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Library Theory and Multicultural Youth Services

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Abstract

This paper will examine some of the global theoretical approaches in providing multicultural services to youths as well as some first-hand examples experienced in the United States by the author. In an international context the field of youth services generates significant attention due to the importance of raising the education levels of adolescents. The three theoretical models under review are urbanization, cultural planning, and social inclusion. When applied to working practices of library service, these models serve as a baseline for innovation—the resultant ideas of which this paper will connect to multicultural youth services. The paper will show that urbanization creates the need for multicultural services while cultural planning and social inclusion create methods of achieving those services.

Library Theory and Multicultural Youth Services

Urbanization occurs in a post-industrialized society which has cleared the major prerequisite of literacy. Literacy according to Yilmaz, a noted international LIS author, “is accepted as a necessity and a mandatory and minimum standard for industrialization in economic theories...For example, a high proportion of literacy is one of the positive preconditions in the industrialization of Japan” (2002, p. 329). Once high literacy rates are achieved a country will become industrialized thus leading to urbanization as cities grow and people move from rural areas into cities, (Yilmaz, 2002, p. 331). The migration and spread of cities also leads to an influx of different cultures living in close proximity to one another—especially in America. Urbanization creates melting pots which require educating institutions such as libraries in order to maintain and continue the literacy rates and education levels of the populace. According to a study done in Ankara, Turkey, “The strongest relationship between the usage of public libraries and socioeconomic elements is education. As education level increases, the usage of the public library also increases,” (Yilmaz, 1998, p. 264). My theory is that due to these urbanized centers and library’s role as a location for continuing education; the library must take into account its diverse constituents and provide multilingual services according to the needs of the community.

According to the study Yilmaz did in Turkey, another element determining use of the public library is the community’s attitude towards it, (p. 265). A positive reaction to the library generates far more use than a negative opinion. This may seem self-explanatory; however the public opinion of a library is an important point to consider during its inception as well as during any building redesigns. Two methods for accomplishing a positive community reaction are cultural planning and social inclusion.

Social inclusion means to involve the community through outreach efforts; to “reach as many people as possible in all kinds of circumstances with the service of the public library,” (Torstensson, 2002, p. 212). However, it is no longer enough to reach them on a local level, the library must incorporate the growing global environment that we live in and provide globally diverse services to its users. Torstensson writes, “We live in a swiftly changing world in which nations are becoming increasingly interrelated with each other. It is a world with strong tensions and also great possibilities,” (p. 211).

Conversely, cultural planning means to assess the level of the community and plan according to its trends, needs, and future direction, (Boaden, 2005, p. 30). Boaden describes the library’s cultural planning as a process to “[assist] councils to integrate and focus their activities in a systematic and strategic way in order to acknowledge and celebrate local identity and distinctiveness and more broadly to enrich the quality of people’s lives,” (p. 30). Through cultural planning and social inclusion the needs of a community can be more easily met by the library.

One of the community needs in this post-industrialized, urbanized society is a better understanding of multicultural perspectives. In the rapidly changing environment of globalization, a comprehension and appreciation for our similarities as well as our differences has become imperative. At the 2000 ALA Conference the ALSC International Relations Committee began to compile a bibliography of texts “celebrating the diversity found in communities in the United States” (ALSC, 2002, p. 42). After September 11th, they saw the need for this bibliography changing; not only is it intended to celebrate that diversity but to remind Americans that our varied cultures make us stronger: “We offer this bibliography as a tool to reaffirm just what makes America so

strong in times of crisis—it is our understanding of those different from us, it is out interactions with our neighbors, it is our drawing strength from one another,” (Ibid). This is true not just of the United States but all countries; and not just of the internal cultures but of the external global cultures as well.

The stated intent of this paper was to focus on youth services internationally as regards the multicultural offerings. Denise Agosto writes that “there is an education exigency for the inclusion of multicultural materials in public and school library collections,” (2001, p. 38). She goes on further to give examples of why these materials are so important, “These vicarious experiences lead to increased sensitivity toward and appreciation of individual differences,” and, “Multicultural materials can bridge the gap that minority students face when learning to read and write,” (Ibid). Agosto cites a case study by Steffenson, Joag-Dev, and Anderson¹ in which letters are read by Indian and American college students describing a wedding in both cultures wherein the participants read faster and retained better the description in their own language. Being presented with your native tongue along with elements of your own cultural heritage provides an easier experience for readers. It also contributes to additive bilingualism as opposed to subtractive. Additive bilingualism means that children view both their home and school languages as of equal importance; while subtractive bilingualism comes from children viewing their home language as inferior to school language and consequently abandoning it, (Ibid).

The idea behind additive and subtractive bilingualism is an important concept which can be extended to include not only those children of two languages but all

¹ Steffenson, M. S., C. Joag-Dev, and R. C. Anderson. (1979). A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Reading Comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 15, 10-29.

children. A public library which purposefully attempts to include multicultural and multi-language materials could stimulate youthful minds to pick up new language skills and develop bilingualism on their own. At a public library in a Californian suburb that I once worked in, the community was made up heavily of Chinese, Filipino, and Mexican subsections. Due to this the library elected to devote several shelves in the children's section to texts in these languages. However, the shelves were in the back of the children's area, were not prominently displayed or advertised, and were not utilized as heavily as they could have been. Several times while covering the children's desk I directed patrons back there—including English speaking children who were just as delighted by the picture books in Tagalog as they were by the English ones. Beginning children's exposure to different written languages at an early age can not help but develop their empathy and understanding of other cultures. A service which is focused on providing this type of experience to children is the International Children's Digital Library (ICDL), a free, online collection of children's books from around the world. The ICDL recognize "the benefit of making their content available to users around the world, not only for the obvious benefits of broader dissemination of information and cultural awareness, but also as tools of empowerment and strengthening community," (Bederson, 2005, p. 4). As more children and teenagers have grown up entirely within the age of the Internet, their access to online information and their exposure to varied sources of information has increased exponentially. The online world is a reflection of globalization wherein services like MySpace and Second Life allow you to chat with others all over the world and English is the native language of only 35% of the total world online population with Asian and European languages taking up the rest, (Ibid).

It is my belief that libraries that provide a multicultural experience to their patrons though inclusion of all cultures represented in the community (plus others at discretion) will produce, not only a literary and educated society but also a multilingual one. So, for example, the public library mentioned above that I worked in could have done much more with their collection of multicultural materials. Some ideas for extending their services offerings could include: a display at the front of the room highlighting the various languages on offer with language learning materials next to them, artwork depicting multiple cultures (Japanese wall scroll, Mexican patterned blanket, etc) in order to present a physical declaration of the importance of cultural diversity, speakers from minority cultures, and multilingual story-times with texts incorporating more than one language, (Agosto, p. 38-41).

Agosto cites a study done by Wham, Barnhart, and Cook² where the authors compared elementary school student attitudes between those children involved in a year-long, multicultural literature curriculum to those using the standard curriculum. Their findings were that as the school year progressed, “students of the multicultural curriculum exhibited increasingly positive attitudes toward people of cultural backgrounds different from their own, whereas students of the regular curriculum exhibited increasingly negative attitudes,” (Agosto, p. 40). Considering the dire consequences of racism and other negative attitudes towards other cultures, participating in a multicultural library program must be seen as having positive and desirable results.

In conclusion, Maurice Line, former Director-General of the British Library and former President of the UK Library Association, states that:

² Wham, M., J. Barnhart, and G. Cook. (Fall 1996). Enhancing Multicultural Awareness Through the Storybook Reading Experience. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 30, 1-9.

It has always been true that no library can be self-sufficient. The same is true of countries so far as the provision of library materials and information is concerned. Not only can no country now be self-sufficient; no country—not even the US with its huge and rich library resources—now needs to be or can afford to try to be. (1997, p. 158)

All libraries need to come to this understanding that the world is bigger than just their community. While all the obvious needs of the community should be met, their education as members of the global community should also be given due consideration. By incorporating multicultural materials and educating from childhood upwards, a globally aware, multilingual society can be achieved.

Summary

By exploring the effect of urbanization on communities and delving into the theories of cultural planning and social inclusion, an attempt was made to highlight the need for library multicultural services targeted at adolescents. I attributed multiple case studies showing the benefit and need of multicultural services as well as my own first hand experience. Hopefully this paper has shown a correlation between theories and practice for libraries on a global level to incorporate multicultural, multilingual ideas and programs into their client offerings.

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