
Perspective: Libraries Doing Justice By Edith A. Campbell

Abstract

Social justice, “justice at the level of a society or state as regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities and privileges” can be found at almost every level of librarianships, from the core values stated by the American Library Association to the practices and principles established in school, public and academic libraries. While social justice is not always intentionally practiced, taking the time to be purposeful with its implementation will allow libraries to interact with their communities in ways that are mutually beneficial.

Keywords: social justice; teaching; library service; diversity; equity

Do Space is a public library in Omaha, Nebraska that has no books but its walls are lined with LED billboards announcing classes, events and tech tools inside the facility. This library provides community members with access to PCs that are loaded with software meant for professionals across a variety of industries, including 3-D printers and laser cutters. This privately funded library provides open and collaborative workspace to run businesses, create art, master new technologies and a variety of other activities patrons might choose to do with this cutting edge technology. Users have the tools to locate and organize information as well as to create new information products. This space exists with no books and probably very few pens and paper. It seems to connect the essence of librarianship with social justice in ways that not all libraries do. Social justice is a verb in the library.

The American Library Association expects libraries to be global in their perspective, to maintain open and inclusive collaborative environments, to maintain professionalism, integrity and intellectual freedom while valuing social responsibility and the public good. It also lists free access, confidentiality/privacy, intellectual freedom and diversity among its core values and in doing so, the ALA speaks of equity, ethical practices and rights to access for our community of users. Social justice is a core value in the library.

I trained to work as a school librarian. Through coursework and readings, I came to realize my obligation to advocate for students in this position.

In my traditional library activities this meant ordering the books that accurately represented marginalized people, teaching about the inherent bias of information and modeling appropriate online etiquette. But, advocacy as an information leader meant speaking up about the needs of our at-risk students as well as to protect the rights of LGTBQ, ENL, new majority or disabled students.

But what exactly is ‘social justice?’ While many social science theorists do not recognize the existence of an exact definition for social justice, the *Oxford English Dictionary* today defines it as “justice at the level of a society or state as regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities and privileges.” The term was coined in 1840 by Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio, a Sicilian priest. John Stuart Mills made the term popular in *Utilitarianism* (Novak, 2000) and gave rise to the notion of ‘society’ as a unit that required cooperation of all individuals within that unit and social justice as a way to allow individuals to contribute for the good of the whole (Miller, 1999). As such, the concept of social justice asks us to realize the ability of all people to fully benefit from social and economic progress and to participate equally in democratic societies. It seems to require the development of skillsets that allow individuals to inspire, work with and organize others (Novak, 2000).

There are those who don’t see much of a place for social justice in librarianship. I think it is more common for librarians to organically work for equity and justice in their communities, without labeling their work as ‘social justice.’ There seems to be many libraries and librarians who work as drum majors for justice, but maintaining or even improving these services that support our surrounding communities will require thoughtful and deliberate planning. We may need to consider how we organize and distribute information, opportunities and privileges in the daily practices of librarianship. This may range from researching to find exactly who the library serves, upgrading computer hardware to improve accessibility, or performing a collection analysis to identify gaps in the collection. Do materials collected represent the diverse languages and ethnicities around us? Do we safeguard the privacy of our users? Do we marginalize queer fiction by placing it in areas outside the realm of general fiction in Dewey, or do we not purchase it at all? Do we maintain standards of conduct that prevent micro-aggressions and harassment? Do we work to employ a diverse staff, one that is sensitive to the needs of the community that the library serves? As with most places of employment, the library is a unit that functions best when everyone contributes to the common good.

There is no social justice when there are barriers to access in the workplace that arise from systemic racism, bullying, insufficient physical access to workplace equipment and similar impediments. Social justice extends through our work practices and into the goods and services that are part of the library's business unit, particularly the services we provide to patrons and the goods we supply, which is typically information.

In 1996, the American Library Association standardized policies and practices for serving the least of our patrons with the Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty Task Force. Across the country, urban libraries, whether they are academic or public libraries have witnessed growing numbers of patrons in need of social or mental health services. As a result, some libraries hold workshops on issues such as mental health or local food pantry services, while others actually employ social workers (Gunderman and Stevens, 2015). The libraries see themselves as a safe harbor for people with no place else to go and they accept this mission that contorts, expands or supplements the call to provide free and open access to information. Social justice does not see patrons as problems, does not recognize them from a deficit model. Rather, it creates opportunities for them to contribute for the good of the whole, to be part of what makes communities better places. In this way, libraries become a component of society that works for the greater good.

For example, the Manlius Library in Manlius New York partners with the Fayetteville Manilus Community Outreach by collecting food and provided free books for the food pantry (Gowans, 2015). The librarians do this work to support the members of their community.

Amy Sonnie works at the Rockridge Branch Library in the Oakland Public Library system and like many librarians across the country, she saw the need to spark action and conversation among her library users around the #BlackLivesMatter movement. She began collecting books, articles and videos and formed them into an online resource series to prompt discussion and action. Sonnie quite simply says "I invite you to join me in learning and listening." (Sonnie, 2014) This movement rose from police shootings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray and hundreds of other young black men across the country. Sonnie builds a bridge through collaborative learning and understanding. When riots broke out in Baltimore after Freddie Gray was murdered, the Pratt Library stayed open even when the city's schools closed; as did the Ferguson Library when rioting erupted after the Michael Brown shooting in that community.

Barbara Quarton describes how her academic library has moved beyond one shot library instruction sessions to delivering a series of workshops that educate students about the political nature of information that shapes our lives rather than basic search and find skills. (Quatron, 2014).

Her university library works to provide an equitable framework for students who are ethnically and economically marginalized. Workshops are delivered to students that begin with the deep web concept and key word searching skill in the freshman year and builds from the concept that knowledge is continually being produced. Students learn to find and acknowledge alternative perspectives. Quarton and her colleagues work to educate students on the use of information for making life choices.

Librarians enact social justice not merely in the programs and policies that are developed to serve patrons, but in the way they're delivered. Eliminating financial barriers to information provides information in a manner that is equitable. Other actions of social justice come from a sense of dedication to service that compel us to realize librarianship is a vocation, a calling, and not just 'a job'. The essence of this level of library service that functions 'at the level of a society or state as regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities and privileges' one would simply need to watch the short video, "Why Libraries Matter" (Dressner and Hicks, 2014) to witness the compassion and dignity librarians display in actions that speak profoundly of social justice.

Libraries do matter. In rationalizing the library's unwavering dedication to provide free and open access to our communities, it soon becomes apparent that we're providing a necessary action in a free and democratic society. It matters how we educate ourselves about the barriers created by new technologies as well as the unequal representation of children of color in children's books. What we do matters because for many, we are the last safe space. Libraries are verbs.

Citations

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Author Bio

Edith Campbell is an assistant librarian in the Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University. She is part of the Reference and Instruction team of librarians and serves as the liaison to the Bayh College of Education. She is a Faculty Affiliate to the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence's Multicultural Curriculum Learning Community. Edith currently serves as the Indiana State Ambassador for the United States Board on Books for Young People, Guidelines for Selecting Multicultural Materials Task Force of the Association for Library Services to Children. She is a past member of the WNDB Walter Award Committee, YALSA's Best Fiction for Young Adults selection committee and the CYBILS Nonfiction Awards committee. She has been elected to the 2018 Printz Award Committee. Edith received her B.A. in Economics from the University of Cincinnati and M.L.S. from Indiana University.