A Global Perspective on Participatory Library Programs for Teens

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Alameda Free Library
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**Objective:**

To provide the Library Director and the Library Board of the Alameda Free Library with information about how libraries in other countries are designing participatory programs for teens.

**Executive Summary:**

The Alameda Free Library can look at examples of teen programming from libraries in other countries to gain insight to inform their own teen programming for the future. The Finding MY Way program in Australia is aimed at teenagers at risk of dropping out of school to help them understand all of the options available to them. The librarians involved in the program can help the students find a better path while simultaneously showing them the resources the library can offer them. The YouthTalk initiative in Scotland was a community-wide project that was led by local teenagers aimed at improving city offerings for the teens. A local librarian played a crucial role in the project by leading the teens and guiding them through every step of the process. These programs illustrate that teens can greatly benefit from participatory programming because they want to feel that their voices are being heard.

“It is easy to lump teens together, but it is important to remember that we are talking about a diverse group of people—diverse in age, interests, maturity, ethnicity...”-Hannan (2011)
Introduction

Teenagers have traditionally been one of the more difficult groups for library staff to connect with because of their varied interests and it can be hard to keep up with what trends they are into. Many librarians make assumptions about the types of programs and services that would benefit teens, which is a strategy with only a 50-50 chance of success. Libraries also have Teen Advisory Boards (TABs) where a group of teens can provide input about the types of events/programs that they would like to see. Another library trend is to provide participatory programs where teens can interact directly with staff to accomplish a goal or to help plan programming. One way to gain information about this trend is to examine libraries from other countries to see how they are adapting this trend to fit the needs of their teen patrons.

In Australia and Scotland, libraries are working with teens to provide them with more engaging services. The Finding MY Place (FMP) program was first launched in Belmont, Australia and was aimed at helping teens at risk of dropping out of school. This program provides workshops that help students explore their options after finishing school and is a way to enable the participants to work together for the betterment of its citizens through community learning. In Edinburgh, Scotland, a local library helped to launch YouthTalk initiative where teens could meet with local policy-makers and leaders to provide feedback and ideas about how to improve community offerings for teens including at the library. These events empowered the teens to actively participate in the creation/development of services for them and held local leaders accountable to the teens involved in the events.
Finding MY Place Program in Australia

In Australia, the Finding MY Place program was developed to help youth at risk of dropping out of school by providing workshops that help students explore their options after finishing school. The program was started in 2003 by the Western Australian Department of Education and Training with the initial program launching at the Ruth Faulkner Public Library (Griggs, 2010). Topics discussed in the workshops include: building a resumé; alternative paths for those who leave school; credit cards; and using drugs (Griggs, 2010). This program is designed primarily to motivate students to remain in school (hopefully) or to help them determine other options using their natural talents and to promote the library as a positive learning environment (Griggs, 2010). This program has potential to provide help and guidance to students in Australia who are at risk of dropping out and to set them on a better path.

The Finding MY Way program has reached thousands of students and the program has expanded to other libraries in Victoria and South Australia (Uppal, 2012). Student feedback from before and after the program indicates that most students who participate in the program have a better idea of their plans for the future after attending the workshops (Griggs, 2010). According to Griggs (2010), “Run on a relatively small budget [the program] …enrich[es] not only the lives of the students…but also the library staff, teachers and presenters who share the experiences alongside them” (p. 106). While there are many benefits to this program, libraries that want to implement a similar program must ensure that there are clearly defined roles for presenters, librarians, and students so that the program can run smoothly. Some of the Australian libraries had to utilize other sources of funding after losing government funding so libraries should ensure that they have a reliable source of funding to implement this program.
YouthTalk Initiative in Scotland

The YouthTalk initiative in Scotland was a way to involve the young people in the planning/decision-making processes on a local level to ensure that their perspective could be heard. In Liberton/Gilmerton, a suburb of Edinburgh, a subgroup of one of the local advisory committees to the city council “…oversaw the work to ‘Positively Engage Young People’ and the local library service was represented on that Group by the local librarian…” (Kilmurry, 2017, p. 204). The librarian gathered a group of teenagers that ended up leading the project and the librarian remained an important figure throughout the initiative. The youth-led project consisted of different steps: first, the opinions of local youth of improvements that could be made were gathered; next, a YouthTalk event which brought together local leaders, community figures, and young people to discuss possible changes was established and held; and lastly, the feedback from the event was given to “…local service providers to assign ownership and request action” (Kilmurry, 2017, p. 206).

Changes that directly resulted from this initiative include opening of the local community center on a weekend evening, raising money for a youth café, and a decrease in youth crime rates (Kilmurry, 2017, p. 206-207). While YouthTalk was not solely a library program, the local librarian from the Moredun Library was instrumental in bringing the teens together and guiding them through the steps of this process. One possible challenge that may arise if others try to replicate this initiative is overcoming limited resources when it comes to the implementation of the desired changes. In the city of Alameda, for example, that may mean working with the city government or similar agencies to address these issues. As Kilmurry (2017) explains, “YouthTalk has provided an ongoing platform for identifying ways to change services, with a greater emphasis on young people ‘having a say’ on new or future developments” (p. 206). The YouthTalk initiative has provided a learning opportunity for teenagers to work with local leaders to enact positive changes in their community.
Conclusion

Designing programs for teenagers can be challenging because it is a difficult age group to reach. Looking at libraries in other countries can provide valuable insight into diverse programming aimed at teens. The program examples from Australia and Scotland show that libraries are working to help teens learn more about themselves and develop the skills that will become important as they advance into adulthood. The librarians working with these teens demonstrate the importance of their role as community activists by allowing the teens to actively participate in the development of services for themselves. The Alameda Free Library can learn from the Finding MY Place program and the YouthTalk initiative and integrate these ideas into teen programming for the library.

References


