

The Progressive Past

How History Can Help Us Serve Generation 1.5

“Generation 1.5” patrons are children of immigrants who are not fluent in the language of their parents or in the English of their peers. While the identification of this group of patrons is relatively new in academia, libraries have always strived to serve them by reaching out to immigrant communities generally. The modern library developed during a period of large-scale immigration and today’s library faces challenges that parallel some of the challenges faced when the profession was new. Librarians can learn lessons from their predecessors in the Progressive Era, who developed outreach efforts to aid their own Generation 1.5 patrons. Many outreach activities to immigrant and underserved communities today were born in the Progressive Era.

The linguistics term “Generation 1.5” is used to describe students who are neither first-generation immigrants nor acculturated, American-born, second-generation children of immigrants. They are not characterized by their parents’ social and linguistic identification to another country nor to their second and third generation classmates who identify linguistically and socially with the United States. They are students who are caught between two generations and two cultures, a product of both yet completely fluent in neither.¹

While the appellation is new, the phenomenon of Generation 1.5 has always been with us. As with previous generations, many communities are struggling as they attempt to provide instruction and library service that best serves the needs of these patrons. One way to examine the issue is look backward to earlier periods of immigration and to examine the stances some libraries and librarians took on behalf of young people who would today be classified as Generation 1.5.

AN OBSCURED DEFINITION

The definition of the term “Generation 1.5” has been obscured by years of interpretation and reinterpretation. It had its origins in a 1988 report by Rumbaut and Ima on Southeast Asian Refugee Youth from Vietnam, Cambodia, Indochina, and Laos in the San Diego, California area. The report, funded by and written for the U. S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), examined the educational and occupational problems, attainment, and goals of refugee youth in a specific region.² Since then, the term has commonly appeared in linguistics and immigration literature.

Rumbaut and Ima’s original definition helped define an entire population

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of young people that had previously gone unnamed in the literature:

They are neither part of the “first” generation of their parents, the responsible adults who were formed in the homeland, who made the fateful decision to leave it and to flee as refugees to an uncertain exile in the United States, and who are thus defined by the consequences of that decision and by the need to justify it; nor are these youths part of the “second” generation of children who are born in the U.S., and for whom the “homeland” mainly exists as a representation consisting of parental memories and memorabilia, even though their ethnicity may remain well defined.³

Rumbaut and Ima, then, defined refugee youths who were born in another country, immigrated with their parents, were educated in the United States and found themselves marginalized between their parents’ old world identities and the American identities of their U.S. born peers as Generation 1.5. This definition was expanded by later scholars. Roberge, for example, states that in the early 1980s, the term *il cheom ose* (which translates as generation 1.5) started to appear in the Korean and Korean-American media. The Korean immigrant youths described in these articles were attempting to thread their way between the two cultural and linguistic worlds of the *il se* (first generation adult immigrants) and the *i se* (U.S.-born Korean-Americans).⁴ Roberge argues for an extremely broad definition of generation 1.5. He would include residents from U.S. territories like Puerto Rico, children of immigrants who live with relatives to attend U.S. schools, children of transnational families who migrate back and forth between countries, people from “linguistic enclaves,” and even English speaking immigrants learning American English.⁵

The work of Harklau and her associates further expanded the understanding of Generation 1.5. Harklau defines Generation 1.5 as English learners educated in the United States who begin attending college while still learning English.⁶ Such students can be referred to as Generation 1.5, according to Harklau, because their experiences and linguistic skills are between those of the first and second generation.⁷ Harklau stresses, however, that there is a wide variance in English and native language skills, academic training and experience, and language dominance among Generation 1.5 students.⁸ She writes:

Equipped with social skills in English, generation 1.5 students often appear in conversation to be native English speakers. However, they are usually less skilled in the academic language associated with school achievement, especially in the area of writing. Academic writing requires familiarity with complex linguistic structures and rhetorical styles that are not typically used in everyday social interactions.⁹

Harklau has expanded the definition even further to include people born in the United States who live in

communities or families where English is not spoken regularly. Harklau’s definition is more inclusive and sophisticated than those of her predecessors. Under her definition, students who grow up speaking a language other than English, but who receive their academic training in English and have developed American social and oral language skills should also be considered Generation 1.5. These students attend American schools but do not develop the fluency needed for academic work in English because they grow up in another language in their homes and communities. When these students enter college, they are still learning English, despite an *appearance of fluency* based on their oral language skills and knowledge of U.S. culture.

For the purposes of this article, Generation 1.5 patrons are young people (1) living in immigrant households who speak a language other than English at home, (2) whose first language is not English, (3) who attended American schools, (4) who have been socially acculturated in the United States, and (5) who exhibit a lack of academic fluency in English because of their non-English speaking backgrounds at home and in their home communities. The patrons may or may not have been born outside the United States. They also tend to lack fluency in the language of their parents because they have not been immersed in it academically. As a result, they suffer from communication deficiencies in the two languages they use on a daily basis. These patrons often exhibit writing and reading difficulties in school and have unique issues relating to their library research and library use patterns.

Like all populations, Generation 1.5 is easy to define broadly and more difficult to define narrowly because of its wide diversity. At its most basic, it is a diverse population of individuals from many linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, with an immense variety of life experiences and learning styles. The largest Generation 1.5 population in the United States at the moment is Latino, but the term can encompass the children of any non-English speaking, recently immigrated population.

In addition to its size, there are three important reasons for librarians to understand Generation 1.5. These reasons are outreach, reference services, and bibliographic instruction. By recognizing that Generation 1.5 is a unique community but a largely invisible and unidentified one, librarians can develop programs that help ensure that this population is taking full advantage of library services and opportunities.

THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY IN THE EDUCATION OF PREVIOUS GENERATIONS 1.5

The profession of library science was born in era of progressive reform in the midst of a large influx of immigrants. With an almost missionary zeal, many in the profession sided with and supported immigrants; not in the political arena, but in service to their educations. These educational efforts were mostly aimed at assimilation or “Americanization,” which mainly involved English language education and citizenship education.

Obviously, not all librarians favored the profession's public position on immigrant education and there were certainly discussions aimed at tempering this position. A *Library Journal* editorial in 1896, for example, argued that promoting good citizenship was one of a public library's primary functions and the extensive inclusion of foreign-language books in a library's collection undermined that purpose.¹⁰ Scholars have also questioned the underlying motivations of libraries and English language instruction programs during this era, arguing that many of the efforts were simply methods of paternalistic indoctrination used to exert social control over the immigrant population.¹¹ Despite those arguments, however, many of the programs that public libraries use today to reach out to under-served and immigrant communities have their roots in programs that were developed to serve immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Currently, the number of immigrants arriving in the United States is the largest in history but the immigrant population as a percentage of the national population peaked in 1890 and 1910.¹² Generation 1.5 youth, who are aware of the promise before them, may be handicapped academically because they do not fully acquire the full range of either the language they speak at home or the language used at school. While they may appear to have oral mastery of both, they may lack academic command or nuanced understanding of either. So in addition to potentially facing racism and prejudice, they may also face unintended discrimination from librarians and teachers who assume a more complex linguistic knowledge than the young person actually possesses.

The library profession, as it exists currently, came into being in an era that has parallels today. In 1875, the father of the modern American library, Melvil Dewey, wrote that "the time is when a library is a school, and the librarian is in the highest sense a teacher."¹³ A year later, the American Library Association was founded. When Dewey made that comment, 14.4 percent of the U.S. population was born in a country other than the United States.¹⁴ In 2006, it was 12.5 percent.¹⁵ Both eras saw dramatic spikes in the numbers of immigrants moving into the United States and facing complex adjustment problems relating to language and culture. During Dewey's lifetime, the United States saw Generation 1.5 students struggle to learn English, find their way in the country their parents had adopted, and face extreme ethnic and racial prejudice. "In fact, with all the millions we are spending on our public schools and all the pride we take in them, we seem to be losing ground," he wrote. "In 1870, less than 15 percent were unable to write, but in 1880, this ugly item had grown to 17 percent. Some reply that this illiteracy is caused by the great tide immigration; but explaining the cause still leaves the fact that we are each year falling behind."¹⁶

From 1870 to 1920, anti-immigrant sentiment was pervasive. Nativist opinion marked much of the national debate, as large groups of Eastern European and Italian immigrants replaced a previous generation of largely Germans and Irish immigrants.¹⁷ Chinese immigrants would face

exclusion in the 1880s. "With the support of politicians, labor leaders, economist and eugenicists, whose pseudo-scientific theories affirmed the superiority of Americans of Anglo-Saxon stock, nativists began a relentless crusade for the restriction of American immigration," wrote Plummer Alston Jones, in his dissertation on the topic on libraries and immigration.¹⁸

The library profession, which launched itself in the heat of an immigration fight, sought to speak with a unified voice and presented itself as being devoted to service to the immigrant community. Immigrant educational efforts were almost entirely aimed at assimilation or "Americanization" of immigrants and libraries played a central role in this education effort. For some, the profession's voice was too soft, however. At the American Library Association Conference of 1913, Mary Antin, the author of *Promised Land*, a autobiographical and popular book chronicling the author's immigration and assimilation experience as a Russian Jew, told librarians that they needed to be the voice of truth in the acerbic national debate over immigration. "When the gentlemen in Congress pass a law to hold up the immigrant at the gate because he cannot read fifty lines of our Constitution, say to them, 'Hold! Wait and see what the immigrant's boys and girls will read when they are let loose in a public library,'" she said.¹⁹

During the Progressive Period, libraries offered English language instruction.²⁰ Many librarians took on this duty as a central mission and were encouraged to help with the assimilation effort by promoting their own resources and encouraging immigrants to attend night school to learn English and about American culture. "Libraries everywhere realize the need of teaching the non-English-speaking immigrant English," a 1913 article opined, then suggested that libraries work with English-teaching night schools to promote themselves in foreign language newspapers.²¹

In addition to the stocking of foreign language materials that would appeal to immigrants, libraries cooperated extensively with government agencies and groups that sought to educate and assimilate immigrants. Plummer Alston Jones describes several such cooperative linkages. In Cleveland, for example, librarians were active observers in 12-week citizenship classes, and in Buffalo were expected to observe citizenship examinations, to familiarize themselves with the needs of those patrons working toward assimilation.²² In Los Angeles, librarians, social workers and night school teachers teamed up to map ethnic communities so they could provide for them.²³

For many, these efforts were approached with an almost religious sense of mission. If public libraries were intended to represent safe space for self-education, then the librarians who worked there would make themselves knowledgeable of the assimilation requirements and stock their shelves with the materials that would attract, entertain, and educate the populations they were called to serve. The success of their efforts is difficult to measure. If success is measured by elevated reading, however, as Mary Antin implied in her speech to the ALA in 1913, the highest circulation of classics in New York were from the eastside libraries, where the largest populations

of Eastern European immigrants resided.²⁴

Recent research as well as historical anecdote shows that immigrants often do manifest strong achievement drives. Use of the library was often a component of that drive to succeed. Alternatively (and counterintuitively), direct correlations have been discovered that reveal a decline in academic achievement by immigrants' seemingly acculturated children. Portes and Hao, for example, found that the longer immigrant children reside in the United States, the lower their academic performance becomes.²⁵

In the early years of the library profession, the subtle and not so subtle distinctions between Generation 1.5 and their immigrant parents went largely unnoted amid the librarians' heartfelt efforts to side with and support immigrants and to help them with assimilation. Much of what was distributed in the popular press about children of immigrants concerned delinquency. "Children who can talk English [sic] and understand American customs are likely to feel they have grown above their parents. That a great deal of child delinquency has its root in this evil is acknowledged," the *New York Evening Post* opined in 1919.²⁶

Currently, many public library programs that are aimed at encouraging reading among immigrant populations, as well as the literacy movement and in-library tutoring programs for school children, have their roots in the ideals of the library movement at the turn of the twentieth century, wherein many librarians serving in immigrant communities saw themselves providing services that paralleled the service of social workers and teachers. (How closely the library profession's self image has matched its public perception has been a constant topic of debate among librarians, leading to what some term as the profession's excessive handwringing about its image.)²⁷

Philanthropic organizations that supported and funded libraries, beginning with the Carnegie Foundation, fed the perception that public libraries were institutions of self-education and democracy. (Andrew Carnegie, who immigrated as a child himself and was said to have ascribed much of his success to his voracious reading habits, was the model for the myth of the self-made man that permeated and continues to permeate US and British culture.) The idea that access to information, which in previous eras nearly always meant information contained in books, and the ability to find and use that information, could profoundly alter individual lives has always been the mantra of the library profession. Such a mantra fits well into the philosophy that with enough reading and work, an individual can rise from poverty to wealth. A newly professionalized group of workers that needed an idealized torch to carry found one in the laissez-faire philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their calling was to convert the poor and huddled immigrant masses to a philosophy of self-determination through reading and books.

With regard to Generation 1.5, there are some parallels between the current era and the early years of the previous century. First, in both eras, immigration rose dramatically, giving rise to large populations of Generation 1.5 students in the

public school system. As with previous influxes of immigration, there has also been a strong anti-immigrant outcry from some segments of society. Second, the library profession continues to seek ways to break into and serve the underserved populations in their immigrant and minority communities, often employing tactics similar to those of their predecessors. Third, most libraries, then as now, have at least some capacity for instruction and have taken up Dewey's mantle of librarian as teacher.

IMMIGRATION BOOMS

The U.S. population has grown from 200 to 300 million since 1965, when some legal restrictions on immigration were lifted. Between 1965 and 2008, immigrants and their American-born offspring constituted 55 percent of that growth, and in 2006 made up 12.5 percent of the population. In 1890 and 1910, nearly 15 percent of the U.S. population were immigrants.²⁸ The Urban Institute, a non-partisan public policy organization, reported that in 2007 more than 1 in every 5 children in the United States had an immigrant parent and that the population of children of immigrants doubled between 1990 and 2007, from 8 million to 16.4 million.²⁹ There are wide variations by state. Nearly half the children in California, for example, have immigrant parents, compared to only 8 percent of children in Arkansas.³⁰ Nationally, about 55 percent of children of immigrants live in low-income families, compared with 35 percent of their non-immigrant counterparts.³¹ These immigrant populations have traditionally been concentrated in six states (California, Texas, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, and Florida) but recently have begun to disperse, bringing large immigrant populations to areas that have not traditionally had them, such as Georgia, North Carolina, Washington, and Massachusetts.³² Many of these children have at least one Mexican parent: 55 percent had parents from Latin America and forty-one percent had parents from Mexico.³³

Many children of immigrants, particularly those living in states that have not traditionally had immigrant populations find themselves living in linguistically isolated households, wherein no one over the age of 14 can speak English well. Although about 25 percent of children of immigrants nationally live in linguistically isolated households, in states like Nebraska, North Carolina, and Oregon the percentage of linguistically isolated households is higher (41, 36, and 36 percent respectively).³⁴

Immigrant children are more likely to have working parents than children of native parents (91 percent of immigrant families have a parent working while 88 percent of native born have a parent working). The disparity is greater among low-income families: an adult in a low-income family was much more likely to have a job than his native-born counterpart (84 to 70 percent). Forty-two percent of children of immigrants live in families classified as working low-income or working poor, while only 25 percent of native-born families can be placed in this category.³⁵

CURRENT AND PAST PRACTICES MERGE

Today's Generation 1.5 students face struggles that arose in previous generations, but those problems have been compounded by changes in society, by the way information is disseminated, and by current trends in educational administration and pedagogy. Libraries can successfully provide for Generation 1.5 by forging partnerships with funders and with interested community groups that provide services like on-site language and citizenship training, health information, and immigration help; libraries can maintain foreign language collections that match their community's language needs; seek out unique ways to publicize their collections, services and programs, such as bilingual pamphlets and foreign language radio; and encourage immigrants to serve on the library board. John Foster Carr, one of the great proselytizers for library services to immigrants during the early years of the last century, made similar recommendations and observations. He suggested English language courses be taught in the library wherein the library could provide the books, which would encourage the use of library cards. He also suggested discussion groups and lectures of interest to the immigrant communities. He described a practice among some libraries of identifying immigrant families and sending them post cards listing new books.³⁶ Such efforts also encourage the parents to model library use for their children. When libraries are viewed by parents as resources for self education, learning environments are created within families.

For many Generation 1.5 youth today, public Internet access has replaced books as a chief attraction of the library, although—with research help from librarians and through basic computer courses and library programs—that initial appeal is often a spring board into the deeper, richer resources.

It is a conceit of today's librarians that the mantle of teacher has suddenly been thrust upon them with the rise of complex computer technology. A librarian's job in the early twenty-first century, like the librarian's job in the early twentieth, is to ensure that learners have access to useful sources of information. Providing access has always involved teaching learners how to seek and find information. While electronic access today requires learners to develop a discerning and critical eye toward sources and a set of access skills to locate them, this is nothing new. The road to becoming an educated person has always required that a person know how to locate information and discern its value. A person well-schooled in library instruction, who had learned to wend his way through the maze of paper indexes and vertical files and card catalogues held by past libraries, would have found himself capable of lifelong learning. The only difference between today's lifelong learner and yesterday's is that one sits in front of a computer screen and the other lugged heavy books to the index table.

Library science is a practical discipline. As teachers, librarians can offer practical skills to Generation 1.5 youth who use their resources and public libraries can help them solve their problems. Even in communities with dense populations

of immigrants, living in a new country is an overwhelming and difficult experience. For those who are handicapped by their inability to communicate well in English, access to government agencies, to public services, and to the marketplace of materials may be limited as well. When libraries seek out these residents and make it known that there are people employed there who want to help them overcome these difficulties, then the library is perceived as a problem solver. When immigrant families connect with public libraries, their children learn not only that libraries can bring solutions to their problems, but that libraries are also quiet, welcoming places, where people are interested in their culture and them as individuals, and where there are enjoyable activities. When a Generation 1.5 student learns the basic skills a public librarian can teach him, he may suddenly find himself immersed forever in a river of ideas.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS FROM THE PAST

In summary, libraries have a long record of improving lives of Generation 1.5 patrons through education. Classes, programs, and collections have been traditional ways that libraries have appealed to immigrant populations. Today, with most governmental and business services administered through websites, public Internet access is one the community library's chief appeals. Creating relationships with immigrant families and ensuring especially that the children in these families learn to use library resources to their fullest advantage can help alleviate some of the language difficulties and cultural uncertainties that Generation 1.5 youths face.

For many Generation 1.5 students, public libraries open the door to the world of ideas and to potential career options. Research has shown that Generation 1.5 students learn and continue to apply the skill sets established in the public library to academic research and often continue to use the public library as a primary resource and study location after they have entered college.³⁷ At the university, the library as a physical space for quiet study and social learning takes on a unique importance for Generation 1.5 students.³⁸ Like generations before them, the success of the current population of Generation 1.5 students will be profoundly influenced by the ways in which public libraries are able to reach them, to teach them, and to make their resources available and accessible to them.

Successful outreach to immigrant communities is a primary means of ensuring Generation 1.5 children become library users. If outreach to immigrant communities is successful, library books and library resources become a known means of navigating the vagaries of the immigrant experience. Children learn from their parents. Like the children in the early twentieth century that Mary Antin described enthusiastically devouring knowledge and educating themselves, children who gain library knowledge in the early twenty-first century can navigate the vagaries of life and gain linguistic ability that will help them compete equally with their peers in school.

Some of the methods that libraries employed in the Progressive Era (such as close attention to community demographics and building bilingual collections that serve immigrant families' needs) remain valuable today. Working with community groups to provide on-site help with immigration, medical needs, citizenship, and English literacy and computer competency classes can help make a library a community hub.

It may seem a cliché from the Progressive Era to describe libraries as centers for self education, but it remains a truism. The idea has always been under attack by many who work in public service who believe that the costs of administering an expensive building and staff are unaffordable luxuries in times of budget difficulties. Many today also wrongly believe that an Internet search can offer the same thing the library can and do so without public funding. Even if this argument were remotely true, librarians who staff desks in low-income communities can testify to the need for free public Internet access by patrons who can't afford computers and need to access information. Regardless of whether a library's patrons are from academia or the public, its librarians need to stand up for the idea, born in the Progressive Era, that at its core the library is a place where communities can gather to build their futures and where self-imposed education through reading, guided by librarians, can allow people to overcome the deficiencies that keep them from fully engaging in the community they are part of.

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