Scales offered this comment made by a seventh grader: "If I read a good book, I'll ask my Mom to read it. The books may help her see how I feel (Scales, p. 11).'

Another way that libraries can actively promote reading among young adults is to encourage parents to keep kids and books together. This was the theme of a program recently offered by Gerald Hodges for parents. Some of Hodges's ideas were: model reading at home, read the same book as young adults and discuss it, use the power of media tie-ins with books, let teens read aloud to younger sisters and brothers, actively support freedom of choice and diversity in reading, and perhaps most importantly, "remember that we all read for similar reasons: information, vicarious experiences, to escape, to pass the time, etc. (Hodges 1987).'

A third way to meet the needs of adolescents in libraries is by offering them full library services. All too often the information needs of young adults are treated as secondary to those of adults. This is perhaps best seen at the reference desk and is most illustrative of the need to incorporate the Public Library Association roles of reference library and formal education support center into YA services. Public libraries are not alone in failing to support effectively YA needs in this area; many school libraries offer inadequate collections and services to support the academic program within the walls of their schools. We must offer online services and other facets of bibliographic instruction to young adults. To have these tools and fail to make them totally accessible and understandable to young adults violates not only the Library Bill of Rights but also the very spirit of librarianship. A prime example of this violation occurring in American librarianship is when use of such tools as online searching requires the user to be present during school hours when the "reference librarian is on duty" (and the student has to be in school) or to pay search charges at rates far beyond what the high school student can reasonably afford. To recognize, realize, and publicize these needs is the responsibility of all librarians.

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