CAIS Paper: Innovative Partnerships: Exploring School Librarianship through a Global Lens

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Abstract
Institutional ethnography uncovers how institutional factors shape practice in sometimes unrecognized ways. This IE study on Brazilian school librarianship, conducted in the summer of 2013 in Florianópolis, SC, Brazil, uncovers similar challenges experienced by school library professionals the world over, as well as unique approaches informed by Brazilian culture.

Résumé

The need to equip today's youth with complex 21st century information literacy and knowledge construction skills is as a catalyst for evolvement and change in the traditional practices of school librarians all over the world. This change led the researchers to question school library practices at an international level, exploring how the field navigates this change through a global lens. Creating innovative research partnerships with school librarians in other countries provides a space for inquiry that can foster connections, collaboration and new knowledge, contributing to school library pedagogy and the preparation of future school librarians.

Asking "what are the similarities in the experiences and practices of school librarians across international boundaries in efforts to meet the needs of 21st century learners?" guided the researchers to Institutional Ethnography (IE), a methodology for explaining and gaining insight into the actualities of professional work lives. Social researcher Dorothy E. Smith developed institutional ethnography as an inquiry framework which focuses on the day-to-day work life of individuals, describing how they choose to operate within their institutions, while examining the ruling relations that impact that institution (Campbell and Gregor, 2004; Stooke, 2010b). It is a "way of seeing, from where we actually live, into the powers, processes, and relations that organize and determine the everyday context of that seeing" (Smith, 2005, 9). Institutional ethnography, while rarely utilized in LIS research, connects issues across multiple sites, uncovering how institutional factors shape practice in sometimes unrecognized ways, providing information to foster change at the local level. This paper will present findings from an IE study on school librarianship, conducted in the summer of 2013 in Florianópolis, SC, Brazil.

IE work-setting research studies are often developed in response to a vague, persistent concern about a situation and the people it affects (Stooke, 2010a). In the context of this study, the concern is the practices of the school librarian in meeting the needs of 21st century learners, and how these practices are shaped by institutional characteristics and culture. In IE research there is a sequence of steps to guide the researcher. First, a point of entry for the inquiry is identified, which for this study, was an invitation to present at the Brazilian Congress of Librarianship, Documentation and Information Science. Next,

institutional processes or elements that shape the situation are identified. Finally, processes or elements are investigated in order to objectively describe how these shape the situation being studied (DeVault and McCoy, 2002). In IE, the researcher "inquires, investigates, examines, and observes," but does not impose (Smith, 2008, 434). Instead he or she develops understandings based on observations and exchanges with those that are directly involved. Therefore, this research began with observing and documenting the practices, or work, of school librarians in Brazil.

This research follows a two-stage model of institutional ethnography, in that it starts with analyzing interviews, texts, and observations to determine further research questions and identify institutional process for further study (Campbell and Gregor, 2004). During the summer of 2013 the researchers completed stage one of the IE model during one week spent in Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil, attending the BCLDIS and conducting school site visits. First, at the conference, the researchers recorded numerous presentations delivered by Brazilian school librarians. Afterwards, the researchers conducted informal semi-structured interviews with the presenters in order to clarify and gain further understanding of the action research presented. This allowed for forging partnerships with practicing school librarians as well as school library educators. Second, site visits were conducted at purposively selected schools, locations that offered the most learning opportunities for intense study due to their accessibility (McCoy, 2008; Tedlock, 2008).

Utilizing an observation questionnaire (Johnston, 2013), researchers recorded data on school library policies and practices, types of school library activities, and the roles of teachers and school librarians. Additionally, informal semi-structured interviews were conducted with school librarians at each site; which allowed interviewees to member-check any of the information recorded, clarifying possible misinterpretations from translation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). All data collected was transcribed and entered into a spreadsheet for translation and coding. The researchers utilized inductive qualitative content analysis to analyze interview transcripts, notes from presentations, and the observation questionnaires, culling emerging themes from the data (Glaser, 1965; Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009).

The themes identified by researchers were: a) collaboration, b) information literacy, c) instruction, d) technology integration and e) learning environment. These five themes speak to common challenges faced by Brazilian school library programs such as institutional barriers to collaboration; the division of instructional duties between classroom teachers, reading specialists, technology teachers and school librarians; access to reading materials or technology, and the use of teachers on employment probation for school library staffing. The first theme, collaboration, emerged from descriptions of the struggle to develop collaborative partnerships with classroom teachers who do not consider the school librarian a pedagogue: "I have one of the strongest collections in the area [fiction collection] but the teachers have no interest in using them or working with me. They don't think I know how to teach." This perception is exacerbated by both the fact that most Brazilian school librarians are not credentialed teachers and a recent Brazilian legislative move that will enable librarians to obtain licensure after a two-year associates, or technical, degree.

The second theme, information literacy, developed out of the strong federal legislative push for literacy and leisure reading as exemplified in national reading studies, federal legislation mandating school libraries in every educational institution, both private and

public, and the impact these laws and pressures have on collection development and student access to materials. The third theme, instruction, reflected coding of flexible versus fixed scheduling, and the unique Brazilian approach to division of labor. The typical duties associated with school librarianship here in the States: technology integration, reading enrichment, collection development et. al, are divided amongst the classroom teacher, the reading specialist, the technology/ computer teacher and the school librarian. This division is fiercely protected in some of the schools we visited, where one interviewee was warned by her principal (before speaking with us) to "not complain or share negative information because this is democratic rationing."

The fourth theme, technology integration, most clearly reflected the disparity witnessed between public and private schools. While private schools had access to state-of-the-art computer labs housed within the school library, wireless internet and computer lab instructors under the supervision of the school librarian, public school librarians described their technology as outdated and unusable. In fact, none of the public school libraries had online or offline catalogs. This disparity echoes the recent struggles in Houston, Texas, where Houston ISD schools in poorer areas are lacking in resources as compared to same-district schools in affluent neighborhoods. The fifth theme, the learning environment, describes the different instructional projects, school library programs and efforts developed and maintained by Brazilian school librarians. Many of these reflect a strong, nationalistic focus, an intentional inclusion of Brazilian culture and local folklore, rich integration with fine arts such as drama and puppetry, and the inclusion of materials provided by the federal government. Unfortunately, this theme also addresses the placement of teachers on administrative leave as library assistants.

Although all themes speak to distinct ways in which Brazilian school libraries reflect the social and economic disparity visible between middle and upper-class private schools and government-funded public schools, these also demonstrate the unique approaches Brazilian educators have undertaken in order to overcome challenges which are quite similar to those experienced by school libraries around the world, including the United States. These themes will be further explored and discussed in the conference presentation and subsequent studies and publications.

The common practices identified as part of the institution of school librarianship indicate that as a profession, school librarians around the world are all struggling with similar challenges, although the ways these challenges are addressed differ significantly – emphasizing the need for international exchange of practices. These commonalities deserve an increased research focus in order to investigate institutional factors that shape school librarian experiences and practices, as well as the development and growth of international communities of practice. The identification of the ruling relations provides important information for practicing school librarians by making power structures visible, identifying both formal and informal barriers to the profession. This 'making the invisible visible' leads to the collection of information needed to develop solutions and programs that strengthen school library programs. Although institutional ethnography research does not identify these solutions, it offers a map that provides school librarians with a clearer view of how to work within the institution to achieve the goals of school librarianship: "producing successful learners skilled in multiple literacies" (AASL, 2009, 5). Additionally, for those educators who prepare future school librarians, a glimpse into the reality of the work of school librarians assists in designing coursework that reflects best practices and instruction on dealing with and overcoming professional challenges. Future school librarians should be able to identify, explore and understand the impact of

ruling regulations on their work so as to best negotiate power structures within their respective institutions.

The goal of this research study was to examine the practices of Brazilian school librarians to learn if these professionals employ practices common to US school librarians, and if Brazilian school librarians experience similar ruling relations. In institutional ethnography the focus is on looking for "how things happen *here*, in the same way they happen *over there*" (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, 69). However, it is important to note that the data revealed only the content that participants chose to share at the time of fieldwork. The results of this present study are not intended to represent the entire field of Brazilian school librarianship. Instead, the data collected represent only the locations visited. Therefore, primary function of this initial data collection was to first acquaint the researchers with the "work and the concerns" of school librarians in Brazil and "glean an understanding of the informants' experiences in order to show how these institutional work processes are organized… and identify sites and processes for further investigation" (Campbell and McGregor, 2004, 123) to move into the next phase of this research. More data is needed to uncover and further describe institutional factors that shape school librarian experiences and practices in Brazil, as well as on a broader international scale – work that the researchers are presently pursuing. Additionally the perceived disconnect between the day-to-day work of school librarians and the institutional guidelines from professional organizations is an area for future research.

Ingrid Parent, President of IFLA recently stated, "We must think globally, act nationally, and deliver locally." As school librarians around the world struggle with strikingly similar challenges, it is important to examine the work of these school librarians through a global lens. This worldwide perspective allows us to engage in partnerships that enable school librarians and school library educators to investigate institutional factors that shape the experiences and practices of school librarians, providing opportunities to learn from, share expertise with, and support one another, thus strengthening the practice of school librarianship throughout the world.

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