

Library Services for Young Adults:

The Importance and History

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Abstract

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This paper will explore the history of young adult library services in public libraries and why such services are important, then and now. To fully understand the current state of young adult library services one must know the history behind it. We will examine the history of the young adult library services, what it arose from, who the main contributors to the movement and the effects had on libraries across the country. We will also discuss why having young adult services are especially essential in public libraries and the value of supporting young adults as they go through the difficult transition from child to adult. We will also discuss why young adult services are important in a multitude of public library settings, from urban to rural.

The first major public library, the Boston Public Library, was founded in 1854. Rubin (2010) writes that by the 1900's there were library services for children in most public library branches, especially those that supported immigrant populations. In fact, many public libraries had children's rooms for children specific literature and services. Prior to the creation of these rooms, it was a common practice to have an age restriction where children under the age of 12 were not allowed access to public libraries (Nesbitt 1954). In Nesbitt's article (1954) she describes the children's rooms of this early era as having books selected with children in mind, with trained librarians organizing book talks, clubs and storytelling. These pioneering librarians set up procedures for the children's room that included a variety of things from how many books were allowed to be check out to policies concerning clean hands.

The beginning of the young adult program started in the early 20th century and was spearheaded by three librarians. Mabel Williams, Margaret A. Edwards, and Jean Roos are often cited as the three most influential librarians in this movement. Prior to this, young adults, or people between the general ages of 12 to 17, were resigned to the children's room in the public library, provided that they had one. Young adults were an under recognized library user group who received no intermediate section, specific programs or any recommended literature for their unique demographic. There was no training available to teach young adults how to use the adult sections of the library, such as the reference section. The transition between a child library user to an adult user was under supported and the population of users reflected that. Often, once a young adult would finish school, they would only rarely continue to visit the library (Roos 1954).

Mabel Williams, a librarian at New York public library who created the first viable young adult program in a public library in the United States in 1919 (Chelton 1983), wrote the 1939 article Young People in the Public Library. It is one of the first articles written on the subject of young adult services and how to effectively reach the age group. She determines the age range of young adults, and writes candidly on the contradictory nature of the children who look like adults but do not yet act like them. Williams' (1939) prime example was a 16 year old student who looked like a man, demanded an adult library card, and then promptly picked out a book from the children's section. Overall, she emphasized treating young adults with respect and fostering the idea that reading and the library were places not just for children or people in school. Williams wrote several such articles on the subject through out her career. Renborg (1997) cites Mabel Williams as an inspiration to many other librarians.

Margaret A. Edwards was one such librarian. She was the Co-ordinator of Work with Young People, at Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore Maryland (Edwards 1952). She wrote the

autobiographical book The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts: the Library and the Young Adult in 1969 about her life and experiences that shaped her view point on young adult services. Edwards felt that direct book talks at local schools would be the most effective method of reaching young adults since they were quickly becoming a captive audience at the time. Katz and Fraley (1983) mentioned her frustration at the lack of access to Baltimore high schools in the 1930's. She emphasized active reading of books for young adult librarians to better be prepared for any young adult who: knew what they wanted, knew only a topic they wanted, or those who had no idea what they wanted. She also organized book mobiles to reach rural areas. She is most remembered by her rigorous training schedule for her library assistants, her riveting book talks, and her lasting autobiography.

A contemporary of Williams and fellow article writer was Jean Roos. She was the Supervisor of the Youth Department of the Cleveland Public Library, and Lecturer on Young People's Literature at Western Reserve University School of Library Science (Roos 1954). She and Mabel Williams would cite each others work and were contemporaries in the field of young adult services. In Roos' article Young People and Public Libraries (1954) she raised awareness about the gap in library users by point out that many children who used the library regularly, only approximately half continued to do so as adults. Roos' speculated that the weak link was the lack of support to young adults. She emphasized that young adults services should be a natural extension of children services and that they should be guided, depending on maturity and interests, towards appropriate adult material. Roos' talks about the few notable libraries that already had small intermediate sections for young adults in the general adult section of the library and how necessary it is that the young adult section be outside of the children's section. Librarians dealing with young adults should have a wide reading range and a forward thinking perspective. Roos' article also illustrates the need to be supplemental to academic work for young

adults.

Each of these forerunners in the field had their own take on how to best approach the subject. Edwards felt that having passive items such as book lists did not do enough and felt that the library assistants should be trained in how to personally guide young adults to books that would entertain and enrich them. She felt very strongly that librarians and library assistants should be able to take even the most vague question from a young adult patron and show them a variety of interesting and age appropriate reading materials. In Edwards (1952) article "How do I love thee?" she talks about the importance of considering the emotional maturity of young adult girls who ask for romance books. She details how the mindset of a girl can be gauged by her age, and how she thinks about love. It's a practical and useful guide for finding books on a particular subject that may be difficult otherwise. Edwards believed in making sure that young adult librarians were well read, and up to date on what books could most benefit the young adult readers. She also was an accomplished public speaker and writer. Renborg (1997) cites Edwards with teaching thousands of library students how to inspire people to read with her book talks.

Before the young adult movement, the age group that was too old to be in the children's room but still too young to be an adult patron was displaced. Mabel Williams' (1939) article "Young people in the public library" discusses an emerging and new service. Her audience was the librarian professionals reading the American Library Association Bulletin. She makes the issue and value clear on the first page: these young people will become adults in just a few years. The adult patron group that actively used the library was at the time was a smaller proportion than the children patron group. She was considered to be one of the most successful organizers for young adult services in the United States. She emphasized that while adolescence is a awkward situation, with children's minds in bodies

nearly adult, respect should be given. Williams encouraged social groups to encourage young adults to read and talk together. She told a brief story where a structured group met after a reading time to discuss their books and a young man cautiously raised his hand and asked if he could go back to his reading. Respecting the desires, opinions and beliefs of the young adult, however contrary to the young adult patron appears, was her prime approach.

Roos' felt that the best strategy was to have a standard set of procedures to better organize young adult library services (1954). She includes in that training, materials, book collection, space and environment, standards of personal and types of administration. Roos strongly advocated libraries recognizing the value of young adults. She speaks frankly in her article about the need for compelling library programs for young adults to compete with other organizations like churches. Roos acknowledged that young adult services cross many departments in libraries, and that can cause administrative problems. She states that cross training of the entire library work force in how to handle young adults would be to the betterment of all. Flexibility in the organization is a necessary attribute. Roos' article also talks about recruiting the young adults themselves to help develop their own space. She believes they have the energy and drive to rearrange furniture, redecorate a space, and help set up book displays. Youth leaders can be tapped for information, assistance, and under the right circumstances, help keep order in the young adult's area. Roos felt that not just book discussions, but other activities such as film discussions could be held for the young adults at the library to their betterment because they are related to library materials. She also felt that the most important attributes a young adult librarian should have are a personality suited to the job and a wide reading background.

The young adult movement had its largest improvements and innovations while Williams, Edwards and Roos were still working in the librarian field. Chalten (1983) discusses the difference

between young adult services and school. Even early on, as mentioned above in regards to Edwards, young adult services in public libraries have had to balance between supporting young adults school related needs and guiding them to literature they can read for pleasure. Chalten (1983) points out that public library young adult services accentuate reading guidance and programs out side of school. Participation in a public library is a voluntary activity and is therefore designed to be open-ended and focused on following whatever interest the young adult has. This is a sharp contrast to the school environment where everything is structured, assigned, and usually based around textbooks.

Chalten (1983) also makes the sharp insight of how often young adults do not receive the assistance they truly need in a library. Many public libraries have the reference desk librarian also doubling as the young adult librarian. That means that when a young adult has a need for a specific resource for a book report that has strict criteria, they would need to go to the reference librarian. This creates it's own problems. For example, the student's inexperience to library procedures, shyness or fears of looking foolish in front of an adult may make them reluctant to go ask for assistance. Chalten's (1983) article Reference Services For Children and Young Adults also raises the issue of how to deal with a sullen young adult accompanied by an adult who are looking to receive assistance in finding sources for a school assignment. She recommends speaking to and raising any questions regarding the assignment to the young adult.

There are several issues that Chalten (1983) has raised in regards to overlaps between school assignments and public libraries. One problem she pointed out was thus: if there is little communication between the teacher assigning a book report with a specific topic for an entire class and the nearby library providing supplemental assistance, then the odds are that there will be a number of peeved young adults who cannot complete their assignment because all the relevant books have been

checked out. A simple solution Chalten (1983) pointed out was to have the teachers provide a timely notice to local libraries that shortly a large number of young adults will be looking for books on a specific subject, so that the libraries can order, or borrow from other libraries, more books to fulfill this need. She also cautions against the urge to minimize the need for services by young adults.

Homework questions are just as relevant as any other type of query, and perhaps more so for students who reach out to public librarians.

However, a recent article Teens Are from Neptune, Librarians Are from Pluto: An Analysis of Online Reference Transactions by Virginia A. Walter and Cindy Mediavilla (2005) raises the issue that students using online library reference services for help with homework are not receiving adequate service from reference librarians. Walter and Mediavilla (2005) examined over one hundred transcripts between young adults and reference librarians on the library's 24/7 service. Typically, a student, 4th through 12th grade, would instant message (IM) a reference librarian and ask for assistance. The majority of questions were homework related. The reference librarians had the option of forwarding the student to a state sponsored tutor service if the student requested it or if the librarian felt that a tutor would be more appropriate for the student. The majority of the time, Walter and Mediavilla found, the reference librarian would, at best, make a half-hearted attempt to help and then quickly forward the student onwards to the tutor service. The main problem they observed from the transcripts was miss-communication between young adult and the librarian. Some of the students had trouble conveying what exactly they needed help finding in the first place, but many of the librarians used canned responses and made no effort to build any kind of rapport with the young adults. Often the librarians would inappropriately forward the student to the tutor service with only vague instructions on how to access the service after a very short and one sided conversation.

Still, since the beginning of the young adult library service movement, young adult services have progressed greatly. The majority of the approaches advocated by Williams, Edwards and Roos have been adopted by librarians in public library settings. It is common place to see teen night programs, or movie nights at public libraries. However, libraries have had branch closings due to budget cuts or shrinking populations groups. This also means that specialty services, like young adult services, are also affected. Without young adult services, libraries neglect a significant portion of their user group. Renee Vaillancourt (2000) cites a 1994 survey of young adult services in the United States public libraries. The findings of this now nearly twenty year old survey were very telling. Nearly one-quarter of all library patrons are between the ages of twelve and eighteen but only around ten percent of public libraries staff young adult specialists. The libraries that do offer young adult services have librarians offering dual services. Typically, young adults would be served by children or youth service professionals, or by a reference librarian (Vaillancourt 2000).

This state of affairs continues in libraries across the country, and so there are numerous published guides for public library generalists. Vaillancourt's (2000) book Bare Bones Young Adult Services: Tips for Public Library Generalists was written to help fill the void in many libraries where the need for a young adult librarian exists, but the funds do not. Exasperating the issues facing young adults today compared to the 1950's situation we discussed above, we have a far more complicated situation. Divorce is commonplace; most children growing up are in single parent households. Vaillancourt (2000) states that a quarter of teens say that not having an adult to discuss problems and decisions with is a serious concern. She goes on to infer that public librarians are in a good position to fill that role. An interested, caring professional can have an immense impact on a struggling young adult.

A recent article by Virginia Walter (2010) called Sowing the Seeds of Praxis: Incorporating Youth Development Principles in a Library Teen Employment Program talks about a public library program in South Philadelphia where young adults are employed by the Free Library as Teen Leadership Assistants (TLA's). They work with LEAP, an after school program that provides educational and cultural enrichment to children and teens, participate in Saturday training sessions, and plan and implement a Youth Empowerment Summit. Walter (2010) briefly discusses the history of youth services and programs and draws to the conclusion that programs where the young adults are in administrative roles have more success than programs without. The TLA's are mentored by Associate Leaders, college students who were formerly TLA's, while they both assist children and young adults with homework completion in an after school setting. The TLA's provide role models to the youth they are working with, and often bring insights into cultural or youth centered issues. The program also provided the teens with much needed skills, feelings about themselves, and feelings about their environment.

Walter (2010) found that the TLA's felt that they were providing a service to the children of their community and discovering the importance of libraries in a community as well as what librarians actually do. The teens, living in South Philadelphia where gang violence is a part of life, described the library as a safe place where they often have created a small community. The TLA's described feelings of pride and confidence from their position working in the library. The teen's relationships with both adults, peers and other ethnic groups was reported as increasing. Indeed, the ability to build meaningful relationships with other people outside of their ethnic group and their age group are hugely important skills to have. The exposure to library resources, and program run SAT preparation for example, help develop additional skills to better succeed educationally. The TLA's gain the job skills

of being on time, group work, appropriate work attire and behavior in addition to the work experience on a resume and the future job references. The teens also gained social and personal skills from their work as TLA's. In reference to the article title, Walter (2010) discusses the effort by the library to recruit “diverse Philadelphians” to the library field with this program. The first former TLA completed their degree and started work as a professional librarian in 2008.

Keeping young adults interested and enjoying the library can be a challenge. Clare Snowball's (2005) article “Teenage reluctant readers and graphic novels” addresses a possible solution to these issues. She discusses how recreational reading of young adults starts to sharply decline between the ages of fourteen and twenty. While young adults are expected to read for school assignments, other activities take up their time so that recreational reading takes a back seat. Eventually, the teen is out of practice with active reading and struggles to quickly and easily comprehend what they are reading. Essentially, reading even for fun becomes a great deal of work. What is needed is an engaging, easy, and fun way to make reading something the teen wants to do. Graphic novels are one possibility since they highly visual. They draw readers in with colorful and interesting cover art. The reading level is low proficiency and is often simply dialog and sparse descriptions. The scenes and characters are not described in text but rather shown. Comic books are a comparable media to video games, television or other visual based mediums. It may help readers, who normally have trouble imagining the world being described in a traditional novel, immerse themselves in the story (Snowball 2005). Snowball advises expanding the graphic novel section of any library.

Fully understanding the actual physical, emotional and mental changes that make up the process we call adolescence is essential for anyone working with young adults. Viallancourt (2000) talks about the importance of recognizing what normal adolescent developments are as well as one's own reaction

to young adults. Sometimes librarians are reminded of their own painful adolescent transition by their young adult patrons and are unable to work past their personal irritation of that reminder. Walter (2010) article frankly discusses that not all librarians acting as supervisors to the TLA's feel comfortable in the role. In fact, one of them have implied that they find the interactions difficult because they do not even like the teens. Viallancourt (2000) discusses why good relationships with young adult patrons are crucial and how to relate better to them. She recommends that librarians try to think back to their own experiences as young adults and remember what their own priorities were back then. Viallancourt (2000) cautions librarians to not assume that the things they found important growing up are the same as what today's young adults find important. Even in the last ten years, the world's technologies have rapidly changed and teen's priorities in relation to them have changed accordingly.

One thing that has not changed is the often traumatic, transitional period of adolescence. Viallancourt (2000) explains how the process of puberty increases physical growth at different rates in different people and can lead to adult-appearing children, physical clumsiness and self-consciousness. She elaborates that young adults self-consciousness is the main reason why they are hesitant to ask library staff for assistance and why a little extra attention can help overcome their fears of inadequacy. Young adults' start to physically resemble adults, are intellectually impatient to be treated like adults but are still dependent on their parents like children. The awkwardness and insecurity of young adults makes them especially sensitive to any perceived insults. Being shuffled to the young adult librarian by other library professionals regardless of the nature of their question can make the young adults feel unwanted. Ideally, Viallancourt (2000) states, the young adult should be treated with the same respect as an adult. Their queries should be taken seriously, their information needs should be investigated,

and knowledge of popular culture should be cultivated to better understand the young adults. She recommends empathy, approachability, patience, an open-mind, and a sense of humor. Young adults are going through a state of flux; they are constantly changing on a physical, mental, intellectual, and emotional level. Viallancourt (2000) especially recommends staying flexible.

Library services, specifically for young adults, is essential to keep libraries vibrant. Without services and programs for young adults, this patron user group will dwindle away as they grow into adults. It is important to point out that adult patrons are the ones paying taxes that pay for public libraries. They are the ones voting to keep public libraries funded. They are the ones who are choosing to use the library and take their children there, or not. The way they are guided through the transition between childhood and adulthood and the types of experiences they have at libraries will affect how they think about public libraries and librarians for the rest of their lives. This means that while not every librarian likes dealing with young adults, they are an essential part of the population of patrons that need to be served.

In summation, the movement for young adult library services began nearly a century ago and was headed up by three passionate librarians who understood the importance of reaching out to this age group. They each had their own methods they felt were the best ways for reaching the young adults in their communities. Their ideas, methodologies, and beliefs regarding young adults has translated to current library practices. Currently, most librarians have a better idea on how to cultivate and serve young adults. Programs that employ young adults and use their energy and abilities to serve their community are more effective than just providing services alone. It is important to respect and provide services to young adults as they metamorphose into adults.

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