



Evidence Summary

Teenagers' Public Library Needs are Difficult to Determine

A Review of:

Howard, V. (2011). What do young teens think about the public library? *The Library Quarterly*, 81(3), 321-344. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/660134>

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Abstract

Objective – To discover the attitudes of twelve to fifteen year-olds toward the public library.

Design – Mixed methodology consisting of a survey and focus groups.

Setting – An Eastern Canadian regional municipality.

Subjects – Twelve to fifteen year-old middle school students.

Methods – Using a disproportionate stratified sample and multistage clustering, the author mailed 900 surveys to middle school students; 249 surveys were completed and usable. Those students who completed the survey and who also indicated they would be willing to

participate in a focus group were randomly selected to participate in nine focus groups with between 7 to 12 students in each group.

Main Results – Discrepancies exist between the teens' level of satisfaction with the library indicated on the survey (high) and expressed in the focus groups (low). Teens seldom use the public library due to: their non-existent relationship with library staff, although teens who were "active readers" used the library more; lack of appealing programs and program promotion; no teen-focused website; poor teen facilities within the library; and an overall failure of the public libraries to include teenagers.

Conclusion – Public libraries need to be more responsive to teen needs to attract teens to use

the library. To uncover these needs, libraries should use mixed methods of discovery.

Commentary

Teenagers inhabit a world of their own; they are too old to be a child and too young to be an adult. Being caught between these two periods of life can be stressful and frustrating for teenagers. This “unbelonging” extends to public libraries, which focus almost exclusively either on pre-teen children or on adult users. Public libraries must do a better job of meeting the needs of teen users to encourage lifelong library use. However, little research has been done examining the library needs of teenagers. Vivian Howard attempts to add to the small quantity of research on teen user needs with her mixed-methods study of middle school students aged 12 to 15 in an Eastern Canadian municipality. The survey results indicate teens use the library very little, but that they are highly satisfied with the level of service they receive. The results from the focus groups, however, show a much lower level of satisfaction with the public library.

Howard uses the findings of several previous studies of teens and libraries to frame her study and to determine what areas of library services should be targeted. The focus groups

were used to enhance the survey findings and appeared to focus solely on the previously identified areas of library service. Qualitative research should be a time for exploration that may very well lead to insights and discoveries outside the original frame. A less rigid approach to the focus groups may have yielded service problems or praise which lay outside the previous studies’ findings. Howard does not indicate whether she used SPSS or another statistical software package to analyze the survey results, or whether the focus group results were analyzed by hand or through the use of a program like NVivo. Nor does she provide the full survey, focus group question guide, or a code sheet used for analysis of the focus group results.

The study is well-designed and well-written, and adds to the scant literature on teen public library needs. However, Howard only presents her findings and offers no suggestions for ways in which public libraries may improve their practices. Her assertion libraries must use mixed-methods to uncover teen needs seems flawed considering the wide differences between her survey results and focus group findings. Perhaps adding a third method, such as observation, would help to triangulate the results and thus provide more concrete discoveries.