

Improving Young Adult Services Using Third Place Principles

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Abstract

This paper investigates third place principles currently recommended within the library profession to serve young adult patrons in the public library setting. Traditionally, library spaces and programs have been designed without concern for the young adult patron or involved the young adult patron in the process of designing their space or programs. The need for specialized staffing for young adult services is another key to providing improved services. As libraries work towards reinventing themselves for the 21st century, the young adult patron has been gaining the spotlight and a movement has been building to incorporate teen-inspired spaces and programming. Third place principles have been recommended as exemplary guidelines for overhauling young adult services in our public libraries. This paper explores the meaning of third place, how it applies to the library and teen third place, provides an urban and a rural case study exploring current young adult services in the state of Georgia, and makes recommendations for the improving young adult services in order to meet the criteria of a teen third place.

Problem Statement

Young adult services remains an area in public libraries that is often understaffed, underserved, and in need of more space, staffing, programming, materials, and, young adult input. Public libraries and public librarians have a long tradition of serving young children, infant to eleven years old, through children's services that incorporate third place principles and traditionally dedicate more personnel, space, materials, and programming than to the young adult patron, twelve to eighteen year olds. The move to focus more on young adult services began at the American Library Association Conference in 1994 when the ALA president, Hardy Franklin, introduced "ephebiphobia: the fear and loathing of adolescents (Walter & Meyers, 2003)." Franklin dedicated his President's Program to the promotion of young adult services; however, the tool kit he created was targeted to those already working with young adults and did little to address the need to expand space, staffing, programming, materials, or young adult input. Current information shows a concern for better young adult services. The 2006 Public Agenda Poll found that 75% of Americans believe it is a high priority for local public libraries to offer a safe place where teenagers can study and congregate and that 26% of youth responded that they would use the library more if there was a space dedicated to teens (ALA, 2009).

Current recommendations state that young adult patrons should receive space, staffing, programming, and materials that incorporate third place principles based on demographics and equal to what children services receive in the public library. The traditional approach to providing services has been to increase space, staffing,

programming, and materials as the demand deemed necessary. This traditional business model is counter-intuitive in the area of young adult services where recommendations are to provide services based on community data instead.

Furthermore, the services provided young adult patrons should be specialized to their needs as they transition from children's services to full use of adult services in the public library setting. Case studies show that not only are characteristics of a third place in spaces dedicated to teens lacking, but that services for young adult patrons are not provided equitably compared to children's services. This paper briefly explores third place principles, how they apply to the public library, and current recommendations for incorporating third place principles to provide better young adult services.

Methodology

My methodology is based on two overlying questions:

- Is there a need to expand and improve young adult services in public libraries?
- How can third place principles be applied to young adult services in a public library setting to expand and improve service?

In order to gather the information needed to investigate the need to expand and improve young adult services in public libraries and how these services can be expanded and improved with the application of third place principles, I pursued a quantitative and qualitative approach based on two case studies. First, I researched original and current third place and young adult services publications. I compared and

contrasted third place principles with types of young adult services currently in practice and recommended. I attempted a telephone and email survey to collect young adult services data measuring space, personnel, and programs from a sample of public libraries in Georgia, but found that the information was not readily available in its current annual report format that did not distinguish between age-related services in its data. Instead, I present two case studies that represent an urban and a rural public library in the state of Georgia. The case studies include quantitative data comparing children's programming and staffing with young adult programming and staffing. Qualitative data is included regarding dedicated space to children's services and young adult services. Finally, I provide recommendations for improving young adult services using third place principles based on my research.

Literature Review

Third Place Principles

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) describes the decline of third places, or public and informal gathering places, in his book *The Great, Good Place*. In it he describes the first place as home with the second place as work. The need for a third place where people gather to interact, enjoy each other's company, and gain familiarity is emphasized by Oldenburg as being vital a community's health. "The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work (Oldenburg, 1989)."

Oldenburg's characteristics of a third place lend themselves to the psychological and social needs of the young adult and are seen by many in librarianship as key to revamping young adult services in the public library system:

- neutral ground in that it is distinct from home or work and where all feel comfortable
- social leveling in that all feel equal, no formal criteria is set for inclusion, and social circles are expanded rather than restricted
- the opportunity for conversation as the cardinal and sustaining activity
- the ability to go alone and encounter acquaintances during on and off hours of the day in a convenient location, to meet new people, and to meet and become a "regular"
- unimpressive or unintimidating appearance that encourages leveling and the abandonment of social pretense in order to prevent self-consciousness and commercialism.
- atmosphere of a playful mood where joy and acceptance reign over anxiety and alienation

Oldenburg asserts that society needs third places more than ever in our modern times in order to create and/or keep a strong community, a healthy democracy, forge a bond between generations, and to give human relationships a higher priority. He states, "Today's legacy to youth is one of isolation," and that there is a "...rampant hostility and

misunderstanding between the generations, adult estrangement from and fear of youth (1989).” This hostility can find its way into our public places and affect how our youth are treated. It is important to work diligently to counteract this in the public library, especially where young adult services are concerned. Oldenburg continues to assert, “The best third places for children are those with adults around (1989).” Public libraries’ ability to serve young adults following third place principles can help to solve these problems with this population as addressed by Oldenburg.

Library as Place

Harris (2007) further explores Oldenburg’s third place principles and argues that libraries are instrumental in facilitating a sense of community. She states that public libraries fill a void as a public third place and the need is great in that social capital is about institutions and relationships that shape the quality and quantity of society’s social interactions. Ways that public libraries serve as third places are:

- providing free internet access and other related information technology resources
- educating and assisting people to locate information thus creating better informed communities
- providing specially designed programs that encourage lifelong learning and literacy within the community
- building connection within the community, between individuals, groups and government.

May (2009) asserts that libraries may be some of the last public spaces in communities. By studying libraries as a third place, we can discover new facets to the role of the public library within our communities as each view the services that a public library offers differently. Ultimately, public libraries can serve their community better by analyzing how they function as third places.

“The Library Landscape” section of the OCLC Environmental Scan (2003) explores the metamorphosis of the public library in recent years. In it is stated that among the many new roles that libraries are assuming is the role of the library as a community center which is in line with third place principles. The role of the library is explored as being not just warehouses of content, but also social assembly places that are part of their larger communities. The need for libraries to work towards different and broader service opportunities is stressed (OCLC, 2003). Including young adults in this metamorphosis of our public libraries into third places is vital to the community it serves.

Teen Third Places

Part of the problem of moving young adult services into the 21st century using third place principles is that the origins of young adult services heavily rely on the pillars of reading and information and education more than the pillar of community. The origin of young adult services and programming is based on the 1940s philosophy that reading is a way to develop an individual's positive social values (Walter & Meyers, 2003). Young adult services founders such as Mable Williams, Margaret Edwards, and Jean Roos enforced that philosophy in the programming they created and the books

they published (Walter & Meyers, 2003). Edwards' development and promotion of book talks as a foundation to young adult services remains to this day.

Book talks should in no way be abandoned, but it is time to implement more community-based programming that relies on third place principles in order to better serve today's young adults. This assertion is supported by a study conducted by the Urban Libraries Council (Walter & Meyers, 2003) where it was found that young adults across the country that were not currently library users responded in an open-ended survey that:

- Libraries are not cool; they are frequented by nerds, dorks, and dweebs.
- Library staff is not helpful or friendly.
- Teens need more access to technology and more training in using it.
- Teens want help with their school projects and research.
- Libraries need to provide better books and materials.
- Teens need welcoming spaces – not morgues.
- Library hours of service are not convenient to teens.
- Teens want jobs and volunteer service opportunities.
- Libraries need to get rid of restrictive rules and fees.
- Teens are willing to help libraries become better.

It is important to note that this comprehensive survey shows that the book collection is a small part of what young adults are concerned with in regards to their perception of the public library. Young adults want more from their public library than a book collection. In order to address the myriad concerns that young adults have regarding their public library needs, libraries should consider implementing third place principles that support expanded space, staffing, programming, materials, and, of course, young adult input.

Heeger (2006) applies third place principles to young adult services and states that it is important for librarians to create third places for teens within their libraries as their third place options are limited. Not using third place principles in young adult services is counter-productive as teens have a need for a third place and librarians need to "...contribute to the health of our communities by providing teens with quality third space options (Heeger, 2006)." Basic third place components of effective young adult services include young adult input in design of space and programming, a library staff that has a positive and respectful attitude towards the young adult patron, a space that incorporates a sense of play, an open space that promotes collaboration and conversation, and a space that is obviously cared for and clean (Heeger, 2006).

Heeger (2006) lists important needs of the young adult patron that third place principles can meet in effective young adult services:

- the need to socialize
- the need for a space that promotes social equality
- the need to build relationships with caring adults

The current expert in the area of renovating young adult spaces in public libraries is Kimberly Bolan. Bolan focuses on creating spaces that make teen third places possible. In her book, *Teen Spaces: The Step-by-Step Library Makeover*, Bolan outlines the basics in redesigning a teen third place in a library. The goal in redesigning young adult services' spaces and programming is "...building a sense of teen belonging, community involvement, and library appreciation (Bolan, 2009)." Bolan further states:

- space is top concern for young adults -- design space around the program, not the program around the space
- young adult participation is key – Teen Advisory Boards (TAB); board representation; focus groups; committees
- research need, demand, and demographics
- use existing successful models for inspiration within and without the library profession
- build relationships and collaborate with the community

Bolan asserts, "Libraries have generally been designed without teen customers in mind, driven by the personal likes and ideas of librarians, administrators, and architects (2009)." There has been an increase in libraries reevaluating how they implement and prioritize young adult services in the 21st century (Bolan, 2009).

Research in how libraries are incorporating third place principles into their recent library renovations includes statistics that show that over 60% of new library renovations include new teen spaces following these principles and the renovations increased

circulation by 50-300% (Bolan, 2009). Less than a decade ago, research indicated that the majority of public libraries in the United States rarely had spaces for young adults and did not offer very much programming. In a short time, the traditional model is being abandoned as an increasing number of public libraries work to create environments to attract a larger young adult patron base. The new model for incorporating young adult services is to re-evaluate the allocations of space within public libraries and then size the space according to demographics. "In public library facilities, the ratio of a teen area to the overall library should be equal to the ratio of the teen population of that community to the overall population of that community (Bolan, 2006)."

The issue of space allocated to young adult services is a complicated one as there is "...no consistent formula to help in computing a recommended range for square footage based on population (Walter & Meyers, 2003)." Research of current libraries and the space they have allocated to young adult services compared to their overall space shows, "...square foot allocation for teens varies between 1 and 5 percent of total square foot allocation (Walter & Meyers, 2003)." Programs that have allotted more space to young adult services such as the Phoenix Public Library report a 300% increase in usage leading to the recommendation that demographics for the area should be used to plan new spaces rather than past foot traffic (Walter & Meyer, 2003).

The condition of a space can be as important as the square footage of a space as noted by Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) President, Kelly Tyler, when she expressed her frustration with what most libraries designate as young adult services. Tyler described what she witnessed first-hand as "...old, uncomfortable, and

stained.” She further stated that, “The only thing that makes the teen area a teen area is the fact that it says “Teen” on the wall (Tyler, 2008).” Bernier asserts that, “Libraries should move away from privileging the collection to privileging the social experience that libraries can support (Tyler, 2008).” In other words, the collections should be used to support social interaction (Tyler, 2008). This is supported by Chiarella (2007) when she stated that today’s teens are looking for a third place for social interaction, beyond their usual environments of home and schools. Chiarella (2007) challenges public librarians to better serve young adults through activities and space. Third place principles are evident in the assertion that the “...traditional quiet, study-oriented library has evolved into a vibrant, community-oriented, social gathering-place of the 21st century (Chiarella, 2007).”

Bolan (2006) laid out the criteria necessary when beginning a renovation project for young adult services that addresses concern over worn-out spaces and lack of social interaction:

- Always encourage teen input and invite participation.
- Create a long and short-term plan for offering library services.
- Get support for your plan from those who will be using the space using advisory boards and surveys that include teens, staff, administrators, and the community.
- Create a space that’s truly teen-friendly by thinking about what young people need, not about what adults want.

- Renew and replace items to keep space fresh every five years and include that in the plan.
- Use comfortable and portable furniture that encourages social interaction.
- Whether selecting furniture, carpeting, lighting, or paint, make decisions that will encourage teens to use the library independently.

Case Studies

Young Adult Services in an Urban Environment

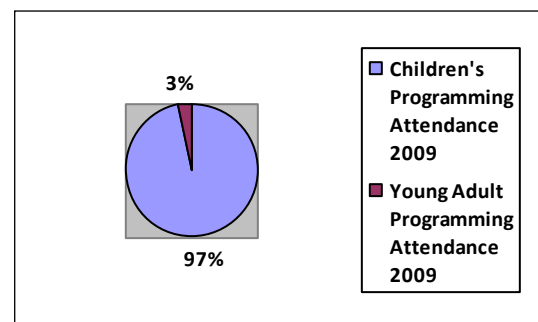
The Athens-Clarke County municipality is home to 110, 311 people making it the sixth largest metropolitan area in Georgia (U.S. Census Bureau). There are 10,225 children in Athens-Clarke County that are age birth to eleven-years-old and 7,581 young adults that are age twelve-years-old to eighteen-years old (U.S. Census Bureau). Using the U.S. Census Bureau data, Athens-Clarke County has approximately 26% more children aged birth to eleven-years-old than young adults aged twelve-years-old to eighteen-years-old.

Mary Jean Hartell, Young Adult Services Manager, has been working for Athens Regional Library System (ARLS) in the main library for over two decades and has seen funding dwindle for her department. She now runs the department as the only full-time staff member which requires her to spend most of her time at the circulation desk when on duty instead of working on advocacy projects or programming. She only has two half-time staff members in her department now when she at one time had one other full-time staff and four half-time staff. Hartell maintains that they have been able to continue

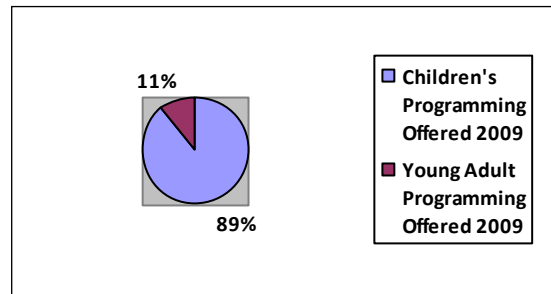
programs for teens despite the cut in staff. The library's teen web page is mostly static and most links lead to resources for the general population. The monthly programming link is updated on a regular basis. The department offers a regular Wildcard Wednesday program from 4:00-5:00 PM each week that has an art focus and is entirely grant funded by the Endowment for the Arts. The department has recently implemented a Teen Coffee House one Friday evening per month from 6:00-9:00 PM that includes an open microphone for singing, playing instruments, and poetry. Hartell stated that they have had two programs to date with attendance of 47 at the first one and 33 at the second one. She mentioned that they did not have enough staff or volunteers to handle a crowd over 30, so that the second one was "more manageable." Currently, there are no other programs offered the young adult population or types of programs other than the once a week art program after school and the once a month Friday evening open-microphone program.

Mark Katzman, the ARLS accountant, reported the following information for the main library:

- Programming attendance for the main library in fiscal year 2009: children's services = 19,956; young adult services = 597. (97% fewer young adults attended programming than children.)

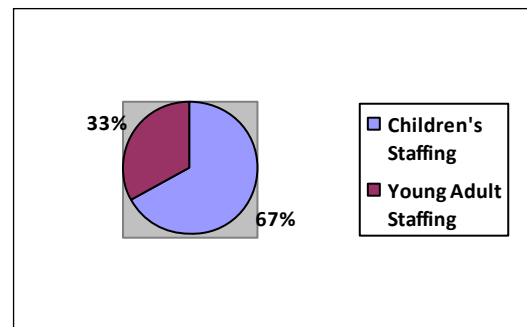


- Total programs offered in fiscal year 2009: children’s services = 615; young adult services = 73. (89% fewer programs were offered for young adults than children.)



- The space for young adult services has some private areas for study and shares programming space with other departments.
- The space for children’s services is separate, sound-proofed and has its own programming room.

- Current staffing: children’s services = 3 full-time and 2 half-time employees; young adult services = 1 full-time and 2 half-time employees. (67% less staffing provided young adult services than children’s services.)



- Comment: Circulation for young adult services is up, but funding for staff is down.

Based on these statistics, the ARLS main branch programming totals do not take into account those attending more than one program during the fiscal year for children’s programming as they reported 19,956 attendees with a total city and county population of only 10,225. Overall low attendance and limited programming is apparent in young adult services when the statistics between children’s services, young adult services, and the area population are compared.

Hartell is optimistic for the future of young adult services at the ARLS main library as they are preparing for a major renovation which moves their department into the current children's area. This space is separate, sound-proofed, and has its own programming room. The space will be renovated, but the design plans have not been visited in five years. There are currently no plans to implement a Teen Advisory Board (TAB) or use teen surveys to help design the space.

Young Adult Services in a Rural Environment

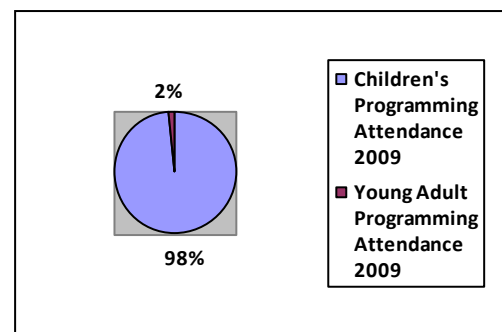
The city of Thomasville is served by the main branch of the Thomas County Public Library System (TCPLS). Thomasville is a rural town with a total population of 18,612 (U.S. Census Bureau). The town has 2,567 children that are age birth to eleven-years-old and 2,320 young adults that are age twelve-years-old to eighteen-years-old (U.S. Census Bureau). According to the U.S. Census Bureau data, Thomasville has approximately 10% more children aged birth to eleven-years-old than aged twelve-years-old to eighteen-years-old.

Nancy Tillinghast, Director of TCPLS, has been serving the system for over two decades and has seen an increase in latch-key children from 3:30 – 5:00 PM during the school year and during the entire day during the summer as their library is located in-between several schools and the neighborhoods they serve. The current design of their building creates a security problem as a private lobby housing bathrooms and water fountains is separated by automatic doors at their entrance. She often has to assign a staff member just to patrol the front entrance area which takes them away from their other duties. The children's services department does have a separate programming

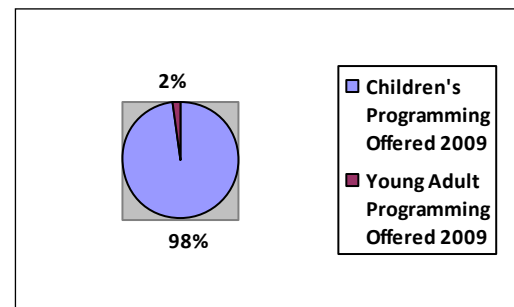
room that offers a sound-proof and private environment, but the main area is open to the entire library. The young services section is part of the reference department and consists of a row of computers and an alcove of young adult literature and resources. Year-round programming focuses mostly on children, but there is an increase in programming for young adults during the summer months.

Tillinghast reported the following information for the main branch of the TCPLS:

- Programming attendance for the main library in fiscal year 2009: children's services = 7,320; young adult services = 112. (98% fewer young adults attended programming than children.)



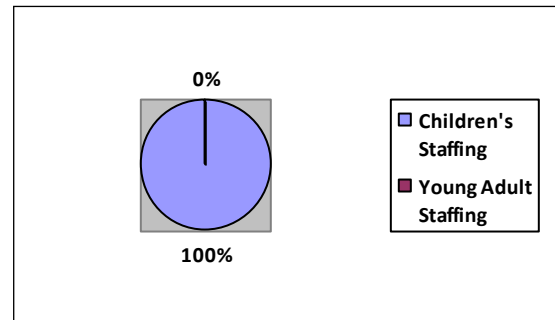
- Total programs offered in fiscal year 2009: children's services = 404; young adult services = 9. (98% fewer programs were offered for young adults than children.)



- Young adults services has a small space next to the reference desk and open to the entire library, has no private areas, and shares programming space with other departments.
- The children's services department has a larger space separated from the library by the computer lab and reading tables, but it does not have doors

to close it off. It also has one private and sound-proofed room for programming and an outdoor patio area.

- Current staffing: children's services = 3 full-time employees; young adult services = 0 employees (reference staff monitor the area). (Exactly 100% less staffing.)



Based on these statistics, the TCPLS main branch's programming totals do not take into account those attending more than one program during the fiscal year for children's programming as they reported 7,320 attendees with a total city population of only 2,567. Overall low attendance and limited programming is apparent in young adult services when the statistics between children's services, young adult services, and the area population are compared.

Nancy Tillinghast is hopeful that their main branch will be able to provide more and better service to both children and young adults. Their system has received SPLOST approval and a substantial government grant to renovate and expand their main branch. The plans include enlarging both the areas for children's services and young adult services. The plans also include making both areas semi-private. However, the system is still in a hiring freeze, has several positions that remain unfilled, and no plans to hire a full-time young adult services manager or other young adult services

staff. There are currently no plans to implement a TAB or use teen surveys to help design the space.

Recommendations for Improving Young Adult Services Using Third Place Principles

The steps to creating a third place in a library are many, but a review of the case studies proves that these libraries need to start with basic third place principles. Based on the information gathered in the one urban and one rural case study in Georgia and the information collected through literature reviews, I make the following recommendations for improving young adult services using third place principles:

- Libraries need to evaluate the space, staffing, programming, materials, and, young adult input they have dedicated to young adult services in comparison to their service area demographics, not the programming data from the prior year.
- Libraries need to use current successful third place programs as models.
- Libraries should have a highly trained staff member that is knowledgeable of third place principles charged with managing and advocating for young adult services.
- Libraries should staff young adult services equitable to the demographics of the area, not the programming data from the prior year.

- Libraries should dedicate space for young adult services equitable to the demographics of the area, not the programming or circulation data from the prior year. (If the young adult population is 76% of the children's population, then the space dedicated to their department should be at least 76% the size of the children's department.)
- Libraries should offer varied programming that promotes social interaction that is created with the assistance of a TAB and is equitable to the demographics of the area, not the programming data from the prior year.
- Libraries should use TAB to help design a neutral, socially leveled, and playful space for young adult services. Teen, staff, administrator, and community surveys should also be consulted when designing an area.
- Libraries should create spaces that are semi-private and casual areas for young adults in order to promote conversation without fear of disrupting other patrons.
- Libraries should include short and long-term plans to keep the young adult services area clean and updated.
- Libraries should include portable furniture that is comfortable so that the design can be easily modified as needed to better promote third place principles.

Conclusion

Current literature shows that the library profession understands that there is a need to better serve the young adult population in myriad areas. However, the case studies indicate that this understanding is not realized in practice; a disparity exists. Young adults are traditionally a disenfranchised and under-served population that merits space, staffing, programming, materials, and input based on community demographics instead of past library data. Studies reveal that communities understand that the young adult population is often disenfranchised. These studies also show that communities aspire to better serve the young adult population and see young adult services as vital to a healthy community. Moving theory and aspirations into reality will take a concerted effort of the public library community and the community it serves. Third place principles can provide a framework for this effort.

Public libraries are undergoing revitalization as their role in the community and the community's perception of the library as a third place is expanding. In order to satisfy this role, young adult services cannot be disregarded. Along with responding to the demands of the users, public libraries should also work proactively towards third place principles and ensure that young adult services are part of the plan. The case studies presented of a urban and a rural public library in Georgia are representative of the need to work diligently to recognize the specific needs of young adults and make changes in library service to better meet them. Following third place principles as recommended in this paper is a start to better serving the young adult population in our public libraries.

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