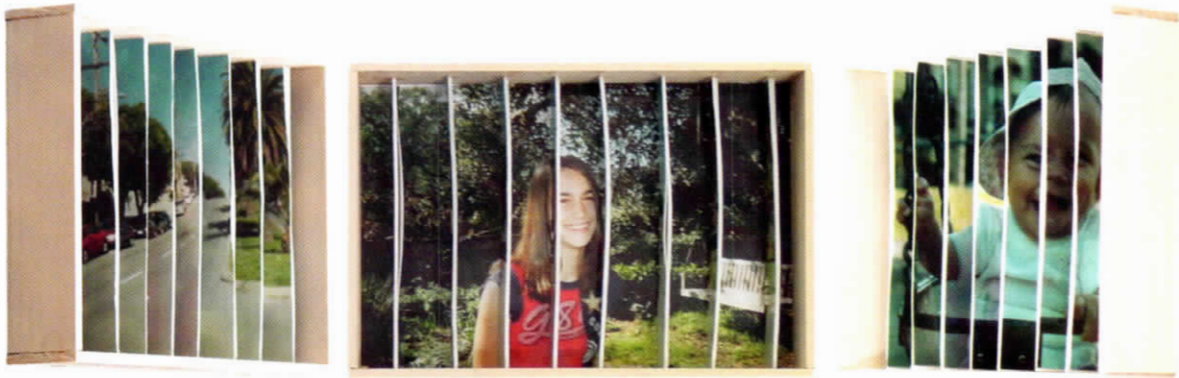


# Knowledge Quest

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**Islands and Bridges**  
**Connecting with Adolescents**

# Teenage Users of Libraries

## A Brief Overview of the Research

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Teens are being challenged as never before with the mass of information available and the expectation that they will find answers to survive in modern society. The last major study of student use of libraries came in the early 1970s, when student use of public libraries was perceived as a national threat to other users in libraries. This prompted the authors to review what research is available in three target areas affecting teens: reading, information literacy, and use of technology. Before we review those specific topics, there are a number of general observations to be made about teens and libraries. We have chosen a question-and-answer format to focus the reader's attention on specific issues and problems.

### Teens and Libraries

#### Why do teens use libraries?

No surprises here. Bishop and Bauer found that the top three reasons teens report for using public libraries was for research, to volunteer, and to use the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Several federal studies conducted in 1995 and the late 1980s found that few teens actually used their local public library.<sup>2</sup> While no studies of school libraries could be found, certainly research, access to the computers, and association with friends would top the list.

#### Do teens regard libraries as an essential service in their lives?

Ah, the tough question! Our review of the research drew a blank on this one. Perhaps it is too embarrassing to ask. Perhaps we already

know the ratings we would get from teens if we asked them to rank essential things in their lives. How would the teens in your library rank your services against such things as talking with friends, gaming, romance, or pop culture? Even if we limited our questioning to "things in school that help me succeed," would the school or public library rank in the top five? *The Attention Economy* posits that attention is the great currency of the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> That is, librarians would need to be armed with a big two-by-four if they were to be noticed compared with the other attention-getting forces in the world. One of the authors of this article regularly does informal research in the lunch rooms of schools he visits, asking teens about their attitudes toward the library. Occasionally there are positive feelings. Too often, however, there are silly giggles or loud, negative responses. That type of research directed at feelings about both school and public libraries in a community could and should be carried out by a disinterested interviewer. But whether we could accept the answers might be a problem.

At a recent gathering of the Treasure Mountain Research Retreat, Valenza showed a videotaped interview with a number of teens in her high school concerning the library and its services.<sup>4</sup> She found teens to be very frank about their information needs and habits, giving her a major dose of reality. When Bishop and Bauer did their survey with adults and teens in public libraries, they found agreement on the top three reasons to use the public library, but disagreement after that. The point is that adult and teen

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perceptions can be quite far apart unless some attempt on the part of the adults is made to really understand what is going on in teen minds.

### Are librarians trying to reach out?

In a major public library survey done for the DeWitt Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund in 1998, public librarians ranked the services they provide teens: middle school youth were the primary target for computer classes and workshops and for community service and leadership programs.<sup>5</sup> High school youth were the primary target for career development programs. Public librarians claimed to cooperate with school librarians in that study, and Callison found in 1997 that the collaboration is shaky but does happen on a limited basis.<sup>6</sup> The next year, Cart’s survey of young adult librarians led him to conclude that more and more public libraries were pushing programs aimed at teens.<sup>7</sup>

Those were the more positive studies.

However, Chelton published a scathing research piece in 1999 in which she lashed out at the service orientation of both school and public librarians.<sup>8</sup> After interviewing teens and librarians as well as analyzing video recordings of services, she found quite a discrepancy between what the literature says about the treatment of teens and what was actually happening.<sup>9</sup> She found many school librarians were enforcers of rules and the pass system, with little time left to actually help teens with information problems. She also found that teens resented being treated as suspect because of their age, appearance, and stereotyping. She had no better words for public librarians. To library educators, she wondered about teaching the impossible ideals when human relations skills were so poor.<sup>10</sup>

### Teens, Reading, and Libraries

The professional literature, replete with ideas and suggestions, spotlights success reports of initiatives directed to young adults and reading.<sup>11</sup> While the body of experience reported by practitioners in the field cannot be dismissed simply because it is not research based, the small body of research about teenagers, reading, and libraries must be considered.

### Do teens read?

Krashen cites a number of studies where teens have been polled and a substantial number of them report that they do read and read a lot.<sup>12</sup> This seems to have been the case over the past fifteen years, since Mellon reported the same finding in 1987.<sup>13</sup> Three other studies report that in schools providing teens sustained silent reading (SSR) time, teens do respond, and almost every one of them uses the time to read.<sup>14</sup> A 1998 study found that teens spent 10 percent of their disposable income on books, leading the researchers to conclude that teens were indeed interested in the printed word.<sup>15</sup> Benetti reviewed a number of studies about reading and teenagers that found that teen girls liked reading more than teen boys, that mothers were strong influences in whether teens read, and that the type of school teens attended did not seem to make a difference in how much teens read.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Chance surveyed teen boys and girls who access the SmartGirl.org Web site (yes, 41 percent were boys).<sup>17</sup> This select group of teens reported lots of reading and high scores in school and used both school and public libraries regularly for their books.

### Does reading make teens smarter?

One of the best research reviews is that of Cunningham and Stanovich, who conclude that reading does tremendous things for the mind, influencing not only vocabulary and comprehension but also verbal fluency and general knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Krashen and McQuillan have also published extensive reviews.<sup>19</sup> McQuillan and Au found that teens who reported more free reading achieved higher scores on reading composition tests.<sup>20</sup>

### Do libraries make a difference?

McQuillan and Au found a relationship between organized trips to the school library and the amount of reading, suggesting that trips to the library help, since teens admitted that libraries provided them with needed reading materials.<sup>21</sup> Winkler and Tassell found that when an entire school faculty joins the librarian in the promotion of reading through bookstore trips, SSR, modeling, book discussion, library collections, and a host of other techniques, teens responded affirmatively, and reading became the norm in

the high school and affected teen achievement.<sup>22</sup> When asked, teens told surveyors that the best stimulus to read was not pressure to do so, but more interesting books.<sup>23</sup> In 1999, when the Urban Libraries Council interviewed urban teens in a wide variety of settings, the received straight answers to their questions: “Librarians are not cool, helpful, or friendly, and need to provide better books and materials.”<sup>24</sup> Teens also voiced the need for more access to technology and training to use it, help with research projects, welcoming spaces, library hours convenient to them, less restrictive rules and fees, and more opportunities to volunteer. Teens wanted to help make things better.

### Teens and Information Literacy

The research studies highlighted in this section appear in the second edition of *Information Literacy: A Review of the Research*.<sup>25</sup> In preparing this new edition, the authors added not only new studies, but also new suggestions, issues, and models that have come out in the last two years.

### Are teens information literate?

Students in an information-rich environment with good computer support, while highly motivated by their research topic (sports figures), were not discriminatory of quality of findings. Instead, they choose “interesting” information sources.<sup>26</sup> Because students operate intuitively, without awareness of process, they must learn how to become more discriminatory rather than rushing to complete their assigned project.<sup>27</sup> Julien’s survey of four hundred Canadian adolescents showed that they did not know where to go for help in seeking career information.<sup>28</sup> Some did not even know what questions they should ask someone offering assistance. Others felt they had too many places to go to seek what they needed. When asked in an AASL research project, the “Power Learner Survey,” hundreds of teens marked themselves as highly information literate, but not quite as high as elementary school children, who were quite certain of their researching ability.<sup>29</sup> In both cases (during the 1999–2000 school year), researchers realized the overconfidence that young people have in

their abilities. Furthermore, one of the authors questioned 110 school librarians at the 2001 AASL preconference in Indianapolis.<sup>30</sup> The participants were asked if they were beginning to notice more and more expertise as children in elementary schools who were taught information literacy then moved on to middle schools where these skills were taught and then on into the high schools where teens should be somewhat proficient at doing research. Not one person in the audience from many states of the union could attest to knowledge that the young people were becoming more and more proficient across the grade levels. Hopefully, that large audience was not representative of the nation as a whole.

### **What skills do they need to become information literate?**

To employ full-text searching of CD-ROM encyclopedias, Canadian junior high school students needed both instruction and practice to develop the skills and strategies needed to be successful. Using only search terms from their original questions, they chose short articles over longer ones; rather than generating additional search terms, they selected topics from a retrieved list or scanned through a longer text.<sup>31</sup>

### **What attitudes, psychosocial theories, and achievement levels affect student research?**

Students exhibit a wide variety of feelings, from poor to strong self-confidence during the research process.<sup>32</sup> Six theories, including alienation theory, gratification theory, knowledge gap theory, resilience theory, dynamic social impact theory, and social cognitive theory, were operational while students tried to develop self-regulatory skills in their learning process. School library media specialists must recognize these theories.<sup>33</sup> For underachieving students, school library media specialists might conduct a warmth seminar and provide constant nurturing and encouragement throughout the research process.<sup>34</sup> Rekrut suggests that collaborative research also helps low achievers; therefore, the school library media specialist should spend time both helping the student find resources and, equally important, learn to use them.<sup>35</sup>

### **What does it take to encourage research completion, satisfaction, and building to lifelong learning?**

Self-selected senior science and English students helped identify factors that motivated them to complete assigned research projects. Focus on choosing the right topic, identifying sources, enhancing computer skills, understanding the research process, and being aware of the time to complete the project were elements in their completion. Students believed that the research process helped them learn.<sup>36</sup> Garland found student satisfaction with the research process also included choice of topic as well as group work, relationship to course content, and clear communication from teachers as to goals and evaluation. Attention should be given to intermediate steps as well as the final product.<sup>37</sup> Todd found that, with a wide variety of information sources coupled with in-depth work by librarians and teachers who understand how cognitive change happens, giving students a chance to evaluate the process of learning can improve the quality of life for adolescents coping with realistic questions.<sup>38</sup>

### **How can school librarians keep current on information-literacy research?**

The authors have published the second edition of their major review of the research in information literacy, but there is another avenue open to both practitioners and researchers in the field. The School of Library and Information Science at San Jose State University sponsors Treasure Mountain Online, a continuing online seminar that uses Blackboard technology to alert practitioners and researchers about new research on information literacy and encourage the online discussion of that body of work. Interested readers are encouraged to contact the authors.<sup>39</sup>

## **Teens and Technology**

### **Do teens use the Internet?**

While estimates vary, most agree that the majority of teens are connected either at home, through schools, or elsewhere. In a study published in June 2001, Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis reported that 73 percent, or about 17 million, youth ages twelve through seventeen use the Internet.<sup>40</sup> This figure was corroborated by

research done by the National School Boards Foundation that found in a 2001 survey that 49 percent of households had access to the Internet at home and 75 percent of the teens in those homes had Internet access either at home or at school.<sup>41</sup> The main reason parents bought computers, they found, was for educational purposes, and parents who could not provide access expected it from the school.<sup>42</sup> Each year, a higher percentage enter the online world. Lenhart, Simon, and Graziano surveyed 754 teens ages twelve to seventeen in 2001 for the Pew Educational Trust.<sup>43</sup> For teens who already have access, 94 percent of these youth say they use the Internet for school research, and 78 percent of them feel that they get help from that source. The Pew study also found that 34 percent of the teens accessed various help sites, including homework help sites, encyclopedia sites, ask-an-expert sites, book notes and summary sites, essay sites, and tutoring sites. They did not inquire whether these teens used portals or school/public library Web pages as their information source.

### **Are libraries an important element in teen technology access and use?**

In the Pew study above, the authors concluded, "For many teens, the Internet has replaced the library as the primary tool for doing research for significant projects."<sup>44</sup> They quote one teen as saying, "Without the Internet you need to go to the library and walk around looking for books. In today's world you can just go home and get into the Internet and type in your search term. The results are endless. There is so much information that you have to ignore a lot of it."<sup>45</sup> However, Lance found in three studies including Alaska, Pennsylvania, and Colorado that the increasing high-tech environment in middle and senior high school libraries was contributing to academic achievement.<sup>46</sup> That is, as quality information networks start reaching out from the library into the classrooms and into homes, an impact is beginning to show up in spite of the rush by teens to Google.

### **Are librarians doing anything about the rush to the Internet?**

While we have seen no content analysis research, Milbury's portal, School-Libraries.Net,

provides access to hundreds of school library Web pages in many countries of the world.<sup>37</sup> Looking at even a subset of these pages, it is quite evident that school librarians (and many public librarians for that matter), are providing increasingly sophisticated subsets of the Internet, including many paid databases. This effort also includes many states that are providing core digital collections to all their citizens, including teens. The trend from free to fee on the Internet may actually push more teens onto library systems. Whether a significant percentage of the teens in your school or community make use of these growing information sources or actually prefer them to Googling first is a local question needing regular probes.

Weathers' report of going wireless, where students have laptops that can be moved about without being plugged in, is a very revealing case study of the dramatic change in an entire school's information environment and teen and teacher behavior.<sup>38</sup> She reports that:

the most successful assignments require students to use a combination of print and electronic resources; that way, students can evaluate which resources best serve the purposes of a specific assignment. . . . The least successful assignments seem to be those in which the teachers have not provided guidelines about what types of resources students should use. The result is that students often produce work that is superficially developed—work that does not indicate that students have mastered or understood the content.<sup>39</sup>

### Implications from the Research for Practice

From the research we found, in addition to the larger body of experience literature, consider the following.

Teens want and need a wide variety of materials; they want to read. Obviously, neither school nor public librarians are expanding this basic resource that has such potential in helping improve achievement and providing other, automatic benefits. Studies have been published over the years (but not reviewed here, except

for Chance) noting the differences in reading preferences of girls and boys, various cultural groups, and ages. It is apparent that every public librarian and school library media specialist must spend time to become intimately acquainted with the types of materials teens want to read and then respond appropriately. Relying on perceptions based on those teens who actually approach adults wanting a certain type of book is not the best way finding out what to buy for the collection. More systematic surveys and discussion groups would help enormously in building collections and reading interests.

Regular discussion with teens about reading, information literacy, the Internet, and other issues in technology would be a rich source for guidance and policy if only teachers and librarians would take the time to ask and then listen carefully. If this does not occur, teens relegate librarians to nonentity status. A number of public libraries have teen advisory councils. Do middle and high schools have teen advisory councils along with their faculty advisory committees? Do you?

In information-rich environments, a human interface between teen and technology is still a critical asset to information use and student improvement. As Chelton observed, many librarians assume this means just helping students operate the technology or just find information.<sup>40</sup> The human interface must concentrate on critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, using, and reporting. The wise professional does an analysis of the quality interactions that are actually occurring, then works to maximize such interactions.

Teachers who formulate guidelines that demand high-quality information from a variety of sources are much more likely to reap academic rewards. Such a rise in expectations as a result of collaborative planning between teachers and librarians is a key factor in analyzing whether the library and its information resources are actually making a difference in learning.

Librarians who create high-quality, targeted information portals and Web sites must compete with the rest of the Internet for student attention. Every librarian offering these portals

and information systems should probe their impact on individuals and groups. As you teach the possibilities of your high-quality resources, do they end up in student products? When questioned, do teens start mentioning library online sources in the same breath and with perhaps a touch more reverence than other Internet resources?

Survey teens periodically to see what percentage are regular, occasional, or rare users of school and public libraries. What percentages would you be happy reaching? Reality checks may hurt, but we can learn a great deal as we concentrate on working smarter, not harder.

The best way to destroy the difference between the haves and the have-nots is for each school to provide high-quality information networks with easy access for every student. School libraries play a critical role in both helping to create the needed networks (such as the need for wireless technology) and, more important, ensuring the quality of the information on those networks.

School and public librarians will do this nation a great disservice if they allow the rest of the Internet to win out over smaller but high-quality, targeted information systems.

### Forthcoming

Several projects currently under way will probably cast additional light on library work with teenagers. Watch for these research reports:

- Robert S. Willard, "U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science Designates Forty-Seven New Sites for Sister Libraries: A White House Millennium Project," <[www.nclis.gov/news/pressrelease/pr99/sistlib2.html](http://www.nclis.gov/news/pressrelease/pr99/sistlib2.html)>.
- Metropolitan Library Service Agency, "Connecting Young Adults and Libraries Project," <[www.connectingya.com/melsa/melsa\\_index.html](http://www.connectingya.com/melsa/melsa_index.html)>. ●

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39. You can become a member of this seminar any number of ways: (1) by attending a Treasure Mountain Research Retreat (you will be enrolled automatically); (2) by contributing one study per year—either as a formal research piece (as a researcher in the field) or as an action research project report in your own library media center; (3) by enrolling in Treasure Mountain Online as a continuing education student or for a graduate credit from San Jose State University. Those interested in Treasure Mountain Online should e-mail David Loertscher at davidl@wahoo.sjsu.edu
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