

NATIONAL RESEARCH AGENDA ON LIBRARIES, LEARNING, & TEENS 2017-2021



YALSA

Young Adult Library Services Association
www.ala.org/yalsa

Background

History of the YALSA Research Agenda

The mission of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) is “to support library staff in alleviating the challenges teens face, and in putting all teens — especially those with the greatest needs — on the path to successful and fulfilling lives.” In meeting the mission the association understands the value of providing library staff working with teens, and other stakeholders, with the research required to support ongoing service and development.

Since the time of the publication of the last YALSA Research Agenda, in 2011, funding from a 2012 grant awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), enabled YALSA to host the “National Forum on Teens and Libraries.” This gave the association the chance to bring the library community and other youth development organizations together to engage in a conversation about how those working in and with libraries can better meet the needs of teens in a time of rapid demographic and technological change. An outcome of the Forum and the year-long work associated with that event, was the seminal report, “The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: A Call to Action” (a.k.a. “Futures Report”).

Additionally, between 2011 and the present, the landscape of teen services in libraries has changed quite dramatically, as the way teens use technology, learn, interact, and socialize continues to progress. Opportunities, issues, challenges, and best practices have evolved significantly since the last YALSA Research Agenda was published.

The five priority areas in the 2011 YALSA Research Agenda helped inform the framework and development of the “National Forum on Libraries and Teens” and the resulting “The Future of Library Services to teens: A Call to Action” report. However, as indicated above, emerging issues in teen services and materials led the YALSA Research Committee to re-evaluate how the existing priority areas reflect these emerging trends and issues. To that end, the Committee has reframed the priority areas to fit the current needs and landscape.

Framing the 2017-2021 Research Agenda

This edition of the YALSA Research Agenda focuses squarely on incorporating the principles outlined in YALSA’s 2014 report on “The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: A Call to Action.” This report challenges libraries to re-envision teen services in ways that recognize the resources available to libraries as well as the changing needs, and demographics, and information practices of today’s teen population. Additionally, significant developments in technology led to the need to rethink how services for and with teens are best designed and delivered.

In order to effectively incorporate the principles and guidelines offered by the Futures Report into the current YALSA Research Agenda, it was essential to identify the conceptual gaps in the previous YALSA Research Agenda that the Futures Report helps bring to the forefront.

It is important to point out that the priority areas in this document are not autonomous areas of research. Rather, YALSA views these areas as interconnected and informed by similar bodies of literature and theoretical frameworks. In this way, scholars who conduct research on teens should consult the literature in each of these interrelated areas to build more robust findings that emerges from a broader understanding of the issue being examined.

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Priority Area 1

The Impact of Libraries as Teen Formal and Informal Learning Environments

Understanding how informal and formal learning environments have an impact on adolescent development, college and career readiness, and acquisition of literacies is crucial in determining how library staff must serve teens in the 21st century. Informal environments include physical and virtual spaces in which teens take part in activities that inherently lead to learning, but do not have a strictly educational focus. Formal learning environments include physical and virtual spaces, such as school classrooms and online courses, where teens spend time specifically to learn content.

The importance of libraries to support flexible learning communities and connected learning opportunities for teens is essential. Connected learning is a framework that brings together three foundational principles of learning - learning that is powered by personal interests, learning that is peer supported, and learning that brings together interest with academic subjects and potential college and career pathways. Underlying these three principles, connected learning requires learning experiences that are designed to enable teen produced content; learning is openly networked allowing for connections between teens themselves and adults who can act as role models, mentors, and coaches; learning that has a shared purpose with others; and learning that brings learners together to reach a common goal.

The connected learning framework highlights the type of learning environment that Lee Rainie pointed to as lacking in many libraries that focus on school research and homework. In his presentation at the 2011 YALSA Forum, Rainie noted that because teens use social networks and the internet they live in a different learning and living ecosystem than previous generations of adolescents. (Braun et al., 2014, p.5).

The MacArthur Foundation's 10-year Digital Media and Learning project, launched in 2006, funded and guided explorations of formal and informal learning environments and "how digital media are changing the way young people learn, socialize, communicate, and play" (MacArthur Foundation, 2011, p. 1). The YOUmedia project at the Chicago Public Library is an example of research that is leading to an understanding of the place that media, technology, and learning environments play in teen acquisition of knowledge and 21st century skills. In early 2016 the Whitney Museum of American Art released the report "Room to Rise: The Lasting Impact of Intensive Teen Programs in Art Museums." The report highlights the value that informal learning environments (in this case museums) have for teens and which research is beginning to show is true through libraries as well. "Room to Rise" notes, "Our findings revealed five significant areas of long-term influence: a growth in confidence and the emergence of personal identity and self-knowledge; deep, lifelong relationships to museums and culture; a self-assured, intellectually curious pursuit of expanded career horizons and life skills; a lasting worldview grounded in art; and a commitment to community engagement and influence." (Linzer, et al. 2015, p. 24.)

Participatory learning can be a transformative experience when library staff embrace the elements of active learning and social learning.

The importance of 21st century skills is also highlighted in the 2009 report from IMLS titled *Museums, Libraries, and 21st Century Skills*. This report provides an overview of what 21st-century skills are within a museum and library context and through real-life examples demonstrates how institutions serving youth are moving forward with aiding young people in acquiring the necessary skills. The report states: "While it is true that libraries and museums are — and always have been — well-equipped to provide critical learning experiences to their audiences, this potential must be further developed, defined, and made more accessible.

All libraries and museums—and the people they serve—stand to benefit from becoming more intentional and purposeful about accommodating the lifelong learning needs of people in the 21st century, and doing this work collaboratively in alignment with community needs.” (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2009, p. 6)

Recently, IMLS turned its focus in part on better understanding how librarians can work to create participatory learning opportunities for their patrons. In their 2015 report, *IMLS Focus: Learning in Libraries*, the agency described how participatory learning can be a transformative experience when library staff embrace the elements of active learning and social learning when developing participatory learning programs for their patrons. Similarly, the 2016 Aspen Institute Report, *Libraries in the Exponential Age* notes, “As the role of the library evolves beyond access and lending to providing a platform for learning, innovation and creativity, libraries need to think in dramatically different ways and develop new approaches to their work in line with this changing role.” (Garmer, p. 13)

The teens of today are part of an ever global and competitive society. They need skills sets that go beyond the traditional academic and into learning and innovation skills. Currently many teens lack these skills for job readiness and success for the future. There is opportunity for libraries to meet these needs in the physical and virtual spaces to provide connected learning opportunities with experts and community members (Braun et al., 2014, p. 3).

Research Questions

1. How does funding for teen services correlate to providing high impact informal and formal learning opportunities for teens?
2. What differences in college and career readiness do teens exhibit based on their participation in library-related formal and informal learning opportunities?
3. How are young adult 21st century and emerging literacies skills supported and enhanced through the use of libraries?
4. What are the possible intersections between youth peer culture, interests, and academic subjects that library staff can use to build meaningful learning among youth that take advantage of both the library’s and the community’s existing resources (virtual, human, community, etc.)?
5. How can library staff help teens develop emerging literacies, creating new ways of interaction and thinking?
6. How might library staff create opportunities for youth to connect their home, community and emerging literacies with traditional library programming?
7. How can the Connected Learning Framework be effectively employed in school and public libraries to develop meaningful and powerful literacies and 21st century skills instruction?
8. How does the integration of youth voice practices in teen library services have an impact on teen learning through libraries?
9. How can public libraries and schools work together to develop connected informal and formal learning opportunities for teens?
10. How are libraries creating and using new models of program evaluation and outcomes-based measurements to assess the effectiveness of teen informal and formal learning opportunities?

Priority Area 2

Library Staff Training, Skills and Knowledge

As the needs and demographics of teens have changed over the past decade, the skills that library staff serving the age group have needed to change. Schools of library and information science, iSchools, and associations such as YALSA need to understand the skills needed and help those going into the library field as well as those that are already in the field gain the skills required. In the 2015 research study conducted

by Kyungwon Koh, and June Abbas, “Competencies Needed to Provide Teen Library Services of the Future: A Survey of Professionals in Learning Labs and Makerspaces” researchers found that “The most frequently reported competencies that participants said they did not learn from higher education fall into the areas of (1) contemporary technologies, (2) Makerspaces, (3) management, (4) community advocacy and partnerships, and (5) teaching and programming. These competencies are closely related to the tasks they did not feel prepared to do, such as (1) working with new technologies and Making tools, (2) advocacy, (3) obtaining funding, and (4) facilitating learning.” (<http://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlya/2016/06/competencies-needed-to-provide-teen-library-services-of-the-future-a-survey-of-professionals-in-learning-labs-and-makerspaces/>)

Institutions such as the University of Maryland iSchool are starting programs that will provide library staff with educational opportunities needed. The UMD iSchool program, titled Youth Experience YX, “...will prepare leaders, educators, and change agents who deeply understand the dynamic contexts of youth.” Education is no longer confined to the school building – youth are learning across both formal and informal learning spaces, including libraries, museums, community centers, and online environments. Information professionals must be prepared to meet youth in their own spaces (online, in person, and in between), use technology to facilitate existing interests, and be in tune with what they find relevant and motivating.” (iSchool announcement <http://ischool.umd.edu/news/marylands-ischool-announces-youth-experience-opportunities-post-masters-certificate-mlis>)

Data is not available on how training for professional teen services librarians helps to guarantee that the teen library program has impact on adolescent lives is valuable. So too is data that shows how the role of a professional library staff member working with teens helps the library to meet the educational, informational, and recreational needs of the age group. Without statistics that demonstrate that library staff specifically trained to support teen needs is a return on investment for a community, it is difficult to advocate for inclusion of that type of position in a library’s budget.

Outcome measures are required to better understand the role of library staff as facilitators of learning for teens and as connectors to coaches and mentors who can support teen learning. YALSA’s Futures Report states, “Degreed library professionals focus on developing and managing teen services in a public or school library at the programmatic level while face-to-face encounters are made up of a hybrid of staff and skilled volunteers who act as mentors, coaches, and connectors to the information and resources needed by individual teens in the community. Library staff, mentors, and coaches build relationships with teens with the goal of supporting their academic, career, and civic engagement and growth. Serving teens is embraced as a role that all library staff must play, regardless of job title, position, or department,” (Braun, et al., 2014).

Research Questions

1. What are the prevalent staffing models for public library service to teens that best demonstrate a strong impact on supporting teen informal and formal learning needs?
2. How do the skills and knowledge that a professionally trained teen services librarian brings to a library impact teen 21st century skill development, college and career readiness, and development of critical literacies?
3. What skills and/or knowledge are required of librarians and library staff to successfully support informal and formal learning opportunities for teens?
4. What skills and/or knowledge do library staff need to be able to empower non-dominant youth to voice their needs and interests?
5. What skills and/or knowledge to library staff need to empower youth voice?
6. How does the introduction of coaches, mentors, and experts into teen library services help to expand library staff knowledge, skills, and ability to support young adults in their informal and formal learning endeavors?

7. How can associations such as YALSA best work with library schools and professional learning networks to guarantee library staff have the skills needed to support teen needs and interests?
8. How do we ensure that library staff continue to be trained in new approaches to facilitating learning?

Priority Area 3

Equity of Access

There is growing gap between “the progressive use of digital media outside of the classroom, and the no-frills offerings of most public schools that educate our most vulnerable populations. This gap contributes to widespread alienation from educational institutions, particularly for non-dominant youth” (Braun et al., 2014, p. 9).

How teens gain access to and use technologies is another crucial research topic. The digital divide used to mean the gulf between those who had ready access to technology and those who did not. Mobile devices (such as smartphones and tablets) may have narrowed that gap to some extent, perhaps only for the more repetitive communication tasks. Nonetheless, in 2015 the digital divide is a divide not of access to technology but a divide in access to specific resources (such as databases) as well as an understanding of how to use those resources successfully. In her article “Many low-income students use only their phone to get online” Crystle Martin notes, “This can be a barrier to learning for young people. It can limit their access to resources to complete their homework, as well as create barriers for other learning. Thirty-five percent of youth who have mobile-only access look online for information about things they are interested in. But this goes up to 52 percent when young people have access to an Internet-connected computer.” (<https://theconversation.com/many-low-income-students-use-only-their-phone-to-get-online-what-are-they-missing-54213>).

Even if the device is available, we do not know to what extent government-required or parental imposed filters limit teens’ access to the information they want or need. Questions still linger about how skilled teens are at using technologies to access accurate information and even more important how adept they are at assessing accuracy or creating information. Finally, research based on needs has produced technologies that provide immensely enhanced access to differently-abled users, including teens, and that could be productively incorporated into contemporary library practice.

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center’s 2016 report, “Opportunity for all? Technology and learning in lower-income families” highlights the need to provide equitable technology solutions to youth and families. Their key findings include data that demonstrates that while low-income families may have internet access at home in many instances that access is limited. One report finding states, “...many lower-income families are under-connected. For example, one quarter (23%) of families below the median income level and one third (33%) of those below the poverty level rely on mobile-only Internet access. And many experience interruptions to their Internet service or constrained access to digital devices. Among families who have home Internet access, half (52%) say their access is too slow, one quarter (26%) say too many people share the same computer, and one fifth (20%) say their Internet has been cut off in the last year due to lack of payment. Among families with mobile-only access, three in ten (29%) say they have hit the data limits on their plan in the past year, one-quarter (24%) say they have had their phone service cut off in the past year due to lack of payment, and one fifth (21%) say too many people share the same phone for them to be able to get the time on it that they need.” (Rideout & Katz, 2016, p. 5).

The digital divide is a divide not of access to technology but a divide in access to specific resources (such as databases) as well as an understanding of how to use those resources successfully.

Along with the Joan Ganz Cooney Center's work, the Pew Research Center has published a rich set of research findings related to teens, media, technology, and learning environments includes a fundamental ongoing inventory of the technologies with which youth are engaged and to what extent and whether/how this differs with income, gender, and ethnicity (Lenhart, 2015). The Center's most recent report on teens and technology, published in April of 2015, highlights the ways in which different gender and ethnic and cultural groups use technology in formal and informal settings. The research within this report helps library researchers as they further their work to better understand how different teen populations access and use technology and what are some of the barriers faced by various demographic groups.

Research Questions

1. How can librarians and library staff best ensure access to a variety of materials for teens in the face of challenges, including intellectual freedom?
2. How can librarians and library staff guarantee digital equity in their collections and programmatic activities including access and content variety?
3. What are the effective library practices for embedding access to technology, resources, and learning within families and communities?
4. How do teens themselves enact, create, and develop information practices and its associated literacies as they move between segments of their everyday life: school, after-school, leisure, health, social, etc.?
5. How does a lack of access to technologies in schools and libraries limit digital equity for teens?
6. What barriers exist in the information practices of today's teens and how might libraries address them?
7. What role have libraries played in reinforcing these barriers and preventing or limiting the information practices of teens?
8. What is the impact of lack of access to new and emerging technologies in schools and libraries on teens' successful and safe use of technology for informational and recreational purposes?
9. How can libraries respond best to socio-economic, ethnicity, gender and ability differences in supporting access to technology?
10. How can libraries support the development of digital literacy skills among youth who have limited access to technology or other resources?
11. How does the library's historic focus on information access impact the ways in which digital equity practices are embedded into service?

Priority Area 4 Cultural Competence, Social Justice and Equity

Perhaps the biggest paradigm shift in libraries is connected to the changing cultural demographics of today's teen population. YALSA captured these demographic shifts in an infographic that was recently published (YALSA, 2015). If we look at one dimension of this cultural shift pertaining to race/ethnicity, the Futures Report provides the following illustrative snapshot of teens today: "Children of mixed race grew at a faster rate than any other group over the past decade, increasing by 46%. The number of Hispanic children grew by 39%. The number of non-Hispanic Asian and Pacific Islander children grew by 31%" (Braun et al., 2014, p. 2).

Given this demographic reality, the primary question for the research community becomes: to what extent, if any, has our research reflected and responded to this shift? How we respond to this shift is in large part driven by our collective sense/level of cultural competence as a profession. In other words, is our profession primed to understand, appreciate, and integrate the culturally diverse backgrounds and ways of knowing of teens today into our research and practices? Have we responded to these shifts through our teen services and collections? Do we honor the cultural capital that teens from diverse backgrounds bring into library spaces from their homes and communities or do we view them as a problem to be dealt with? Have we as a library community looked reflexively at our own views, dispositions, and interactions with teens from

diverse backgrounds to see how they might reinforce stereotypes or conversely provide opportunity for cross-cultural learning? These are just some of the questions that can serve as point of entry for research and action in the area of cultural competence. Scholars interested in learning more about this topic might look to YALSA’s wiki resource on cultural competence (YALSA, nd, http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Cultural_Competence).

Among the scholarly resources featured on this wiki is that of LIS scholar Patricia Montiel. Overall, who articulates a definition for cultural competence related to the field of library and information science, which she described as: “a highly developed ability to recognize the significance of culture in one’s own life and in the lives of others; and to come to know and appreciate diverse cultural backgrounds and characteristics through interaction with individuals from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic groups; and to fully integrate the culture of diverse groups into services, work, and institutions in order to enhance the lives of both those being served by the library profession and those engaged in service,” (p. 1).

The work of Paul C. Gorski (2014) is also worth exploring within the teen library services context as it can help staff to understand exactly what’s required to develop equitable learning spaces. Gorski states “... if we are committed to creating equitable, bias-free learning spaces, cultural proficiency describes only part of the skill set we need. In fact, when it comes to equitable education, cultural proficiency has a few limitations. For example, like many of the recent models for teaching with diversity in mind — culturally relevant teaching, cultural competence and intercultural communications—cultural proficiency focuses primarily on culture and cross-cultural knowledge. However, I wonder whether we have become so focused on culture in education that we have failed to address inequities like heterosexism, ableism or racism sufficiently.”

If we are committed to creating equitable, bias-free learning spaces, cultural proficiency describes only part of the skill set we need.

Research Questions

1. What are the techniques library staff are using to successfully engage with teens to build reflective and responsive collections?
2. To what extent does the current body of young adult resources adequately meet the needs of today’s diverse teens?
3. How can the emerging literacies skills of low literacy teens, English language learners, and reluctant readers be enhanced through the services that libraries provide?
4. How do factors such as race, ethnicity, culture, class, sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic status, language spoken and read, and geographic location (i.e. rural vs. suburban vs. urban) shape need for and use of library services and resources?
5. How do youth of color perceive libraries and library staff in their schools and communities?
6. To what extent do library staff understand their own cultural biases and blind spots with respect to supporting the needs of youth of color?
7. What are the models or conceptual frameworks that might drive the development of library programs that bridge development of emerging literacies between a teen’s home and community?

Priority Area 5 Community Engagement

Community engagement is another aspect of the work required of library staff to guarantee that diverse community members are heard and supported. Community engagement is a process in which library staff

build relationships and understanding of the needs of the community in which they work, and as noted in *The Principles of Community Engagement* 2nd edition “Acknowledging diversity in background, experience, culture, income, and education and examining how society produces privilege, racism, and inequalities in power should be central to the process of community engagement” (Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium, 2011).

Library staff must move from designing services in a vacuum and then informing teens and youth development stakeholders that the services are available to using participatory design strategies.

In a 2014 report from the Building the Field of Community Engagement collaborative the value of community engagement is clearly stated. “Community engagement creates more sustainable, long-term progress for communities because it is rooted in relationships. Many organizations driving a specific issue or campaign agenda build transactional relationships, which are less personal and built specifically to obtain a desired result. Authentic community engagement, on the other hand, depends on developing a relational connection to the community that is focused on achieving long-term results rather than short-term gains. As one event attendee said, ‘It can’t just be about a project, because projects end.’” (Building the Field of Community Engagement, 2014, p. 5)

Another opportunity for community engagement and increased connections between libraries and the teens that they work with is through Research Practices Partnerships (RPP). As stated on the RP+P Collaboratory website, “Jointly-conducted research builds relationships that can lead to more relevant questions and more usable results. It can produce tools and findings that

speak directly to the concerns of educators. This approach may also represent a more ethical approach to education research by giving equal voice to the insights, experiences, and complex working conditions of practitioners on the frontlines of advancing equity and excellence....” (Why Research + Practice, 2016) In 2013 the William T. Grant Foundation laid out a framework for research practice partnerships that can be integrated into teen library services research. The Foundation noted these five conditions for successful partnerships: 1. They are long-term, 2. Focus on problems of practice, 3. Are committed to mutualism, 4. Use intentional strategies to foster partnership, and 5. Produce original analyses. (Research-Practice Partnerships, 2013, p. 2.)

There are barriers to building community engagement with and through libraries. When discussing External Collaborations in Libraries in the Exponential Age, Brian Bannon, Chicago Public Library Commissioner and CEO states, “One of the things we learned from the work with IDEO [a design company] was allocating the time to people to do the work, and to give them the support and structure around it. The original idea was that they can do it on the side. But no, you can’t do it on the side. You have to invest in people and give them the time. There was a huge change in our organizational culture as a result of doing this — allocating the time to the support line folks, and that’s how change happened.” Siobhan Reardon, President and Director of the Free Library of Philadelphia goes on to say, “Our work of moving the library system is from the inside out. We had to change the internal structure so that staff knew we were serious about the need to meet community needs. We had to look at the staff and create the possibilities for the staff to get out from behind their desks and get into the communities.” (Garmer, 2016) Research needs to occur place to demonstrate the value of teen library staff moving beyond their buildings so to guarantee teens have the skills needed to succeed in the 21st century.

To succeed in community engagement library staff must move from designing services in a vacuum and then informing teens and youth development stakeholders that the services are available to using participatory design strategies, community discovery processes, assessment techniques, and relationship building outside of library buildings.

Research Questions

1. How can we leverage participatory design methods to support community engagement and teen library services?
2. What training do library staff need to effectively implement successful community engagement techniques?
3. What are the models in community engagement and community discovery that libraries need to implement to best serve teens?
4. How do library staff engage with underserved teen communities including those representing teens living in poverty, those from underrepresented cultures and ethnic groups, and those in rural, suburban, and tribal areas?
5. What are the library infrastructure barriers that limit community engagement opportunities and how can they be overcome?
6. What are the benefits and models to teens, their families, and communities when libraries embed research practice partnerships into their work?
7. What is the impact on teens when library staff implement community engagement activities?

Conclusion

Answers to the questions posed in the five priority areas above will aid librarians and library staff as they move further into the 21st century. The agenda is forward-thinking in its framework with a strong focus on the areas librarians and library staff need to be well-versed in to support the informational and recreational needs of young adults who are born into a world of e-content, technology, mobile devices, and social media.

The research that is an outcome of this agenda will provide information librarians, library staff, administrators, policy makers and community members need to advocate for high-quality library services for young adults. Teens will therefore have access to library staff, programs, services, and collections that will help them to develop successfully and succeed well after their adolescent years.

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Looking for more research-related resources?

Check out YALSA's research journal, *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, at www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlya, and our Network for Research on Libraries and Teens at yaresearch.ning.com.



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