Ungdomarna väljer bort biblioteken!
Anteckningar från Portsmouth, England
 Dave Percival

Ungdomarna väljer bort biblioteken. Dave Percival rapporterar från ett arbete att inkludera ungdomar i Portsmouth, England

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English translation

Libraries, young people and QLP-Y

By

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It would appear, on paper at least, that public libraries in Britain have "discovered" young people. Interest in the 13-24 year old - long overdue - has come about from two fronts, the practical and the ideological. On the one hand there is the politically expedient realisation that public libraries - with their aging workforce and correspondingly aging readership – are unsustainable. According to a recent study, nearly a third of all present library staff are due to retire in the next ten years. (MLA 2005) In this self-preservation paradigm, the problem facing service managers is how this neglected audience can be reached and their presence in libraries maintained. Whilst most libraries authorities have at least a nominal collection of youth book titles, and some make cursory attempts to provide youth-friendly décor, young people in public libraries are mostly noticeable by their absence. Such tokenism in their approach explains that while there are undoubtedly some centres of excellence in British libraries, youth provision is patchy at best and at worst, non-existent.

On the other hand, as recent documents on public libraries in the new century have shown, there can and should be much more creative approaches to service provision in the twenty-first century. In this transformational paradigm, there have been calls to make sure that libraries evolve from being merely passive service providers for those "persons desiring to make use thereof", as enshrined in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 (nowadays the overwhelmingly white, middle class and elderly core users of our libraries) to providing a more relevant and socially inclusive service, truly open to all. (Muddiman et al 2000)

This article focuses on some of the recent debate surrounding young people, and why they are a socially excluded group. It also examines the extent that public libraries can currently engage young people, and how the Quality Leaders Project – Youth provides a framework for libraries (in partnership with youth services) to begin to adequately address these issues.

Discriminated youth

Young people, or perhaps it is more correct to say *working class* young people, have always caused the state concern. Today, the mainstream media has cranked up the hysteria levels, in a way that echoes their reporting of asylum seekers and refugees, demonising (and often criminalising) them collectively. The rise in the number of ASBOs (anti-social behaviour orders) or the lesser sanction of ABCs (anti-social behaviour contracts) has led to an alarming tendency to focus solely on the problems when they arise and not the social structures that cause these problems to arise in the first place.

It is in this climate that the Bluewater shopping centre in Kent famously banned young people from wearing baseball caps, hooded tops and swearing in May 2005. (BBC 2005) Tony Blair immediately (and unsurprisingly, given the interdependence of the state and its media) jumped on the bandwagon with the announcement of his "reform and respect" agenda. The hypocrisy of this is indicative of the current New Labour administration. Despite the fact that young people are portrayed as being anti-social, lazy, overweight and non-political, tens of thousands of young people must have put down their Playstations and marched against their government's plans to attack Iraq! At what point was respect shown to them (and the rest of us, for that matter) as the Bush and Blair unholy alliance continued? And where is the respect to be found in the assault on civil liberties, particularly affecting young Muslim men as a result of the recent terrorist attacks in London?

Young people in Britain are assessed and examined more than ever before at school. It is an educational system with emphases that are clearly failing many students. A recent report has suggested that only fifty-five per cent of boys will move on to secondary education (at 11 years plus) with sufficient writing ability to cope with the curriculum. (Halpin 2005) Even those students who manage to do well out of the system and achieve "A" level qualifications, rather than congratulated, are year upon year told that the reason for their success is that the exam is getting easier!

Libraries and young people

It can be no real surprise, bearing in mind the factors outlined above, that some young people show reluctance to engage with official institutions. Although it would be difficult to argue amongst ourselves that increased access to books and information can improve outcomes, how do we communicate to young people that libraries might be a place that they would voluntarily visit? Outreach can spread the word, and get young people through the doors, but the challenge for us is to provide a service that ensures return visits.

My feeling is that present teenage collections of books are rather too safe, and rather highbrow. We need to be less concerned with literary merit and other notions of quality based on personal value judgements, and less scared of provoking controversy by seeking out non-book material, fanzines, and other "alternative" titles. If literacy is an issue for young people then we can have as many wonderful novels on our shelves as we like but they will have no impact if few people can read them. If anything, such material will put them off ever coming in again. Put quite simply, material for young people should be chosen by young people.

If young people do take an interest in any of the material on the shelves, and want to take it away, they will usually have to go through a lengthy and prohibitive joining procedure to become a library member. More than likely they will be expected to get a parent or carer to sign on their behalf. There are many parents or carers who do not want to do this for various reasons, and as a result young teenagers find themselves excluded from the service almost immediately.

There are also problems with the free internet access that libraries provide as part of the so-called "People's Network". In our library authority, and in common with many others, we insist that a parent or carer signs a consent form on behalf of the young person. As

with library membership procedures, if a parent or carer does not want to know, the young person is effectively barred from ICT in libraries. Aside from the fundamental issues of *how* the young user accesses library facilities, there is the related question of *what* they can access. Official institutions, in their advocacy statements still trumpet the People's Network as a transforming presence in public libraries, providing free access to internet and other computer facilities. (MLA 2004) In fact, some library authorities *do* charge users for access to the People's Network, although this practice was at least met with some disapproval in the recent Parliamentary Select Committee Report on Libraries. It is argued that the increased availability of ICT in libraries has increased our credibility amongst the public, many of which previously were non-users. It is undoubtedly the case that many members of our society, for example asylum seekers and refugees, have found real value in the People's Network. Unfortunately, as has been pointed out, it would appear that many people who access the technology in libraries have access to computers elsewhere. (Pateman 2003) The divide between information rich, information poor increases further where those who have computers at home can look at whatever they want, whilst those who have no other means of access are limited by library censorship.

Our own professional organisation, in their recent report *Start With The Child* (CILIP 2002), stated that we should provide "services that are relevant and responsive" and provide young people with "opportunities to take responsibility, and exercise freedom of choice". This is hardly reflected in current practice where there is flagrant discrimination imposed by measures to limit the content of the internet. This is achieved by filtering or more insidiously by the use of "walled gardens", which effectively reduces the world wide web to a few sites deemed suitable for young people by librarians. No wonder then, that young people often have negative experiences of public libraries. Instead of addressing child protection concerns through training young people to use the internet safely, the tendency is for public libraries to virtually pull the plug on internet access for them.

Then of course, there is the issue of staffing. In any discussion of library staff and young people, the usual stereotypes are heard from both groups. However, recruiting staff because they are young will not necessarily improve things for the better if attitudes towards young people and their needs remain the same. There needs to be a seismic shift in the culture of public libraries and the public service they provide. This is the social and library-related context of young people in Britain and it is also why the Quality Leaders Project-Youth (QLP-Y) could not have been more prescient.

Quality Leaders Project - Youth

The long awaited government green paper on young people *Youth Matters*, was published in July and QLP-Y will help those of us participating with the main areas of challenge that the paper identifies

- engaging more young people in positive activities and empowering them to shape the services they receive;
- encouraging more young people to volunteer and become involved in their communities;
- providing better information, advice and guidance to young people to help them make informed choices about their lives; and
- providing better and more personalised intensive support for each young person who has serious problems or gets into trouble. (DfES 2005, 5)

QLP began some years ago and addresses the dual challenges of providing library services for all communities *and* providing equal employment opportunities. The first strand of the project looked at library services to black and minority ethnic groups (and the corresponding need for those working in libraries to mirror the communities that they serve). QLP-Youth is now run as a partnership between the Department of Applied Social Sciences (DASS) and the Management Research Centre (MRC), both at the London Metropolitan University. The project is funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) who support "organisations which aim to maximise opportunities for individuals to experience a full quality of life, both now and in the future". PHF "are concerned with children and young people, and others who are disadvantaged". They make it clear that they "prefer to support work which others may find hard to fund, perhaps because it is breaks new ground, is too risky or is unpopular". (PHF 2005)

The QLP-Y programme is one of "management development through service development" which provides double benefits - the development of staff as well as development of services to young people. In addition, the programme involves consulting young people in developing services they need, and also develops partnership with the Youth Service. There is a strong "audience development" element to the programme which helps to connect creatively with young people not previously reached.

Portsmouth Library Service joined QLP-Y as the second phase of the project was beginning. This has meant that we have been playing catch-up to some extent with the other authorities that have been

involved since the start, undertaking consultation with many groups of young people on their terms, away from library settings.

Other participating authorities in QLP-Y are Knowsley, Liverpool, Lincolnshire, Barnet and Haringey. With the exception of Liverpool, where the Quality Leader is from the Youth Service, the participating authorities are led by personnel from the library service, in partnership with the youth service.

Portsmouth has a population of around 189,000 and with an area of forty square kilometres it has the greatest population density of any British city outside London. Portsmouth is a city where many social inequalities are evident, scoring relatively highly in the English Indices of Deprivation Index. Famous as the home of the Royal Navy, the dockyard is today suffering from a decline in fortunes. Of some relevance to libraries and Portsmouth, there is also a proud literary heritage. Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, HG Wells and Rudyard Kipling spent a small amount of time in the city and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote the first two Sherlock Holmes novels here. However, one sometimes senses that the city directs too much of its energies and resources in celebrating the past, at the expense of providing for the future. According to the Deprivation Index, Portsmouth is ranked 88th (out of 354 local authorities) in England. 27 areas in Portsmouth are in the most deprived 20% nationally. (ODPM 2004, 165)

Much of our consultation for QLP-Y has been undertaken through many face-to-face discussions with young people across the city, beginning in the Portsea area. Later this year, the present Portsea Library will move to a much bigger location in a newly built community centre. This will be the first new library in Portsmouth for fourteen years. As such it presents us with an ideal opportunity to have local young people decide on the type of library service *they* would like (as opposed to what the librarians would like!). Similarly, the old Portsea Youth Club will move from its current premises right next door to the library in the new building. Since September last year, I have been visiting the youth club on a regular basis, introducing some of the more interesting items that the library service has in stock, but more importantly introducing myself and getting to know the young people and youth workers. There was some understandable resentment from the young people in that whilst their youth club was decreasing in size, the library (which most of them did not use) was increasing its floor space substantially.

Working with colleagues in the youth service, a written survey was piloted at the club. One of the underlying needs of young people,

emerging from discussion here and in the wider community, is the need for improvement in literacy skills. As Britain is one of the few countries in the "developed" world where young people have lower levels of literacy than adults, this is not a surprising discovery. That the young people were as candid as they were regarding their literacy skills was a revelation.

As well as being responsible for library provision to young adults, I also work with children who are in care in Portsmouth, living with foster parents or in residential units. Running parallel with the consultation in youth centres, secondary schools and special schools, I have spent nearly eighteen months introducing high interest material and getting to know the young people and their carers or care workers. I have been extremely fortunate in having no time constraints placed on me, as the process of building relationships with young people can be slow. Working with vulnerable young people has also made it imperative that the library service has forged links with colleagues in Social Services and Education departments.

Generally we have found that young people relish the opportunity to make their views heard, but there is some consultation fatigue because so many agencies are required (quite rightly and properly) to get a "youth" perspective on things. Young people are of course as sceptical as anyone that their suggestions will be acted upon. The library and youth service now has the responsibility to make good the participation of the city's young people. How we intend to do justice to their comments will become clear in the second phase of QLP-Y where we hope to have young people on steering groups to manage the audience development workshops. It is also our intention that the new library will open simultaneously with the youth club at least once a week and that we will be able to have some volunteers from the youth club helping to run the library.

I believe that QLP-Youth will make a significant contribution to our library service, by increasing levels of participation by young people, empowering them by giving them the confidence to air their views, and most importantly ensure that they are taken seriously. For far too long, public libraries in Britain have been run from above, with only the views of an extant readership taken into account. QLP gives young people a real chance to affect change from below and I sincerely believe that a change in the way libraries deliver their services to young people and other socially excluded groups will help bring about the fundamental social changes in wider society that we all desire.

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Further details on QLP are available from

http://www.seapn.org.uk/qlp.html

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