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Failing To Read Well: The Role of Public Libraries in Adult Literacy, Immigrant Community Building, and Free Access to Learning

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Keywords: Adult literacy, public libraries, immigrant communities, community engagement.

Abstract: This study explores the impact library literacy programs have in the development of immigrant community engagement. Public libraries services are essential to the social, cultural, and economic development of rapidly expanding ethnic communities. A library's adult literacy programs play an important role in reaching new Americans and expanding their participation in society. Through learner-centered instruction, these programs provide opportunities for advancement and integration. The dialogic exchange among learners promotes reciprocal teaching, and enriches their voices as they link what they learn to what is relevant in their lives. This study concludes with strategies to successfully bridge immigrant transition to become active citizens.

Introduction

There are 104,000 foreigners arriving in the United States every day. Out of those arrivals, the majority of foreigners enter with visas and about 2,000 are unauthorized (Martin & Midgley, 2010). With the economic downturn resulting in loss of employment and homes, and an increased pressure on workers to keep or find new jobs, English proficiency and effective job-seeking skills are a real life necessity for learners. The public libraries are one of the few democratic institutions left where literacy services, computer access, job seeking and training workshops, and an expanded range of library services are offered free of charge to any adult learner.

The purpose of this study is to learn how are library based literacy programs an integral part of the mission of library services, and how do these services contribute to the building of immigrant community engagement in their neighborhoods. This study seeks to discover what literacy programs are doing that is working to enrich a global village, and on the other hand, why literacy programs are being eliminated and how.

As a government institution with a strong ideal to free access of information, libraries have been able to continue to provide library services, including literacy services to adult learners and their families for free. Due to extensive budget cuts, these program gains are being threatened. How important are libraries in building a community's knowledge through its collection and through literacy classes? The importance of library and community partnerships will be explored with descriptions of successful program models in urban settings in the greater San Francisco Bay Area.

In 1984, five new literacy programs formed the Bay Area Literacy Network. The California State Library's California Literacy Campaign under State Librarian Gary Strong provided the initial grant (CLLS, 2010). The California State Library has continued to fund California library adult literacy programs, Families for Literacy and Mobile Library Literacy Services with approximately \$4.5 million in grants. In FY 2011-12, this funding may be eliminated by California Governor Brown or reduced by the California State Finance Committee.

Nearly a quarter of California's adult population (23%), lacks prose literacy skills. In Alameda County and Santa Clara County the low literacy skills is 19% and 16% respectively (IES, 2003). Asians are the majority in the cities of Fremont and Union City in Southern Alameda County. In Fremont, 50.3% of over 250,000 residents are Asian. According to the Institute for Educational Science, ten years ago, Asians made up 36.8 % while the white population has decreased from 41.4% to 26.5% in the same period (2003). The emerging trend is evident. New immigrants will become a majority in many cities in California, and the library has a role in welcoming New Americans and integrating them into their community (Ashton, 2008).

Neal Peirce of the "Washington Post" wrote, libraries "can be the fulcrum of renewal in cities and neighborhoods" (2008, pg. 1). Libraries continue their historic responsibility to provide free early literacy to young people, conversation classes to immigrants, computer skills, access to the Internet and library databases, job seeking assistance and networking for the unemployed and for entrepreneurs. According to Jonathan Bowles, Director for the Center for Urban Future, "many of the needs of the immigrant entrepreneurs also overlap the traditional forms of public library service, namely language and literacy skills, which may not be the stuff of headlines, but are absolutely essential roles in smoothing the path for immigrant entrepreneurs" (2007, pg. 1). Libraries create connections to local institutions and build English language skills for immigrants and native speakers. Libraries are important for involving adult learners and their families through their collections and classes, including adult English instruction, early and family literacy and school readiness programs (ULC, 2008). Libraries contribute to the future of communities by supporting "successful immigrant transitions and help communities deal effectively with the effects of rapid worldwide change" (2008, pg. 5).

Theoretical Perspective:

This research focuses on social constructivism as the main theoretical perspective. As recipients of a socially constructed set of codes or language, we are constantly embarking in critical reflection of our learning, not just what is learned, but how and for what purpose we learn (Kong, 2010). The vessel for social knowledge is embedded in historical and social forces that emerge over time. Library literacy programs are constructing ways to reach learners and build civic engagement in a global community. These programs are building learning communities through small group instruction in non-formal and informal settings that are primarily functional, but also empowering and reciprocal because learners teach each other as much as a teacher teaches them. Mutual learning is encouraged whether in a learning pair or in a small group.

Daphne Ntiri defines literacy as having a functional purpose that is more in tune with the expectations of the workplace, but, she adds, that literacy is also tied to power relations among those who have and those who have no wealth (2009). She writes, "Literacy has undergone a shift from the traditional, non-engaging paradigm to an open, dialogic approach that is politically energized and possesses transformative qualities to enhance understanding of the demands of a changing world" (pg. 103). This dialogic approach can be traced to the work of Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Dialogism describes the relationship that each utterance has with the previous and forthcoming utterances. A book is not alone nor does it provide meaning without the intervention of outside dialogues, texts or voices that intersect it. Martin Nystrand states, "discourse is dialogic...because it is continually structured by tension, even conflict, between the conversants, between self and other, as one voice "refracts" another" (1997, pg. 8). Discourse is aided by each participant's history, social role, and context. In a library-based conversation group, the participants provide a window to the text, and their

discussion is dialogic, and treated as “thinking devices” and not just as a means to transmit facts (Nystrand, 1997). Nystrand refers to this exchange as reciprocal teaching which is a process that is both dialogical and sustained by its focus on experiences relevant to the learners, and on a deeper reflection of the literature whether in the form of a book in an English conversation group, a discussion in a ESOL about American idioms, or preparing for an interview in a job-seeking class. As opposed to monologism, learning is enhanced by the interaction of those involved, as in a community of practitioners where participant’s thoughts and responses are taken into account and respected. Dialogue is chained by the meanings carried from one voice to another. As learners construct their own views of what they read in conversation groups or ESOL classes, they contribute to each other’s analysis by their dialogic interaction. Library literacy programs surveyed promoted this web of “interpretative complexity” in their learning activities, in particular, their small group learning (1997, pg. 77). In their learner-centered approach, literacy programs are powerful contributors and change agents when learners discover they are thinkers and creators of their own history.

Literacy aims at rectifying the historical and cultural oppression people endure, and at transforming the spirit of learners in order to break through political, and social injustice (Freire, 1973). Libraries are no strangers to freedom of information and to the ideals of a democratic distribution of knowledge to anyone who walk through its doors, material or virtual.

Methodology

This action research focuses on a group of five library based literacy programs in the San Francisco Bay Area who are members of the Bay Area Literacy Network (BayLit). Semi-structured interviews, personal stories, surveys, document reviews, and field notes were used.

The guiding questions for this research are: What are adult learners learning in library based literacy programs? Do public libraries really care about adult literacy education? How do literacy programs expand their reach and retain new limited English proficiency (LEP) adults? How do library literacy programs encourage civic engagement by learners of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds? What stories do you recall that exemplify the learner’s experiences?

Findings

The 2008 Urban Libraries Council report, “Welcome Stranger: Public Libraries Build The Global Village,” proposes five strategies for success that can assist in bridging the change experienced by many immigrants adjusting to global migration in the United States. The report places America’s urban libraries at the forefront in building immigrant communities by the library’s accessible information and institutional networks, understanding of local immigrant dynamics, sensitivity to cultural and language differences, building English proficiency, as a bridge to other local institutions, and in the ability to encourage civic engagement.

According to the Asian American Justice Center 2007 report, “a growing number of immigrants – especially from Mexico, Latin America and parts of Southeast Asia – are not only LEP but also have low levels of formal education and limited literacy skills in their primary languages” (pg. 7). Immigrant community development is enhanced by the librarian’s knowledge of immigrant demographics. The potential for public libraries to organize its services to make the information more accessible to community groups can result in a clearer understanding of the issues affecting immigrants (ULC, 2008). The inclusion of literacy programs as a core library service has a significant effect in the rapid transition of immigrants into their communities.

In this study, there were five literacy programs managed by four female managers, and one male manager. Two are Asian Americans, and three are white. These programs provided services from 180 to 350 learners in their respective jurisdiction for a total of about 1,300 learners for all five programs. The majority of participants were second-language learners. Two programs have literacy services countywide, while three have services in large urban cities. These programs cover areas with a population ranging from 250,000 to over 500,000 ethnically diverse residents. The number of staff averages from 3-7 people with full and part-time workers, including contract teachers. All programs rely on volunteer tutors and outside library funding to operate their tutoring activities. The California Library Literacy Services funds adult basic education tutoring for all programs, with the majority of expenses paid by their local or county libraries. At each program, literacy services are held in multiple locations, both at the library branches and in the community.

The learners served by these literacy programs included native English speakers, second-language learners, inmates, re-entry learners, homeless participants, families, children and youth, unemployed, people with a learning disability, residential recovery clients, apartment residents, older adults, library and non-library users, government workers, private industry and non-profit employees. In all programs surveyed, library directors supported literacy program expenses and in some cases pro-actively advocated for library literacy as part of the mission of their library system. One library director was fully supportive of the library's literacy program. However, the library staff viewed literacy as inessential to the core services of the library. In light of severe budget cuts, and the unforeseen staffing costs of a newly built library, at this library, literacy was not viewed as a core library service even though nearly 200 learners and library users benefited from the service with reading, writing and work related instruction. Library politics and the actual adult basic education program can be at odds. When asked why the literacy manager liked her job, she responded, "I wanted to be a part of direct service, to develop policy and curriculum, to improve adult education in the U.S. This position has allowed me to do that."

Another literacy program director manages a program in a large urban city with approximately 160,000 adults functioning at the lowest literacy levels. According to this literacy director, 35% of the population was described as having limited English proficiency. This literacy director supervises a program for 350 adult learners in basic literacy, ESL classes, workforce specific instruction, voting, computer labs and a partnership with the library's Family Learning Centers at branch locations. The literacy manager predicts that the future of her program lies in a partnership with the library's Family Learning Centers. Recently, their local adult school budget was cut by 70% from 5 million to 1 million. Literacy managers are aware that many learners from adult schools are seeking services at the library, as well as laid-off workers from business and factory closures. Learners are seeking all levels of ESOL classes and basic education at libraries. Because of budget limitations, these literacy programs cannot increase the number of classes or tutors. The literacy staff is not able to maintain program growth without additional funding for classes, tutor training and promotion.

Tutor recruitment and training was in every literacy manager's mind. They made a constant effort to encourage outside and peer volunteers to get involved, to advocate for the program, to speak with public representatives, and to commit to staying long enough to meet participants learning goals. Managers were inspired by the involvement of learners in leading a conversation group, attending a leadership workshop, in peer tutoring, by their involvement in a learner advisory board, and participating in a voting workshop. These activities are seen as

essential in encouraging civic involvement among literacy learners, particularly immigrants. Program services were marketed to local immigrant agencies and community groups.

The level of satisfaction was very high among literacy managers because, in the words of a manager, “I can see a permanent impact on people, literacy provides learners with something they never lose, that cannot be taken away.” Another manager said, “I am able to help people. I am engaged on a daily basis with everyone in my program. I go to the community to show the positive things that we do.”

The federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) has funded several innovative projects that have taken the library out of the building and into the community. With LSTA funding, one literacy program has established four free computer labs, and a job-seeking class at three apartment complexes where learners’ interests are combined with reading and writing skills practice. Residents and neighbors can attend any class and learn about how to complete online applications, write a resume, prepare for an interview, send and receive email, search the internet, find online library resources, search the library catalogue and place holds on books, and arrange a delivery through the bookmobile. The same program has expanded popular Reading Clubs for second language learners with high interest literature and well trained facilitators.

Library literacy programs face a myriad of challenges from budget cuts, to a politically charged organizational culture, to labor union influence, to learner persistence and recruitment of volunteers, and government procedures and policies. Nevertheless, several programs have found a balance in programmatic development and service delivery that have increased the learner’s capacity to succeed either in job seeking skills, English proficiency or confidence in every day life dialogue. Library literacy programs are sites where emerging promising practices can be found in a learner-centered adult education that both inspires, and encourages personal advancement and civic participation. Library literacy programs are able to provide diverse modalities of instruction that work for the learners, at a time that is convenient for learners and with an open door policy. These literacy programs are integrating ESOL or ABE instruction with life skills, computer training, job-seeking soft skills, and library usage in a focused contextualized learning environment that is safe and learner-centered.

Implications for Adult Theory and Practice:

Library based adult literacy programs are major contributors in the education of adult learners in urban and suburban communities. These programs provide free individual and group instruction during the current economic recession. Many literacy programs are replacing classes offered by many adult schools due to budget cuts.

According to the Asian American Justice Center (2007), there are approximately 4 million LEP adults who are native born. This figure doubled between 2000 and 2005 and “is increasing at a higher rate than is the immigrant population” (2007, p. ix). Immigrant populations are more dispersed, and their English proficiency challenges have encouraged new strategies for effective instruction of learners. Some of these encouraging practices include a focus on life skills instruction, an integration of English language proficiency with job training or GED classes, class schedules that fit the learner’s availability, well trained teachers and an increase in collaboration and partnership with other community organizations. The literacy programs in this study use many of these strategies and are successfully attaining learner goals.

The public library is a little explored organization where adult literacy services are provided for free. It is one of the few remaining government institutions that have consistently stood by its ideals of free information for the masses and a commitment against the failure to

read well, but for how long? Can libraries fail to read well into the future and eliminate literacy as part of their mission of public service or can libraries expand their role in community social and economic development and see the role of literacy and education as essential to library members, to civic engagement and the public good.

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