

Changing the Mindset of Pre-service Librarians: Moving from Library Servants to Public Servants

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ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2020, we engaged in a participatory design process (also known as co-design) with 137 library staff from across the United States. These library staff provided insight into how public libraries built services to support non-dominant youth and families during crises. Through this work, we learned that these staff had a library servant instead of a public servant mindset. Public servants make decisions *with* community members. Library servants make decisions *for* them. We designed and published a Field Guide to help public library staff better understand how to work with and for communities during crisis times. We share our findings related to library staff mindsets in this paper.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Public libraries; Community-led services; Community engagement; Young adult services.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Pre-service librarian training; Disaster preparedness; Youth and families; Librarians' mindset.

INTRODUCTION

Between May 2020 and August 2020, we engaged in a participatory design process with 137 public library staff from across the United States (U.S). The focus of the project was to understand the needs of non-dominant¹ youth and families during the pandemic and civil unrest

¹ Instead of using terms like minority, diverse, or of color, we use the term non-dominant youth because it "...explicitly calls attention to issues of power and power relations...to describe members of differing cultural groups" (Ito, et al, 2013, p.7).

and how libraries were helping to meet those needs. Based on what we learned, we designed a Field Guide for public library staff to use when preparing and responding to current and future crises (Subramaniam et al., 2021).

We saw our work as an opportunity to reimagine and to center library services within an equity framework so that library staff have the skills and knowledge necessary to leap into equitably serving non-dominant members of their community. What we discovered through this work is that library staff were not prepared to take this leap and spent much of their time focused on acting in the role of library servant instead of public servant. Public servants make decisions *with* community members. Library servants make decisions *for* them (Yoke, 2020). In the library servant role, library staff determine resources, buildings, and marketing without community input. Library servants tell their community and partners about their programs and services and what the library can do for them. In the public servant role, library staff gather and analyze community data and work with local stakeholders to innovate solutions that would go beyond re-imagining traditional services. Public servants demonstrate strong empathy and loyalty to their communities. Seeing this disconnect between the library servant and the public servant role in our work led us to ask the question: *What was the mindset of library staff in serving their communities during the crises of 2020/2021?*

By knowing the mindset of library staff and how they see their role within their communities, library educators are able to better understand what skills, knowledge, and mindsets pre-service librarians must have in order to craft a resilient future. Public library staff with the public servant mindset are those that will be able to lead and inspire their colleagues and their community. We delve into findings from our work and provide a set of ways that LIS educators can work towards instilling a public servant mindset in pre-service librarians.

RELATED WORK

“Public libraries are a natural gathering place for people after a disaster because of the multiple roles they assume and because they are located in practically every community” (Stricker, 2019, 13). Supporting their communities during crises is not new for public libraries. Libraries regularly step-up during weather emergencies and provide shelter, technology, warmth or cooling, and access to electricity ((Bishop & Veil, 2013; Stricker, 2019). Libraries embraced their community during civic unrest and remained open to serve as safe spaces during these challenging times (Alajmi, 2016, Cottrell, 2015). During these emergencies, library staff demonstrate a mindset focused on helping community members in ways that attend to easily recognizable needs such as shelter and access to information.

Prior to the crises of 2020/2021, library staff were able to quickly identify what community member’s short-term needs were: shelter, information access, safe space, etc. These responses did not require library staff to work with community members. They exhibited a limited public servant mindset in which their services supported obvious public needs but did not extend to engaging with the community to determine if there were more ways to provide service

beyond the traditional building-oriented approaches. With the crises of 2020/2021, libraries had to think differently about crisis responses. They needed to start asking questions such as: How do we serve the community when buildings are closed? How do we determine community needs when community members are in quarantine?

During the crises of 2020/2021, library staff tried these traditional approaches mentioned above but under the conditions of closed buildings, resulted in varied levels of success and often missed serving community members who needed services the most (Braun et al, 2021, Subramaniam & Braun, 2021). Responses were also often focused on serving community members who were already familiar with the ways in which libraries work - using online catalogs to borrow materials and services like grab and go and curbside services (Hughes & Santoro, 2021). As a result, many non-dominant youth and families were not adequately served by their public libraries and staff did not demonstrate a public servant mindset in order to build services that directly supported the needs of these youth and families (Subramaniam & Braun, 2020b).

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned in the *Introduction* section, this work is part of a larger study which led to the creation of a Field Guide (Subramaniam et al., 2021). We conducted seven virtual participatory design (PD) sessions (90 minutes each, using Zoom) with 137 youth-serving library staff² in the U.S. between May 2020 and August 2020. We learned about library services and challenges faced during the ongoing crises. PD (also known as co-design) is derived from Scandinavian efforts to democratize the design process, featuring a strong focus on allowing those who are going to use the resulting product to have significant input throughout the design process, with participants as informants (informing the design) and design partners (participating in the entire design process) (Druin, 2002; Floyd, Mehl, Resin, Schmidt, & Wolf, 1989). Data gathered during our process includes audio recordings of co-design sessions and artifacts produced during and in-between sessions in the form of Padlets, Jamboards, Google Docs, Google Slides, homework assignments, word clouds, etc. In August 2020, we also conducted 30 minute semi-structured virtual interviews with 12 youth-serving library staff (selected from staff that participated in the co-design sessions) who shared their challenges and solutions for serving community needs during crises. Library staff that we interviewed served rural, urban, and suburban populations, and included those that were able to transition from a library servant to a public servant mindset during the co-design process (six participants) and those who were still unable to make that shift after the process (six participants). We observed this through the artifacts that they produced. Throughout the process of building the Field Guide, we published articles in *School Library Journal* (SLJ) that provided an overview of challenges that we

² We use the term “library staff” to be inclusive of all library workers.

discovered (Subramaniam & Braun 2020a, 2020b; Braun & Subramaniam 2020a, 2020b). We extracted and analyzed public social media postings posted between July 2020 and September 2020 from library staff who responded to these published articles, through SLJ's publicly-accessible Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts.

To analyze the data collected, we used thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), and created a coding scheme aligned with our research goal for our overall work. We ensured that the codes were applied accurately to the entire data set by conducting regular collaborative discussions throughout the coding process (Smagorinsky, 2008). We created a codebook consisting of 15 codes developed through a three-stage process. In the first stage of coding, each of the researchers separately coded a single interview transcript. We then met to discuss the codes applied and built an initial codebook. In the second stage of coding, we used the codebook we created and coded another additional artifact individually. We met afterward to discuss the results of the second coding in which we finalized the codebook. In the last stage of coding, two team members applied the final codebook to all data sources, with one researcher applying the codes, and another researcher checking to make sure they agreed on the codes assigned. We left memos for each other if there was a discrepancy in the coding, and discussed disagreements (if any) (Smagorinsky, 2008).

FINDINGS

Our analysis found the following salient themes that demonstrate the prevalence of the library servant mindset in responding to the crises of 2020. Some library staff pivoted towards the public servant mindset towards the end of our co-design work, possibly signaling that our discussions may have facilitated such change.

We're the experts

We found evidence that administrators, decision makers, and library staff strongly believed that they knew what the community needed during the recent crises, without reaching out and learning about the community's needs. Library staff made decisions *for* the community. Here, Interviewee 5 mentioned how her manager was convinced that books are what the community wants during a crisis, "*[I] was like, I want to do all this technology stuff. And the city manager was like, Oh, well, hold on. That's not what the community wants. The community wants books, so we're kind of following her lead in that regard.*" Library staff that responded to our articles via social media also made similar claims. For example, "*Getting physical books into people's hands IS valuable and we WERE listening to the needs of our community*"; and incredulous questions were posed to us such as "*When did the library's mission become end homelessness and feed the community?*". After participation in our design sessions, we saw some evidence of the change in this mindset among our participants. For example, Interviewee 8 stated that "*... I'm trying to get my staff on board for what that looks like and to take away some of the ownership...when they develop programs themselves... how do they co-develop it with somebody from outside the library who has expertise? Because I feel like the librarians for a*

long time were like, "We're the experts. We know how to do this.""

We're here and we're essential

Library staff perceived their service as essential. They felt that it was important to continue doing what they have been doing to remain connected with the community that they served before. The focus was not on the community needs and/or communities that are most impacted by the crises, but was more on tools that are needed to connect with community previously served such as figuring out how to do Facebook Live, setting up Discord servers to connect with teens, and obtaining Zoom accounts for library staff. Staff spent a significant amount of time learning these tools to offer the same programs that they did before the pandemic. Interviewee 2 shared the success of these programs through her lens, *"We're going to do a bunch of programming and be satisfied with three people in attendance for all this work..."*.

The curbside pick-up service was and still remains the most frequently offered service offered by public libraries nationwide during the 2020/2021 crisis. Our analysis revealed that the optics of demonstrating that the library was doing something, as opposed to offering the programs and services that the community needs was prevalent. Interviewee 2 described how this manifested in his library, *"We all have to be active. We have to be doing stuff. I think there's a community political element to contactless holds meaning we're still here, and you see...we're working". There was also a perception that this is what the funders and taxpayers wanted. Interviewee 6 stated this point eloquently, "There's just so many competing interests to balance, and optics is absolutely a part of that for sure."* Focusing on these optics and the inability of the library to be nimble did trouble some of the library staff such as Interviewee 11, who mentioned *"We're not as nimble...We seem to have gone back 50 years to what the definition of library was...your white, middle-class whatever, and have not moved beyond that..."*. After participation in our design sessions, we saw some evidence of the change in this mindset. In one of our visioning exercises as part of the homework following the discussion about the public servant mindset, one of our participants stated, *"Change the definition of library in the community's mind; we are not just the provider of books."*

We promote the library

During our initial co-design sessions, many ideas that we put forward such as learning about the community needs and co-creating programs with the community encountered pushback. Library staff were convinced that promoting virtual programs and services and convincing the community to use them would result in higher virtual attendance and use. We heard plenty of suggestions on how to market the virtual programs, from distributing flyers during curb-side pickups, at community's farmers markets, or at meal pick-up sites. There was much less recognition of building community relationships needed to determine needs and assets in the community. Interviewee 9 captured this succinctly, *"To be honest, they're not really looking at...what kind of relationships do[es] a... librarian have with the people in your*

community? It's not relationship-based...I mean, some have relationships with their school districts...[but] it is transactional....". After participation in our design session, we were able to capture some evidence of change in mindset, as exhibited by Interviewee 5, ".....do we focus our efforts, and our time, and our energy on providing readers advisory opportunities...or do we focus more on the partnerships and the equity that I've been learning about...?"

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout our work, we consistently encountered attachment to the library servant mindset. It became clear that some library staff came to the profession with this mindset, or were converted to this mindset after they entered the workforce. Our work did not illuminate where and how this library servant mindset was acquired, but what was clear was that it existed and hindered staff from serving their communities effectively during the recent crises. We argue that this public servant mindset is crucial when serving communities before, during, and after crises. Without being able to demonstrate the impact that they have through the essential services that they provide that meet community needs, libraries risk being admired as an iconic building in the community but will be the first public service to go when fiscal challenges arise. We have already seen instances where library staff were fired, furloughed indefinitely, or moved to other essential units within the city (Peet, 2020). As a result of continued building closures and limited services, some decision makers are starting to ask if we need libraries (see Flood, 2020). We plead the library educator community to begin consciously integrating the public servant mindset into their librarian preparation programs.

We conclude with a list of additions and revisions that LIS educators must embrace in their curriculum in order to build the public servant mindset in pre-service library staff:

- Highlight the public servant mindset in recruitment and seek evidence of this mindset in application materials;
- Infuse the public servant mindset into the design of *all* LIS courses;
- Incorporate service-based learning in the LIS core courses to allow pre-service librarians to work in communities and participate in real-life public servant oriented activities;
- Create courses that empower pre-service librarians to learn techniques to uncover community needs and assets and use what they learn in a co-creation process with communities;
- Emphasize assessment and evaluation in existing courses;
- Create courses that focuses on how to build and sustain relationships and partnerships with community anchors, leading to collective impact in communities served; and
- Create a course on serving communities during crisis, specifically on how to prepare for crises and how to respond to communities needs during crises.

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