

Proposal for  
Library Research Seminar V

**Excursions into Post-Modern Young Adult Librarianship**

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Over a decade ago, scholar Wayne Wigand observed that library school education had changed little since Columbia's School of Library Economy introduced it in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This paper extends Wigand's observation beyond general views of the profession's own training process by inaugurating questions about its application specifically to institutional LIS notions of young adult (YA) services. Where youth are concerned, LIS continues to manifest what Wigand would call a scholarly and professional "blind spot." The historical analysis of the present study inaugurates a discursive critique of "youth" as manifest in LIS practice and research.

The study, incorporating the multiple, critical perspectives post-modern conceptualizing offers, explores what Michel Foucault termed "discursive formations" by examining relationships between the historical constructions of "youth" and the LIS contexts emanating from them. In connecting post-modern theory and YA librarianship this study provokes suggestive and fundamental questions. What are the institutional implications of borrowing extra-disciplinary historical constructions of youth? Further, informed by the linguistic turn toward discourse analysis, this study nominates considerations for reconstituting the disciplinary LIS concept of "young adults."

In partial response to these questions, this paper explores how LIS has historically imported visions and theories of "youth" from non-LIS disciplines despite wide recognition that approximately 25% of library patronage is young adults (adolescents). These visions of youth inform YA services to such a degree that today they appear normative - a dominant, professional consensus that in fact represents a kind of conceptual poverty. This study concludes by examining emerging concepts of "citizenship" as an option for a more LIS-specific definition of youth - one more deeply rooted in broad LIS-specific values.

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, each generation of “youth experts” has advanced its own Olympian or universal vision of adolescence. Three broad visions of youth will be examined in the present study. First, the origins of the “child sciences” began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with G. Stanley Hall, who coined the phrase “storm and stress” to characterize adolescence as a biologically determined phase of human development. Youth were viewed as inherently problematic. Hall and his contemporaries advanced that youth exhibit natural conflict with the broader society.

A second theory under analysis in this study is the still very popular “youth at risk” model. In this vision, even if any given youth is not in inherent conflict with the larger society, every individual youth is implicated because youth *as a class* are suspected of potential anti-social behavior. In anticipation of these negative behaviors, susceptible youth are viewed as requiring massive institutional intervention and prevention programs even prior to the appearance of anti-social behaviors.

The final theory under examination, “youth development,” is likely the most popular and well-received of any in currency among today’s youth service professionals. Indeed, there is near ideological consensus in LIS about its role in informing and evaluating the profession’s relationship with youth, their care givers, and related institutions.

While the term “youth development” has appeared in youth studies practice and scholarship since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has evolved through many iterations and different meanings. The most recent of these innovations explicitly attempts to reverse the previous “youth-at-risk” model that anticipated negative youth behavioral outcomes with a new iteration called “*positive* youth development.” This vision considers all youth not as potential criminals but as quantifiable community “assets.” For LIS, and other youth services and institutions, this represents a radical

paradigm shift. Today, fewer progressive institutions imagine youth in negative “at-risk” terms; rather, informed by research such as that produced by the Search Institute, they see youth as valuable community resources that, once carefully cultivated and developed, promise to yield “thriving” adults capable of demonstrating discrete, measurable, productive, and pro-social skills.

As a consequence of this paradigm shift, libraries have launched various schemes in which they actively solicit youth participation and involvement. This is the era of burgeoning “Teen Advisory Groups” and other “partnering” configurations in which selected youth negotiate their views, desires, and evaluations of library youth services directly with library professionals.

Nevertheless, while these ostensible differences and evolutions in the discourse of/on “youth” have come and gone, considered from a broader context in which LIS professionals continue to construct “youth” have actually only imperceptibly differed since the late-19<sup>th</sup> century inauguration of the “child sciences.” However labeled, there remains a dominant, ideological consensus of youth as a marginalized, problematic, “Other.” Youth development ideology is layered thick with requirements and metrics for specific and discrete activities and outcomes (heavily adult-mediated) necessary to impart particular goals, objectives, and measurable skills variously promoted to inoculate, rehabilitate, improve, and/or prepare youth.

Why must LIS rely exclusively on other disciplines for its vision of youth, who, after all, comprise 25% of library users? Instead LIS might now begin to re-conceptualize its own definitions of these library users.

Pursuing an LIS-specific definition of youth promises to impact every facet of the institution’s youth services profile. It immediately begs questions about power relations between young people, libraries, professionals, and the institutions connecting them. This approach would

focus less on enforcement of behavioral rules, for instance, and emphasize more relationship-building, social experience, and peer associations; less library-determined programming models and more youth-centric initiative; less alignment of resources to anticipate youths' adult futures and more to support the current experiences of youth today; and less institution-derived evaluations of program profiles and more client-centered assessments.

Re-envisioning youth, however, as entitled library citizens would require rethinking the narrow roles to which we have historically confined them: criminal intruders into our quiet and orderly world at worst, marginalized library users requiring subtle and deft management in most cases, narrow "student" audiences, or hand-picked Teen Advisory Group members at best. A critical examination of past characterizations of youth, combined with the potential emergence of an LIS-specific vision, promise to ignite a productive and long over-due discussion in LIS of the ways in which youth, as individually varied as any other class of library users, also share interests as a class that libraries can adapt to better serve.