

## South Auckland Libraries –Connecting with Southside Youth

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### **Abstract**

A key priority for Auckland is to focus on becoming a city that puts children and young people first. The new Auckland Plan is the strategy for making Auckland “the world’s most liveable city”. The Southern Initiative’ is a significant part of this plan. It focuses on an area in South Auckland with high social needs and significant economic opportunities. The magnitude and scale of under-achievement in education, high rates of unemployment and health inequalities make this an area for national attention. The initial focus of the Southern Initiative will be on early childhood learning, supporting and up-skilling parents and guardians and raising educational achievement and employment across the area. Auckland Libraries have a vital role in supporting the Auckland Plan and the Southern Initiative priorities. Eleven of our community libraries are located in the area highlighted in the initiative. However, engaging young people in our libraries is a continual challenge. Young people, particularly in this region do not always find libraries the most welcoming or pleasurable environment. Mangere East and Tupu Youth Library have had success engaging the young people from their communities by working within their communities and with their young people to develop library programs and events. They have also worked with their library teams to develop the skills and attitudes which will bring their young people into the library and keep them coming back. We will share the programmes, events, and teamwork methods we have developed which ensure acknowledgment and respect is a key factor in all interactions with our young people thus ensuring we can work together to help achieve the Auckland Plan and Southern Initiative priorities.

## Introduction

Youth services are a vital part of societal health, yet it is one of the most difficult to execute. Lack of understanding of youth culture and community perceptions of youth behaviour are factors that can inhibit the delivery of these services. It is absolutely essential that youth are active contributors of society. The government recognises this need and is allocating a generous amount of money towards raising the status of the youth. After all, the youth of today will become the leaders of tomorrow.

The importance of youth services is shown through these initiatives:

- From July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the NZ government will contribute \$148.8 million over the next four years for youth services (Ministry of Social Development, 2012)
- Multimillionaire Owen Glenn donated \$8 million to launch initiatives in Otara addressing domestic violence and helping children. (NZ News, 2012)
- In April Prime Minister John Key launched a \$62 million package over four years to improve youth mental health services which have its foundations in a report by science adviser Sir Peter Gluckman last year that highlighted the risks facing young New Zealanders (Bennet, 2012).

Auckland Council recognises the importance of investing in children and young people. Within the Auckland Plan, one of the three priorities in its first strategic direction is to 'Put Children and Young People First' (Auckland Council, 2012, p. 76). In addition to this, the Southern Initiative, one of two big placed-based initiatives in the Auckland Plan, focuses on strengthening educational achievement and success in life for children and young people (Auckland Council, 2012, p. 90 – 99). As its main goal for 2012-2013, Auckland Libraries aims to have 200,000 children and young people as active library members.

Public libraries are already recognised as having the potential to be "fertile ground to cultivate positive youth development" through free access to computers and internet, to resources and information, for socialising with peers and much more. Rather than welcome youth into libraries, often library staff have scrutinised the way in which youth use libraries and created climates that have been unsympathetic to youth needs (Jones & Delahanty, 2011). The IFLA Guidelines for Library Services for Young Adults recognises that "special library services for young adults have not been well established in all countries....Young adults are entitled to the same quality of library services offered for other age groups in the population" (IFLA, 2009). It specifies that not only should these services specifically meet the intellectual, emotional and social developmental needs of young adults but it should be developed in partnership with young adults themselves wherever possible.

Librarians generally thrive in their services to young children. They happily visit preschools and primary schools and enthusiastically organise children's events. When it comes to services to teenagers, however, they are generally out of their comfort zone. Griggs (2010) questions public library relationship with at-risk youth: "What about the youth that have never walked in the door of public library? What about the youth that do walk in the door but only to run havoc and cause grief for staff? What about at risk youth who feel more comfortable at the skate park? How do we capture their interest? For a start, we really do need to step outside of our comfort zone...we need to get to know about this group of youth which is largely foreign to us" (Griggs, p.103).

We work in two libraries in the Southern region of Auckland where we have engaged youth with great success – Mangere East Library and Tupu Youth Library. This paper aims to share with the strategies that have been used to do this. First and foremost, it is important to understand the communities in which these libraries operate and to understand what

characterises “Southside youth”. Auckland Libraries targets its services to youth aged between 10-18 years old. This paper will mainly focus on this age group.

## Statistics

Both Mangere East and Tupu Youth Libraries are established in very similar demographic areas – Mangere and Otara respectively. The tables below compare the two areas (both in red) with Auckland and National figures (both in blue) for different factors. It must be noted that these statistics are from the 2006 census so they are somewhat outdated. Youth in both these areas have a higher-than-average chance of coming from low-income homes with no internet access. Their home situation is usually made up of one parent who is unemployed with no formal qualifications. As librarians, it is imperative to understand how important it is for youth in these areas to bond with their libraries.

Factor	Mangere East	Clover Park	Auckland	National
<b>Population</b>	#: 5517 Pacific Islanders: 44% European: 26.3% Asian: 24%	#: 4365 Pacific Islanders: 73.7% Maori: 20% European: 11.4%	#: 1, 303, 068 European: 56.5% Asian: 18.8% Pacific Islanders:14.3%	#: 4, 027, 947 European: 67.6% Maori: 14.6% Other Ethnicity: 11.1%
<b>No formal qualifications (15 years and older)</b>	31.2%	40.9%	20.3%	25%
<b>Unemployment</b>	8%	11.9%	5.6%	5.1%
<b>Income of \$20,000 or less for those 15 years and older</b>	47%	47.3%	40.9%	43.2%
<b>No internet access at home</b>	54.6%	67.5%	34.5%	39.5%
<b>One parent homes</b>	27.1%	32.9%	18.9%	18.1%

## Defining ‘Southside Youth’

### Stereotypes of ‘South Auckland’

Further to these unsavoury statistics there is another stigma that is very much attached to “Southside” youth. This is a result of stereotypes and negative public perceptions of this southern region of Auckland, which is continuously perpetuated by the media. For example, in a ‘Close Up’ debate for the Auckland Mayoralty between Len Brown and John Banks, Banks argued that he did not want ‘South Auckland’ replicated across to the North Shore and across all of Auckland.

When crimes occur in this region, the media uses the term ‘South Auckland’ rather than identifying the suburb. South Auckland is seen as a region characterised by crime, violence, homicide and gang activity. Not only do people living outside the region believe the stereotype portrayed by the media, but the youth we work with, believe it as well. Often, they come into the library in a ‘defeated’ state, believing that they are failures and often living up to these mentalities – “They think I am stupid, a thug, rat bag, so I may as well be one.”

Intertwined with our services, we push our youth to disbelieve the negative stereotypes and begin to instill confidence in their gifts and talents. This is done alongside the promotion of character building.

### **“What do our teens look like?” (Mangere East and Tupu staff)**

The youth at our libraries reflect the communities we are located in. Here are some generalisations or characteristics highlighted by staff members about the youth in our library:

- Mainly Pasefika
- Low levels of achievement in mainstream ‘academia’
- Low reading levels which leads to low reading interest
- Fervent for acknowledgement from library staff
- Low self-esteem or perception of own abilities
- Extremely talented in music, dance, art
- Keen learners
- Family/home life can be a barrier to academic success e.g. overcrowding, commitments to look after younger siblings as parents are away at work.
- Family life can sometimes be marked by financial limitations.
- Schools attended by teens are typically not as well-resourced as other schools in affluent areas

## **Connecting with ‘Southside Youth’**

Below we share principles and examples of how we have engaged with our youth. We believe that these are universal principles which can be applied by all libraries for any patron group, but the means by which they are executed, will differ according to customer base and team culture. We have no doubts that other libraries already use these methods in their service delivery. The four principles which we feel are important in our success are:

1. Relationship building with youth
2. Knowing what youth want
3. Relationships with the community
4. Staff engagement

These will be further elaborated in the next section.

### **1. Relationship building with youth**

This approach begins with staff learning and using names of the children and youth in their daily interactions. This recognising of names helps the youth to understand that as staff members, we value them and perceive them as ‘worth remembering’. *“Cherish, 16, introduced herself twice in my five-minute conversation with her for some reason. Upon leaving, I shook her hand and said, ‘Later Cherish’. With a surprised look, she replied, ‘Whoa, you remembered my name. That’s real cool. Will you remember me when I come back?’”* (Richy – Tupu Youth Library) What we have found with youth is that they merely want to be acknowledged and valued. Once this foundation has been set, relationships can be established which then aids in creating more successful programs and events for youth.

We use non-traditional methods of delivering holiday programs which is vital for relationship building. All staff members are involved in the planning and delivering of holiday programs and other events throughout the year. This method allows for the pooling of staff skills so programs are fun and innovative and helps youth, as well as children, to get to know all staff, not just the dedicated children and youth librarians. Relationships between staff are also strengthened as a result of working together for a common goal. The programs are shaped around youth interests such as art, technology, music, dance and reality TV. They are also designed so that they are interactive so staff and participant interaction is high. The result: Mangere East staff have built a strong bond between youth, who in turn, have become more connected with the library.

Through conversations with local youth, Tupu staff perceived that a forum was needed where girls and boys could openly share about their lives without judgment or criticism. The girls club meets every Tuesday from 6-8pm. The aim of the group is "...to develop and nurture the growth of young women of Otara into extraordinary women of the world..." They are given a lesson plan which focuses on issues they encounter as a young Pacific woman in Otara. The boys club (known as Adullam) exists to create an environment where boys can grow and learn about being a good male role model for the community. The boys share about anything good they have experienced, but must also admit to anything they have done wrong e.g. mocking the teacher. They are then applauded for the 'positive' and encouraged to do better with their 'wrong', after which, the life lesson is given. At the time of writing this paper, the boys were learning about 'serving others' by serving dinner to another youth club. While the focus of these groups is not purely literacy-based, they both exist to build strong relationships with local youth and build loyalty to the library. One of the tangible benefits through this is the decrease of tagging in the library as boys develop a sense of ownership.

Staff member Paulo Va'a, a world champion hip-hop dancer, saw the opportunity to connect youth to the library using hip-hop dance as a draw card. "We did a call out to all teens who wanted to do a 6-week dance workshop (September 2010) where I would choreograph a set for them to perform at the Mangere East Cultural Festival and Mangere East Café Night." Paulo used the dance arrangement to connect the keen dancers to library resources. "An agreement was also made with the teens in that they would do research using library resources before each practice and share how it assists in their performance." The youth also came up with the name for the group. They appropriately called it "Non-Fiction". For the teens, the term was a connection to the books Mangere East held and also an expression of saying, "We exist, We are real, and We are here – Believe that!" From the workshop, paths for other types of performing arts arose – singers, pianists, music mixing, etc. The library found that the opportunity to use what teens in the area enjoyed, enabled them to build long-term relationships with the library and its staff.

## **2. How do you find out what 'youth' want?**

Teens are most comfortable in environments they can relate to. Adults may have an 'idea' of what works best with children and youth, but the most successful ideas come from collaboration between all groups. We achieve this through different means:

- Spending time with them. Some of our youth enjoy receiving attention, so giving them some of your time will enable you to receive firsthand information on youth culture.
- Simple 'ask and listen'. Youth are very honest once they're open, and will tell you what they want from you.
- Observations of what they do in the library. What are they currently watching on the internet? What are they wearing now that wasn't worn a month ago? What new slang can you hear them speak? It is important to do this without judgment.

After the amalgamation of the various Auckland Councils, Auckland Libraries were in a state of transitional stage where no teen reading program was set for the region. Teens realised

that this, expressed disappointment and requested for one. Mangere East and Tupu staff listened to them and organised a program at branch level. A name for the program was chosen with their input - "Fusion" – which for the teens meant the combining both libraries. Through a Facebook page, youth from both libraries connected and gained more information about the program. Participants read and submitted reviews that gained points. The prize system was shaped so that each point's level was attached to a specific prize. Participants were separated into their point's level, and a draw was done to determine the winner. The bigger goal was for the participants to attain enough points to attend the finale party. At the time of this writing, Auckland Libraries have just completed running its first and very successful teen literacy program, Fuse, which contains a large social and digital component – a reading program designed around youth interests.

A 'Future Directions' workshop with teens was facilitated by Sue Sutherland at Tupu Youth Library which looked at how youth perceived and wanted youth services to look in Auckland Libraries. Teens wanted to see their own art and pictures covering the area, more computers, and more programs. The space was to be more 'youth-centric' yet having the element of professionalism. Tupu looked at what it could control and began a holiday program for youth to get some of their art up on the wall. Boundaries were established (e.g. no gang names; anything offensive, etc), markers were given, then they were left to it. It was such a success that teens stayed on much longer than the time prescribed for the program and Tupu's community room now has local youth art work covering its walls.

After observing how much the youth and children enjoyed programs based around dance and music, in May 2010 Mangere East staff decided to run a night of musical performances for double celebration for New Zealand Music Month and Youth Week. Some talented staff lined up to perform while a call out was made to youth in the community who also wanted to perform. The youth started working with the staff in planning, preparation and promotion of the event. On the night of the event, not only did youth have a chance to showcase their dancing and singing talents but helped set up, looked after sounds, MC'd the night and helped clean up later. This event has also become a regular yearly feature for youths since then and different approaches have been used. The 2012 event involved asking a popular local band to play at the library and youth worked with them to perform with this live band on the night.

### **3. Relationships with community groups**

Mangere East and Tupu Youth Libraries owe some of its successes to partnerships established within the community. Both libraries have well established relationships with local pre-schools, primary and high schools. Visits by staff to schools and/or visits from classes to the libraries for various activities and events are regular features in their calendars. The partnerships do not end with schools and pre-schools however but extend to many other organisations, such as youth training providers, youth and church groups, local community trusts, sports clubs and tertiary providers. Partnerships are vital, a point supported by Tasha Squires paper, "Library Partnerships: Making Connections between School and Public Libraries". In her paper, Squires discusses the benefits of such partnerships. Benefits include resource sharing, developing life-long learners and financial share (2010).

Auckland University of Technology has recently set up a new campus in Manukau, the first ever university to be established in the area. The AUT Relationship Manager met with Mangere East and Tupu staff to talk about creating a potential relationship between the two organisations. Initially, AUT wanted to visit both libraries to deliver a workshop on courses at the campus to teens at the library. Rather than settling for another power point presentation, Mangere East staff members thought it would work better if their youth were given a more interactive and enriching experience – physically visiting the campus. Unfortunately, there

was no budget for transporting the teens to AUT. Mangere East approached the Relationship Manager with the proposal and a request for them to cover transport costs. AUT obliged not only with transport but lunch for all participants. A total of 23 students went on the visit, and they left with a positive and refreshed perspective on tertiary education and the libraries. This opportunity has also fostered a great relationship with AUT and we are excited to see how we can work together in the future.

In 2009, Clover Park began experiencing problems with students from local schools. Students frequently engaged in street fighting with one another. Local community leaders, school youth workers and the local business association approached Tupu Youth Library to help launch a community youth group which would later be known as 'Tulaga' (a term the students themselves produced). The youth group comprised of student leaders from the 'warring' schools and was led by a Tupu Youth Library staff member. The aim of the group was to bring serenity between the schools and to encourage youth to uplift the community through good works. In that same year, the group led one of the largest Community Clean Up days of the area. The local shopping center, Tupu Youth Library, the local reserve, and adjacent roads were all cleaned by youth, community leaders and members, police officers, church groups and even the local MP. Fighting amongst the schools decreased dramatically. The group continues to run youth events at the library and brings a positive youth experience into the library.

Mangere East Library has a close relationship with Mangere East Community Learning Centre which is located behind the library. Since December 2010 staff from both teams collaborate to deliver two large events yearly to the local community, the Mangere East Christmas Festival and the Mangere East Cultural Festival. The relationship between the Library and Learning Centre has enabled the learning centre to provide its bus service at a very cheap rate for Mangere East's youth participants for the many different programs where transport was required for youth to attend events such as Manix, Fusion and FUSE party (Teen reading programs ever since 2010). Another relationship with a local organisation, STRIVE trust, who deliver youth programs and has a Youth drop-in centre, also ensures that there is support and manpower for large events.

Tupu has established a partnership with a local church in helping to run a study group for secondary school students. The church provides the 'syllabus' and mentors (who are all university students) while Tupu provides the space, resources and allocates one of its staff members to mentor as well. Students must register to be in the group and are asked to be committed to the program for the term. The group has approximately 30 students involved.

Similarly, Tupu staff connected with R'n'B singing duo, Adeaze, to appear in a 'library ad' produced by young patrons of Tupu. The song was recorded and edited with the help of Clubhouse 274 Otara (The Computer Clubhouse is a international organisation that provides a learning environment where young people from underserved communities work with mentors to explore ideas, develop skills, and build confidence in themselves through the use of technology). The song and video was a success and an experience thoroughly enjoyed by the youth, Clubhouse, as well as Adeaze.

#### **4. Staff Engagement**

This principle is probably the most vital of all four principles we have presented. This is because without good staff engagement, none of the principles will work. We will address staff engagement through four key points:

##### **a. Recognising and utilising staff gifts and talents**

People are an organisations most valuable resource. Our 'people' have immense potential, so we allow them freedom to follow their initiative, communicate personal expression and

push them to grow as individuals and as a team. Every effort is made to recognise the interests, talent and skills of each staff member and they are encouraged to contribute these towards events or programs with the goal of bringing youth into the library, and with the ultimate goal of lifting youth literacy needs. Here are examples of this in practice:

Rachel Booth an ex-primary school teacher (on her way to having her first spy novel published) used her connections with other authors to run writing workshops for teens during NZ Book month. Her interest in astronomy also saw her create an interactive tent where youth could enter and follow her recorded instructions to find the matariki stars in the night sky for Matariki celebrations. Morgan Borthwick, with a special interest in drama, wrote a musical play called 'G-Locks and the three librarians'. Staff member and qualified music therapist, May Clulee and Rachel Booth also contributed by putting the music for the play together. The staff then worked together with children, youth and parents to rehearse and perform the play for a finale party event held at the library. Joseva Viqasi, a staff member who is both a specialist youth worker and an architecture student, used his skills to run weekly drawing workshops with interested youth for Comic Book Month.

Spoken Word is a popular medium for youth to engage in due to its large American influence. Tupu staff members, Liz and Beulah do not perform spoken word themselves, but has been exposed to the South Auckland Poets Society and their work. After experiencing this and researching online about the medium of spoken word and its impact and relevance, both ran an 'Open Mic' night which encouraged spoken word, poetry and other performances from local youth. The staff knew that this type of format for performance was something not experienced before by local youth. The night was attended by over 50 teens and helped to expose them to another meaningful medium.

#### **b. Buddying**

We have some staff who are naturally inclined towards working with youth. Staff who have become popular with teens have warm personalities yet are seen as cool and hip. They are relaxed, good listeners, approachable, outgoing with teens but are also very upfront and firm when needed. They have no difficulty engaging in conversations with youth who often hang out in loud, boisterous groups and use language that can be challenging. For some staff the above youth trait can be quite intimidating. So, we will pair up an anxious staff member, with someone who is quite confident when either delivering a youth program/event, or when just 'hanging out'. As well as this, both of us motivate all staff to undertake some work with children and youth. For example, we will set objectives around leading a youth or children's event. Or, as mentioned earlier, if the staff member is nervous, they will co-lead with someone more experienced. This allows all our staff to grow that skill base.

#### **c. Common Vision**

Working for the best for our youth, our community and the library requires our teams to adhere to a common ground. Influenced by the Auckland Libraries goal, Tupu has as its vision to be a "...POWERFUL influence of literacy, education and information". This is expressed to the team at what we call a 'Vision Night'. Here, Tupu staff members get together for an evening meal and share about how Tupu is going with regard to its vision. If the team can see that they are on track, they will congratulate themselves. If not, that time is used to realign. All staff members have taken this onboard as their mantra for the work they do at Tupu, and it helps to lift team morale and culture.

#### **d. Team Culture**

Both library staff have such a positive team culture embedded that they are constantly looking at ways of delivering programs of high quality ('WOW factor') so that youth can go away with lasting positive connection with libraries. Not only are staff members willing to put in discretionary effort towards planning events, for almost every program the whole team turns up to support and deliver it. As part of Manix (teen reading program in 2010) rather

then deliver a quiz night of horror, Mangere East staff decided to step it up and deliver a horror night which saw the entire library being turned into a horror house with frightful characters and challenges for the teens. Participants were given a “Fright Night” as library staff and helpers transformed into evil nurses, chefs, clowns, witches, mummies, zombie dancers, “cereal killers” and “head on a platter” on the table.

As part of the new Auckland Libraries teen literacy program - FUSE 2012 - the entire Mangere East team got behind the planning and delivery of the “Who Dunit?” Murder Mystery Night”. Teens were given the ultimate task of working out who killed ‘Laqisha Adams’. The teens viewed police interviews of the suspects, checked out the ‘crime scene’, dusted ‘crime objects’ for fingerprints and matched pieces of information to work out the mystery. In order for the youth to have a memorable night, staff worked in sync to create the amazing event. The team culture showed staff to work outside of branch hours, utilise talents and skills, and even use some discretionary funds to resource the event.

## **Conclusion**

Auckland Council is making children’s and youth services a key priority. Auckland Libraries also prioritises children and youth, making 2012 – 2013 the year they want to reach the goal of 200,000 children and young people active library members. In order to achieve this, libraries must shift from the fearful mentality of teens, to become places that cater its services and resources towards youth interests and appeals. From our experiences, this will take some time, but it is well worth it.

As the managers for Mangere East Library and Tupu Youth Library, we have expressed four principles we believe can help to build solid relationships between youth and libraries. These principles are universal and are not unique to our libraries, so can be applied broadly. These include relationship building with youth and the community, asking teens what they desire from the library and the most critical of the principles, staff engagement – without good staff engagement, proper youth engagement will suffer. These principles have guided both our libraries in our dealing with youth, and have provided taxing, yet great success.

Youth services in libraries are so imperative for society because of the two groups involved – the youth, who will become our leaders of tomorrow, and libraries, the treasure-house of knowledge. If libraries create an atmosphere that gives youth open access to this treasure-house, then our ‘tomorrow’ definitely looks optimistic.

**We are not teachers yet they learn, we are not parents yet we take care of them, we are not friends yet we can hangout with them.**

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