
Youth-serving libraries hold a unique position as they serve both as cultural gatekeepers and gate openers for youth (p. v).

With this in mind, Lesley Farmer and her associate editors have produced a comprehensive collection of essays addressing the issues of libraries serving youth in Japan, Russia and the United States that includes contributions from the leading voices of youth services in libraries from these distinct geographic areas.

The differences of youth as library users are well known to librarians around the world and the issues that set them apart from other library users are unique to the age group. And, while political, educational and social history has so markedly affected the development of the library services in different ways in the different countries, the services themselves have evolved into familiar patterns with similar issues that we all recognise. It is interesting to reflect while reading this book that we are all ‘not so different’, and yet those difference can create a seemingly impossible divide.

This book evolved from discussions among the editors about their shared interest in the development of youth-serving libraries and services and their desire to develop an information-based cultural awareness within the profession. Their aim is to explain how youth-serving services have developed in their respective countries and, by sharing the trends and issues, to build cultural bridges for other library professionals and the youth they serve. By illustrating the development of their library services in the light of political, social and educational history, the editors highlight the values and priorities of their citizens in order that a better understanding of the drivers behind the collections and services in each country is appreciated.

The three editors, identified the key issues for their area and selected expert authors to contribute to the volume on these issues. The result is a unique insight and appreciation of the role that libraries play in supporting youth and indeed their communities.
Many of the issues are relevant to our own libraries, and there are lessons to be learned across the cultural divide. With the tragedy of recent natural disasters in Australia and New Zealand, we could use the history of Japanese public and school libraries to learn how to rescue and rebuild our services and how to offer support to our youth in the first days after the disaster has broken. We often think of disaster management and disaster plans as focusing on collections, but libraries have an important role in communities and in the aftermath of a disaster that destroys homes, schools and families. The library can be a safe place, a refuge of familiar comfort and a place for good, up-to-date information. It can provide access to technology and a place to meet. It can be a point for seeking help, delivering support and gauging the needs of a community in need. Libraries that serve youth have a particular strength in helping young people to cope by quickly providing a familiar face, space or function. The examples described in the Japanese experience offer excellent ideas not only for disaster programming but also for other ways of engaging youth in libraries.

Issues such as the relationship between public and school libraries, managing diversity, and media literacy are covered by all three regions, each with a different focus according to the issues identified by the editors. The Russian essays present some innovative services and describe the role of specialised libraries for youth. The relationship between school and public libraries in the US is explored and provides a sobering view. Should our public libraries be supporting our schools, and do they replace school library services?

This comprehensive collection of essays forms a body of research that explores the development of library services, the impact of contemporary issues such as technology, and the cultural and social impacts of libraries on young people. The research is valuable in the development of new libraries, the redevelopment of old services and in building new ways of reaching youth who often disengage from library services. This will be of interest to youth-serving librarians in schools and public libraries, library educators and particularly students of library science.

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