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Immigrant Youth's Perceptions of the Library: A Pilot Study Involving Youth Ages 14-18 years of African and Caribbean Origin

Abstract: A pilot study of immigrant youth ages 14-18 of African and Caribbean descent revealed a generation wired to the internet for their information needs. The study finds that they would benefit from library programs better suited to their day to day life questions concerned with living in the adopted community.

Résumé : Une étude pilote auprès de jeunes de 14 à 18 ans d'origine afro-caribéenne révèle une génération qui se branche sur le web pour satisfaire ses besoins informationnels. L'étude démontre que ces jeunes tireraient profit de programmes en bibliothèque mieux adaptés aux enjeux du quotidien qui pavent leur vie dans une communauté d'adoption.

This paper investigates the experiences of the library in the lives of immigrant youth, specifically immigrant youth of Caribbean and African origin living in the city of Kitchener, Ontario. A review of the existing literature on the subject of immigrants and libraries reveals that very little has been written on the *experience* of the library in general, and that, the experiences of *youth* with the library whether in their countries of origin or in their adopted communities have been particularly neglected. Indeed, the majority of literature on libraries and immigrants is concerned with library policy (Library Settlement Partnership 2009), and seeks to establish library services to immigrants as a core library practice through initiatives such as outreach and literacy programs as well as addressing management issues such as those related to the recruitment and retention of staff that corresponds to diverse languages and cultures (Cuban 2007). Associated literature focuses on the information needs of immigrants involved in the acculturation process in general. Based on research conducted by Mwarigha (2002), Caidi and Allard (2005) point out that the information needs of immigrants become more specific as they become more acculturated to their adopted country. Mwarigha's research shows that there are three stages common to the settlement process of immigrants, or newcomers: the first stage is the orientation to the new community, with pressing concerns such as food, clothing, and communication in a new or different language. The second stage reveals that the needs of immigrants are centered on access to various community systems and institutions, such as municipal services, health services, legal services, housing, and employment-specific language instruction. The third and final stage of the immigrant experience is a desire to become equal participants in the social, economic and political life of their adopted country.

Scant research has been focussed on the experience of immigrant young adults and the library. Much more research has been completed on immigrant adults, young immigrant children, and the library (Burke 2008; Jang 2003; Alexander and Sanz 2006). Indeed, a survey of literature only found two articles on immigrant youth and the library: one article was a reflection on the experience of one Arab American teen (Fredericks 2005), and another investigated the information seeking behaviours of Sudanese youth in

London Ontario (Silvio 2006). Both papers presented cursory initial studies and revealed fertile ground for continued study.

This paper reports on a pilot study conducted for an MLIS guided research project that evaluates eleven surveys and two interviews with immigrant youth between the ages 14 to 18 years, all of whom identified as being of African and Caribbean background. Participants were of any ethnic or racial descent from Africa or the Caribbean – for example, African, East Indian, European, Asian, etc. The study sample was limited to those who were proficient communicators using the English language, and who have lived in Canada for five years or less (in order to abide by Citizenship and Immigration Canada's criteria qualification for new immigrants). Of the eleven participants in the pilot study, 7 were female and 4 male. Their ages ranged from 14 to 18 years, with 3 eighteen-year-olds, 6 seventeen-year-olds, 1 fifteen-year-old and 1 fourteen-year-old. There were no sixteen-year-olds involved in the study. All eleven participants were enrolled in school; nine in high school and two having completed some university education. All considered their adopted community to be their "new" community, which can be interpreted as positive self-identification with their new environment as a place of belonging. Survey responses were tabulated and analysed using descriptive statistics in order to show the characteristics of the data. Qualitative responses to survey questions (captured primarily by the "other" option on the survey instrument) and the interview data were analysed looking for both common and anomalous themes. Themes and concepts were identified and isolated using a method of open-coding taken from grounded theory as formulated by Strauss and Corbin (1990). It should be noted that given the small sample size and the status of this research as a pilot project, we make no attempt to generalise to the larger population of immigrant and newcomer youth. The research presented here seeks to explore an understudied set of experiences with the aim of providing insight into our understanding of the role that public libraries play in the lives of particular group of young people.

Analysis of the information collected reveals a group of participants that seems to rely on the Internet and the World Wide Web for most of their information needs. Their experience of the library is limited to using its space as a social place, whether it is as a result of access to the computers that helps participants to maintain online contacts, or for meeting friends to work on various projects. The results of this pilot study suggest that the library generally is not the first place for youth participants to come to in order to gather information. They do, however, generally hold a favourable opinion of the library as place and would use it more if they were more aware of services and programs offered. Integration experiences might benefit by library programs that explicitly sought to match these immigrant youth with local peer youth or other peer immigrants also transitioning to help with information needs concerning day to day life and questions concerned with living in the adopted community.

The presentation will discuss the participants' responses to four survey categories 1) familiarity with the library concept and comparisons to libraries (if any) in their countries of origin; 2) experience of the introduction to the public library in their adopted community and their memory of first impressions; 3) experience of the use of the library; and 4) opinions regarding how the library can better serve them in terms of accessibility, services and collections currently not available. The presentation will also discuss the objectives of this pilot study which included identifying sources of information used by this demographic of young people, understanding their choices in using (or not using) the library, and identifying aspects of the library that served useful purposes to members of

this immigrant youth community. Finally, we will discuss implications of the study findings and look toward further study on this topic that may help in developing better library experiences that would assist in the transitions faced by immigrant youth.

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