Some Thoughts on the Future Direction of Library and Information Science Education

By Sandra Hughes-Hassell

As part of YALSA's year-long IMLS-funded National Forum on Libraries and Teens project, YALS asked me to ask Library and Information Science (LIS) educators to consider how LIS education needs to adapt and potentially change to better meet the needs of 21st century teens.[1] Thanks to our colleagues for taking the time to think about these questions and share their insights.

How Do You Think LIS Education Needs To Adapt or Change in Order to Prepare Youth Librarians To Engage With Today's Youth?

Denise Agosto, Drexel University: I would argue that current LIS programs do a fair job of preparing students to engage with youth, at least those students who take youth services classes. Most LIS programs offer at least one YA resources course, and many offer additional courses in youth services, youth programming, and more. That said, we certainly could do better, and we could do so by broadening our coverage of youth resources beyond just books to include a wider range of resources and, more importantly, by moving our educational approach away from a focus on youth resources to a focus on youth themselves.

LIS youth education has a long history of focusing on the study of information resources—paper books in particular—with the goal of teaching students to identify, collect, and recommend the "best" youth resources. "Best" is usually defined according to adult experts' opinions, with a heavy focus on award-winning titles. Certainly, we must continue to teach our students about youth resources and how to evaluate and collect them, but we need to move toward letting youth define "best" for themselves, based on interests, contextual factors, and personal tastes. We need to remember that books and other information resources are not just creative works to be appreciated for their literary and artistic qualities, but tools for meeting youths' varying needs and interests. We must also remember that most of today's youth spend many more hours online than they do reading traditional paper books or e-books. Although reliable figures are hard to find, most national surveys indicate that nearly all U.S. teens regularly go online, with some recent estimates indicating that the average U.S. teen spends seven or more hours per day using electronic devices.[2] From an educational standpoint, this means that we need to teach students about the full range of youths' media preferences and behaviors, moving away from promoting traditional reading as the holy grail of youth library services to teaching library students to become youth media educators, helping youth to become better educated, more thoughtful, more engaged media users, creators, and evaluators.

We also need to move from a resource-centered educational approach to a youth-centered educational approach, teaching students above all about youths' intellectual, social, emotional, physical, creative, sexual, and cultural needs, preferences, and development. In youth library courses, LIS educators should first teach students about teen behaviors and needs and then move on to show how information resources, library programming, library services, etc., can best be leveraged to meet those behaviors and needs. For example, rather than teaching a course about common types of library programs and how to

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implement them, in a youth-centered programming course the focus would first be on methods for identifying community needs, and second on how to design and implement innovative programs to meet those needs. This approach would mean teaching students first about youths' media behaviors and preferences, and then studying what media can best support them and how. It's a subtle difference, but a crucial one for enabling future librarians to best serve today's and tomorrow's youth.

Kafi Kumasi, Wayne State University: From my vantage point, libraries are already designed to serve youth from the dominant white culture. Whether we look at whom most of the books in the collection are marketed toward, or the racial/ethnic composition of the librarian workforce, or the rules for conduct in the library, most libraries are designed by and for whites. Therefore, I would like to focus my response on how LIS education needs to change to engage historically underrepresented youth of color, particularly African American youth.

We can use the recent verdict in the trial of George Zimmerman as a case study for teaching future youth services librarians about what it means to be a youth of color in today's America. I contend that unless today's majority white youth librarian workforce can put themselves into the shoes of today's youth of color, they will fall short of engaging youth of color like Trayvon Martin, the 17-year-old unarmed black boy killed by George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old armed Latino man.

I would argue that the not-guilty verdict that was rendered by a jury of six females, which included five white and one Latina, illustrated that we are far from the post-racial America that some might purport. To me, the verdict showed that we have a huge racial empathy gap that needs to be closed in order for today's youth of color to feel welcome enough to want to be engaged in libraries and with librarians. For some youth of color, libraries represent another in the cadre of racist infrastructures where their presence and sense of belonging is continuously subject to contempt, suspicion, and objectification. Just as Trayvon was suspected to be a criminal for merely wearing a hooded sweatshirt while walking on his way home from the store in the rain, many black male youth may feel this same level of surveillance when they walk into majority white library spaces. They are the outsiders who must prove they belong by following all the right (aka white) codes of conduct including being mindful of how they talk or dress and how they are perceived under the gaze of whiteness.

Ultimately, we need to educate the current and future youth librarian workforces on how to examine their own biases and prejudices toward nonwhite youth. We could start by asking them to put themselves in the shoes of parents of a youth like Trayvon Martin. Could they imagine living in a world where their child is seen as guilty until proven innocent? Can they imagine their teenage son going to the store to buy candy and never coming home because he was murdered by an overzealous neighborhood watch person who mistook him for a criminal? Can they imagine the mere presence of their child in an environment being seen as not only illegal, but also possibly lethal? These are the kinds of questions LIS educators need to consider if they wish to engage today's youth of color in libraries.

Don Latham, University of Florida: I think LIS educators, much like librarians, have long been responsive to the changing needs of their user groups, and, while I am probably biased, I think youth services faculty have often been particularly innovative in changing course content and instructional strategies in order to meet the needs of their own students, as well as the youth these students are preparing to serve. That said, I think LIS educators who teach youth services courses must continue to incorporate the latest knowledge in three key areas: youth behavior related to their informational, recreational, and developmental needs; social media, and how and why young people use it; and, to borrow a phrase from Eliza Dresang, "changing forms and formats," such as digital books, fan fiction, gaming, mobile apps, etc.[3]

Mega Subramaniam, University of Maryland: Today's digital, networked, and interactive media offer unprecedented opportunities for learning and pleasure that are highly engaged, personalized to youth interests, and part of their social communities and shared purpose. Youth are embracing new media for learning related to their social and recreational pursuits. However, there is still a disconnect between these informal forms of cyber learning and the learning that happens in formal education. Youth are turning to cultural institutions such as libraries and museums as venues for informal exploration.[4,5] I see these trends continuing, and this is a good thing for youth librarians. The big question is, are we ready for this? In the near future, the following three immediate changes need to take place in the young adult services education:

1. Begin embracing literature and expertise from other fields: education, learning sciences, improvement sciences, communication, human computer interaction etc. If LIS schools do not have faculty members with such expertise, there needs to be flexibility for LIS students to take courses from relevant departments and units, invite adjuncts to teach these courses, or encourage the co-development of courses that will be

co-taught by LIS faculty and faculty members from relevant disciplines.

2. LIS education needs to embrace and provide "evidence-based practices" or "design-based implementation research" experiences for the next generation of librarians. I am perplexed to find that many LIS education programs do not require such courses for their students. It is vital for all librarians but especially critical for youth service librarians to have the knowledge and skills to collect data and make iterative revisions to their programs and services.

3. LIS education must incorporate the concepts of diversity and inclusion in the courses offered to youth librarians. To meet the information needs of this increasingly diverse youth, the next generation of librarians needs to be culturally competent from the moment they graduate. This means being ready to work with youth diverse in race, language, literacy, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, education level, socioeconomic status, and other factors, which may be unique to the local community being served. The curriculum of LIS education has to adapt and evolve much faster than it has to ensure that our graduates are ready to serve every member of their communities. The vast majority of students graduating from LIS programs—nearly 80 percent—report that they did not have the opportunity to take even one class related to diversity.[6]

What Do You See As The Most Pressing Challenge LIS Education Faces When It Comes To Youth Services?

Subramaniam: The youth services landscape will continue to evolve. Changing the mindset of youth service faculty members to make changes to their courses, the bureaucracy that is involved in making these changes especially in offering interdepartmental courses or co-teaching with faculty from other disciplines, accreditation demands, the complexity of training and hiring the next generation of youth services faculty, and the need for youth services faculty to keep up with cultural and technological trends and pedagogical changes all coalesce as the most pressing challenge in youth services' education.

Latham: I think the most pressing challenge for youth services education is maintaining a sense of relevance among non-youth-services faculty. Many LIS schools and iSchools are gravitating away from public sector information services and toward private sector, "entrepreneurial" systems and services. Youth services educators need to advocate for the importance of public sector information services, especially for young people, and at the same time, figure out a way to tap into the entrepreneurial opportunities. Hollywood and Madison Avenue have known for a long time that there's a gold mine in marketing to teens. How can we, as youth services faculty, convince our non-youth-services colleagues that the same holds true for the information industries?

Kumasi: Ironically, youth services may very well be too "youthful" to garner the gravity and respect it should as a veritable area of research, teaching, and service. We see this youthfulness translated in a number of professional marketing programs, infographics and programming initiatives. Although we should not shy away from celebrating the vibrancy of the age group we represent, we should also strengthen our research knowledge base in order to be sure we have a seat at the table when weighty decisions are made about funding. To that end, one of our most pressing challenges is to help our students be able to effectively find and critically read research on the intersections of libraries and young adults. Once they are able to do this, they can become better advocates for the profession and take their rightful seat at the decision-making table when youth services positions, programs, and grants projects are being considered.

Agosto: Youth library services have been around for well over a century, and they're likely to continue to exist for the foreseeable future. Education for youth library services, on the other hand, is in a somewhat more tenuous position. The challenge for library schools is to continue to seek and hire full-time, research-active faculty. Many ALA-accredited programs are increasingly using adjuncts and other part-time faculty to teach their youth services courses. Not only does this lead to the reduced production of youth services research and to the consequent thwarting of the academic study of the field, it also leads to reduced prestige for youth services concentrations within library schools. The reasons for the increased use of part-time instructors to teach youth services courses are complex and vary somewhat from institution to institution. In some colleges and universities, this shift is part of an institution-wide movement toward using more part-time instructors in order to save on costs. Another reason is an increasing emphasis on funded research in many U.S. universities. In these institutions federal and corporate research grants bring with them not just money but prestige and a greater likelihood of attaining tenure. This focus on funded research adversely affects the hiring of youth services faculty for whom there is little available research funding compared to faculty who focus on computing and technology research. Regardless of the many reasons for this trend, it will take strong arguments from current youth services faculty and from other LIS faculty

as well to fight for the continued hiring of full-time youth services faculty in order to ensure the robust future of youth services education and research.

What Are The Mos Exciting Opportunities For Youth Services/Teen Services LIS Education?

Latham: LIS educators now have great opportunities afforded by technology and social media. It's relatively easy now for students in LIS youth services courses to make connections with other youth professionals (teachers, counselors, other librarians) as well as with young people themselves. There are also numerous opportunities for research (for both faculty and students), much of which can be done virtually.

Agosto: I can think of many exciting opportunities, but due to space limitations, I'll just mention two: (1) educating library students to view libraries as community spaces, and (2) educating youth librarians to become digital information educators.

Particularly in the public library realm, libraries are moving away from the traditional role of libraries as information providers to libraries as community spaces. This is especially important for teens, who have few places other than school and home that they can call their own. Public and even school libraries can act as a "third place" for teens, a noncommercial public space where teens can gather both physically and virtually for social, educational, and leisure purposes.[7] Unfortunately, the U.S. public continues to think of libraries mainly as book providers.[8] Library educators can help their students learn to value libraries as community spaces for youth and teach them ways for broadcasting the important message that there is much, much more to librarianship than books and reading.

As a result of the great deal of time youth are spending online, the "texts" of their social, educational, and personal lives are less likely today to be traditional printed books, newspapers, and magazines, and more likely to exist in any of a variety of digital formats. Consequently, most of today's youth are able to read and interpret a wide variety of digital texts, provided that they are exposed to them at a young age. LIS educators are perfectly positioned to teach youth librarians to become digital information educators, helping youth to become better informed, more thoughtful, safer, and more responsible users of digital information and digital technologies.

Subramaniam: Opportunities are endless. I will mention two. Given the present-day economic atmosphere, youth services are welcoming participation from LIS students in any capacity at their libraries—as volunteers, as hourly employees, and even allowing students to plan, conduct and manage events. Some even allow preservice librarians to conduct events, with little oversight from the library staff, encouraging creative endeavors from students. LIS educational institutions should embrace such opportunities by working closely with their community youth services units and integrating experiential learning in course assignments and deliverables.

With the recently popularized revelation that youth "hang-out, mess-around, and geek-out" in public libraries, many nonprofits, foundations, and private entities are eager to conduct their programs in the libraries, such as FutureMakers (http://kidsmakethingsbetter.com) and AbleGamers (www.ablegamers.com), to mention just two.[9,10] However, youth services personnel are stretched thin and often cannot find the time to work with such partners. LIS educators can partner with these entities and their community libraries to allow students to co-manage these programs in their communities.

Such partnerships benefit the students, the libraries, the outside partner, and the community it serves individually and collectively.

Kumasi: Social media holds a lot of promise and excitement for youth services in LIS education. We know that youth are very consumed with social media in their daily lives. I'm not sure, however, that we know how to leverage these teen's usage of social media to the fullest degree. I see opportunities for LIS educators to not only teach LIS students about what the latest social media sites are but more importantly to help them understand the essence of what these sites offer. For instance, we should be teaching students the difference between peer-based (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Vine) versus interest-based (e.g., Tumblr) social networking sites so these sites can be optimally utilized in our outreach and services to teens.

Understanding how these social media sites work also holds a lot of promise for teaching librarians how to help youth use this technology to become more actively engaged in the civic and political issues surrounding them. We saw how the 2008 presidential election was driven largely by the youth vote and what a powerful tool social media became in galvanizing youth around a political cause and campaign, with the election of President Barack Obama. Youth librarians need to be at the forefront of helping youth use social media to become more critically engaged citizens.

Given The Current Economic Environment, How Do We Continue to Recruit Students Who Are Capable Of Taking Leadership Roles in Defining the Direction of Youth Services?

Kumasi: Cultivating tomorrow's leaders will take a certain level of investment on

the part of the existing leadership in the profession. However, this investment does not necessarily have to cost a huge amount. With strategic planning and mentorship development among the existing professional members and leaders, a strong leadership program can be developed within our current organizational structure. For instance, I participated in a mentoring program as a graduate student, which has made a great impact on my success and professional identity. The program, "Cultivating New Voices" (CNV), operates under the auspices of the National Council of Teachers of English. We could utilize similar organizational resources that are already available to us through ALA/YALSA and create mentorship programs of this type. Readers who want to learn more about the CNV program can visit their website at www.ncte.org/research-foundation/cnv. I maintain contact with my cohort (see www.ncte.org/research-foundation/cnv/2006) and am proud to call such dynamic and successful people my colleagues and friends.

Subramaniam: We need to add color, abilities, culture, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) backgrounds, and many other diversity elements to the composition of the youth services profession. Lacking inclusiveness will dissuade underserved, underrepresented, or disadvantaged students to even consider the profession. We need to rigorously recruit students to join youth librarianship from nontraditional disciplines, such as engineering, basic and applied sciences, and computer science. We need to be proactive and creative in our recruitment strategies. Attending recruitment fairs, and advertising in the ALA publications is not going to get the leaders that we want in the profession. Packaging our courses to undergraduates in a way that will

appeal to them (such as part of learning communities where undergraduate students take courses as a group or as part of first or senior year experience programs), offering undergraduates service learning opportunities in nearby libraries or after-school sessions working with disadvantaged youth, involving undergraduates in creative research projects that involve running DIY or maker spaces sessions in the library, and involving diverse undergraduates in brainstorming recruitment strategies in focus groups are some ways that come to mind that may have a better success rate than the ones that we have now. The key is to get candidates who are passionate about youth and their needs, rather than the money.

Agosto: To continue to recruit students interested in serving youth and to ensure that they become strong leaders and youth advocates upon graduating, we should focus recruitment messages on explaining to potential students that education for youth librarianship and youth librarianship itself are first and foremost about youth—learning about youth, learning from youth, working with youth, and championing youth rights. We must fight the "library-equals-books" oversimplification that is still so prevalent in the public mind.
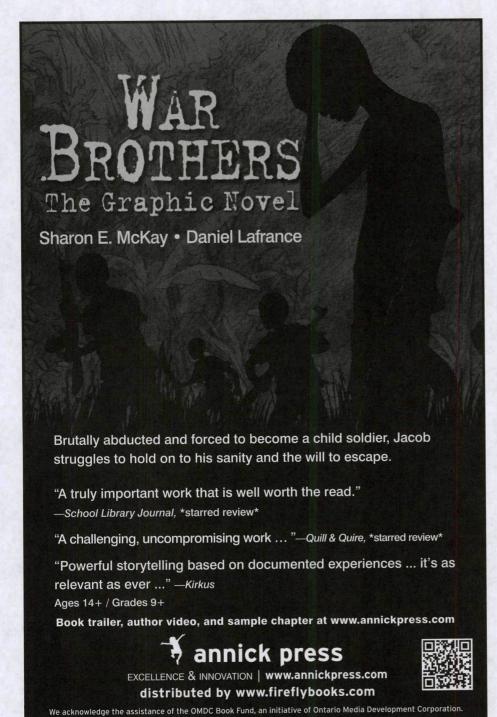
With so many other exciting topics of study in LIS programs, how can we keep students in youth services after they begin working on their degrees? Of course, increasing the availability of youth librarian positions and increasing salaries for those positions would be helpful, but more important than the current economic environment in influencing students to continue to stay in the youth field is the relevance and currency of youth librarianship curricula. As youth library educators in the modern information environment, we must constantly ask ourselves, "What is the most important

potential contribution of today's youth librarians and of youth library services?" One answer is that with so much information online and the relative ease with which most (but not all) youth can access it, the youth librarian's job now becomes less about teaching youth how to find information and more about teaching them how best to navigate and interpret the modern information world and how best to interact with others online. Another answer is that youth library services must move beyond information provision to supporting youths' broader needs and interests by providing social, intellectual, creative, and cultural opportunities, both online and in physical libraries.

Latham: It's important for all LIS students to gain education and experience in complementary areas. Students taking courses in youth services should, for example, also take courses in social media and media production. Flexible programs that allow and encourage students to develop skills in more than one area will better serve both students and the profession, and will also make it easier to recruit new students. Why not offer programs where a student can pursue tracks in youth services and app development, for instance? Why not youth services and health information technology? Regardless of where students end up working, having useful "crossover" knowledge and skills will serve them well. YALS

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