How Libraries Provide Safe Spaces for (All) Youth

IFLA, 12 August 2018

Introduction

International Youth Day 2018 focuses on safe spaces for youth. For young people, in a transition phase between dependent childhood and independent adulthood, such spaces offer an important opportunity to develop their skills, their ideas and their identities. A place to continue and complete the process of learning and finding a place in society.

Libraries form an important part of the public service infrastructure, complementing other institutions such as schools, health centres, and cultural centres, as well as non-public actors such as NGOs. They frequently have an explicit mission to serve all members of the community, in particular the vulnerable, and are associated with educational opportunity[1]. Indeed, in many places they are the only genuinely public indoor space.

As such, there is both an opportunity – and a duty – to respond to the need of young people for safe spaces. This article, drawing on papers presented (and to be presented) at IFLA's World Library and Information Congress, explores lessons learned from efforts to deliver on this.

Why Access to Information Matters…

As underlined in the Development and Access to Information report[2], information is a key driver of development. It is what allows us to take better decisions for ourselves and those around us, to innovate and to create. Providing access to this information in a meaningful way – i.e. ensuring that everyone can access, use, share and create information – is therefore essential to development, from the individual to the global level. Libraries help deliver this[3].

While it has long been understood that a more literate and educated population is good for overall social and economic progress, some countries are increasingly underlining the direct role of libraries in reducing poverty[4], in promoting full and active citizenship, democracy, and free expression[5], and in supporting sustainability[6].

---

[1] Hoerning, Beate (2017)
[2] Garrido, M, Wyber, S (2017)
[3] Radijeng, Kgomotso (2013), WEBER, Claudiane and SILVA, Jusélia Paula and MIRANDA, Clarissa Mazon (2017) offer just some examples
[4] Mchombu, Kingo Jotham and Mchombu, Chiku Mnubi (2014)
[5] Hyttinen, Ritva and Salmela, Satu (2017)
[6] Purnik, Anton and Vasileva, Ekaterina (2018)

As highlighted in a paper to be presented at this year's World Library and Information Congress, '*because libraries are open spaces full of information experts, they should be the cornerstone of a global strategy to fight social inequalities by empowering every individual to make informed decisions and fully take one's place in the political and social space*'[7].

… especially to young people

This is particularly true for youth, who are moving from a situation of dependence (being fed information directly by teachers or families) to independence. They take on new responsibilities, and must take new choices. As they have new experiences, and find out new things about themselves, the importance of being well-informed grows, as well as simply having a quiet place where they can be calm, and be themselves.

Moreover, age may well be the only common factor among young people[8]. As each person discovers their identity, their information needs become more and more diverse. They may meet challenges – home life, isolation, institutional problems, literacy and access issues, motivation, and social skills, amongst others (and often more than one at once) – that leave them particularly vulnerable[9]. Rapid economic and social change can intensify these situations[10].

Especially as youth start to want to find out things for themselves, rather than just being instructed, the space provided by libraries becomes more and more important[11]. They are places allowing for freer information seeking, with practical support as a fall-back, less formal than schools or universities. By providing access to information, libraries can offer a bridge between home life and the wider world[12].

Nonetheless, together with greater independence can come a resistance to the idea that outside information is helpful[13]. Moreover, those who belong to marginalised groups – young mothers, people enduring homelessness – may seek to hide their identities and their struggles, in order not to seem different or vulnerable.

Libraries around the world <u>are</u> successfully overcoming the challenges, and offering young people the safe spaces they need. The rest of this paper looks at some of the ways in which they are doing this. As highlighted by a user

---

[7] Lachal, Jérémy and Peich, Muy-Cheng and Echelman, Adam and Chang, Allister (2018)
[8] Hyttinen et al, ibid.
[9] Buchanan, Steven, Loudon, Katherine and Tuckerman, Lauren (2015) *R*
[10] Wang, Lei and Xie, Xiaoyan and Chen, Weidong and Liang, Yiming (2018)
[11] Buchanan et al, ibid
[12] Sabelli, Martha, Szafran Maiche, Paulina (2014)
[13] Buchanan et al (ibid)

quoted in one paper, 'I think it's just so important to kind of build this space where like they're not alienated and they're not ignored, and they're not kind of pushed to the sides'[14].

Innovative Methods

A first task to make the library, and the services it offers, into an attractive proposition. Libraries do already benefit from being seen as a less formal environment than school, where there is no-one to judge or grade, and where there is much more freedom to experiment[15].

Nonetheless, the stereotype of libraries among non-users risks being outdated. Those who struggled at school or have low levels of literacy may hesitate before coming into what they see as a building full of books, or feel that they may not fit in. Research shared at WLIC has highlighted, for example, a sense that young mothers with noisy children are not welcome, or rules which aim to target antisocial behaviour[16]. Experience offers a number of responses to this.

A first step is to embrace new technologies and ways of doing things. Youth today are, in many countries, the most connected segment of society. They feel comfortable with new technologies, and almost expect to be able to use them in what ever they are doing. A number of libraries are therefore using Connected Learning techniques[17], which combine formal and informal institutions, work through networks, and a strong focus on producing things. Libraries become 'hives' of activity, and have seen strong engagement among youth involved[18].

Another approach is to expand the concept of the library space, bringing library methods beyond the walls. The experience of 'Wash'n'Learn', piloted by Libraries Without Borders in the United States, offers great examples of how to bring the access to information provided by libraries to laundrettes[19], with good levels of success. Through combining the finding of a place where youth did come and feel at ease with new technologies and librarians' own skills, it became possible to deliver services more effectively.

A final opportunity is simply to think hard about the language used, and the spaces offered, in order to make them as welcoming as possible. Information needs to be offered in a context that makes sense, and with greater use of

---

[14] Winkelstein, Julie Ann (2014)
[15] Hoerning, ibid
[16] Buchanin, ibid
[17] Nygren, Åke (2014)
[18] Marx, Maura (2014)
[19] Lachal et al, ibid

visuals and other supports as far as possible. Experience in Montevideo shows what can be done when the library is turned into 'their space'[20].

Identifying the Needs of Youth

A paper due to be presented later this month highlights that the library is still a 'public' space, where young people may not feel ready to state their identities and needs[21]. The public library is still very much 'public'. As such, simply offering the same service to everyone may deepen the isolation of some of the most vulnerable youth in the community.

To take one example, homelessness is already associated with a variety of negative outcomes, although those enduring it will often try hard to look 'normal', in order to take part in society[22]. Identifying them, in order to offer them support, is not necessarily easy.

In particular, among young homeless people, LGBT youth are over-represented, and face additional challenges linked to risks of psychological or physical violence. People in this situation do not only need a place where they can safely look for information about employment, education and housing, but may also have important needs for legal or health knowledge[23]. But once again, given this experience, they may hesitate before identifying themselves, and not want to be seen lending out books on these subjects.

One answer is to make stronger use of academic libraries, where there is a larger (and often more openly diverse) population. However, all libraries can help, with experience from many offering some useful lessons.

Clearly thinking carefully about rules around anti-social behaviour is important. All library users need to feel safe and comfortable, but it is often people experiencing homelessness who need library access the most.

Suggestions proposed include stronger outreach to shelters, ensuring that the composition of library staff reflects the communities served, creating private information spaces, working more closely with social workers, delivering relevant training and development to staff, better understanding of community trends and needs, looking at collections and materials offered and simply looking to be friendly (including through clear indications that LGBT youth are welcome).

---

[20] Sabelli et al, ibid
[21] Walsh, Benjamin (2018)
[22] Terrile, Vikki C. (2016)
[23] Winkelstein, ibid

As Walsh suggests, 'Homeless youth are hungry for kindness and few professionals are better suited to demonstrate interest, respect, and thoughtfulness than librarians and library staff'[24].

Building Partnerships to Create Safe Spaces

Returning to a key point in the introduction, libraries are often the only public indoor space in the community. This is a significant asset, bringing with it important potential. It is often through partnerships that libraries can fully realise their potential to provide a safe space.

These partnerships can go from effective use of volunteers[25], who can bring in new skills and experience, to more formal links. For example, some countries may have no training available for youth librarians, meaning that libraries have to engage other partners to be able to offer tailored services[26]. Such partnerships do require time and effort, but can yield important results in terms of turning the library into a welcoming hub for all of the community[27].

Of course libraries are often part of, or closely linked to, local government, who will have their own strategies. It is important for governments to see libraries as an ally – or support – in their own youth policies, and bring them into collaboration with social workers, health workers, teachers and trainers and others. This has been the case in the Netherlands, where libraries are seen as a pillar of life-long literacy strategies, offering a vital space for those who have left school already, as well as a key place for understanding needs[28].

These partnerships can also help in responding to some of the issues set out above with identifying needs and engaging marginalised youth. Experience from Finland shows how, by working with NGOs, libraries were able to use arts-based methods to reach marginalised and vulnerable users – 'invisible youth' – and help them improve their lives[29].

Conclusion

Providing a safe space for youth can be as hard as it is necessary. But there are many great examples of libraries around the world who have successfully done this, even in the case of some of the most vulnerable individuals and

---

[24] Walsh, ibid. List also contains suggestions by Winkelstein (Winkelstein, ibid).
[25] Hoerning 2017, ibid
[26] MEYERS, Jane Kinney (2016)
[27] ALEXANDER, Susan (2015)
[28] Langendonk, Adriaan, Toonen, Maiike (2017)
[29] Hyttinen et al, ibid

groups. In doing so, they have have provided access to the information people need to find themselves, grow, create and innovate.

Through new methods, investment in identifying and responding to needs, and developing partnerships, they have shown what can be done, and how essential libraries are in delivering the goals of International Youth Day.

Bibliography

Alexander, Susan (2015) *Masiphumelele Library: a holistic service to youth and children in the community*. http://library.ifla.org/1094/

Buchanan, Steven and Loudon, Katherine and Tuckerman, Lauren (2015) *Reaching the disadvantaged and disengaged in times of crisis: towards an understanding of information behaviours to inform interventions,* http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1251

Hoerning, Beate (2017), The importance of volunteer work for successful children's and adult literacy programs in US Public Libraries – a view from outside, http://library.ifla.org/1757/1/138-hoerning-en.pdf

Hyttinen, Ritva and Salmela, Satu (2017) *Reaching out - public libraries against exclusion with art based methods*. http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1944

Lachal, Jérémy and Peich, Muy-Cheng and Echelman, Adam and Chang, Allister (2018) *Librarians as information champions in a world of infobesity and fake news,* http://library.ifla.org/2188/

Langendonk, Adriaan, Toonen, Maiike (2017), Dutch approach to prevent and curate low literacy, http://library.ifla.org/1759/1/138-langendonk-en.pdf

Marx, Maura (2014) *Shaping the New Information Normal: Connected Learning through Empowering Young Adult Spaces*. http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1013

Mchombu, Kingo Jotham and Mchombu, Chiku Mnubi (2014) *The Role of Information and Knowledge in Poverty Eradication in Africa: a case study of Namibia,* http://library.ifla.org/996/

Meyers, Jane Kinney (2016) *Dynamic Partnerships for Sustainable Development of Public Libraries for Young People in Zambia,* http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/2084

Nygren, Åke (2014) *The Public Library as a Community Hub for Connected Learning,* http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1014

Purnik, Anton and Vasileva, Ekaterina (2018) *Library as a "Point of Grow" in Sustainable Development Society,* http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/2177

Radijeng, Kgomotso (2013) *The role of public libraries in the attainment of Botswana's vision 2016.* http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/258

Sabelli, Martha, Szafran Maiche, Paulina (2014) , The librarian as agent of change in contexts of social vulnerability: an experience with young women in Uruguay, http://library.ifla.org/976/7/166-sabelli-ppt-en.pdf

Terrile, Vikki C. (2016) *Our Invisible Families: Library Services with Families Experiencing Homelessness.* http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1501

Walsh, Benjamin (2018) *Public library and private space: Homeless queer youth navigating information access and identity in Toronto* http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/2144

Wang, Lei and Xie, Xiaoyan and Chen, Weidong and Liang, Yiming (2018) *Marginalized Population Service of Public Libraries of China in the Past 30 Years: A Survey of Public Libraries in Guangdong Province, China,* http://library.ifla.org/2138/

Weber, Claudiane and Silva, Jusélia Paula and Miranda, Clarissa Mazon (2017) *The Implementation of The Agenda 2030 at The International Center of Art and Humanistic Cultur: A Case Study From The Humanitas Library.* http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1829

Winkelstein, Julie Ann (2014) *Public Libraries: Creating Safe Spaces for Homeless LGBTQ Youth,* http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1029