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Negotiating the Social Organization of School Library Work: An Institutional Ethnography

Abstract

This institutional ethnography starts from the standpoint of a school librarian to examine how school library work is coordinated and explained by social institutions. Areas of focus include the work of accounting for materials, the work of accounting for students, and the work of understanding and negotiating schedules.

Ruling Relations

The school librarian's activities are coordinated across multiple sites. The school librarian exists at an intersection of multiple institutions, often assumed to be made up of the school building or buildings, the "institution" of school librarianship, the "institution" of librarianship, and the "institution" of teaching. These institutions control the work of the librarian. The work is also controlled by multiple governing bodies, including local school boards and state departments of education.

"'Relations of ruling' is a concept that grasps power, organization, direction, and regulation as more pervasively structured than can be expressed in traditional concepts provided by the discourses of power" (Smith 1987). What Smith refers to as relations of ruling are the taken-for-granted forces that organize and coordinate work and life.

Some examples of how the work of the school librarian is coordinated internally include hall pass policies, scheduling decisions, and an understanding of the work of the librarian as including making decisions for children about appropriate reading materials.

Many schools require students to have permission to be in the halls. This leads to library staff being required to be "hall pass police." That leads to the first interaction with a student being some form of "where's your pass," "where should you be right now?" or "remember to sign in." The ruling practices must be enforced—without conscious attention to the effect on the student's view of the actual school library or of libraries in general.

Scheduling decisions also affect the work of the school librarian in dramatic ways. Questions about negotiating scheduling decisions come up frequently in conversations among school librarians in person and on email lists, but the impact of school-wide or district-wide scheduling decisions is rarely addressed in school library research.

Another way the work of the librarian is coordinated is in the expectation that the librarian will act as a gate-keeper, judging on behalf of individual students which books they

should read. In some cases, this is evident when librarians agree to sort their library by devices like Lexiles or grade levels. In a sense, librarians end up enforcing reading levels, using standards determined elsewhere. While an important role of the librarian is to help patrons find books, taking on the role of denying a book because it is “too easy” or “too hard” for the student transmits ideas to the students about what reading “should” be like and about how librarians will react to personal reading choices. As Gramsci put it, “Literacy is not a need and it therefore becomes a torment, something imposed by the wielders of power” (Gramsci 1988). Children do not have ownership over their own reading choices, and are rendered powerless. Their library use is dependent on school requirements, so their library use dwindles each year as it becomes less and less required in higher grades.

Collection development decisions can be driven not just by reading levels, but by initiatives intended to improve children’s reading. Some of those initiatives include Reading Counts and Accelerated Reader, commercial programs that assign books an immutable reading level and that provide quizzes to prove the student has read and comprehended the books. Schools might not buy books that are NOT included within these programs, yet the processes by which books are chosen for inclusion are not transparent. This is a ruling relation. Someone is choosing which books children should read and excluding other books, but who gave that institution authority?

The work of the school librarian is also coordinated by the community, by parental interaction, by tax decisions, and by school board decisions. Taxes are a big issue in education. Although researchers prefer to look at educational issues as if they are divorced from any kind of local culture and community, people who have lived in areas where educational tax increases have been voted for or voted against know that issues of district and community culture play a big role in how much a community is willing to pay. The school library can play a role in shaping the community culture, but the community also plays a role in shaping the school library.

While these examples can be evidence of ruling relations at play, what is not clear is how activities like this become part of the socially organized work of the librarian.

Literature Review

School library literature is explicitly normative. The authors have in mind idealized pictures of school libraries and teacher-librarian interaction. The perpetuation of these idealized libraries becomes a form of ruling relation in the work of school librarians, transmitted through professional literature, conferences, mailing lists, and library education. Writers in school librarianship have specific visions of the role and place of the school library. These visions emerge from the researchers’ own standpoints and understandings of acceptable research and work practices.

It appears that the profession of librarianship is not as influential in school library media research as one might expect given the close relationship assumed between school library work and public library youth services work. The library work of the school librarian appears to be glossed over or openly disdained in much of the literature about school librarianship (Lance 2002; Hartzell 1997; Lance 2002; Church 2008). Ideas from public and academic librarianship appear to be absent from the literature of school librarianship. The focus is almost entirely on the instructional and collaborative roles of the school librarian. This focus becomes more understandable when it becomes clear how many researchers came to school library research from the field of education. This is important because this perspective informs their research and

their recommendations for "proper credentials," yet this bias is not made explicit in the research articles that then embed themselves in ruling practices.

Much of the research done on school libraries appears to be along the lines of "how do we strengthen our position in the school and the community," rather than "why do we do what we do?" or even "what do we do?" This might be because there is a belief that there is neither the time nor the money available for school librarians to examine the assumptions that guide their work or the effect those assumptions have on children.

The perspective regarding proper qualifications for school librarians is focused on gaining respect and power for the librarian. Church uncritically applauds Virginia's requirement of teacher licensing for media specialists as "recognizing the teaching role of the school library media specialist" (Church 2008). Todd and Kuhlthau, both former classroom teachers, also focus on credentials. They claim that "Part of creating effective school libraries is a credentialed school librarian who has the pedagogical background to engage in shared instructional initiatives to help students learn and achieve" (Todd and Kuhlthau 2005). They do not explicate what they mean by "credential" and "pedagogical background."

"Professionally trained and credentialed" and similar phrases are educational short-hand reflecting ruling practices embedded in education and librarianship. Several researchers emphasize the need for school librarians to be seen as teachers, but perhaps this need is overstated or simply assumed. The profession of librarianship includes a teaching component, but there is more to the work of the school librarian than instruction. The focus on the school librarian as a leader, collaborator, instructional partner, or coordinator appears to be at the expense of the school librarian as a librarian.

A common question in school library research is "What are the roles of the school library media specialist?" Questions about roles seem to dominate school library research. Neuman notes questions about roles come up every time education shifts its priorities (Neuman 2003). This shows how school librarianship reacts to "institutional forces" and "ruling relations." It would appear one force at play is the "educational establishment."

The place of the student in school library literature and in school libraries appears to be marginal. Neuman states that student learning should be at the center of the research, yet the "diamond" metaphor in her article places school librarianship in the center (Neuman 2003).

Students are referred to in school library research only in the aggregate or as disembodied demographic numbers, or represented by test scores or implied in circulation numbers. I have seen this tendency in actual school librarians as well. It is a common short-hand to refer to a group of students as "Teacher X's Class," or in the middle school model, "Core X." This reference has embedded within it several assumptions. One is that the students are a single entity, rather than a group of individuals. Todd and Kuhlthau quote teachers referring to "my" "special needs" students. How does referring to the students as property affect the way they are provided service? How does constructing students as "special needs" affect the services?

The literature reflects common assumptions about children, including the "tabula rasa" belief about the learning abilities of children. The blank slate assumption informs discourse in the field related to students, including the belief that librarians can "instill a love of reading" in children (Lance 2002). A view of children as passive objects into which knowledge can be "instilled" affects recommendations of "best practices" in librarianship.

Perspectives about "proper" research are embedded in the research into collaboration. Montiel-Overall notes a gap in research about collaboration.

However, little is known about how collaboration between teachers and librarians occurs, what practices are involved in collaborative endeavors, and how teacher and librarian collaboration is facilitated and/or inhibited. While there is much anecdotal evidence regarding successful teacher and librarian collaboration, there is little hard research that defines specific practices leading to successful collaboration (Montiel-Overall 2007).

Perspectives presented by authors about power relations between school librarians and others in the environment

Much of the school library research is written from a standpoint of ruling. Often, the role power relations play in shaping the work of the school librarian are dismissed, perhaps because the researchers come from a ruling standpoint. A recurring theme in school library literature is the idea of the school librarian as a "leader" in the school. However, this theme is presented as if the librarian is working in a context-free and culture-free environment. "School library media advocates have long struggled to integrate school library media programs into schools' instructional process. The literature suggests that they have been slow to adopt those responsibilities" (Drake 2007) This statement is disturbing in its dismissal of institutional forces that might affect how well a school librarian can push for changes. This statement also shows an assumption of agency on the part of the school librarian that simply might not exist in an actual school environment, and it shows an assumption of adequacy of the standards and agreement to those standards by the librarian.

The same stance and assumptions are seen in Lance's writing. "Library media specialists should be recognized and utilized by principals and teachers as professional colleagues in the teaching and learning enterprise. Where such recognition and the collaboration to which it leads do not exist, the LMS must exercise some leadership in changing the environment" (Lance 2002). This statement implies that librarians have not been exercising leadership and that changing the environment would be relatively easy.

The literature of school library media research has adopted some of the language of ruling described earlier. Todd and Kuhlthau examine "effective" library programs, but ignore the power structures and assumptions embedded in the idea of effectiveness (Todd and Kuhlthau 2005). Morris and Packard surveyed principals at schools with "exemplary" library media programs, defining exemplary to mean how well the programs match AASL's current standards (Morris and Packard 2007). It becomes a closed loop of research.

Current research in school librarianship objectifies the participants by aggregating them into anonymous numbers. This objectification, while seeking generalizability, leaves out details of HOW ruling relations and ruling practices shape the work. For example, Lance looks to test scores to explain the importance of school libraries to schools. While he is responding to a current belief that learning can be tested in standardized and quantifiable ways, he is also unintentionally reifying the belief that activities that cannot clearly be linked to higher standardized test scores are not valuable or do not lead to learning

The primary perspective presented about power relations seem to overstate the power of the principal and the librarian, and understate the power of teachers, the community, and others. Power structures and power relations affect the work of the school librarian in ways that are not made explicit in the literature about and for school librarians.

A key element in the literature is the perception of the intra-school power structure with the principal at the top and the library media specialist dependent on the principal's advocacy. The power and influence of the principal is overstated at times. Direct quotes from principals contradict the idea that the principal is the most powerful person in the school when it comes to the school library: "Regarding the lack of up-to-date computer skills, one respondent described the library media specialist as "a librarian who runs an organized library where students check out books and are read to. . . . We are waiting for her to retire (next year) so that we can get someone who is truly a media specialist.'" (Church 2008). This principal is clearly dissatisfied with this school librarian, but must wait until she is ready to leave before the principal can choose a "media specialist." There are forces at play here that are glossed over in the literature about principal support or influence on school libraries.

The prevailing attitude appears to be that if the principal understood how effective school librarians could be, they would promote the library more and provide more time and money for school libraries. For example, Neuman asserts that "Library media programs in schools will be marginal and tenuous until research yields evidence of SLMCs contributions to success and until administrators are forced to pay attention" (Neuman 2003). Church asserts that the relationship between the principal and the school library media program is key to the program's effectiveness (Church 2008).

However, other factors, or institutional forces, affect principals' decisions, such as budgets and scheduling decisions. While principals have some control over the library budget, certain power structures have led that to be so. At the same time, in some districts, library purchasing is done mainly at a district level, not the building level, thus lessening the principal's influence over the budget. As for scheduling, school library media centers compete with other programs in the school, including art, music, and physical education.

Collaboration

School library media researchers are very interested in the issue of collaboration. Almost every article reviewed here uses the word collaboration in a normative sense, as short-hand for an idealized librarian-teacher relationship. The focus on collaboration implies an assumption that collaboration can be plucked out of the context of the school and the lived experiences of the librarian and teachers and studied in a meaningful way. Resistance to collaboration is dismissed as a result of a lack of education.

Todd and Kuhlthau point out the exclusion of the classroom teacher in assumptions about the role of a school librarian. "Contemporary school librarianship literature is based on the assumption that there should be a strong and positive collaborative relationship with classroom teachers, with mutual planning, design, implementation, and evaluation of instructional interventions to ensure that students develop the appropriate cognitive, behavioral, and affective scaffolds for finding and using information in their learning tasks. Whether this role is actually endorsed by classroom teachers has never been determined" (Todd and Kuhlthau 2005).

An assumption at the core of Montiel-Overall's research into collaboration between teachers and librarians appears to be that all school libraries and school librarians involved are cooperative and prepared (Montiel-Overall 2008). She asks no questions about why a teacher might bypass a librarian or prefer a classroom collection. As mentioned before, classroom teachers have not been involved in developing idealized models of school librarians. Their needs and preferences have been assumed or imposed in the standards for school librarianship.

The issue of librarian resistance to collaboration is not addressed in the literature. Although Church's survey includes personal stories from principals about inheriting uncooperative librarians who block access to the media center or guard the collection, the literature is otherwise silent about the issue. This is important, because it has been acknowledged that administrators base their perceptions and expectations for library media specialists on previous experiences, as administrators, teachers, and even students (Church 2008; Neuman 2003; Hartzell 2002; Alexander, Smith, and Carey 2003).

The effect on information technology (IT) in shaping the work of the school librarian is pervasive but not examined in the literature. Todd and Kuhlthau assert that "...the provision of a strong informational infrastructure, centering on diverse sources in multiple formats targeted to learning levels, learning styles, and interest levels, and a backbone of state-of-the-art information technology are fundamental" (Todd and Kuhlthau 2005), yet the reality of IT issues work a bit differently. IT issues are governed by various ruling practices, including efforts by librarians in the 1960s and 1970s to take more control of audio-visual and later digital learning technologies. There are also concerns about inappropriate computer use by students, which leads to intensive firewalls and blocking of content at a district level, with no in-building ability to overcome blocks or provide more than a very basic level of computer support. This is a "ruling relation" at work in which a librarian performs clerical functions- inventory- and light technical support, while lacking real agency and decision-making power when dealing with technology.

School library research literature focuses on building-level issues (such as educating principals and collaborating with teachers), but has not looked at how the local community affects school libraries, or how state and national issues affect school libraries. The effect of the institutions of education and librarianship are implied in the literature, but not examined closely. School library literature is largely silent on the issue of how the institution of education affects librarians, except to repeat that librarians should be seen as teachers. Church notes that school libraries are rarely mentioned in publications in educational leadership (Church 2008).

Information Power

I had not intended to focus heavily on the American Library Association's Information Power because in my personal interactions with school librarians, I had found that they do not acknowledge influence from that document in their day-to-day work. However, the document dominates the writing in school library research, so its appearance in the literature must be examined here. While there might be a disconnect between practitioners and school library researchers, these documents are used to design and inform studies of school librarians (Church 2008; Morris and Packard 2007).

Although Information Power standards are presented as a logical progression in the understanding of the work of the school librarian, rather than as a series of intentional decisions made by people, AASL standards are not simply a logical progression. Ruling practices and ruling relations are embedded in the standards.

GAP

Much of the best-known research comes from outside the daily lived experiences of librarians. Practicing school librarians tend to write about specific ways they can help students "achieve" in school, as defined by test scores and grades. These are useful points of view, but

without looking at the invisible forces shaping school librarianship, they can only tell a tiny part of the story. And they do not acknowledge the barriers created by unacknowledged relations of ruling.

Surveys and “hard research” add useful information to the field of school library research, but they cannot substitute for an understanding of the work of an embodied school librarian. At the same time, personal anecdotes have limitations in explicating ruling relations. An institutional ethnography goes beyond the personal anecdote and starts from the embodied experience of the situated knower, exploring from that standpoint to discover how the ruling relations are organized. While an institutional ethnography from one person’s standpoint cannot be described as “generalizable,” the method of inquiry can be used in a reader’s own situation to understand the ruling relations governing his or her work.

There is a gap in school library media literature in research based in a real school culture and grounded in the experience of librarians, teachers, and administrators. The literature lacks an analysis and explication of how community forces, including school boards, school district personnel, and city government, affect the work of school librarians.

While the power of the aggregated librarian to advocate for the aggregated library is overstated, there seems to be little focus on how individual librarians can better understand their school’s power structures and work within those structures to advocate for student and faculty use of the library media center.

Researcher’s Standpoint

I became interested in the subject of the teacher-librarian’s place within various institutions as I worked on my Master of Library Science with concurrent school media certification. I did quite a lot of professional reading as part of my studies and wondered how the advice and commentary in these articles would translate to the real life work of a teacher-librarian. There seemed to be a gap between what I was reading and what I was experiencing.

I have worked part-time in several school libraries and have some field experience as a teacher of middle school language arts. My limited practical experience in school libraries gives me the neophyte’s eye when it comes to watching how a teacher-librarian negotiates work. I am also not bringing habits that are set from years of practical experience. On the other hand, there are sure to be nuances that will slip by me in my observations. Since a study like this will produce reams of data, I am sure it will be useful even if there are small details that go past me.

Problem Statement and Questions

The problematic: How do school librarians understand and negotiate the social organization of the institutions within which they work?

Unseen ruling relations help shape and organize the work of the school librarian. These ruling relations can be discovered with the methods of institutional ethnography, which can explicate the power structures and ruling relations that shape the work of the school librarian. An institutional ethnography starts from the standpoint of the school librarian and works from that standpoint to examine how the work is coordinated by institutions.

Questions

- How does the librarian understand and explain the power structures of the institutions she works within?
- How does the librarian negotiate the power structures of the institutions she works within?
- How do the power structures manifest as ruling relations?
- Which institutions exert the most apparent influence on the librarian's work?

Methods/ Methodology

The pervasiveness of the relations of ruling and the objectification of these structures are what makes them so difficult to make visible to people who take them for granted. Smith argues that “traditional sociology” objectifies people and their doings and precludes inquiry and discovery from within the topic (Smith 2005). Institutional ethnography is grounded in the standpoint of the people whose experiences are being explicated and it tries to make those ruling structures visible. The method of inquiry does not turn the people whose experiences are being studied into aggregated, context-free numbers or anonymous survey quotes. “The promise of institutional ethnography is that it maintains the subjectivity of those whose experience is problematized” (Campbell and Gregor 2004)

Dorothy Smith began developing her alternative to “traditional” sociology when she realized that traditional sociology looked at life as if the observer/ researcher could stand outside and view life impartially. Smith’s notion of discourse is derived from Foucault, but she expands the notion from statements alone to “actual ongoing practices and sites of practice, the material forms of texts [...], the methods of producing texts, the reputational and status structures, the organization of powers intersecting with other relations of ruling in state agencies, universities, professional organizations, and the like.”(Smith 1987) She views discourse as socially organized and coordinating local practices. “Discourse refers to translocal relations COORDINATING the practices of definite individuals talking, writing, reading, watching, and so forth, in particular local places at particular times.”(Smith 2005)

Although I do not consciously think of myself as researching gender, Smith’s focus on gender is very important for my exploration of a working environment that consists of mostly female workers governed by mostly male administrators. Gender does play a role in shaping how decisions are made in a school district, and Smith’s ideas here will help shape my understanding of the role gender plays.

Smith addresses issues of shifting the focus from a critique of individual workers and their competence to a critique of the work process and work tasks themselves (Smith 2005). This is a key concern of mine as I embark on a study of a school’s library program. In no way do I want to criticize or embarrass the human beings who work to make the school libraries happen. Rather, I want to make the invisible visible, thus working with the people to discover where they have power to make changes to the system and where the power comes from.

I will be using a generous notion of work in this study. “By institutional ethnographers, ‘work’ is used in a generous sense to extend to anything done by people that takes time and

effort, that they mean to do, that is done under definite conditions and with whatever means and tools, and that they may have to think about” (Smith 2005). Any work the librarian does, including the work of being a parent, friend, or partner, has the potential of shaping her work as a librarian. I will be especially interested, though, in the work the librarian specifically associates with being a school librarian or an educator. “The concept of work and work knowledge as they are conceived in institutional ethnography orients the researcher to learn from people’s experiences regarding what they actually do, how their work is organized, and how they feel about it” (Smith 2005).

Location, standpoint, and authority are key concepts used in specific ways in institutional ethnography. Location does not describe a physical space, although a physical space can be part of a participant’s location. Location refers to where the participant is located in the processes being explicated. Standpoint can be described simply as a person’s point of view, but is informed by the person’s background, experiences, gender, and location, among other elements. The participant’s authority comes from his or her experiences of work. The researcher’s authority comes in part from the backing of her own institution (received by going through the proposal process and the Institutional Review Board process) and in part from her experiences as a participant observer.

Data Collection

Data collection is aimed at getting information about how the key participant and others around her understand the social organization of their work. The main goal is to learn what the librarian understands about her work. What parts of the librarian’s work are not captured in institutional discourse? What parts contradict institutional discourse?

A school is a closed environment, functioning within the institution of education, and serving children. Key concerns in collecting data are avoiding disrupting the school day and protecting the academic privacy of the students and the employment privacy of the adults. Methods of collecting and analyzing data take those factors into account.

Data collection within a school setting must not interfere with the education of the students, which means the researcher must be unobtrusive in the environment. The researcher must also avoid inhibiting the work of the staff and faculty. Data collection must also protect the privacy of the participants and non-participants at the site. This research must not become a burden for the participant, although it will require extra work.

When collecting data, I allowed the experiences of the participants to determine which data will be necessary and I guarded against letting the institutional understanding subsume the actual experiences. Specifically, this means I should watch for use of institutional language that is empty of meaning.

Participants

The key participant in this study is the school librarian, whose viewpoint and experiences are the starting point for the institutional ethnography. I observed an MLS graduate with four years of experience in an elementary school library and one year of experience in a middle school library. The librarian was selected because of her willingness to participate in the project and because she entered school librarianship without professional classroom teaching experience.

Key researchers in school librarianship emphasize the importance of a school librarian being a teacher, with some emphasizing the importance of a classroom teaching background. This assumption is taken for granted and perpetuated in state standards for school librarians privileging teaching certification. Initial certification librarians come to school librarianship from a different standpoint and need to learn how to understand and negotiate the ruling relations of the institution of education and of the school building. Certified teachers face their own challenges when transitioning from classroom teaching to librarianship, but starting from the standpoint of an initial certification librarian allows explication from an outsider perspective and might help show the special challenges school librarians face when changing from a career outside of education.

Because the school librarian does not work in isolation and affects and is affected by administrators, parents, and teachers, selected adults associated with the school were also invited to participate. I quickly identified several adults who appear to have a connection to the library. These were people who regularly brought their classes to the library, used library computers for themselves, spent their preparation time in the library, and ate lunch with the librarian and the library aide.

Although children participate in the work of the school library, students were excluded from direct interviews because of privacy considerations. Students were involved in observed interactions, but the focus on such observations was on what the interactions reveal of ruling relations and how they reveal the relations. If potentially sensitive student information (such as information about overdue library books) informed the understanding of ruling relations, the information was noted as the interaction reflects ruling practices and not with identifying details.

The participants are identified in this writing by pseudonyms chosen by the researcher.

Observations

The foundation of my data collection is ten weeks of participant observation in a single school library. I worked as a volunteer in the library for more than 20 hours a week for ten weeks. I generally worked full days, arriving when the librarian arrived and leaving when the librarian left. I used the technique of writing the ethnography as I collect data, comparing new data to previous notes, along with clarifying observations, and sharing conceptual maps with the key participant.

I also attended district librarian meetings, building faculty meetings, and other library-related meetings the librarian attended. I invited any interested adults to document their observations in/about the library.

I have used cognitive walkthroughs of several tasks to understand better how the actual work is both coordinated by and subsumed by its institutional description.

Casual conversations

Casual conversations proved to be richer in data than I expected before I began data collection. Because I was in the school at least three days a week for the full school day, I had many opportunities to have casual conversations with participants. The data collected from these casual conversations will be cross-checked in formal interviews at the end of the school year. These casual conversations and interactions allowed me to get to know the people and reminded me not to objectify their experiences or their work.

Textual analysis

Texts play a role in enforcing and transmitting ruling relations. “While we have valuable things to learn from discourse analysis as well as from the field of rhetoric, institutional ethnography recognizes texts not as a discrete topic, but as they enter into and coordinate people’s doings” (Smith 2005).

The key participant in this study recently moved to this library after working in an elementary school library for four years. We are discovering the ruling relations and social organization together. I focused the textual analysis on texts identified by the key participant and other participants in order to keep the study to a manageable size.

Findings

Three elements of school library work that are often dismissed in the literature immediately appeared evident in the observations and casual conversations. Those elements included accounting for students, accounting for materials, and understanding and negotiating the school schedule.

Accounting for Students

A great deal of the daily work of the librarian and the library aide involved accounting for the whereabouts of students. When students arrive in the morning, they must choose where they will spend the time before the first class begins. One choice is called “Media Center Study Hall.” When students arrive at the media center, they are expected to sign their names, the time of day, and their “team” name in a log kept at the circulation desk. They are also expected to turn in a pass, color-coded by grade and marked with a number. There are 12 passes for each grade level.

A worker in the main office calls the media center every morning to determine how many students are there, how many have signed in, and how many passes have been turned in.

At a specific time of the morning, the media specialist announces “All right ladies and gentlemen, it’s locker time.”

The work of accounting for students continues throughout the day. When students enter the library, the librarian and library aide must identify whether the students are in the library individually or as a group accompanied by a teacher. If the students are in the library individually, their whereabouts must be accounted for. They must have a “pass,” which represents the permission of the teacher currently responsible for the student for the student to go to the media center. This permission can be represented by materials ranging from official printed materials filled in with the student’s name, reason for going to the library, and the time the student left the classroom to scraps of paper, the backs of old assignments, and sticky notes.

It is the work of the librarian or aide to ensure the student has a pass and has signed in the log book with name, time, and teacher’s name. Because of this work, the student is often greeted by “do you have a pass” or “where is your pass?” Students sometimes put the passes in their pockets and must dig them out and leave them at the circulation desk.

When students leave, the librarian or library aide signs the pass to verify that the student has been in the library and ensures that the student marks the time he or she leaves in the log book.

Occasionally, students will ask why they have to sign in. Generally, the reason is given as “so if the office is looking for you, we can tell them whether you’ve been here.” The pass system falls into the school’s discourse of “safety” and is embedded in a culture of “accountability.”

After the end of the instructional day, students may go to the media center without a pass. Students who ride buses have about ten minutes between the end of class and the departure of the bus. The aide leaves just before end of the school day because her contract does not allow her to stay longer. The media specialist has been expected to monitor and control traffic in the hallways after dismissal, but she requested to be allowed to stay in the library to help students who come in after school.

Accounting for Materials

Accounting for materials, while often listed in a single sentence in texts about the work of school librarians, involves negotiating with a variety of people with a variety of expectations. School librarians have traditionally been responsible for keeping track of the inventory of the school library, requesting the return of overdue materials, and recovering the money for lost materials. The school library workers recently also took on the work of maintaining the inventory for the schools instructional materials collection. This collection contains materials used specifically for classwork, such as sets of books for a class to read together and reading materials for students who read at lower than grade level.

Understanding and Negotiating School Schedule

The site of this research is a school for students in grades six and seven. This school was founded in the mid-1990s and follows the middle school approach. Students are placed in “teams” with motivating names. Each team is expected to function as a self-contained unit, with its own content-area teachers. The students are expected to stay with the same classmates and teachers for both of their years at this school. They are then expected to move on together to eighth grade.

The teachers in each team create their own schedules for rotating students between the content areas. The reading teachers for most of the team have also arranged times for their classes to come to the media center. The effect of this scheduling is that certain days in the media center appear to “belong” to certain teams. The librarian and library aide refer to the printed weekly schedule and “team” schedules often when deciding when to carry out library tasks and when to have lunch.

The work of understanding the schedule involves knowing a specialized vocabulary unique to the middle school philosophy.

Analysis

I analyzed the data repeatedly throughout the course of the observation period. Since I am trying to understand social organization of work, I am interested in learning who has the power and authority to organize work. How is that authority conveyed? How is it received? How is it negotiated? How is it resisted? Again, this study is not a critique of a specific school and its embodied workers. It is an examination of work processes and how they came to be.

Research quality measures

According to Campbell, “The scientific nature or validity of research results is established when methodological procedures are logically consistent with an accepted and adequately described theory of knowing and are demonstrably followed” (Campbell and Gregor 2004) In addition to creating a clear research plan based in the institutional ethnography method of inquiry, I will employ member-checking at all stages possible to be sure that my interpretations of the librarian’s experiences are accurate. Using several methods of data collection and discussing the findings with participants with different standpoints at different locations will also help validate the findings.

An institutional ethnography does not seek generalizability of the experiences of individuals. It is not an examination of how a particular phenomenon affects specific individuals, but is an example of how the experiences of embodied individuals can explicate social organization and ruling relations. The generalizability of this study would be in showing a way of viewing library work as socially constructed.

Institutional ethnography has its problems. The intimate nature of an institutional ethnography brings up difficult issues of confidentiality and protection of participants in a sociology that does not objectify the participants. Objectifying and aggregating experiences allows for a certain measure of anonymity that is not as easy to attain in an institutional ethnography. I will maintain the participants’ anonymity and confidentiality to the greatest possible extent, and will be careful to exclude elements of interviews and observations that could put the participants at risk.

The standpoint of an institutional ethnographer can be difficult to maintain. Smith and Griffith learned how easy it is for the researcher to slip into the standpoint of the institution when they were beginning their study of mothers’ work in relation to children’s schooling. They found they were looking at the mothers’ work from the standpoint of school organization (Smith 1987). While interviews, observations, and data analysis, it is essential not to fall into the habit of evaluating the library through the lens of the institutions. “[Institutional accounts are] likely to be describing a work process as if it were performed by a position or category rather than by the person the researcher’s talking to...” (Smith 2005). If I find myself constructing sentences using institutional language, I can be aware that I have likely fallen into the institutional viewpoint. Another way to avoid the institutional viewpoint is to avoid evaluating the librarian’s work in comparison to standards transmitted and enforced by the institution. Comparing the librarian’s “collaboration” with teachers with the idealized image in AASL documents would be one example of slipping into the standpoint of an institution.

Conclusion

The current writing on school librarianship comes from a standpoint of ruling and leaves out the embodied experiences of actual school librarians. An institutional ethnography, beginning from the standpoint of the librarian, can fill a gap in understanding how school librarians understand and negotiate the social organization of their work.

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