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Raising the Bar in Public Libraries: Literacy, Adolescent Development and Young Adult Services

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Abstract:

This article takes a close look at teenage education and development with the intent of discovering ways in which public libraries can be of better service to a currently underserved population. The research in the area of literacy and learning reveals that over time adults and educators have begun to expect teens to develop a certain skill set. While helping teens to develop skills is of great importance, some expectations are unnecessary and potentially very damaging. Educational theory relates that the educational mold in the United States, while helping many, is not right for all people and a number of the ways teenagers learn (their intelligences) are not being catered to. Here public libraries have a distinct advantage and opportunity to fill some of the gaps. The research in adolescent brain development is also analyzed to the benefit of better understanding the teenage population. This increased understanding can help Young Adult Services Librarians cater their collections and programming to better suit and assist the teens being served.

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Introduction

This article takes a close look at teenage education and development with the intent of discovering ways in which public libraries can be of better service to a currently underserved population. The research in the area of literacy and learning reveals that over time adults and educators have begun to expect teens to develop a certain skill set. While helping teens to develop skills is of great importance, some expectations are unnecessary and potentially very damaging. Educational theory relates that the educational mold in the United States, while helping many, is not right for all people and a number of the ways teenagers learn (their intelligences) are not being catered to. Here public libraries have a distinct advantage and opportunity to fill some of the gaps. The research in adolescent brain development is also analyzed to the benefit of better understanding the teenage population. This increased understanding can help Young Adult Services Librarians cater their collections and programming to better suit and assist the teens being served.

Teen Literacy and Learning

An exploration of the literature has shown that literacy involves more than the ability to read and write. There has been a lot written about how people learn as well as many theories on what should be taught. This expanding conception of literacy is an asset to the learning of individuals who do not fit the precise educational mold laid out in the United States. More particularly, it is an asset to the increased understanding of adolescent learning and modification of teaching the adolescent population.

The evolving definition of literacy has begun to impact public libraries. Library professionals have realized the need to cater services to the sometimes turbulent, yet dynamic teenage population. Much of the early concern seemed to revolve around getting teen bodies into the physical structure of the library, but that concept is changing as well and many practitioners are making valiant attempts to serve the teenage

population by meeting them in their own learning mediums. However, there is still much to be learned about teen service within public libraries and application of new information literacy ideas coupled with new information about adolescent development can assist librarians to greatly improve young adult services within their public libraries.

Literacy is a term that has become weighed down over time. Initially the term simply meant the ability to read and write, but when the term is now used understanding what is meant requires a bit more attention. Authors such as Anne Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola and James Paul Gee have sought to clarify what has happened to literacy and point out why the mere ability to read and write, while valuable, is no longer a sufficient measure of success. In their piece entitled *Why Are We Using Literacy as a Metaphor for Everything Else* Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola do an excellent job of pointing out that literacy has become a word weighed down with political, social and cultural meaning. After discussing the baggage that accompanies the word 'literacy' they make this poignant statement, "if we have unpacked 'literacy' at all adequately, we hope we can now argue that 'literacy' gets put behind 'technological' or 'computer' because 'literacy' is already used to encompass everything we think worthy of our consideration: the term automatically upgrades its prefix" (Wysocki 360).

These authors have done the literacy discussions a favor in clarifying what has been done to the term. Using 'literacy' so ubiquitously has built a bizarre and false expectation where we want people to have a given set of 'literacies' or skills and what we are really hoping is that they themselves will be of value; making the reverse expectation very dangerous. When the individual has not and is not acquiring the given set of skills they are suddenly, and often unconsciously, deemed to be without value. This seems to be especially true for teenagers, who are being educated as part of their transition into adulthood. If they are not acquiring the skill set deemed to make them literate they are seen as failing themselves and society.

James Paul Gee did teenage literacy and learning a particular favor by talking

about semiotic domains. Semiotic, he argues, is a word that helps clarify that meaning is not limited to words, but can be found in “images, sounds, gestures, movements, graphs, diagrams, equations, objects, and even people like babies, midwives, and mothers” (Gee 17). Semiotic domains, then, are areas that carry their own distinct ways of communicating ideas, using methods that extend beyond the printed word. The main example Gee uses is the semiotic domain of video games, arguing that simply because the playing child is not studiously deciphering the words on a printed page of a book does not mean he is not acquiring valuable skills. Gee argues that, “people need to be able to learn to be literate in new semiotic domains throughout their lives” (Gee 19). Gee asserts that people impact these domains as the domains impact us and gaining literacy in many domains and design spaces allow us to learn “how these design spaces relate to each other and to other sorts of semiotic domains” (Gee 43). Literacy, or multiple literacies, increase power and understanding.

Librarians seem to have heard these requests for an evolved understanding of literacy to the benefit of the young adult population. Many public libraries have attributed staff time and funds to new efforts in young adult programming. There are many examples of this. In 2003 Walter Minkel published an article entitled *The Wisdom of Goofing Off* in which he insists that access to the Internet in public libraries may be one of the only locations where young people can explore the many possibilities of the World Wide Web, and so their use of the computers should not be limited to homework only (Minkel). This is a great example of the growing awareness of the need for proficiency in many arenas.

Articles published as early as 2002 carry reports of growing dedication to the teen population. Patrick Jones cites large urban libraries as well as small school and public libraries as having increasing success using developing technology to bridge the gap between library services and young adults stating “services to young adults are, in many parts of the country, not just alive and well, but thriving” (Jones

21). He also saw that there was a need to increase the amount of effort going into teen services. He strongly encouraged a comprehensive approach to offering young adult services that includes dedicated leadership from staff, the development of a strategic plan and the consideration of young adult development in the process. He declares, “focusing on developmental needs, youth development, assets, and outcomes represents a vision of looking outside the library walls, not only for the ‘usual suspects’ of collaboration or outreach, but also at what value our services have in the lives of teenagers” (Jones 21). And further states, “while this vision could occur through happenstance, good luck, and the dynamic leadership of one person, any organization is likely to better reach its vision through the development of a strategic plan involving many stake holders, including teens themselves” (Jones 23).

In offering many wonderful suggestions for improving young adult services Jones recognizes that a more developed conception of educating the teen population in a public library setting is needed. The public library is in an incredible situation, especially when placed in juxtaposition to the public education system in the United States. Jones himself states, "In a time when secondary students more than ever need to learn the skills to solve information problems and become information literate, in many schools they are instead focused on drills to learn skills used primarily to pass a politically mandated test” (Jones 21). Many authors have similarly recognized that the method of teaching in public schools fails many students who do not fit the mold.

Teens, Education and Public Libraries

Paolo Freire wrote extensively on what he called the banking concept of teaching. Students come to the classroom and sit quietly while the instructor doles out pieces of information to be stored in the students’ brains until such a time as the information needs to be withdrawn, most typically for the exam. Instead, Freire suggests that problem posing is a better method to use when educating learners.

An instructor who uses problem posing is someone who “does not regard cognizable objects as his private property, but as the object of reflection by himself and the students. In this way, the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students . . . are now crucial co-investigators” (Freire 75).

The banking concept so often exists in an attempt to maintain order, control and stability in the classroom. The public library is not bound by a certain curriculum that must be met, a certain standardized test that students must pass, and so has a great deal of freedom that school educators do not enjoy. The library is posed to be a great asset to the community and marvelous supplement to schooling systems. What is a more perfect place to integrate programs that will partner with groups within a given community while involving young adults in the process than the public library? Such programs offered by such an institution will allow them to be ‘co-investigators’ while teaching them to make valuable contributions and showing them how and where to get the information they need to do all this. And, it can do all of this for teenagers in a dynamic and exciting way that will engage and interest them. Freire proclaims, “The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity” and the public library is the ideal place to be seen as a resource for such continued life learning (Freire 75). It is a free resource to the entire community throughout the lifespan and is flexible enough to fill almost whatever role is necessary to that community.

The following articles, published in 2005, highlighted the importance of partnerships between community entities in helping the young adult population engage in worthwhile programs that directly involve and empower the youth. Patti Kozlowski offers an example of such a partnership in her article *Sharing the Language of Learning* in which high school students partner with other students or families in the community who speak English as their second language and teach them of the wonderful assets

available in the public library. She states, “It is important to note that this is service-learning and not simply volunteerism. It does more than just make students ‘feel good about helping others,’ because the students are providing service to the community through curriculum goals” (Kozlowski). Jami Jones provides other such examples in her article *The Power of Partnerships*, one of which is the Joint Task Force on School/Public Library Corporation and is sponsored on a national level by the American Library Association. This partnership has resulted in a range of efforts “from homework help and library-card sign-ups to book-discussion groups and storytelling festivals” (Jones). Jami Jones states that these partnerships help build social capital which, in her view, “is the glue that holds us together. It helps shape the way children develop, view others in their community, and relate to institutions” (Jones).

Partnerships and programs offered in public libraries, such as those mentioned above, are also a wonderful application of theories on literacy and learning presented by Howard Gardner. Gardner’s research supports the concept of multiple intelligences. He argues, “Multiple intelligences theory . . . pluralizes the traditional concept. An intelligence entails the ability to solve problems or fashion products that are of consequence in a particular cultural setting or community” (Gardner 15). There are seven main areas defined, with others added later. The main seven are musical intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Gardner points out that, “An exclusive focus on linguistic and logical skills in formal schooling can shortchange individuals with skills in other intelligences. It is evident from inspection of adult roles, even in language-dominated Western society, that spatial, interpersonal, or bodily-kinesthetic skills often play key roles. Yet linguistic and logical skills form the core of most diagnostic tests of ‘intelligence’ and are placed on a pedagogical pedestal in our schools” (Gardner 31).

This lack in schools can be, and is becoming, a gain in public libraries. The public library can offer a space where teenagers can come and enjoy using technology they

may not get anywhere else, where they can interact with their peers in formal and informal ways. They can also interact with adults in an open environment receptive to possibilities and take an active part in community partnership programs. A wonderful success story comes from the Chinatown branch of the San Francisco Public Library. In 2002 the public library created a workshop series for young adults, ages 14 to 18, in which they taught editing, journalism and Web design skills to help the teens of varying cultures write a Teen-zine that would offer an online walking tour of Chinatown. This workshop taught the teens valuable skills in computing and writing and in the same breath contributed to the community and exposed the youth to the cultural issues they were sifting through daily in their own lives (D.L.W.). Such collaboration is a credit to Freire's problem-posing theory by allowing adults and students to interact and work in partnership to build new and innovative skills together, outside of a strict banking concept. It also appeals to Gardner's multiple intelligences by exercising the youth's interpersonal and intrapersonal skills along with their logical, mathematical, special and linguistic skills. (They were building a virtual walking tour of Chinatown complete with images and personal essays and articles written by the teenagers).

While this and many other great examples of successful teen services in public libraries do exist, there is still progress to be made. As Donald Schon points out, it can often be difficult to put theory into practice. A survey put out by the Young Adult Library Services Association in 2006 revealed that while many public libraries were making great strides in young adult services a great many libraries still did not have any at all. There were some that had allotted a segment of the library to young adult books, but did not have any dedicated staff to support teen services. There were some who had part-time staff assistance and some who had a full-time staff member dedicated to youth services, but there were very few institutions which had a separate budget dedicated to young adult services. Of course, the libraries that had part- or full-time staff dedicated to youth services saw the greatest amount of increase in young adult circulation and

program attendance, but the presence of these staffing situations is rarer than it is common (Alessio).

A poignant and wrenching example of a public library failing to appropriately serve their teenage population was published in the School Library Journal in 2007. The feature article highlighted the New Jersey Maplewood Public Library's decision to close down the library from 2:45 p.m. to 5 p.m., because the teenage population was coming into the library and being unruly and disruptive. They left finding a solution up to the mayor, who allotted $220,000 to a local church's after school program, keeping the school's gymnasium open after school hours and hiring consultants to find alternatives to the library. What a tragic and inappropriate response. It is clear that while there is literature in place calling for better teen services, misunderstanding and resistance still takes place. Fortunately, catastrophes such as this one are rare. Most commonly found are the programs that approach teen services in a pell-mell fashion and, while making an effort, get hit and miss results.

A prime example (that seems to be a particular response to Gee's argument) is that of public libraries investing in popular gaming systems and offering evenings where teenagers can come to the library and play together. This has been done by such libraries as the Salt Lake City Public Library and the Davenport Public Library. The idea is great because it appeals to a commonly known interest of teenagers and displays a willingness on the part of librarians to cater to different intelligences and facilitate learning in various semiotic domains. However, these programs are often not a raging success, especially in public libraries of larger communities. I believe that this is because a program like this is implemented with good intentions, but not much else. No professional thought has gone into ensuring that the program will be valuable to adolescents or the community. While most young adults would shun a program that was blatantly established 'for their benefit and the benefit of the community' they can often sense, and will equally shun an activity that holds no value at all.

It is time to renew the call issued by Patrick Jones for an organized effort in quality teen services. Public libraries should have full-time staff dedicated to establishing strategic plans, valuable partnerships and fostering an understanding of adolescents and their development. A particular area that the field of education has started paying attention to is the cognitive neurosciences. Studies are being conducted that reveal the development occurring in the adolescent brain and how these developments influence their learning experiences. Educator Robert Sylwester is a particular example of someone who has been working to use these findings to better serve the teenage population.

The Teenage Brain

In the preface of his recent book The Adolescent Brain: Reaching for Autonomy he writes, ""To understand what's occurring within adolescents doesn't mean we can control them, any more than understanding meteorology means that we can control a tornado. Still, understanding a phenomenon is much better than not understanding it, and scientists are now providing us with a much clearer understanding of the nature and neurobiology of adolescence" (Sylwester vii-viii). Just as educators are striving to use these findings to better serve teenagers, librarians can use them to improve their young adult services. Such knowledge may have proved invaluable to the staff of the Maplewood Public Library and may have prevented redirecting funds and teenagers elsewhere.

One recent study focuses on the unique role the pre-frontal cortex plays in the development of the adolescent brain. The field of neuroscience has shown that this area experiences significant maturation and development during the teenage years. More formally stated, "The structure of the pre-frontal cortex (PFC), the area of the brain associated with understanding other minds (social cognition) and coordinating thoughts and behaviors (executive function), undergoes significant changes during puberty and

adolescence" (Choudhury 143).

Choudhury, et al., highlighted two major developments unique to PFC development in the adolescent brain, "First, there is an increase in axonal myelination, which increases transmission speed. Second, there is a gradual decrease in synaptic density, indicating significant pruning of connections. These neural changes make it likely that the cognitive abilities relying on the frontal cortex, such as executive functions and social-cognitive abilities, also change during adolescence" (Choudhury 142). This is an interesting discovery in regards to the implications for working with teenagers. Abilities that adults take for granted, such as coordinating our own thoughts and behaviors and being able to understand the social cues and intentions of others, are in a major state of overhaul for teenagers.

Initially, some of the terms used in the field of neuroscience can be confusing, but understanding the research will become more than worth the effort. The human brain communicates through electrical and chemical impulses sent through neurons (brain cells) and synapses (gaps between neurons). Myelin is a type of coating around the axon (part of the neuron) which increases the speed of the communication between the cells. The two findings stated above reveal that the adolescent brain is undergoing a process of great change in the way it operates by increasing the speed of transmission in certain areas and fine tuning the paths and processes used in many higher level thinking tasks (pruning of connections). The pre-frontal cortex, the area needed to conduct complex reasoning and make tough choices, "is temporarily perturbed by the wave of synaptogenesis that occurs at puberty. Only later in adolescence does synaptic pruning render this region more efficient, such that less neural activity will correlate with the same task performance" (Choudhury 146). Incredible. It is no wonder that teenagers often make choices that seem irrational when you understand that perhaps their developing brain is still processing their reasoning ability.

Another researcher further confirms the importance of the functions performed

by the pre-frontal cortex. The PFC is located just behind the forehead and nasal cavity, and is the area of the brain that is in charge of higher level thinking, such as decision making and cognitive control (Casey 68). Throughout adolescence the brain undergoes a shift. Basic functions, like the sensory and motor systems, develop first and the systems that associate the basic functions through efforts of controlling which stimulus' to respond to develop later (Casey 66). Interestingly, this path of development occurs laterally across the brain, from back to front. It is only understandable then, that a teenager will often seem incomprehensible to those adults trying to work with them. They will have outbursts that seem out of place, they will often be awkward in their social interactions and they will frequently be overwhelmed by the task of filtering the information they are receiving to determine what information will best help them make the choices that will tender the results they want. What a wonderful stage of life for information specialists to be involved with. However, it is not an easy charge to work with individuals who are in such a stage of flux and it is a tall task to interpret adolescent brain discoveries for the benefit of the young adults librarians wish to serve.

Fortunately, there have been recent attempts on the part of neuroscience researchers themselves, to link their findings to potential usefulness in an educational setting. Studies that have looked closely at processes of pruning in the brain have revealed that, with young children, the development of the brain can be positively influenced by their environment. One study states, "It is unknown whether the pruning of synapse in frontal cortex during adolescence is similarly influenced by the environment. If this turns out to be the case, it would have profound implication for the kinds of experiences and environments that are optimal for teenage brain development" (Choudhury 146). This finding could be remarkably useful for librarians as well as educators. Catering situations and opportunities offered to the young adult population according to their stages of brain development would result in more successful efforts on the part of the adults privileged to work with these dynamic individuals. At the very

least, awareness among librarians of the processes occurring within the brains of young adults would engender a greater understanding and sensitivity to situations that may otherwise be exasperating and discouraging. The research in this area is in its beginning stages so attention to the progress of studies like these will likely prove fruitful.

Another connection researchers are making is the relationship that exists between the temperament of a teenager, the effort the individual puts into control of thoughts and behavior, and their performance in academic and social settings. In this study Checa et al. clarify that, “the executive attention network is the most directly involved in cognitive and affective regulation” (Checa 177). They also stipulate that effortful control, “refers to the efficiency with which self-regulatory abilities are used in both personal and interpersonal situations that require overcoming dominant but inappropriate responses” (Checa 184). The study participants took part in response testing and completed temperament surveys as well as surveys asking them to self-assess their levels of personal effortful control. Parents of participants were asked to complete similar surveys.

The results showed that poorer functioning of the executive attention network relates to poorer performance in classrooms and poor or improper responses to social cues and interactions; creating a negative response among teachers and peers (Checa 184). Another article similarly relates that “the self-reported ability to show self-control predicts academic success better than IQ tests (Sodian 111). Checa et al. significantly state, “Our results point to the importance of understanding students’ temperament by parents and educators to promote their adaptation to the classroom. Increased teacher’s awareness of how students’ temperament relates to their responses to the social and academic challenges is likely to reduce teacher’s negative reactions and promote feelings of support, which in turn have the potential to reduce conflict and encourage the use of more appropriate coping strategies by the students. Emphasizing

the mediating role of the self-regulatory processes also offers guidance for designing interventions to improve school readiness by enhancing cognitive and temperamental control systems" (Checa 185).

Not only are teenagers dealing with a synaptic pruning process in their pre-frontal cortex that is intermittently impeding and enhancing their ability to process information and make decisions, their brain is also developing the ability to respond to stimulus', interpret social cues and exhibit impulse control, which helps people perform goal oriented behavior(Casey 65). This is a lot to be processing all at once for the teenager, and a lot to understand and keep in mind for the adults working with the teenagers. However, results that relate that the adolescent's own perceived ability to show self-control is a reliable predictor of future success are invaluable in helping adult mentors understand where to place a focus in helping teens through this time of difficult transition.

Another interesting factor found to be uniquely impacting teenagers is a biological shift in sleep cycles. A change in the circadian rhythm of teenagers causes a transition to later sleepiness and later wakefulness. Currently school systems in the United States require students to be ready for the day several hours before their body is ready for them to be awake. "A number of cross-sectional studies have demonstrated that an earlier start of the school day results in worse sleep and that also there is a negative influence on daytime functioning as well as grades" (Fischer 21). This situation often creates a sleep debt for teenagers during the week which they often try to recover from during the weekend. While there is not much librarians can do about the academic schedule of the adolescents they work with, knowing about the sleep and waking schedule of teenagers can help them plan events during prime waking hours when teens will be most alert. The public library is in a prime position to offer activities during young adult waking hours by offering after school programming during weekdays and trying to schedule weekend programs later in the afternoon.

The many discoveries being made by neuroscientists about the development of the adolescent brain can help teen service librarians in public libraries better understand the population they are trying to serve. This research will not necessarily be a direct guide to programming or the type of reading that will best serve an adolescent, but it will certainly increase understanding and awareness. Teenagers are a very unique group of people within a population or community and the services provided for them need to be prepared with thought, care and research. Programming geared specifically to and for young adults needs to exist, just as programming geared specifically for younger children currently exists.

Teen Services Deserve Unique Attention

Samantha Wikstrom, Head of Children's Services, Davenport Public Library is a marvelous example of such programming for younger children. Under her care there are story times offered for several different age groups, where children of a particular developmental level will receive stories and activities that will interest them and help them progress from the level in which they currently reside. To plan each of these programs she trains her staff to consider six development elements as they plan their story times. The print awareness, phonological awareness, letter awareness, vocabulary level, ability to understand narrative and print motivation of each group is taken into account so that each group gets the help they need at the level appropriate for them.

Wikstrom admits that she sees herself as an educator and is continually on the lookout for teaching moments—opportunities in the course of interacting with her patrons that can be used to help them learn something new. She is dedicated to creating children programming that is consistent and transcends the interests and abilities of individual staff members. Doing so also requires the establishment of relationships (with parents, community institutions, political entities, etc.) that are

committed and sustainable. Wikstrom knows the value of theory in literacy, learning and child development and actively seeks to apply this theory in the children programming offered in the Davenport Public Library.

Young adult services deserve no less. As the above review of research in adolescent brain development shows, teenagers are in a special state of developmental transition. In an article preceding his earlier mentioned book, Robert Sylwester proclaims, “Our search for the meaning and nurturing of childhood and adolescence must thus begin with the organization and extended development of the maturing brain that regulates our long, sometimes-awkward, but always-fascinating journey into an autonomous adulthood” (Sylwester 3). The unique transitional stage teenagers find themselves in warrants unique attention from public library systems and the concentrated efforts of a staff uniquely dedicated to them.

Mary Louise Pratt introduced the idea of contact zones into the literature about information literacy and learning. She states, “contact zones . . . refer to social space where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, p.4). While she was referring to the clash between two large bodies of people whose cultures substantially differ from each other, it is not difficult to see how this theory may apply to adult interactions with teenagers. Young adults are struggling toward autonomy; and it is a struggle because their brain development impacts their social and cognitive abilities in a dramatic way. If librarians are to properly serve this population we need to try to meet them on their ground, and to do that we must understand as much as possible about the ground they stand on.

Unfortunately, up to this point, young adult services in public libraries have received a bit of a sporadic approach. Typically they are an addendum to already existing adult or children services. The library literature has begun to call for something more for our young adults than an afterthought. Of course, young adult services in a public library setting are not an easy task. There are budget constraints, space

constraints, staffing constraints, and a general lack of understanding of the population to be served. Librarians are beginning to recognize the increased need and many libraries implement what is found in the literature.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of opportunity for growth in this niche within librarianship. Just as educators are beginning to see the need to more fully understand the developmental process occurring within teenagers, so too should librarians. In fact, librarians should follow the example of Samantha Wikstrom and begin to consider themselves as educators, but educators who are freed from the restrictions of a classroom and a required curriculum. Young adult librarians in public libraries who are informed of theories of literacy and learning (Gee's semiotic domains and Pratt's contact zones), theories of education (Gardner's multiple intelligences and Freire's banking concept), and who keep an eye on the growing research in adolescent brain development (especially the change in pre-frontal cortex functioning and its impact on behavior and reasoning) will be appropriately equipped to create strategic plans that build quality services and programming. Careful and thoughtful efforts such as these will engage and benefit the youth in lasting ways.

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