SERVING IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN CANADIAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES
by Heather Campbell

Introduction

It is without doubt that Canada is a multicultural nation, with a vast array of ethnicities and cultures represented within our cities and towns. As libraries increasingly become access points of information, both print and digital, and locales for community engagement, the importance of ensuring services meet the needs of all patrons is heightened. Indeed, the Canadian Library Association (1987) identified the role of libraries in providing equitable services and resources to minorities in Canada to ensure that they support multiculturalism in Canada. As newcomers to Canada, immigrants possess unique information needs and require enhanced opportunities to practice English/French language skills. While such resources for immigrants are federally funded and typically available through community spaces or libraries, it appears that they are often geared towards adults seeking aid with housing, employment, or other settlement activities (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010). Therefore, there is a distinct need for Canadian public libraries to ensure that their programs and services are adequately addressing the needs of youth immigrants.

Challenges Faced by Youth Immigrants

Although opportunities are present within schools for learning and social engagement, other public institutions outside of the education system must be equal partners and support those immigrant youth who may be inadequately served by educational institutions. While Cooper (2008) argued that many immigrant youth are succeeding within their schools and community, others are not being provided the proper developmental supports. In addition, Oxman-Martinez et al. (2012) found that, of the Canadian youth immigrants they surveyed between the ages of 11 and 13, 25% reported experiencing discrimination from peers and 14% by their teachers. Such mistreatment of youth already facing enhanced adversity is likely to lead to feelings of exclusion within their community. Dhawan-Biswal and Gluszynski (2008) stated these youth "are an important addition to the current as well as the

future labour force" (p. 1), thus highlighting the importance and benefit for Canadians of incorporating and welcoming these youth into society. Where schools may falter, public libraries can play a crucial role in providing positive spaces and resources for these youth to develop.

Public libraries must ensure they are knowledgeable about the challenges faced by youth immigrants and the barriers to their access of libraries. In addition to the already daunting world of adolescence and identity development during these formative years, immigrant teens must navigate additional challenges such as language acquisition, separation from peers and family back home, and exposure to different cultural values (Janzen & Ochocka as cited in Quirke, 2011). These issues are of course exacerbated for the refugee segment of this population who are involuntary forced to leave their homeland (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010).

Van der Linden, Bartlett, and Beheshti (2014) found unique barriers to public library access among the immigrant community, most notably the sense of being overwhelmed due to the quantity of available resources and lack of navigational skills to access these resources, difficulty communicating with staff, and a limited awareness of programs that may be due to perceptions of the library as a place for accessing materials, not for providing educational services. Others have found that trust of staff can cause further barriers, due to apprehensions about language abilities in posing questions and comprehending a response (Caidi et al., 2010). Therefore, it is apparent that more needs to be done to ensure libraries are responsive to these needs and challenges, and are welcoming environments for immigrant youth.

Engagement & Identity

In addition to the importance of incorporating immigrant youth into Canadian society that was discussed by Dhawan-Biswal and Gluszynski (2008), social engagement is beneficial to ensure that they feel they are productive, respected, and valued members of the community in all aspects

of society. It is also imperative for their personal development, as Cooper (2008) argues, "participation in activities, communities, and institution promotes positive identity development, social responsibility, and the development of a wide range of life skills and competencies" (p. 2). Cooper (2008) sees engagement as a process where individuals with a sense of engagement or belonging are more likely to participate within the community, and in turn, that participation enhances engagement and/or feelings of belonging.

Unfortunately, factors that typically inhibit individuals from social engagement are often experienced by immigrant youth, including: socio-economic barriers, discrimination, language differences, and feelings that one does not belong (Cooper, 2008). If positive youth development and sense of identity is dependent upon overcoming these barriers so that youth may be full participatory members of the community, then public libraries should play a role in providing learning resources and support, positive spaces free of discrimination, and programs that are welcoming and serve the needs of these youth.

Serving the Information and Social Engagement Needs of Immigrant Youth

While much research has been conducted on the information needs of adult immigrants, Hakim Silvio (2006) points to the lack of research on information needs of immigrant youth. Hakim Silvio (2006) found that immigrant youth most required access to information regarding education, health, employment, and politics, along with information on "how to deal with racism" (p. 263). With this understanding, it is important that librarians be welcoming representatives of the library and not make generalizations on the information needs of immigrants as they are not a heterogeneous group (Hakim Silvio, 2006; van der Linden et al., 2014). Furthermore, it must be noted that libraries may be perceived differently in various cultures; that is, information itself may be accepted with varying degrees of trust and may be interacted with differently (Caidi & Allard, 2005). Aiding in the development of information literacy skills required for navigating libraries and their resources, while maintaining respect for cultural and linguistic differences, is vital for serving an immigrant community (Caidi & Allard, 2005).

In addition to immigrant youth's unique information needs, Byers and Tastsoglou (2008) identified particular challenges for immigrant populations present in other areas of the country, such as Atlantic Canada, where they may have trouble developing or maintaining a sense of identity with lower numbers and population densities of immigrants. It can then be assumed that youth may not have school or community peers with whom they share a common ethnic or cultural identity. Public libraries can serve as valuable locales and provide opportunities for these teens to foster relationships and meet other newcomers who share a common identity and with whom they can navigate challenges to their identity (Kayaalp, 2014). Varheim (2011) argues that "library programing for immigrants can serve both processes of group identity formation […] and processes of integration" (p. 13), thus indicating the importance for public libraries to not only offer programming for immigrant adults, but also youth who may not receive these participatory opportunities at school.

Caidi et al. (2010) also identify the need for volunteer opportunities for immigrants, both for gaining work experience within their new country and to allow for social engagement opportunities. Fortunately, most public libraries offer opportunities for this form of youth engagement with teen volunteer programs. By encouraging participation of immigrant youth, the library will be helping these youth to develop a sense of belonging, enhancement of language skills, and possibly reducing risks of these youth facing economic barriers in the future.

Survey of Public Library Services for Immigrant Youth

A brief surface survey of the websites for Halifax Public Libraries (2015a), Edmonton Public Library (2015), and Toronto Public Library (2015) revealed little in the way of targeted programming, services, or resources for immigrant youth. While all three libraries provided language courses and other community services for immigrant adults and their children, only a single type of program existed for youth – that of combined homework and English language help after-school programs. In Halifax, this program is only offered at one branch and is only for those aged 16 to 28. In addition, there was no indication whether the extensive adult programming options were available for youth to also participate in.

Edmonton's "Youth Corner Homework Help Club" is specifically designated for ELL (English Language Learning) students and is open to youth aged 9 to 18 years, thereby allowing for full participation of all teens. Edmonton also offers an all ages tech-help program that would be useful for this population. In contrast, Toronto's "Youth Hubs" restricts the program to those in grades 7 to 10, excluding those above these grades, and does not specifically target immigrant youth.

While van der Linden et al. (2014) found collections and conversation groups to be the most used among Canadian immigrants, it was not apparent that conversation circles were offered for youth. The above mentioned after school programs will naturally involve opportunities for socialization and practice of language that may be more appealing to teens, but it is possible that they could benefit from similar style programs offered to adults. They are of course welcome to participate in all other programs offered by the libraries, but providing alternate options that offer additional opportunities to meet other newcomer teens would be invaluable for aiding in their engagement. Neither Halifax nor Edmonton offered specific online resources or information for immigrant youth within the teen sections of their websites. Toronto, however, made a concerted effort to highlight resources for teen immigrants through the use of a "Newcomer Youth" tag and an easily located booklist of "Immigration Stories." A more varied list with multilingual books would enhance the value of this resource. By linking immigrant teens to valuable online resources relating to their identities and experiences, and potentially even providing resources within their native language, libraries could reduce some barriers to access to information.

Finally, while volunteer opportunities exist for youth in each of these library systems, it is not clear if effort is made to ensure inclusion of immigrant youth or if targeted volunteer options are available to them. The required application forms that they must fill out may present a barrier for some youth if they are not comfortable with the English language. Furthermore, Halifax Public Libraries' (2015b) form requires volunteer applicants to provide a reference from someone who is not a relative. While an understandable requirement, this too may prevent some immigrant youth from participating if they are new to the region and lack contacts within the community.

Conclusion

Although not library specific, Cooper (2008) identifies key outcomes that programs for immigrant youth should strive to achieve, including: allow youth to develop relationships with peers and positive adults, enhance understanding of Canadian culture, provide social support, and allow for engagement and the development of positive self-identity. Additionally, individuals with a common language and understanding of immigration should staff programs, leadership opportunities should be provided, language and homework training should be offered, and diversity must be encouraged and respected (Cooper, 2008). These guiding principles can help aid in the development of programs for immigrant youth within Canadian public libraries and should be at the forefront of the service attitude.

In surveying the websites of Halifax Public Libraries, Edmonton Public Library, and Toronto Public Library, it became apparent that more must be done to meet the needs of immigrant youth in Canada. While they all offer extensive resources online and in programming within branches for newcomers to Canada, there is a dearth in the same offerings for youth. Greater opportunities should be available for volunteering, better online informational resources provided, and more support or programs available to allow youth immigrants not only to learn about Canadian culture, but also to foster relationships with those sharing an ethnic, cultural, or immigrant identity, and to encourage their engagement and healthy personal development.

Works Cited

Byers, M., & Tastsoglou, E. (2008). Negotiating ethno-cultural identity: The experience of Greek and Jewish youth in Halifax. Canadian Ethnic Studies, 40(2), 5-33. doi:10.1353/ces.2010.0003

Caidi, N., & Allard, D. (2005). Social inclusion of newcomers to Canada: An information problem?. Library & Information Science Research, 27, 302-324. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2005.04.003

Caidi, N., Allard, D., & Quirke, L. (2010). The information practices of immigrants. Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, 44(1), 491-531.

doi:10.1002/aris.2010.1440440118

Canadian Library Association. (1987). Canadian Library Association/Association canadienne des bibliothèques Position statement on library services to linguistic and ethnic minorities. Retrieved from http://www.cla.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Position_Statements&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=3051

Cooper, M. (2008). Overcoming barriers to the positive development and engagement of ethno-racial minority youth in Canada. Retrieved from http://teresawoopaw.ca/info/ESL_documents/Background%20Document%20-%20Youth%20Framework%20(3).pdf

Dhawan-Biswal, U., & Gluszynski, T. (2008, June). Reading skills of young immigrants to Canada: The effects of duration of residency, home language exposure, and schools (Report No. HS28-146/2008E). Retrieved from Human Resources and Social Development Canada website: http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2009/rhdcc-hrsdc/HS28-146-2008E.pdf

Edmonton Public Library. (2015). Retrieved from http://www.epl.ca

Hakim Silvio, D. (2006). The information needs and information seeking behaviour of immigrant southern Sudanese youth in the city of London, Ontario: An exploratory study. Library Review, 55(4), 259-266. doi:10.1108/00242530610660807

Halifax Public Libraries. (2015a). Retrieved from http://www.halifaxpubliclibraries.ca

Halifax Public Libraries. (2015b). Youth volunteer application. Retrieved from http://www.halifaxpubliclibraries.ca/assets/files/volunteer/Youth_Volunteer_Application.pdf

Kayaalp, D. (2014). Educational inclusion/exclusion of Turkish immigrant youth in Vancouver, Canada: A critical analysis. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 18(3), 655-668. doi:10.1080/13603116.2013.802031

Oxman-Martinez, J., Rummens, A. J., Moreau, J., Choi, Y. R., Beiser, M., & Ogilvie, L. (2012). Perceived ethnic discrimination and social exclusion: Newcomer immigrant children in Canada. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 82(3), 376-388. doi:10.1111/k.1939-0025.2012.01161.x

Quirke, L. (2011). Exploring the settlement experiences and information practices of Afghan newcomer youth in Toronto. The Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science, 35(4), 345-353.

Toronto Public Library. (2015). Retrieved from http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca

van der Linden, K., Bartlett, J., & Beheshti, J. (2014). New immigrants' perceptions and awareness of public library services. The Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science, 38(2), 65-79.

Varheim, A. (2011). Gracious space: Library programming strategies towards immigrants as tools in the creation of social capital. Library & Information Science Research, 33, 12-18. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2010.04.005