

# Identifying the Special Requirements of Teen Library Users: An Analysis of Current Research Studies

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**Abstract** - Though the researchers and librarians paid attention to children and adults, they have not recognized adolescents as a special category as library users till recent times. The researchers have emphasized that teen library users have special requirements in addition to conventional ones. Basically, they expect the libraries to act as an Information Gateway as well as acting as a provider of information and information access from the internet and database access to book circulation and reference services etc. They expect the library to act as a Social Interaction or Entertainment Space with a special area assigned to them to meet with each other and do group activities. Since the teens are expected to be prepared for future employment, the libraries should act as a Beneficial Physical Environment by providing information and training for jobs and skills development. To fulfil these requirements, the researchers suggest a collaboration between school and public libraries, since both cater for the same group of clients.

**Keywords:** Teen Library Users, School Libraries, Public Libraries

## I. INTRODUCTION

We usually talk, pay attention, and research children and their needs. Though society identifies adults also as a special category, till recent times, the society as a whole, even the researchers and the librarians have not recognized the adolescents who stand in between the children and the adults as a special age group, or they have special needs and behaviour as well as the children and the adults. Identifying teen library users or adolescent library users as a special category is very important.

2014 has been the Year for Youth in Sri Lanka and launched the first national youth policy. A World Conference was held, and it led to the joint signing of a statement by the government and the youth delegates for the first time. According to the Sri Lanka National Human Development Report (2014), the youth population (ages of 15-29) in Sri Lanka is 23.2%. The National Center for Educational Statistics in the U.S.A. has conducted a survey in 1995 and there the librarians have estimated that 23% were twelve- to eighteen-year-olds. Walter (2003) says between 50% and 60% of public library users are young people. National Center for Education Statistics (2011) says School libraries are available to more than 62% of the teenagers in government schools. The 'Opportunity for All' study (2011) has reported that the young people aged 14-24 consists of 25% of all

public library users. According to American Library Association (2013), nearly 82% of public libraries report providing library services to teens, and youth aged 12-18. Eight in ten Americans prefer all kids to get engaged in some kind of organized activity or to have a safe place to go after school and school and public libraries often serve as those places. A Pew survey (2013) found that 72% of 16-17 year-olds had used a public library in 2012. Teens use libraries to study, read, write and discuss books, access the internet or computers, use the library's research resources, socialize, participate in various programs and just to hang out. Now libraries are accepted as safe public spaces giving opportunities to young people to develop intellectually and socially, to gain new skills in learning and expression, and to prepare them for higher studies and employment. The teenagers, as well as their requirements from libraries, have changed.

According to a study done by Pew Internet & American Life Project, the usage of technology by teenagers for more than ten years. In late 2012 and 2013, the Project released some reports that tempted the librarians, educators, youth workers, and parents giving a clear view of how teens build up their relationship with resources, information, and one another in the point of view of technology. In his presentation at the YALSA Summit on the Future of Libraries and Teens, Lee Rainie, Executive Director of the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2013), pointed out seven observations from the project's research such as "teens live in a different information ecosystem and a different learning ecosystem, their reading levels match or exceed adult levels, teens use libraries and librarians more than others, but do not necessarily love libraries as much, they have different priorities in library services, and will behave differently in the world to come and the teachers and the public recognize this and want libraries to adjust to it".

Recently many researchers have identified teenagers as library users who have special needs in addition to conventional ones. According to Walter (2003), young adults visit libraries to go through the shelves, get involved in book discussion groups, use computers to look for information about their current sports activities and favourite musicians, seek materials for schoolwork, borrow CDs and magazines, and do their homework. They sometimes give instructions to

the library staff about developing the library collections and the services. Some of them work in libraries as paid workers and volunteers.

## II. ACT AS AN INFORMATION GATEWAY

People including adolescents go to libraries to find information. They expect basically to find information from libraries. A survey was carried out by Denise Agosto (2007) in two public libraries in Pennsylvania and Philadelphia. A questionnaire contained two parts. Part one asked for basic information such as age, gender, frequency of public and school library use and home computer access. Part two was designed as three open-ended questions: they were “Why did you come to the library today?”, “What kinds of information do you look for at the library?” and “What kinds of information do you need that you can’t find at the library?” were distributed among 100 teenagers aged between 14-17. (p. 57)

Out of the respondents, 52.1% of them have identified the library mainly as an Information Gateway. According to the respondents, the libraries acting as information gateways means “being a provider of information and information access from internet and database access to book circulation and reference services, etc.”. They stated that they needed information for personal needs and schoolwork etc. By saying seeking information for personal needs, they meant finding topics of leisure or personal interest, such as photographs of celebrities, codes of computer games, music lyrics and other similar topics. While saying that they sought information for their school work, they meant to find books or search the internet for their assignments. (Agosto, 2007)

Agosto (2007) suggests creating a web page named “Homework Helper” (p.60) within the library’s website to guide the young adults to recommended reference tools, free online homework assistance services, useful library databases and other relevant online resources. She further suggests developing another web page named “Popular Hobbies” (p.60) within the library’s website including links to film and TV related websites, online magazines for teenagers, young adult book reviews, and “Top 10” (p. 60) book lists for new young adults’ titles, sports biographies, graphic novels, etc. Creating an attractive area to display new teen titles and issuing a form for them to suggest new titles are also recommended. Setting up a box to exchange the magazines freely and organizing informal classes for the teens to instruct how to use databases were also recommended.

According to Walter, the students go to public libraries for “after-school programming or homework assistance.” (2003, p. 571). Analyzing some research work related to information needs and information-seeking behaviour of the students, Walter has identified the importance of coordination between school librarians and class teachers in improving the information literacy skills of the students. According to her, the public libraries that are keen on providing “after-school

homework assistance programs” (p. 571), should think through developing the information literacy skills of the students and make sure the staff that assists the students in finding information for homework be more confident (p. 580). Walter further points out that providing other reference services in addition to online searching is essential, though the scholars have not done sufficient research on the work that the school librarians and public librarians have done on it (p. 580). According to Meyer, young people need more welcoming environment, better access to higher-end technology, more help with their homework and better books and magazines. They prefer a revision of rules and fees (1999).

After closing the teen lounge of the Central Library of Rochester Public Library, the administration has done a research study and given several recommendations regarding young adults’ information needs such as collecting, providing and displaying local information of particular interest to young adults, acting as a clearinghouse and a dissemination centre for all local job information for young adults and cooperate or communicate with a variety of local youth agencies and with information and referral services dedicated to adolescent needs, to maintain current awareness of youth needs (Gratch, 1981).

### A. Materials Needed

A survey was conducted to identify the special user needs of the age group of 11 to 19 in a middle-sized public library in Italy (Ala Town Library, Trento) by using questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups (Corradini, 2006). The researcher as a librarian identified this age group as “a key user group to investigate to assess actual and future needs for maintenance and implementation of services, first of all, because adolescents have ‘just’ developed the habit of coming to the library for studying and cultivating the pleasure of reading, at the time when they begin to have more responsibility for their future lives, and secondly, because they represent the future customers of the library services.” (Corradini, p. 482). This group was selected because they leave the area after their compulsory education for higher education or doing jobs that the area cannot provide them. The researcher was keen to find out their attitude towards the public library, whether they would forget about the public library, whether they would still feel the library is important in their lives and whether they would come again to explore the resources in the library someday in the future as adults. According to Corradini, the 15 to 19 age group prefer CD ROMs and printed periodicals, the 11 to 14 age group prefer comic books, and all, in general, prefer non-book materials. They feel that the library should provide information as well as materials for studying and leisure reading purposes. Respondents have stated that to provide a significant and effective library service, the chosen materials should be accessible and there should be a connection between materials and users.

Discussing about the teens' need for library resources and services in an environment of public libraries of Iran, Asemi states that, though the teenagers' priority is textbooks, they have other needs such as expanding and improving lending services (2018). The study concluded that libraries were less successful in meeting the needs of the young adults. Therefore, the libraries need to develop the resources and enhance the services based on the needs and priorities of the patrons.

### *B. Collection Development*

In a dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of a Doctorate in Education, Fae Christie Giffen (2020), a librarian by profession, studies how adolescents face the environment of the public libraries and discover how their connection to space impacts their "sense of belonging in the library space". (2020, p. 2) According to her study, the teens stated that the collection reflected their identities including race, culture, gender, hobbies, interests, and other important parts of identity such as mental health and academic identities. Still, the library collections including books, DVDs, and music collections remain important items to teens. She recommends frequent collection updates and getting the teens involved in collection development.

Shenton (2007) has done a study to evaluate the recent changes done in a school library in Northeast England and to help in future development. The findings of the study disclosed that fiction was expressively more popular than non-fiction, though a specific genre was not specified. When considering non-fiction, they had no specific areas to point out. The researcher was concerned that the study discovered that the school library usage was very low. The students' attitude was that libraries are basically to fulfil their academic needs. When they were asked about the collection of the library, they said that the content of books should be useful, should be easy to read and well presented, should be current editions and the materials should be in good condition. One of their requirements was that the collection to be more presentable.

### *C. Guidance to Use Materials*

The Central Library of Rochester Public Library in New York was forced to close the Teen lounge due to financial difficulties in July 1976. The administration somehow wanted to make the library an attraction to young adults, and they have decided to do a research study. Young adults aged 12 to 18 or students from grades 7 to 12 living in Rochester were selected and a questionnaire was used for data collection (Gratch, 1981). Almost 50% of the young adults were frequent users (i.e., use the library at least once a month.) Even though the study was done some time back, it has provided some interesting outcomes. They have complained that the young adult recreational materials were not organized well and cannot be well accessed. 50% of the sample said that they sought assistance to find materials and information. Almost one-third of the sample that didn't ask

for assistance admitted that they felt uncomfortable asking for assistance. From the viewpoint of the young adults of the Rochester Library, the primary need was related to assistance (Gratch, 1981). Many of them mentioned the difficulty in finding library materials and the need for improvements in instructional and directional aids, preferably friendly and understanding assistance. The researchers have recommended establishing and funding a young adult librarian's position, offering staff training programs to the staff who did not identify the need to provide different kinds of services, and providing library instructions through a sign system, user aids, and tours designed for teens.

Giffen (2020) points out that teen users should be educated about what the library has to offer them. Then only they feel that they belong to the place. If they do not know the available library resources they will not use them.

Doing a study to find out how young people find nonfiction material in a public library environment, Shenton and Dixon (2004) say that some are familiar with the location of the materials on the subject and go directly to the particular place, but some did not know the exact place. Therefore, they searched randomly through the shelves or guided by labels on the shelves or walls, by the staff or by the subject index. The majority of users wanted information on a particular topic, rather than a specific item. Most of them seemed to ignore the library terminology as well as the arrangement of books on the shelves. The researchers recommend arranging the book collections in an easier sequence with signs and symbols. Since many young people seek assistance from the public library staff, the study recommends a more friendly and attentive staff too. For school libraries, the researchers recommend at least one professional librarian or to collaborate with the LIS programs conducted by public libraries since in England library media centres of small schools are handled by teachers.

### *D. Technology and Internet Facilities*

According to a report by Pew Internet, "If librarians better understand kids' online needs, and create libraries and services that respond to these needs, then teens will be much more likely to visit our libraries-either in person or by way of cyberspace." (Schmidt, 2005, p. 45). The library staff have to provide easy access to databases and catalogues in the libraries through the internet. They need speedy internet connections to download content faster, at the same time chat with friends, listen to music, check out various sites, play games and possibly even do their homework (p. 45). Aplin (2011) while writing a review article under the title 'Using Technology to connect Public Libraries and Teens, examines how public libraries can use technology to effectively connect with and serve their teen customers. Other than connecting physically, public libraries are expected to connect online with their teen users. Since they prefer to be online than in a library, the libraries should thoroughly be aware of the online community. Reviewing the literature gathered, she recommends connecting with teens through

library websites, social networking sites, mobile devices, and e-readers. She further suggests getting involved the teens in the planning of providing reader services to young adults services and designing teen library spaces and the library staff to get some training in providing library service to the teens as well as getting access to technology and gaming.

#### *E. Relationship between the Staff and the Users*

Howard (2011) has done a study to find out the attitude towards the public library of young adults, ages between twelve and fifteen, living in an Eastern Canadian regional municipality. The respondents have pointed out that not being satisfied with the existing library staff is one of the reasons for the lack of use of the public libraries.

Giffen's study too emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the reader and the staff. In her study, when the patrons were asked how they feel safe, respected, reliable, and aware of the library, the answers were such as staff smiling and greeting them, answering questions, treating them like adults, and trusting them to use the library without supervision (2020). On the other hand, young adults are reluctant to seek assistance from the staff if they seem busy or engaged in other work. According to Giffen's study, the staff interaction with library users depends on their race, culture, and other identity factors too. Some studies have found that similar behavioural issues can be judged more harshly based on the race of the students (Wun, 2016). Staff should be trained to provide information services to a diverse community.

### **III. ACT AS A SOCIAL INTERACTION OR ENTERTAINMENT SPACE**

Even though libraries are recognized mainly as information providers, many research studies done with young people have identified libraries as social interaction spaces or entertainment spaces. According to several studies done with young adults, they are keen on creating and maintaining social relationships and expect libraries to fulfil that need. Agosto's survey has revealed that 38.7% of them visit the library for some kind of "organized entertainment, interaction with peers, unorganized entertainment, and interaction with library staff." (2007, p. 59). They have mentioned 'Organized Entertainment' like events or programs held at the library such as showing films or meetings of their various groups. (p. 59) By saying 'Interaction with Peers' (p. 59) they have suggested meeting with friends or new people. Playing games on the computer and reading anime books they have named 'Unorganized Entertainment' (p. 59). The respondents who visited the library to talk to the library staff mentioned their Teen Services Librarian by his or her name. One girl has mentioned her as 'Mommy#2 (p. 60).

The researchers of Rochester Public Library have recommended scheduling and publicizing the programs that interest young people (Gratch, 1981).

By analyzing survey results, Agosto (2007) suggests organizing teen-friendly library clubs, such as drawing clubs, knitting clubs, and chess clubs, offer programs which have entertainment value, for instance, movies, dance shows and storytelling and provide low-cost entertaining or socializing materials for free use, such as card packs, board games, and web pages with links to free online games.

#### *A. Special Area and a Sense of Belonging*

According to Gratch (1981), teen users have requested to set up a teen recreational area consisting of fiction and nonfiction material related to various subjects.

According to Coradini (2006), adolescents who use libraries have requested separate rooms for study group sessions, for music playing, and for meeting friends.

Agosto (2007) suggests "designating a separate Teen Room in the library, where young adults can play music, play card games and board games, hold library club meetings, or browse teen magazines without disturbing patrons in other parts of the library." (p. 61).

Giffen (2020) finds out that teens use their familiar areas of the library. One of the key findings of this study is that teens are not always keen to use the areas designated to them. The majority tend to feel more comfortable in the Adult area. She recommends separate areas for teens that are removed from the kids' areas of the library since the kids' area makes them uncomfortable. Many participants chose to avoid the children's area because it was filled with young children, and they did not like the atmosphere. Therefore, she emphasizes that there should be a separate space for the teens. Some researchers have observed that the teen areas were not used as much as adult areas even though separate teen areas were designed with good intentions. Giffen (2020) recommends keeping some of the resources such as flyers in different locations where the teens continuously go.

#### *B. Privacy*

According to Adams's study in 2002, privacy is very important for teens when they seek information. If the teens are not sure that their information-seeking data is going to be kept private they will be uncomfortable and they will not ask for certain information. As one of the coordinators of a school library in Pennsylvania explains, from the American youth, 25% of girls and 10% of boys are abused before they become adults, but they would rather suffer the consequences of not being knowledgeable if they are not sure whether their privacy is protected or not. They do not want the others like teachers and parents to know what they search for, especially when they search the internet. One boy wanted to find the 'Dragonball Z book' and while he was talking to the librarian the mother overheard the conversation and terminated the interview. Adult society is not ready to grant complete privacy to young adults. Even the librarians do not agree with it because then they cannot guide the students to find information or materials.

A significant finding of Giffen (2020) was the importance of independence and privacy during library use. Nine out of ten participants stated that the adult seating areas are a part of the library and that they feel connected and safe to be their true selves. When they were asked to explain their feelings about the adult seating area, many participants stated that they preferred the privacy of that area.

#### IV. THE LIBRARY AS A BENEFICIAL PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Agosto (2007), in her research, has identified that 9.2% of the respondents have considered the library as Beneficial Physical Environment. Five of them indicated that they went to the library to escape from the dangerous environment of the house, from the family members, or from the noise. One teen has called the library “a quiet place to get away from family.” (p. 60) Another one was expecting to find “a quiet place to study for [his] finals.” (p. 60) One identified the library as “a safe place to go after school.” (p. 60)

Five respondents were using the library for community development. They visited the library to do volunteer work. Four of them indicated that they came for personal improvements such as to enjoy the educational benefits and improve their reading and communication skills. One student mentioned that she goes to the library to work and earn money. (Agosto, 2007).

According to Gratch (1981), the library should act as a clearinghouse and a dissemination centre for all job information in the area for teens. Preparing teenagers for the workforce has become one of the major concerns in the United States. In the Public Library Association’s last three decades, the skills required for young adults to succeed in the workforce have changed considerably, but the skills laid emphasis on in schools have not kept up with these changes. 87% of public libraries offer programs for teens, targeting career guidance and computer skills. In addition to that, libraries recruit teens to work as interns, helping them to build professional skills and gain work experience. (Public Library Association, 2012).

Agosto (2007) recommends to “create a Web page with links to vocabulary-building games and lists of great books, create bookmark-sized pathfinders relating to college and career information, designate a small room or corner of a room as a teen study/reading area, a quiet space with a few tables and a computer with library database access, provide volunteer opportunities for teens, such as programming assistants, teen advisory board members, and grade school homework helpers and consider hiring teens for part-time positions in YA and children’s services”. (p. 61)

#### V. REQUIREMENTS OF INDIVIDUAL LIBRARIES

Sometimes it is useful to do studies in individual libraries since most of the time the environment of individual libraries and the requirements of the users can be different.

#### A. Change the Environment

Wendy Stephens, a school librarian in a school in Alabama, U.S.A. got the opportunity to plan a new library building with two floors in 2015. The building became a showpiece with a lot of glass in the college surrounded by two busy pathways. Consulting the architect, the project coordinator, and the interior designers she gave the library a new look that the teens would like. She arranged the first floor with fiction, comics, graphic novels, and curricular materials in current use. The second floor was filled with nonfiction, reference, and two specialized collections for career planning and local history. An area with computers and networking also was established.

#### B. Change the Opening Hours

Stephens (2015) was not satisfied only by providing a new environment for the students and decided to expand the opening hours of the library. Earlier the library was open only 20 minutes before school opened and was closed after 20 minutes. With the new place, she made the library open from 7.00 am to 8.00 pm. According to her, the library has become one of the busiest places in the school after the changes.

#### C. Adding Special Collections

During the summer of 1979, the West Junior High School library in Colombia, Missouri decided to add a collection of comic books (not for borrowing) to attract the teen students to the library and it was successful. Before that, the library has been used less because of the negative attitude of the students. Data were collected from January 17 to May 7, 1980, and library circulation and library attendance increased rapidly during this period. In addition to that, the number of students who misbehave in the library was reduced. (Dorell & Carroll, 1981)

### VI. CONCLUSION

“Research could tell us so much more about why they have come to the library, what they are doing there, and what difference it will make in their lives.” (Walter, 2003) The needs of teen library users may differ from country to country and society to society. While the teens in the USA, Canada, UK, Italy, or Australia ask for various kinds of materials and information, a place for social interaction, and the library to act as a beneficial physical environment, the teens in Iran request mainly textbooks and expanding and developing lending services. By doing various studies to find out the special needs of teens as library users, the researchers have come to various conclusions. Examining several research articles, the basic requirement of teens as library users can be named to act as an information gateway in different ways. The need to find information alone is a very broad area. It includes book circulation, reference services, and internet access for studies, homework assignments, and numerous personal purposes. To fulfil these needs the libraries have to manage the collections, create websites, and guide the users

to materials. Acting as social interaction or entertainment space and a beneficial physical environment are the main expectations of a library from the teen's point of view. The research shows that adolescents expect more than traditional services provided by libraries. The library is not only a place to read or borrow materials. This is the demand of the teens from the libraries for the future.

### VII. SUGGESTIONS: BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

A case study was undertaken by Fisher (2003) in one secondary school in New South Wales, Australia examining the relationship which students and teachers had with their nearest public library. Based on the findings she suggests that a strong collaboration should be built between the school and public libraries since both cater to the same groups of clients, even though they view their clients from different viewpoints.

In both school and public libraries, library staff needs to address the same issues related to physical, emotional, and intellectual improvement of youth, the procedures and phases of their development of information literacy skills in terms of collection development and the services provided including programs and activities, displays, service practices, internal spatial arrangements, technological provision and general library environment. Even though the responses will vary according to the type of place and the staff, there are a number of common requirements that should be fulfilled by these two types of libraries.

Fisher points out that there should be constant communication between the school librarians and the public librarians targeting "a close awareness of all things about the shared clientele, a sharing of rare or expensive resources where possible, a forum for active and professional networking where experience and differences of perspective can be discussed and understood and in some events, like Library and Information Week and Book Week, a sharing of the promotional ideas to present a common front to achieve a greater impact." (2003).

For this to happen there would have to be an understanding concerning the association at the top management level of each organization and school librarians and public librarians and a belief about the value of this collaboration.

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