

Isn't It Time for Youth Services Instruction to Grow Up? From Superstition to Scholarship

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The overarching assessment of youth services rendered by Leslie Edmonds in 1987 remains largely true today: that its most influential force remains not research, or evidence, or constant professional improvement or addressing field-based challenges, but “superstition.” Research in youth services pedagogy, likewise, offers a perpetually weak response to the field’s many and growing challenges. Professional associations advance long and undifferentiated lists of aspirations uninformed by evidence-based research. And course syllabi do not sufficiently differentiate conventional practice from the delivery of evidence-based and measurable definitions of success. Taken together, the teaching of youth services librarianship remains mired essentially in superstition, without a practice rooted in defensible evidence and lacking a clearly understandable, unique, and measurable indicator of success.

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KEY POINTS

- Neither research in library youth services nor institutionally produced “competency” statements sufficiently respond to pedagogical challenges in preparing new professionals.
- Masters-level courses in youth services must become more critical and interdisciplinary to keep pace with changing professional environments
- LIS must produce and promote a measurable and easily understood metric for youth services success.

For at least the last 30 years, LIS scholarship has called attention to how little research youth services pedagogy attracts. Some date this observation as far back as the 1940s. Given how youth services remain among the most prized, integral, and celebrated features of library services, is this merely an ironic juxtaposition (Long, 2018)?

When one examines current scholarship on graduate-level pedagogy in LIS courses, some advances certainly emerge. Professional associations, too, advance what they feel practitioners should know to provide successful youth services. As well, youth services course syllabi frequently exhibit responsiveness to the constantly changing nature of the field. Nevertheless, the overarching assessment rendered by Leslie Edmonds in 1987 remains

largely true today: that the most influential force in youth services remains not research, or evidence, or constant professional improvement, or addressing field-based challenges, but “superstition.”

“Most librarians,” Edmonds (1987, p. 510) wrote, “try to avoid superstitious behavior, but the profession does not have strong theory, a large body of research, or established facts to protect it from superstition.” In using this term, Edmonds was referring to the commitments and beliefs that youth services maintains about a practice unrooted in evidence. The consequence for maintaining this commitment, she argued, renders the profession “prone to attack” from those who expect accountability. Today, still without such protection, without the ability to defend current practice with evidence and research, and with mounting neo-conservative skepticism about the value of civic institutions like libraries, the profession nevertheless continues to herald youth services as among its most robust domains, among its highest achievements, among its most cherished contributions.

Research in youth services, however, offers a perpetually weak response to the field’s many and growing challenges. Professional associations advance long and undifferentiated lists of aspirations uninformed by evidence. In addition, course syllabi do not sufficiently differentiate conventional practice from the delivery of evidence-based and measurable definitions of success. Taken together, youth services librarianship remains essentially mired in superstition, without a practice rooted in defensible evidence, lacking a clearly understandable, unique, and measurable indicator of success. For the field to approach maturity and be more influential within the broader field of LIS, it must begin to address its challenges, inform practice, and enhance pedagogy.

Research and pedagogy

Since the turn into the twenty-first century, research on youth services paints a bleak picture. Christine Jenkins’s much-cited critical assessment observed the matter in stark terms: “If the history of library programs and services for children is insufficiently studied, the history of library programs and services for young adult is nearly nonexistent” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 119). Nearly two decades after Jenkins’s observations, and lending continuing credence to Edmonds’s superstition thesis much earlier, circumstances have changed only slightly. Still, while thin, an increasingly vibrant scholarly literature is attempting to inform pedagogy in preparing professionals to deliver library service for and with children and youth (adolescents). The most influential scholarship concentrates on addressing perceived important changes focused largely on graduate students seeking the accredited professional master’s level degree. This literature collectively asks about what students are taught in response to changing circumstances and what they should learn.

Changing job descriptions and new service topics number among the concerns addressed by research. These changes presumably influence

library instruction and curriculum. Walter (2003), for example, identified several important new topics surfacing in youth services, pointing specifically to the manner in which libraries had been recently serving youth, the changing reasons that youth use libraries, the importance of evaluating new services, and being clearer on justifying those services. Walter argued that these changes required a wide and systematic address in a national forum. Disappointingly, no such forum emerged. And with only rare exception, these topics remain poorly treated in research.

Also in 2003, Winston and Fisher argued that graduate students face new service challenges and thus also require targeted leadership course work and skills to meet them rather than relying on libraries and employers to offer it. This call, while not original in 2003 and repeated regularly since, also pushes back on the putative assumption that youth librarians do not need preparation for management because they *only* work with children. Winston and Fisher build upon the notion that professionals “lead” from every position and thus require more focused training in response to rapid changes in the field (see also Ivy, 1987; Phillips, 2014).

Adkins’s (2004) research quickly followed in examining 30 years of the skills that youth services job descriptions called for in response to changes taking place between 1971 and 2001. As with previous scholars, Adkins found fundamental change afoot, noting a shift from the previous narrow focus on children’s services to a broader and growing category in more general “youth” service. Thus Adkins and, later, Bernier (2008) document the growing incorporation of “young adult” specialists into library professional staffs. Like Winston and Fisher (2003), Adkins also identifies the growing importance of professional preparation in management and administrative capacities.

During the mid-2000s, researchers turned more explicit and focused attention on what instructors offer new professionals in adapting to the rapid changes that scholars observe in youth services. Adkins and Higgins (2006), for example, inquire about what students are taught in library school courses across international lines. Their content analysis of course descriptions discovered that, likely to no one’s great surprise, curriculum focuses largely on materials. Admittedly, no school curriculum can comprehensively prepare students with every important competency for an entire career. Pinkston’s (2009) research, while raising reasonable questions regarding the efficacy of continuing education (CE) efforts, thus challenges CE to respond better to rapid changes within LIS by demonstrating participant outcomes. This study does not specifically concentrate on youth services but militates for a much-needed “revolution” in CE that is clearly applicable to youth services professionals.

Research into the middle of the present decade has continued to pose questions regarding professional preparation in response to change. In the most comprehensive treatment of youth services instruction in decades,

Welch's (2013) research manifests growing impatience with the pace of pedagogical change relative to rapid challenges in daily practice. Welch asked what LIS students studied in their classes by directly surveying youth services faculty in three primary areas. First, the study compares faculty curricular priorities to practitioner priorities. Second, faculty responded to questions about the degree to which changing technology influenced pedagogy. Finally, Welch asked faculty about the biggest challenges and opportunities they saw in preparing new professionals. This study did not yield persuasive findings that pedagogy was keeping pace with environmental changes. It also calls for future research on the experiences and perspectives of students and employers.

Somewhat to that end, librarians Hamada and Stavridi (2013) systematically pursued practicing youth librarians and managers of children's and young adult sections in Egypt regarding what challenges they felt are posed by rapidly evolving technology. Unlike Welch's (2013) concern for broader LIS curriculum and pedagogy, the question informing this study specifically attempts to identify "essential requirements of youth librarians working in 'the new digital age'" (Hamada & Stavridi, 2013, p.5). Hamada and Stavridi find that practicing librarians report being overwhelmed by the demands of constantly changing technology.

Walter (2014) quickly followed with a study exploring the lack of a diverse profile within professional ranks. While misconstruing the role of accreditation in the recruitment process (accreditation insures that programs develop, implement, and measure policies themselves but does dictate particular objectives), Walter (2014) does justifiably pose the question about the steps the profession might take to better reflect the nation's increasingly complex demographics, especially among younger populations. Her study relies quite heavily on the aspirational documents emanating from youth services divisions within the American Library Association (ALA)—which, as we will see, provokes concerns of its own. In addition, the study's notion of "diversity" remains rather narrowly conceived.

Three important additional mid-decade studies turn to especially promising questions in asking, first, about the skills that youth services professionals require to work collaboratively; second, about the topical patterns emerging in recent youth services curricula; and third, about the notions that the institution should hold of its always changing end users: young people themselves.

Gross and Witte (2016) advance a fundamental question about what constitutes quality collaborative experiences among and between professionals. Their study addresses this long-promoted and much-discussed, though ill-defined, value in professional youth services practice. The study finds that professionals experience successful collaborations when concentrating on effective communication techniques, equitably sharing responsibilities, and better structuring work processes. On the other hand, it also reveals how professionals remain plagued by poor exploitation of

newer technology (reinforcing [Hamada and Stavridi, 2013](#)), suffer from an insufficient appraisal of time as a resource, and remain perplexed in defining partnering roles.

Yi and Turner (2014) purportedly produce the first comprehensive examination of school librarianship criteria to determine new patterns in what topics LIS students study in preparing for practice. This “snapshot” mined over 1,100 course titles and descriptions from 84 school librarian master’s degree programs in the winter of 2013. While the study discovers an increasingly higher profile for technology in school librarianship courses, literature and materials still reign supreme across various instructional venues. This emphasis in materials comes at the cost, the authors appropriately acknowledge, of subordinating content in changing information literacy patterns and, presumably, other areas as well.

This particular critique appears more plainly stated by Long (2018, p. 236): “The short-sighted assumption that the only requirement to serve youth is a deep knowledge of children’s (or young adult) literature has never been more inaccurate than now.” It might serve at this point to acknowledge that when the profession refers to “materials,” it does so with respect only to materials produced by adult authors and publishers. The literary and cultural productions of youth themselves appear ubiquitous today in response to the democratizing popularity of social media. Aside from Agosto (2016), however, the field has yet to reach for and take them seriously.

The same holds true more broadly for youth services outcome measures in general. Annual studies by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) continue to document the self-reported number and attendance figures for library children’s and young adult program offerings. But the report does not offer any data or analysis about what youth attendees gain as outcomes from these experiences or about what, or if, libraries use program data for evaluation, or conduct any evaluation at all ([IMLS, 2018](#)). Further, the lack of institutional inquiry into any relationship between conventional library materials budgets and actual library use (not to mention outcomes) remains largely unaddressed.

A more recent study pertinent to youth services pedagogy is an emerging debate addressing the notion of what youth services means when it envisions “youth” identity as library users (Bernier, in press). This debate, facilitated within an edited collection, weighs different, fluid, and changing ideas about the young adult user group to contrast static age-based conceptions. Though focused on young adults, the work’s questions remain as relevant and rich for children’s services. In this conceptual engagement with conventional youth services, Agosto (in press), for example, argues that LIS pedagogy, in preparing new professionals, should imagine young people both through the traditional “youth development” paradigm, and as individuals, when executing services principles, foundations, and practice. This question leads to a host of provocative inquiries taken

up by scholars and others in the second edition of *Transforming Young Adult Services* (Bernier, in press).

Taken together, this relatively thin body of LIS scholarship portrays a sputtering focus on important changes and challenges to pedagogy. On one hand, this literature documents an expanding role of youth services within the field. It highlights several important shifts, such as more broadly conceiving youth services to include a higher profile for young adult specialization, a larger role for technology in the curriculum and in practice, an increasing call to transition away from a continuing over-exaggerated emphasis on materials, and recognition of the importance of preparation for leadership in a variety of roles. On the other hand, while this literature does document a growing concern for pedagogical interventions in preparing graduate students for professional efficacy, it does so still upon a very thin base of evidence and research, both about the field itself and about how to teach it. Thus, aside from noting some obvious changes and developments, the field does not appear prepared to identify an evidence-based key performance measure. Consequently, there exists little evidence about the nature of learning outcomes that these pedagogical interventions intend to achieve in the short term for new graduates, nor for the longer length of a professional's career.

One possible response to these important gaps would be to invert scholarship's current near-exclusive focus on changes and concentrate research on achieving foundational institutional *continuities*. LIS's traditional preoccupation with materials, for example, will likely remain a key topic for research. But new work might well more critically address questions about the implications of this preoccupation for envisioning library service to youth. Certainly, the incorporation of technology into the competencies of professionals remains a constant concern for the preparation of today's youth librarians. Rather than primarily only documenting various incorporations of technology into service and instruction, however, other critical questions might better differentiate ephemeral technological changes from those that appear more enduring. Promoting a shift toward studying continuity might well assist scholars and instructors to point the field toward identifying that currently illusive and overarching key performance indicator in library youth services.

Associational aspirations

Most American Library Association divisions and specialized units identify core features, skills, and capacities that they advocate their practitioners should ideally possess. Commonly referred to as "core competencies," these lists are articulated by professional associations ostensibly to guide the delivery of services to children and young adults in public and school libraries. Associations also advance these lists to guide LIS faculty in particular directions when developing curricular experiences for students studying to become information professionals. In publicizing these lists,

associations presume that particular aspects and attributes of professional competencies contribute to the execution of pertinent and high-quality professional-level practices.

The ALA divisions with these competency lists pertaining directly to youth services, assessed briefly below, include the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), and the American Association of School Librarians (AASL). The youth services division of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) also renders its own list. Most of these lists receive updating on a regular basis. In graduate-level master's courses, these lists can identify and nominate skills, tasks, responsibilities, and an overall construction of what constitutes professional service.

However, such lists also present pedagogical challenges. They consistently emerge from rather opaque methodological processes, without demonstrable grounding in evidence and, as in the recent research literature, without measurable outcomes. Further, competency lists rarely express proportionality or priorities, nor do they benefit from critical field-tested scrutiny or evaluation. Few even demonstrate benefitting from scholarship about their public service or value. Ultimately, these lists lack a critical sensibility regarding contextual challenges that professionals will face in preparing for and serving young people—which they frequently do in the face of substantial obstacles. Given these features, competency lists are better characterized as *associational aspirations*—skills and capacities that current association committees hope professionals develop and bring to their work—rather than evidence-based fundamental competencies to inform the cultivation of new professionals. Pedagogy, however, requires better grounding.

First, ALSC represents the division within the ALA universe dedicated to professional practice specifically with children (unilaterally pronounced as ages 0–14). ALSC's Education Committee first created a list of “core competencies” in 1989. The association revises its list regularly, as it did in 1999, 2009, and 2015 (see ALSC, 2015). The most recent revision of ALSC's competencies proclaims that the association “envisions a future where public libraries are recognized as vital to all children and communities.” The list focuses particularly on “access, advocacy, outreach, inclusion, and diversity.”

Although it acknowledges that there is varying applicability in particular circumstances, ALSC envisions the highest quality of library service being rendered when “all competencies are developed and achieved by all staff.” The list identifies seven core competencies supported by additional lists of sub-competencies for each (62 in all):

1. Commitment to client group (7 sub-competencies)
2. Reference and user services (8 sub-competencies)
3. Programming skills (7 sub-competencies)

4. Knowledge, curation, and management of materials (10 sub-competencies)
5. Outreach and advocacy (8 sub-competencies)
6. Administrative and management skills (12 sub-competencies)
7. Professionalism and professional development (10 sub-competencies). (ALSC, 2015)

Despite the long list of skills and capacities contained in the current ALSC list, a number of methodological concerns present themselves with specific regard to youth services pedagogy. Some of these are large methodological concerns, such as the importance of ALSC not revealing how the association arrived at these criteria, how these core elements (and sub-elements) of professional practice were compiled, or how these improve upon previous competencies. Further, the resources and evidence presumably used to inform these lists remain unidentified. It is unclear, for example, if the process even includes investigating what current LIS children's services courses already address. And although they are numbered, it remains unclear whether ALSC prioritized or sequenced these competencies—the same remains true of each of the supporting sub-competencies. Nor does ALSC offer ways to evaluate these competencies or measure their effectiveness. More importantly, the list does not offer a clearly understood metric for determining overarching success.

Other concerns linger as well, such as ALSC's claim that the end user in children's services range in age from 0–14, when clearly the ages of 13 and 14 fall under a conventional definition of “teenager,” ages also currently claimed by other ALA divisions. ALSC advances no evidence-based claim for this definition, nor did it engage collegial collaboration or discussion with other ALA divisions in asserting it. Without these methodological concerns being addressed, it remains difficult to understand how LIS instructors justify incorporating these aspirations into master's, or even undergraduate, instruction. Edmonds's (1987) assessment of the field being based on “superstition,” therefore, remains rather valid.

A second youth services division of ALA, YALSA, first published a list of its own competencies starting in 1981, updated it in 2010, and more recently released a new version entitled *Teen Services Competencies for Library Staff* in 2017 (YALSA, 2017). YALSA's competencies list reveals an even more detailed and complex list than ALSC's. After providing a long series of “dispositions” (constituted of “ongoing beliefs, values, and commitments”), YALSA's list divides into 10 “core knowledge areas,” each one containing three additional “levels” of intensity (“developing,” “practicing,” and “transforming”), with sub-competencies listed under each emphasis area:

1. Teen growth and development
2. Interactions with teens
3. Learning environments (formal & informal)

4. Learning experiences (formal & informal)
5. Youth engagement and leadership
6. Community and family engagement
7. Cultural competency and responsiveness
8. Equity of access
9. Outcomes and assessment
10. Continuous learning

Unlike those of ALSC (2015), YALSA's competencies identify committee individuals (though not their institutions, qualifications, or titles) associated with drafting the list. YALSA (2017) also offers readers a glossary. The list, however, shares many of ALSC's methodological challenges for pedagogy. It makes grand claims, for instance, for "alleviating the challenges teens face, and in putting all teens—especially those with the greatest needs—on the path to successful and fulfilling lives" (p. 1). Further, this list claims to enact and achieve these goals through a "paradigm shift" envisioning library staff in "facilitating teen learning that is hands-on and interest-based" (p. 2). The association does not offer ways to determine the degree to which professionals might achieve these claims nor their questionable scope.

The YALSA (2017) list raises many other methodological concerns that it shares with ALSC's (2015) list in limiting pedagogical value. No references to resources or evidence appear in disclosing what the association advances as necessary for excellent service. Like the ALSC list, no indication is given that YALSA investigated LIS courses for what they may already teach. What, then, might give LIS instructors confidence that these newly revised competencies improve curriculum in general, or even that the new list improves upon the previous one? Simply proclaiming a "new paradigm" similarly lacks persuasive power.

YALSA also produced a companion document, the "YALSA National Research Agenda" (YALSA, 2015–2016), which consists of five "priority areas." In this document, each priority area includes several paragraphs of justification highlighting presumably key events, facts, or examples in support of that priority topic. The five priority areas are:

- Priority Area 1: The Impact of Libraries as Teen Formal and Informal Learning Environments
- Priority Area 2: Library Staff Training, Skills and Knowledge
- Priority Area 3: Equity of Access
- Priority Area 4: Cultural Competence, Social Justice and Equity
- Priority Area 5: Community Engagement

This National Research Agenda acknowledges its subordinate role to YALSA's mission: to assist library staff in "alleviating the challenges teens face." Similarly to other documents of associational aspiration, however, while such claims are advanced in broad support of the research topics

presented, the methodological and pedagogical challenges are also easily apparent.

Readers do not learn the approaches used to identify, compile, discuss, define, or rank the priority areas listed in YALSA (2015–2016). No narrative advises how this list builds upon or advances previous efforts to identify research priorities. An appended bibliography unfortunately confuses and conflates practitioner essays, published anecdotes, and actual peer-reviewed research as if there were no qualitative differences between these different modes. Further, under each narrative justification, long lists of additional “research questions” appear—again without a sense of proportion or priority and with no way to measure or evaluate the answers they presumably seek. Many of these questions are redundant, and they beg answers or causal relationships where more critical scrutiny is required—for example, “What skills and/or knowledge do library staff need to empower youth voice?” Even assuming that youth lack “voice” (which alone is debatable) and without a clear definition of what the term means, the assumption that library staff lack these skills should raise discerning eyebrows.

As with the ALSC (2015) list, although each core knowledge area is numbered, it remains unclear whether YALSA determined how, or if, they represent a prioritized or proportional sequence—and although the differing levels of emphasis do offer a sense of intensity for each knowledge area, the same un-prioritized and un-proportional nature of the sub-competencies also remains. Nor does the association offer ways to evaluate these competencies or measure their effectiveness in practice. Under “Content Area 6: Community and Family Engagement,” for example, at the level of “Developing” (the least intense level), appears “[m]aintain[ing] open, friendly, cooperative, and respectful relationships . . .” Is that more or less important than, or equally important as, “[f]osters an asset-based lens to understand the larger community context,” which is also defined with this Content Area at the level of “developing”?

As with ALSC’s (2015) competencies list, YALSA’s (2015–2016) purports to be relevant to library school curriculum but does not identify measures for documenting or achieving these aspirations, or any method for evaluating their effectiveness, either in the LIS classroom or in daily practice. More importantly still, and in common with other associational aspiration documents, these lists do not culminate in an overarching key performance indicator easily understood by students, professionals, institutions, or the public. Today’s pedagogy, however, calls for measuring skill acquisition through documenting learning outcomes (either learning or service outcomes) as detailed in ALA’s Public Library Association’s Project Outcome (PLA, 2016). Thus the current advance of committee-derived competencies, as with those emerging from ALSC, remains, as they have historically, largely unsubstantiated.

Of course, libraries serve youth in environments other than in public libraries. The third example of associational aspirations appears in work

advanced by ALA's American Association of School Librarians (AASL). Most recently approved in 2010, AASL's *Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians* were also approved by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and thus represent the only example of professional criteria endorsed by an outside entity (AASL, 2010). These standards address professional preparation for librarians serving youth in any PreK–12 (pre-kindergarten through senior year of high school).

The AASL standards document key aspects and capacity expectations for professionals and, perhaps *because* an outside agent reviewed them, achieves comparatively more than other associational efforts. For example, AASL (2010) presents a disciplined and prioritized list of only five standards, each one supported by a three-level assessment rubric (“unacceptable,” “acceptable,” and “target”), and each is supported with references to secondary scholarship:

- Standard 1: Teaching for learning
- Standard 2: Literacy and reading
- Standard 3: Information and knowledge
- Standard 4: Advocacy and leadership
- Standard 5: Program management and administration

AASL thus offers pedagogy more substantial legitimacy in prioritizing and assessing the competencies of new practitioners. It also supports many of its claims for professional interventions with scholarship. Still, concerns for implementing these aspirational goals in master's-level curricula persist, and for the same reasons they remain problematic in others. The documentation lacks methodological explication for how AASL arrived at identifying and prioritizing these standards. No evidence or measures appear to assess their effectiveness. Indeed, as with the others, no evaluation steps appear at all. All of these aspects should be important to youth services pedagogy through their identification of instructional and curricular needs at the level of professional preparation. No evidence appears that these competencies derive from anything beyond committee member opinions.

The fourth and final example of associational attempts to document aspirations of professional proficiency in library service to children and youth is the result of the working group for the Children and Young Adult Section of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). The 2015 version of *Guidelines for Library Services for Young Adults* received revision from the original in 1996 (IFLA, 2015). IFLA's guidelines organize their aspirations into six “sections,” with each section containing further criteria and examples. The six sections are the following:

- Section 1: A ten-goal “framework” establishing a vision for the following sections

Section 2: Definition of the target group (including basic categories of service such as materials, programming, and staff)

Section 3: Co-operation with other institutions

Section 4: Planning and evaluation

Section 5: Marketing and Promotion

Section 6: Best practices

Similar to the other attempts to establish frameworks, models, and lists of essential professional capacities thought necessary for quality service, IFLA's guidelines assert claims about service goals and standards. These lists adhere closely to the kind of categorical professional capacities to which the other associations aspire, such as remaining sensitive to cultural diversity, presumptive youth developmental needs, materials, recommended services and programs, and so on. Interestingly, IFLA (and YALSA), in contrast to ALSC, defines young adults more conventionally: between the ages of 12 and 18.

While IFLA's Section for Children and Young Adults does not proffer a research agenda, as YALSA does, its webpage resources includes content characterized as "best practices." As with other aspirational assertions, however, no evidence supports the inherently comparative claim that some practices are demonstrably *better*. Under what contexts? With what resources? With what measurable criteria? Like the others, IFLA offers pedagogy no methodological explication for how it procedurally arrived at identifying these standards. Further, the association offers no evidence or effectiveness measures. In addition, as with the others, there are no evaluation steps identified to document value to institutions, professionals, or end users: young people. And, like the others, the list does not culminate in or synthesize what the association might identify as a key performance indicator to gauge or measure success.

Lists of practitioner-generated aspirations like those briefly examined above do offer, of course, the profession some value. They likely offer assistance to supervisors and administrators when assembling or revising job descriptions and evaluating performance. Likely, too, they offer rhetorical support to professionals looking for vocabulary to articulate comprehensive service profiles. The similarities among these lists become problematic, however, when one attempts to assess youth services upon pedagogical, instructional, and curricular criteria particularly for graduate-level professional preparation. The procedures for identifying, deliberating upon, selecting, ordering, and prioritizing these lists of competencies, research agendas, and "best practices" remain undocumented and thus remain shrouded from critical scrutiny or evidence-based analysis. No evaluation or effectiveness measures are advanced. No evidence is presented that these competencies derive from anything beyond the opinions expressed by particular committee configurations, under particular circumstances, at particular times.

Thus, several fundamental questions emerge about how these associations identify, advance, and defend their claims of core competencies and “best practices.” Replete with so many problematic methodological concerns these aspirations beg the question about the degree to which graduate-level teaching and pedagogy should rely upon them to inform current or future needs of LIS professionals. Few of these resources qualify for substantial generalizability in libraries or in library school classrooms.

These concerns also beg a larger essential question for youth services pedagogy: if not derived from professional aspirations like these, from where should instructors derive youth services curricula? Perhaps the best place to apply practitioner insights is in direct engagement, debate, and consultation with the LIS faculty preparing students for future professional leadership. Here, the investigative forum nominated by Walter (2003) remains a plausible way forward. More importantly still, the competency lists, as currently enacted by these associations, do not arrive at a synthesized core insight by which youth services can articulate, measure, evaluate, and promote their singular contribution to libraries, their communities, or society.

Selected syllabus analysis

Reliance on a weak base of scholarly research and associational aspirations poses many challenges for instructors in preparing youth services professionals for practice. Without actual evidence to support particular pedagogical goals (so-called “core competencies” notwithstanding), how can instructors, employers, indeed the public in general, maintain confidence that students receive a curriculum that is capable of addressing current and future needs? What can a brief scan of youth services course syllabi contribute?

ALISE offers LIS instructors access to a voluntarily posted “Syllabi Exchange” for youth services.¹ From these documents, we can detect qualified patterns to discern recent course content. When added to analysis of recent scholarship and associational aspirations, a larger picture begins to take shape. Of course, these syllabi represent only a small and highly selective sampling from courses taught by youth services instructors. They include syllabi from graduate programs across the continent. Senior faculty contributed most of these examples. Naturally, discrete contents of each syllabus differs between faculty, and even between the same faculty teaching different youth courses.

Nevertheless, given the limitations discussed above, it should come as no surprise that course syllabi exhibit compromises especially with respect to pedagogy. What emerges from this syllabi examination are pedagogical approaches too confined by narrow disciplinary boundaries and a lack of evidence as to their efficacy in teaching or practice. Among the most important common and traditional aspects of these course syllabi remains a distinct over-emphasis on youth literature and materials at the expense of

so many other aspects of youth services (Adkins & Higgins, 2006). More specifically, across syllabi there remains a consistent focus particularly with respect to materials garnering associational recognitions and awards.

Without questioning the nature and scope of award-winning criteria for this literature (which beg methodological questions all their own), we nevertheless might acknowledge that practitioners (rather than full-time scholars and faculty) teach many, if not most, youth services courses. Given these circumstances, it might be expected that practitioners evince a bias for teaching literature. The prevalent focus on materials, however, presents several additional questions that future research might pursue. What pedagogical ends are served? Which sacrificed? To what degree do instructors know that such a focus responds to demonstrated needs of the field?

A cursory examination of these syllabi also points out a second pedagogical concern. Many courses rely upon practitioner monographs as required texts, but there appear comparatively far fewer vetted scholarly monographs or evidence-based materials. Allowing that required texts do not necessarily constitute all of a course's assigned materials, nor how critically an instructor teaches students to understand the differences between practitioner literature and evidence-based scholarship, the prevalence of assigning practitioner literature remains consistent across youth services courses. Among the consequences of this pattern is an inherent overreliance on conventional practices. In addition to the concerns raised earlier about materials, other conventions, such as the bias toward psychology's conceptual influence and frames of analysis about youth, frequently go unacknowledged and thus unquestioned.

Closely associated with the bias toward teaching literature and materials are many assignments associated with performance activities. This represents a third concern for pedagogy. Here, presumably to complement, enhance, and promote reading activities, graduate students learn and practice various storytelling and "booktalking" performance techniques. The high and fundamental value of such activities is rather taken on faith. Edmonds (1987) might call it superstition.

This observation does not necessarily dismiss these skills as being incapable of producing demonstrable outcomes among end users (be they children, youth, or adults). But little evidence currently documents or supports the claims attending these activities. Lyons (2011) documented many similarly dubious claims advanced about the near sacrosanct annual Summer Reading Program. To what degree do these efforts achieve library goals or school curricular goals? As with so much youth services course content, these performance and programming techniques exemplify the ritualized nature of youth services characterized by Edmonds (1987).

A fourth common pattern observable in youth services syllabi remains rather insubstantial "observation" or "reaction" assignments. While these are more evident in courses concentrating on young adult services, students are often assigned to identify and "observe" young people

congregated in various configurations in commercial or educational spaces (sometimes in libraries), to presumably draw insights and conclusions about collective behaviors. Rarely do such assignments appear informed by critical insights from legitimate ethnographic research methods. Nor do scholarly anthropological or sociological sources appear in evidence to help students qualify these single-instance observations or help them model thick ethnographic observations for their future appointments. What insights can pedagogy expect students to derive from such superficial exercises?

Similarly prevalent among youth services courses is the “reaction” paper assignment (or “discussion” posts in online courses) requiring little more than sharing opinion or responses based upon anecdote or student experience. Perhaps instructors find these types of assignments a way to mollify the age-old student criticism that library school is “too theoretical.” Asking students to share their views, therefore, might assist them in applying course content to “the real world.” Yet many assignments fail to ask students to substantiate their views with evidence, align them with professional values or principles, or acknowledge the difference between making claims with and without evidence.

Fifth, a survey of youth services syllabi also reveals that while instructors commonly assign students various configurations of small-group or team assignments, there is little evidence that they apply pedagogical interventions to teach or ensure successful experiences for students (Bernier & Stenstrom, 2016). Instructors generally understand that group work constitutes a substantial aspect of a professional’s work profile. Certainly, research documents that employers continually seek new professionals with the capacity for succeeding in collective configurations (teams, committees, task forces, panels, etc.). Yet instructors appear reluctant to extend teaching beyond simply assigning groups (either randomly or not) and addressing group problems only after the fact. Questions abound about how instructors could better introduce group project protocols and success strategies to help youth services students overcome wide-spread cynicism about working in groups but also to help them become more reflective group participants and thus more influential in their future roles.

Finally, when one examines the syllabi voluntarily posted to the ALISE youth services website, there is little evidence that instructors employ scholarship from disciplines outside of education and psychology. Once again, we must note that such a cursory and selective review of posted syllabi poses its own liabilities in generally assessing how individual instructors critically evaluate assigned readings. However, while not exclusive to LIS youth services instruction, certainly it is true for youth services that a too heavy reliance upon the disciplines and assumptions emanating from departments of education and psychology dominate what students study: education for presumptive “skill acquisition,” psychology

to inform LIS's vision of youth as merely objects under "development." In the first instance, youth experience deserves a more complex treatment than being reduced to the status of individual skill-acquiring "students." In the second, the "youth development" paradigm (originating in nineteenth-century psychology) constitutes a *theory* of human experience, not the objective truth as is taught in so many youth services classes (Bernier, 2013).

To highlight only one instance in which inclusion of more diverse disciplinary scholarship could serve as an asset for youth services pedagogy, we might turn to the recent publication of *The Desegregation of Public Libraries in the Jim Crow South* (Wiegand & Wiegand, 2018). This work, concentrating on LIS's own institutional history, documents stories of southern Black teenagers braving physical violence to gain equal access to public libraries in the 1950s and 1960s. Stories like these can serve as a corrective to the contemporary culture's visions of youth as either developmentally anti-social or mere victims of abuses of adult power (these patterns dominate discourses in psychology and education literature).

Broader and more self-aware interdisciplinarity promises to change the way in which LIS students and librarians envision the profession and service with young people (Budd & Dumas, 2014). Scholarship drawn from more diverse fields and research traditions (particularly the rapidly maturing domains of critical youth studies) offers rich opportunities and fresh perspectives. New and highly relevant issues would surface in curricula to inform practice such as new insights on youth privacy rights or immigration status. Reaching for more diverse disciplinary scholarship offers new questions about dynamic power relationships between children, youth, and adults within institutional contexts. All of these topics, among others, do not commonly appear in current youth services syllabi but promise to impact daily practice with respect to collection development, strategic planning, technology, outreach activities, programming initiatives, staff development, and broader institutional influence and leadership.

This cursory syllabi examination thus suggests that LIS courses in youth services have their own "growing up" to do. Such development would include recalibrating the degree to which courses emphasize materials produced for children and youth. It would include reduced reliance on practitioner literature and the inclusion of more broad-based scholarly research. It might also include a thickening of conceptual assignments and more pedagogical attention paid to skills that professionals require to solve daily problems and build institutional influence.

Conclusion

When fending off criticism that their practice remains off to the side of, or subordinate to, mainstream LIS concerns, many in youth services advance a common defense of their work, a special pleading of sorts. The reason

for this subordination, they claim, emanates from the particular nature of work with children and young people. This current assessment, however, revealing such a poor scholarly research base, together with superficially supported associational aspirations and a conventional curriculum that students currently study as they prepare to enter practice, should provoke pause regarding the degree to which the field is producing fully equipped LIS professionals. We should put on trial the claims that avoid re-evaluation and the premises upon which they are based, those that substitute confidence for subjectivity and anecdote and thus confuse evidence with a mere clinging to chimerical good intentions.

Under these circumstances, this common special pleading defense appears far less than persuasive. If the profession ever expects youth services to take their place among other domains within LIS, then the curriculum must grow up to meet technology's unrelenting disruptions and the demands continually confronting the institution's role in civil society. The professional master's degree from ALA-accredited LIS programs in no small measure seeks to guarantee that graduates can assume responsibility for delivering a full portfolio of professional skills. The degree is not a certification delimited to the age of library users.

Thus, the portfolio of a professional in youth services, no less than in other LIS areas, must rise to deliver on three broad capacities. First, a youth services professional should exhibit an understanding of, and commitment to, the profession's enduring foundational principles and values. Second, a youth services practitioner should possess the capacities to work in any information environment at any level, no matter whether they specialize in serving young people. Finally, youth services practitioners should exhibit the capacity to train and supervise others in executing institutional objectives: in other words, leadership (Haycock, 2005). A master's degree should prepare a new youth services professional to execute and deliver on these capacities just as it does candidates vying for appointment in top-tier university libraries. Different end users. Same capacities.

What emerges from this current study, however, with particular respect to LIS research, associational aspirations, and graduate-level course curriculum suggests that rigorous pedagogical outcomes necessary for preparing LIS professionals to serve children and youth continue to remain largely elusive. Instead, evidence points to its deep roots in the superstition that Edmonds (1987) assessed more than thirty years ago, rather than offering comprehensive preparation to shape and evolve work articulating and pursuing evidence-based objectives.

Many areas for advancing pedagogy remain under-researched. Associational aspirations require priorities and evidence. Course curriculum requires recalibration based on addressing evidence-based practitioner needs, field-based challenges, and the delivery of demonstrable learning outcomes. When one addresses these perplexing and vexing circumstances, however, certain opportunities do present themselves. First, while

attracting active association members to participate in defining the profession's contours represents a clear strength, more care and discipline might better focus these energies on things practitioners know most about: the problems and challenges they face in the field.

Master's students, for their part, could learn to recognize the problems created when practitioners claim things they cannot demonstrate with evidence and differentiate them from insights gained through evidence-based research. Here, master's-level programs could more fully prepare students to become better consumers of evidence-based research by requiring courses in research methods. Such courses need not press students to produce original research but rather prepare them to support, read, criticize, and implement pertinent research.

Another measure that youth services instructors might take to better address the yawning gaps in preparing students to assume professional responsibilities involves incorporating into their courses research beyond the literature that youth services currently relies upon so heavily. LIS frequently promotes itself as interdisciplinary—yet rapidly growing disciplines relevant to youth studies, such as anthropology, history, sociology, cultural studies, feminist studies, geography, social theory, among other allied disciplines that include youth as part of their domains of knowledge, rarely appear sampled or drawn from in youth services courses. Yet new ways of thinking about teaching can thus emerge, such as offering more course differentiation between the information experiences of children and young adults. Historian Louise A. Jackson's (2007) observation reflects how this insight is already dawning on other disciplines: "We need to distinguish between young people of different ages, rather than treating 'children' or 'adolescents' as homogeneous groups" (Jackson, 2007, p. 647). A burgeoning specialization of interdisciplinary scholarship particularly focused on youth studies research methods promises an abundance of rich and thick resources to prepare students (Clark, Flewitt, Hammersley, & Robb, 2014; Elliott, 2017; Kellett, 2010; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

A third measure to enhance current youth services courses might derive pedagogical value from the aspirational documents produced by associations, even despite their liabilities. While these documents do pose methodological problems, they can still yield productive exercises, assignments, and robust classroom discussions and debate in critically evaluating them for the very methodological challenges they present. Instructors might ask students, for example, to defend, identify, or question the priorities embedded in core competency lists, or speculate on how to define and measure such competencies, or how to evaluate them for effectiveness or success.

Finally, beyond these categorical aspects of preparing students for successful professional careers in youth services, LIS should aim at assembling one clearly understood, measurable, and overarching performance

indicator to define and trumpet the contributions that youth librarians make to society. Such a success indicator would contribute something more persuasive than a mere special pleading. Identifying a key performance indicator would present a more compelling appeal to the larger LIS mission and offer an affirming response to the current assault on the currently embattled social infrastructure of civil society.

Increasingly buffeted by disruptive cultural and technological challenges, the profession calls out for a fulsome youth services pedagogy more urgently than ever. A more evidence-based ambition promises to contribute insights about youth and libraries to broader youth scholarship in general. Only a more sophisticated and critical pedagogy appears likely to bring youth services into a fitful maturity.

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Note

1. It should be noted that this is a relatively small list of syllabi (approximately 19 different youth services courses). Retrieved from <https://aliseys.wordpress.com/syllabi-exchange/>.

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