

Expectations and Understandings of Critical Work in School Libraries

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Introduction

Libraries are tied to an American history and current context that oppresses, demonstrates prejudice, and embodies injustices. Children's librarianship originated with goals to assist children with reading, but to also guide them in "their assimilation to White Supremacist 'norms'" (Lugo Vázquez, 2021, p. 177). Libraries continue to reflect this in their physical structures, policies, and programming. For instance, libraries further "racialized knowledge production" (Hudson, 2017, p. 23), curate book collections with dominant narratives portraying historically marginalized individuals and groups in inauthentic and stereotypical ways (Hughes-Hassell, 2013) and use exclusionary and derogatory subject headings such as "illegal alien" (Morales & Williams, 2021). While current efforts are attempting to "creat[e] awareness of the oppressive structures within which librarianship was developed and continues to operate" (Prescott et al., 2017, p. 295), an exploration of school libraries and school librarian understandings and beliefs of these oppressive structures is needed to better inform efforts for change.

Statement of the Research Problem

Research on school library standards and to what extent they expect librarians to engage in critical, anti-oppression work is limited. Literature examining critical standards and practice has focused on research about library and information science masters programs (Cooke,

2018; Mehra, 2021; Rapchak, 2021) and professional articles discussing critical work (Burns, 2021; Fitzgerald et al., 2020). This study addresses the lack of research exploring critical work in school library standards, the responsibilities of librarians in the critical work context, and school librarians' knowledge and perceptions. In order to disrupt oppressive library systems and move from bystander or participant to resistor of these systems, a greater understanding of school library standards and librarian knowledge and beliefs is important to ascertain. The research questions for this study are:

- To what extent is critical work present in school library standards?
- What are school librarians' understandings and perceptions of critical work within the context of the school library?
- To what extent do school librarians perceive critical work to be a part of their professional responsibility?

Literature Review

A plethora of literature examines the prejudiced and inequitable origins of libraries (Gibson et al., 2017; Jennings and Kinzer, 2021; Mehra and Gray, 2020; Prescott, Caragher & Dover-Taylor, 2017). This oppressive foundation is reflected in current library collections, programming, systems, staff and physical spaces (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Hughes-Hassell, 2013).

Library neutrality and an emphasis on diversity have been examined as factors that ensure maintenance of the status quo (Gibson et al., 2017; Hudson, 2017; Scott & Saunders, 2021). Library *neutrality* has had an impact on the education of librarians (Mehra, 2021) and provided support for inaction (Gibson, et al., 2020, Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Scholars have looked at the need to push beyond the call for diverse books and in addition, work to rectify inequitable library systems through deliberate action (Gibson et al., 2017; Hudson, 2017). A large part of current school library practice related to this study focuses on diversity initiatives (Lechtenberg and Phillips, 2018; Gibson et al., 2020). Burns (2021) examined personal bias and the individual's role in the library system as a part of efforts to build on diversity initiatives and move into equity work. Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2019)

analyzed this focus on diverse representation and saw a need to bring a critical eye to how identities are represented.

Working from a foundation that values and is influenced by Critical Race Theory, I will utilize a lens of critical librarianship (Drabinski, 2019) and critical information literacy (Drabinski & Tewell, 2019; Tewell, 2018) to meet the study's goal to examine expectations regarding critical work in school libraries and guide action to create more equitable school libraries.

Methodology

I utilize an action research approach, acknowledging the *problem* of minimal or lack of critical work in school libraries and the need to *create change* in order to work towards more equitable and liberatory school libraries. Cohen et al. explain that in action research in education, “typically teachers and other parties research their own institutions” (2017, p. 440) and are guided by a “desire for improvement to practice, based on a rigorous evidential trail of data and research,” (p. 441). I examine a district I am employed in and can most directly impact to create change based on research findings.

Phase 1 of this 3-part study involves examining the treatment of critical work in the Texas School Library Standards, the American Association of School Librarians Standards, and the Future Ready Librarian Competencies. Standards were coded using a priori codes and emergent codes as part of an iterative coding process. Phase 1 findings served as the foundation for a survey to be distributed in Phase 2. In Phase 2, a convenience sample of 40 librarians in North Texas will complete an online survey sharing their knowledge of critical school library concepts and practices and their perceptions about school librarians' professional responsibilities engaging in critical work. Phase 2 participants have the option to volunteer to take part in one-on-one interviews that clarify and deepen understanding related to school librarians and critical work in Phase 3. Phase 1 and 2 findings will guide the formation of questions and areas of clarification in Phase 3 interviews.

Preliminary Findings & Discussion

Preliminary findings suggest (1) school library standards insufficiently address school librarians' roles in engaging in critical work and (2) school librarians need additional learning opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, and desire to engage in critical work. Although the study is limited to one school district, findings may offer insight into and potential guidance for evaluating school library programs, and strategies providing support for anti-oppression work in school libraries. A complete set of Phase 1 findings will be presented at the conference.

Poster Formatting

This digital poster will highlight Phase 1 findings, illustrating to what extent school library standards include critical work. The transition from those findings to the formation of survey questions will be visually represented, along with current analysis of the research questions. Succinct, descriptive, and aesthetically-pleasing charts, infographics, maps, word visualizations, and concept mapping will create a visually engaging experience for participants.

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Biography

Kim Krutka is a high school librarian in Denton, Texas. She is pursuing her doctoral degree at the University of North Texas, focusing on anti-oppression work in school libraries.