Creating Culturally Responsive

Public School Library Media Centers

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Introduction

The School Library is an invaluable resource and a key component to any truly effective public school. The evidence of this has been shown in academic papers, annual school library reports, and the personal experience of school librarians. Those who dedicate their professional lives to libraries do not require further persuasion. The question for practitioners is not whether school libraries add value to school communities, but how these institutions can grow and improve in the services they provide. Growth requires critique. To improve, it must be acknowledged that there are deficits in the school library culture that can be addressed to improve services. This is especially true in communities that have traditionally been underserved or even harmed by a failure to properly include them in the library culture that touts inclusion and equality. Public school libraries can work to close many of the gaps seen in America's educational system.

Literature Review

Foundations of Library and Information Science

While library professionals agree that the public school library is an invaluable institution, for the purposes of this paper it is worth examining the mission and purpose of that institution. Only by clearly defining the purpose of the public school library can one ascertain whether any given school library is fulfilling that purpose. In recounting the history of the public school library in chapter 2 of *Foundations of Library and Information Science*, Rubin (2016) shows that public school libraries, which developed in conjunction with compulsory public school, were created to support the public school curriculum. It reasons, therefore, that the public school library shares a purpose with the public school system; the education of children. This is not to say that the

public school library was successful in fulfilling this purpose from its inception. Rubin (2016) cites multiple sources to explain that early public school libraries were "poorly developed [and] poorly maintained," (Rubin, 2016, p. 55). He states that "Although these libraries had great potential, they did not perform their central mission," (Rubin, 2016, p. 55). Early in the 20th century several groups, including educators and library professionals, sought improvements for and eventually established standards for the public school library. Concurrently, public education as a whole was reformed to represent a more progressive child-centered educational paradigm. These reforms and paradigm shifts helped to create the public school library as it is today. These reforms also influenced the stated mission, "to support the primary and secondary curriculum by providing current and appropriate materials for students and teachers," (Rubin, 2016, p. 57).

With reforms in the latter part of the 20th century, the school library has become the School Library Media Center (SLMC), incorporating current technologies in addition to books and print materials (Rubin, 2016). In his discussion of the effectiveness of the SLMC, Rubin (2016) notes that the SLMC size and staffing are "the best predictors of academic performance, with the exception of at-risk conditions such as poverty," (Rubin, 2016 p. 130). The statement about at-risk conditions is used to underscore the importance of the SLMC by showing there is only one factor more significant in predicting academic outcomes. However, the School Library Media Specialist (SLMS) in communities with at-risk students must realize the significance of that statement for their students. While the SLMS cannot affect the at-risk factors of the students they serve, the support provided to those students is a powerful tool. Unfortunately, there seems

to be minimal critical academic work on the practice of providing support to at-risk students in the SLMC.

The Rich Potential of American Public School Library History: Research Needs and Opportunities for Historians of Education and Librarianship

Wayne A. Wiegand (2007) points out that "an adequate scholarly body of historical literature available to guide leaders planning the school library's future" (p. 57) is not currently available. He reports a drastic decline in the literature on the American public school library after 1965. Wiegand (2007) cites LIS programs dropping the requirement of a master's thesis around this time as a possible reason for the decline in scholarly works produced on the subject. This is specifically problematic for the SLMS in urban schools, although probably uncorrelated because this is the same time period in which public schools in America were integrated: when white, middle-class school librarians began working with students from different cultural backgrounds. Much of the literature covering the early days of the public school library lacks critical analysis and simply seeks to celebrate and justify the institution. The literature "does little to relate school library development to a larger context of social, cultural, and education history" (Wiegand, 2007, p. 59) in America. One important critique missing from the literature is the fact that information professionals historically tend to be "a relatively homogeneous group." Historically, there is a lack of diversity among librarians. This lack of diversity means that librarianship has, at its roots and perpetuating into the training of new information professionals, certain presuppositions that may not apply to nor be inclusive of other cultures. According to Wiegand (2007), this perpetuation of a set of values attributed to this singular group (white, middle/upper class) continues into almost all facets of the public school library. While the

training of librarians and the institution of the SLMC may be biased toward a specific set of ideals, Wiegard points out that there have been school librarians who have, "subvert[ed their] professional discourse" (Wiegand, 2007, p. 71) and added items to their school library's collection that represented more appropriate inclusivity. This speaks to the ability of individual school librarians to exercise their authority and create a school library that embraces inclusion and truly serves the needs of their students.

School Libraries and the Urban Learner

The SLMC can, and should, play a significant role in providing support for those students with one or more at-risk factors. In her paper, "School Libraries and the Urban Learner," Dr. Vonita Foster (2014) outlines many of the challenges urban students face including poverty, chronic low self-esteem, chronic fear, and multi-generational abuse. What she doesn't mention is cultural trauma, although for many communities in America, cultural trauma is a significant factor in how individuals view and interact with the public educational system. Foster (2014) provides some suggestions on how to engage urban students in authentic ways. Among Foster's suggestions are real-world workshops that introduce students to skills such as how to eat nutritious food, interviewing, and dressing for success. Relating information to the real world of urban students is key to engaging them in the benefits of the school library. The SLMS must "utilize the urban learner's knowledge and life experience" and "make books practical, pertinent, and significant to the urban learner" (Foster, 2014, p. 33). To do this, the SLMS must seek to understand the urban student's reality. For the SLMS that may require exhibiting information-seeking behaviors.

Framing an Urban Public School Library with the National School Library Standards

In her paper "Framing an Urban Public School Library with the National School Library Standards," Mary Keeling (2018) notes some of the same at-risk factors noted by Foster (2014). These include "higher rates of poverty, cultural diversity, and limited English proficiency" (Keeling, 2018. p 36). Keeling (2018) encourages the urban SLMS to use the AASL standards as a framework. "Inquiry is important for urban children because it provides a mental model for authentic learning and a structure for developing voice and agency" (Keeling, 2018. p 37). While all students benefit from authentic learning and finding their voice and agency, it can be especially important for students who come from communities that have historically been excluded to have their voices encouraged and celebrated. To help make connections between what is being taught at school and the real-life experiences of urban students, an aspect that Foster (2014) stresses, Keeling (2018) suggests service projects that allow students to have an impact on their community. In addition to linking what is being taught in the educational setting to the real world, which helps create student buy-in, community service projects can help students, who traditionally doubt their ability to positively affect the world, to develop a sense of accomplishment. This can help students feel more secure in their own abilities. This combined with other practices that encourage community partnerships can also "help learners to understand how they can participate in larger scholarly and social communities" (Keeling, 2018, p. 39). Keeling (2018) additionally encourages the development of multicultural collections to help celebrate the various cultures of diverse populations. This and other practices, such as seeking out community partnerships, help the SLMS "cultivate [their] own cultural competence"

(Keeling, 2018, p. 39). Cultural competence, or cultural literacy, is crucial if the SLMS is to truly connect with students who come from and live in different cultural communities.

Moving Beyond the Boat without a Paddle: Reality Pedagogy, Black Youth, and Urban Science Education

It is this cultural literacy that is the focus of Dr. Christopher Emdin's work. While Dr. Emdin's work focuses on classroom practices, clear parallels can be drawn between effective practices in the classroom and strategies that foster inclusion and representation in the SLMC. Dr. Emdin's work focuses on black students. However, the same concepts of respect of culture and valuing of individuals that his Reality Pedagogy prescribes can easily translate to other non-dominant cultures. Emdin (2016) points out such parallels in his book, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood, and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education,* in which he refers to "urban youth as neoindigenous" (p. 8) There are many similarities between the experiences of people of color in America and indigenous groups in colonized places around the world.

In "Moving Beyond the Boat without a Paddle: Reality Pedagogy, Black Youth, and Urban Science Education," Emdin (2011) acknowledges that achievement gaps exist for black students but purposely does not describe or attempt to quantitatively prove such gaps exist because this practice is counterproductive. "By focusing explicitly on achievement gaps, researchers place too much emphasis on deficits within students" (Emdin, 2011, p 284) and do not address the underlying issues that create these gaps. Education professionals know there are differences in academic performance among black and other minority students as compared to their white, traditionally more affluent, peers. Educators, including the public SLMS, need practical

techniques to engage these students more fully and enable them to excel in academia. These practical techniques are the focus of Emdin's (2011, 2016) pedagogy. Emdin (2011) provides tools that focus on the reality of the lives of the students, as recommended by Foster (2014) and Keeling (2018), and supports both educators and learners in the educational process. However, Emdin (2011, 2016) takes the process further by suggesting that educators infuse their practice with the culture of the students. The five steps in Emdin's (2011, 2016) pedagogy include cogenerative dialogue, coteaching, cosmopolitanism, context, and content. Cogenerative dialogue is a method of inviting students to critique the educational environment and incorporates student suggestions into the teaching methods of the educator. Emdin's (2011, 2016) coteaching, instead of being two professional educators, invites students to teach lessons while the educator takes notes on how the lesson is taught for the purpose of improving their own teaching. Cosmopolitanism values each member of the educational community and their role in the learning environment. This creates a community in the educational environment instead of a system where students enter an educator's space. Emdin's (2011, 2016) definition of context supports both Foster (2014) and Keeling (2018) in the idea that students must see connections between the educational environment and their reality. Emdin (2011, 2016) recommends bringing artifacts from the students' world into the educational environment. Content is the material to be learned. Emdin's (2011, 2016) approach is to honestly admit the limits of the educator's knowledge and thereby encourage further inquiry. When there is more to discover than the educator knows students are invited to "exchange with the classroom and support the teacher in codiscovery of new knowledge" (Emdin, 2011, p. 291)

Discussion:

The purpose of the public SLMC is to provide tools for and support the education of America's children (Rubin, 2016). This mission includes providing books and encouraging reading. It includes engaging and empowering all students to find their passion for learning. As Rubin (2016) and Wiegand (2007) point out, school libraries are not always perfectly executed inclusive learning facilities. There is a need to critically examine the practice of librarianship and incorporate theory from other areas, such as education (Wiegand, 2007). Since Wiegand's (2007) publication there have been some peer-reviewed works published on the topic of tailoring the SLMC to the specific population of individual schools. Both Foster (2011) and Keeling (2018) speak to the need to create an SLMC that engages students from at-risk communities in meaningful and empowering ways. Unfortunately, for many, the discussion of how a predominantly white library community actively engages students from different, and often less advantaged communities in meaningful and culturally literate ways is difficult and uncomfortable. Theorists tend to use vocabulary that implies acceptance and inclusion without discussing how to create a library that truly honors and includes members of other communities. To do this, it is imperative to include the perspectives of the communities that libraries serve. This can mean including voices from outside the professional library community (Wiegand, 2007).

Emdin (2011, 2018) provides practical solutions Soliciting the expertise of students by building and participating in cogenerative discussions about how the SLMC should operate, including collection development, would enable the SLMS to better understand the students and provide materials that genuinely engage the student body. Co-teaching in the SLMC could utilize student expertise in cultural communication practices to demonstrate book talks and teach other students

about the library services. This would give the SLMS valuable insight into how different cultures share information. Positioning students as valued experts builds relationships. Creating a cosmopolitan SLMC where students are equal owners of the space would create true inclusion. Displaying artifacts from the communities the students belong to in the SLMC links the academic world of the SLMC to the real world of the students in tangible, meaningful ways. These practices together show the infinite nature of information and the finite knowledge of the SLMS, thus inviting students to partner with the SLMS in creating a truly culturally responsive SLMC.

Conclusion:

A Truly culturally responsive SLMC is crucial to the success of all students. The SLMS who seeks to create these culturally literate spaces of inclusion, acceptance, and learning needs better tools to engage and inspire students of diverse and at-risk populations. Through the use of reality pedagogy, the SLMC can meld the mission with the reality of the students. “Hopefully, through the practices provided here, we move toward giving teachers the tools--the paddle--to move the boat that connects urban youth to academic success.” (Emdin, 2018, 292-293).

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