

School Librarians Conducting Research Across Cultures and Countries: Connecting and Collaborating While Enhancing Our Professional Practice

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Abstract: *In an increasingly multicultural world it is essential that school library studies are not solely focused on Western, middle class subjects. However, school librarians who have been trained in cross-cultural practice may not feel as confident in engaging in cross-cultural research. Researchers should be thoughtful as they design their research project and consider at each step in the process whether the study is accessible to all, regardless of cultural background. Furthermore, they may wish to consider the consultation of study participants as they design their research project. They may also consider knowledge paradigms, study context, power issues, and the role of the researcher vs. the research participant. Finally, researchers must keep in mind specific considerations that are specific to research that occurs with children or within schools. Finally, researchers should be aware that new laws regarding how educators question children about family beliefs or values are up for debate in many American states.*

Introduction

Many studies reference the need for increased research in the field of school librarianship. However, many of these studies also note the challenges faced both by school librarian practitioners and school library researchers, the first who may wish to engage in research and the second, who may not have the connections needed to conduct research in schools. Furthermore, researchers or those who hope to research may worry about their ability to effectively work in cross-cultural research situations or to properly engage with students who are of a different cultural background than themselves. This paper considers the ways in which connecting and collaborating between teacher librarians and school library researchers can enhance the field of research, engage professional practice, and be practiced effectively and sensitively in the opportunity of a cross-cultural research situation.

Need for School Library Research studies

Developing culturally competent school librarian researchers will help provide additional scholarship to the field and body of research. For example, while school library studies have historically reported positive impacts of the school library, there is value in having them replicated in other scenarios (Lance, 2001). Furthermore, there is a need for library and education studies that have K-12 participants (Morris & Cahill, 2017; Stefl-Mabry & Radlick, 2017). More recently, Johnston & Green's (2018) study of school library research over the past decade considered additional areas of research needed in order to consider how school library programs work in their entirety,

Such as the impact of school library programs on student learning; the roles of the school librarian in an ever changing educational landscape; the school library's role in social justice and community activism; technology-enabled learning; technology as a cognitive development tool; information literacy including critical evaluation and curation; and the link between the new 2017 AASL Standards introduced in 2017, school library programs, and student learning.

However, school librarians should not just consider research for the benefit of the school library field but as their own tool to guide reflective practice, "Action research is a tool of evidence-based practice that empowers teacher-librarians to take charge of the systematic evaluation and continuous improvement of their school library programs" (Gordon, 2015, p.1).

Defining Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is defined by Alizadeh and Chavan, (2016) "as the ability to work and communicate effectively and appropriately with people from culturally different backgrounds" (p. 120). These authors considered 18 different cultural competence models primarily in the fields of business and health care and found the majority of cultural competence models included "cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural skills" (p. 126). They include a study by Overall (2009) from the Library and Information Science field that fit the same primary themes. Overall's (2009) view of cultural awareness, considers the individual's self-awareness where one, "begin<s> to examine unconscious cultural values, norms and ideas" (p. 192). Overall (2009) also emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness and interpersonal empathy that motivates individuals to engage with other cultures and increase their personal cultural competence. Moving past awareness into cultural knowledge, LIS practitioners work with, learn about, and interact with individuals of different cultures. These interactions set the stage for learning about specific cultural differences and

allow the individual to learn the cultural skills needed to interact with people in a culturally sensitive manner (Overall, 2009). Papadopoulos & Lees, (2009) consider this skilled area, 'cultural sensitivity,' and in both cases this step precedes true cultural competence.

Finally, while most studies looked at the role of the individual and not the institution, Balcazar et al. (2009) cited in Alizadeh and Chavan, (2016) also considered ways in which an organization's policies and procedures can either support or discourage workers attempting to engage cross-culturally. For further information on the ways in which organizations can support cultural competence, the Georgetown University's National Center for Cultural Competence (n.d). organizes its cultural competence framework around the requirements of organizations rather than individuals.

Student vs Practitioner vs Researcher

Studies on cultural competence in LIS have notably focused on developing the practitioner librarian or LIS student and less on the development of the librarian as researcher.

Overall's (2009) cultural model considered not just the way LIS professionals were working, but how culturally competent LIS practitioners could be developed through the leadership of the American Library Association (ALA), the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking (REFORMA), and the Association of Library Services to Children (ALSC).

Other studies have focused more on how LIS students develop cultural competence in LIS education. For example, Kumasi & Hill, (2011) completed a gap analysis on how LIS' students self-identified on cultural competence topics including, areas of 'understanding,' 'knowledge,' 'recognition,' and 'strategies' to perform librarianship in a way that reflected various cultural needs. Villagran and Hawamdeh, (2020) looked at ranked ALA-accredited library programs to see how course offerings, learning outcomes, reading and literature were providing LIS students with the background necessary to become culturally competent.

The related field, education, also recognizes the need for educators to engage in culturally responsive and multicultural practice. Culturally responsive teaching is part of United States teacher training standards in 16 different states (Hawk et al., 2017). Internationally, Boelens et al., (2021) consider the ways in which the UNESCO multicultural guidelines for schools impact school libraries and school librarians. They also consider how teacher librarians can support multicultural education both through the provision of multicultural resources and make sure, "the teaching which takes place in the school library places a strong emphasis on multicultural (intercultural) education" (p. 11). School librarians who want to consider the ways to reach specific cultural groups would do well to read Lum's (2011) book, *Culturally*

competent practice: A framework for understanding diverse groups and justice issues. However, as IASL 2022 keynote speaker, Asino (2022) noted, we should connect with individuals and determine how they self-identify rather than place people indiscriminately in a cultural box based on our assumptions. In addition, “although culture provides similar worldviews, rules of interaction, and approaches to social situations, there is a great variability between individuals within the same cultural groups” (Reich & Reich, 2006, p.52). Finally, cross-cultural teaching and research experiences should take care not to focus on the culture as a deficit or reinforce or share fear based narratives around working with individuals of other cultures (Asino, 2022; Emdin, 2016; Villagran, 2022).

Villagran’s (2022) article, based on a presentation given during a Library Research Round Table (LRRT) webinar, provides suggestions for incorporating cultural concerns in LIS research by considering models from within and without the LIS domain. This article considers the purpose of culturally competent research and the benefit to scholarship as research based on biases, stereotypes or misinformation will have results that are not accurate. Nastasi (2017) identified the need for researchers who are culturally competent, who design culturally sensitive research, and who engage in cultural co-creation with research participants and partners. Finally, Asselin & Doiron (2019) consider the challenges and benefits of global school library research and the importance of international organizations, such as the International Association of School Librarians (IASL) in promoting ethical international research.

Research Design Process

Studies have considered ways in which cultural concerns can be considered during each stage of the research process. As Villagran (2022) states, “As a researcher, the capacity to produce high-quality research that considers aspects of culture and diversity of the community across all points of the research process is essential” (p. 4). Using the research process as a guide enables researchers to take culture into consideration in a step by step manner (Cain & Lawless, n.d.).

Research Question and Design

Research questions are influenced by the context, assumptions, and climate of researchers and when funded, by the needs and desires of the funding organizations (Asselin & Doiron, 2019). However, it is necessary for the researcher to practice mindfulness in considering the research problems that are of interest to the community being studied (Casado et al., 2012; Villagran, 2022). In order to truly integrate community concerns the researcher may need to engage with community leaders in the phase of the research design process (Casado et al.,

2012). In addition to a culturally focused committee is the need and necessity of offering that group power in the research process, as Reich & Reich (2006) note, “the mere presence of members of a different cultural group is insufficient if they do not have power in the interaction” (p. 57). Nastasi, Schensul, et al. (2015) describe a true cultural (co-)construction as “the process of dialog among equal partners across class, ethnic/racial, disciplinary, cultural, and other boundaries that integrates knowledge, values, perspectives, and methods derived from all parties, resulting in shared innovation” (p. 94 as quoted by Nastasi, 2017, p.208).

Recruitment

Researchers engaged in the recruitment of participants in research studies should keep in mind the communication style of subjects and an awareness of identity and power differences between themselves and their study subjects (Casado et al., 2012). They may consider utilizing a research team that has been trained in cultural competencies to provide various perspectives on study materials such as IRB materials and introductory letters. This might include bilingual resources as necessary and bilingual individuals available to answer follow up questions (Alibali & Nathan, 2010; Casado et al., 2012). Asselin & Doiron, (2019) note that collaborating on research outside the country poses additional challenges, “few countries of the Global South have instituted comprehensive processes for conducting educational research. In many cases with educational research, no formal ethical approval is needed” (p.165).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis also rely heavily on research design that takes cultural considerations into account and cultural competence of the researcher. This may mean that researchers must keep in mind that data collection tools need to be culturally sensitive instruments (Asselin & Doiron, 2019). Data analysis also relies on the self-reflection of the researcher. For example, cultural competence helps individuals be aware of previously unconscious biases that can cloud judgment (Blackburn, 2015). In addition, research that is child centered may consider ways in which students can assist in data collection thereby, capturing “children’s voice” in research encounters (Nastasi, 2017, p. 209).

Dissemination

While it may seem less important from the culturally competence stance, the plan to disseminate research may still be important to research subjects or those otherwise involved

in research topics. Researchers will want to avoid the challenge mentioned by Alibali & Nathan, (2010), “From the perspective of administrators and teachers, researchers often seem to ‘appear’ when they need something and then “disappear” without sharing results or giving anything in return” (p. 404). Further, they note that school staff may appreciate even seeing the preliminary results of studies, as research can take time to be fully published (Alibabi & Nathan, 2010). Finally, results should be shared in ways that are relevant and accessible to study subjects (Asselin & Doiron, 2019)

Other Features of Culturally Competent Research

Culturally competent researchers also consider 8 other features of the research process such as contextuality, relevance, communication style, awareness of identity and power differences, disclosure, reciprocation, empowerment, and time (Meleis, 1996, as cited in Villagran, 2022). These features of culturally competent research occur throughout the research process and not only during one particular stage. Contextuality in research refers to the “understanding of the sociocultural, political, and historical context of where the study participants live” (Villagran, 2022, p.6). Researchers also must consider the relevance of the study’s topic and results to the cultural customs of study participants including their, “local systems of meaning, knowledge, and action” (Nastasi, 2017, p. 207). This was reiterated by Asselin & Doiron (2019) who considered ways in which cross-cultural research needs to include participants' ideas and feedback through the research process through the process of reciprocation. Researchers, Gray et al, (2017) considered the ways in which communication takes place in a research situation and how IRB and other forms of formal communication may be interpreted differently by some cultures. Furthermore, they noted an awareness of identity and power differences in the course of the study is essential as it is not always possible to make the researcher and participant have equal power in a research study through providing information or disclosures. Villagran (2022) notes that it will take time for the researcher to consider all these features as they design and implement a research study. Finally, as noted by Lawless et al. (2014) these features are interrelated. For example, taking into consideration contextuality, communication style, awareness of identity and power differences, may lead to increased relevance of the research results and empowerment of study participants.

School Library Research

As Morris & Cahill (2017) note, “School librarianship is a discipline with one foot planted in education and one in library science” (p. 1). Therefore the teacher librarian who wishes to conduct research must not just be concerned with the discipline of library science, but also the methods of doing research with children and the policies and procedures of doing research in

schools. In addition, Morris and Cahill (2017) note that the school library research that is produced is heavily influenced by the challenges of working with children and schools such as obtaining IRB approval, district and school approval for research, and the availability of library practitioners willing to collaborate.

Research With Children

Research with children in cross-cultural contexts can be particularly challenging. Asselin & Doiron (2016) note, “Ethical issues of research with children are embedded in diverse and shifting paradigms of children, childhood, and research that are embodied in theory, policy, and research discourses,” (p.25). In particular, since different cultures consider the role of children differently this can affect the way research is conducted (Asselin & Doiron, 2019). Asselin & Doiron (2016) cite four types of research that often occur with children such as the Adultist, or traditional positivist approach, Rights-Based Research; Children’s Movement, or Critical Reflexivity. The role of the child changes significantly in each of these types of research. In the first, traditional approach, the child is an object to be studied. In the second, rights based approach, the child is protected from harm during the research process and their thoughts and perceptions may be considered. In the third, Children’s Movement, the research is based on empowerment and children’s opinions may be considered throughout the research process including as the research is designed. This type of research may be based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a document that details respect for the views of the child and their general lack of power. Finally, the fourth type of research, Critical Reflexivity, which considers, “multiple dimensions of research and includes trust, consent, privacy and confidentiality, parents’ fears, power differentials, reciprocity, long-term relationships, and archiving” (p. 28). These features of research may be important and necessary to consider in a one culture context, but become even more important features to consider when working in an international context with populations that are vulnerable for many reasons including poverty, status, or other reasons (Asselin & Doiron, 2016). The article concludes with specific tips for researching in international contexts and is suggested reading for LIS researchers seeking to do research with children in a cross-cultural context.

Research in Schools

Researchers will likely not be surprised to note that research in schools requires obtaining approval of the school district on top of the usual requirements for the IRB proposal. Schools and school districts vary greatly in the policies and procedures required to obtain district approval, with some schools having very clear set policies and procedures, while others are more opaque or have few set procedures for obtaining approval (Alibali & Nathan, 2010;

Pierce-Goldstein & Culp, 2021). In some cases district approval and then school based approval are both necessary (Alibali & Nathan, 2010). In addition, many schools may be reluctant to approve research that disrupts the school day or takes away progress towards testing, curriculum or other district identified goals (Alibali & Nathan, 2010). In addition to gaining the approval of school administrators, Nastasi (2017) notes, studies based on adaptations to school programs and school-age populations, “requires representation of multiple voices—students, parents, teachers, and school administrators, and other key stakeholders” (p. 208).

American Laws Regarding Research in Schools

In addition, federal and state laws may guide regulations for how research is conducted with students. The Federal Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) outlines how to legally obtain consent before surveying students about eight different protected areas of political affiliations or beliefs such as,

mental or psychological problems of the student or the student’s family; sex behavior or attitudes; illegal, anti-social, self-incriminating, or demeaning behavior; critical appraisals of other individuals with whom respondents have close family relationships; legally recognized privileged or analogous relationships, such as those of lawyers, physicians, and ministers; religious practices, affiliations, or beliefs of the student or student’s parent; or income (other than that required by law to determine eligibility for participation in a program or for receiving financial assistance under such program), (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

At the state level, Parent Bill of Rights bills, while often being mostly about curriculum and opt-out policies, may also include language about collecting information via student surveys on family beliefs, religion, values, or beliefs (Parents’ Bill of Rights, 2022). Language from some of these bills outlines the time frame for which parents may be informed of surveys, how consent is granted, and when parents should be informed (HB 2567, 2022; HB 2513, 2022). Draft legislation also considered where information from such surveys may be stored such as, “Any information obtained through such tests or counseling services shall not be stored on any personal mobile electronic device which is not owned by the school district, including but not limited to laptops, tablets, phones, flash drives, external harddrives or virtual servers” (HB 2567, 2022). While this precise language was removed from the final bill, the fact that restricting information and surveys of this kind was written into multiple bills over the last legislative session suggests a culture change which researchers should be aware of (HB 2567, 2022; HB 2513, 2022).

Suggested Next Steps for School Library Researchers

While the laws and considerations for school library researchers may look intimidating they will hopefully not deter interested researchers in finding areas to explore and engage with in order to further knowledge in the field. Some suggestions for school library researchers include: connecting with researchers across the globe in order to identify common research interests; obtaining research support such as through national and international professional associations such as IASL, ALA, and AASL; making connections with schools and practitioners in order to identify important areas of research; and to continue to further their own knowledge in cross-cultural topics to improve their cultural skills.

Summary

The field of school librarianship will benefit from additional studies undertaken in a variety of different contexts and cultures. In addition, the field will benefit from the viewpoints of both the traditional researcher and the practitioner school librarian, who in collaboration with each other may be able to identify the most significant and timely topics of research. While cultural concerns may initially be a challenge for practitioners or researchers who have not been trained to work in cross-cultural contexts, the field is beginning to consider ways to remedy this knowledge gap. By taking cultural considerations into account through the entirety of the research process, researchers will be able to complete projects that are relevant, empowering, and unbiased, thereby enhancing the school librarian's field of practice.

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Biography

Amanda Harrison worked for 14 years as a school librarian in Illinois, Missouri and Kansas. Her interests include school libraries, librarians connecting globally, and the development of librarians' professional identity.