

## **Building Civic Capacity Using a Holistic Approach to Public Library Service: a Participant Researcher's Perspective on Social Justice in the Cayman Islands Public Library Service**

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the implications and potential impact of the public library service on the social, political and economic conditions in the Cayman Islands. The Cayman Islands is currently facing a variety of quality of life issues including unemployment, declining industries and a dynamic government landscape. Underpinning these issues is the need for Caymanians to participate, from an informed perspective, in the decisions directly impacting quality of life. To this end, Caymanians will need to be information literate, civically engaged and aware of the global market and, cognizant of and participatory in the preservation of their individual cultural heritage in order to ensure on-going economic viability for the country. An analysis of the information access practices in the Cayman Islands show how the restructuring of the public library service along four strategic directions supports an expanded the civic capacity for Caymanians.

**Keywords:** Social Justice, Public Library Roles, Civic Engagement, User-Centred Services, Community Information Centre, Service Transformation, Cayman Islands

### **1. Introduction**

Contemporary public library (PL) research reveals the importance libraries play in the development and provision of a democratic society. PLs are rapidly transitioning into community information centres, amplifying existing community services as well as creating an information culture in the community. PL transformation is currently focused on expansion of the community information centre model to include elements of social justice. Social justice is the advancement of equality and commonality within a society that understands and values human rights. John Rawls (1985) in his writings on justice identifies the scheme of equal rights and liberties as the "basic structure" of a modern constitutional democracy. Inherent in the scheme of equal rights

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defended and supported by public libraries is freedom of thought, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. Both the American Library Association (ALA) (2004) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (2013) have core values statements endorsing the principles of freedom of information access as well as the social responsibility of libraries and librarians to contribute to solving critical societal problems. The library–community convergence framework (LCCF) developed by Mehra and Srinivasan (2007) identifies user-centred service as a critical component to developing libraries that are proactive catalysts of social change. Pateman (2011) outlines steps for developing needs-based and community-led library services by identifying “elements of transformation” required to transition libraries into public institutions that advocate social justice. This paper outlines the provision of PL services in response to identified community needs arising from existing social/cultural/political/economic conditions in the Cayman Islands.

## **2. Existing social/cultural/political/economic conditions in the Caymans**

The Cayman Islands, a commonwealth of the United Kingdom (UK), is currently focused on the provision of services and resources found in democratic nations. A diminished trust of the government stems from factors that include a lack of operational transparency, inconsistent data collection and reporting, a constantly changing government structure, polarity resulting from the two-party political system and a contentious relationship between the Caymanian/UK governments. These combined factors make understanding the political structure and interacting within it from an informed perspective problematic. The Cayman Islands economy is based on the provision of services, primarily tourism-related and financial sector services. Currently, the top five employers (wholesale and retail industry, construction industry, financial services, public administration and self-employed small business owners) account for 50% of the employed persons in the 15-to-60 year age bracket (Government of the Cayman Islands, 2012). A large overseas workforce is imported to work in the lower paying retail and tourism jobs industry requiring no education, jobs in the professional sector requiring higher education and work experiences, and to fill technical and vocational service industry needs (van Tubergen, Maas, & Flap, 2004). The 2011 population estimates indicate that just under 50% the total population in the Cayman Islands (55,517) is comprised of non-Caymanians from Jamaica, USA, UK, Honduras, Canada and the Philippines. Additionally, the remaining non-Caymanian residents are from 11+ other countries (Government of the Cayman Islands, 2011). In 2009 the country began implementation of the *Freedom of Information Law* (FOI) (Government of the Cayman Islands, 2007). Caymanians have openly embraced access to government information as evidenced by FOI requests numbering between 100 and 200 per quarter (ICO, 2012). This interest has spotlighted the need for consistent reporting structures and increased online access to government information. However, access to information without meaningful construct

frequently results in misperception. Following the implementation of FOI is the November 2012 implementation of the *Bill of Rights Law* (Government of the Cayman Islands, 2011). The Cayman Islands Bill of Rights document is similar in content to the bill of rights in other democracies in that it focuses on the rule of law and on the values of human dignity, equality and freedom. Understanding and effective application of these two laws requires both a transparent and accountable government as well as a greater understanding on how to effectively interact with government.

### **3. Social justice issues as relevant in the library context of the Caymans**

The Cayman Islands Public Library Service (CIPLS) is the national library system of the Cayman Islands. Since its inception, the CIPLS has embraced traditional PL roles resulting in a library user base comprised of non-Caymanian residents with higher education, parents with very young children, Caymanian adults and tourists needing Internet access, and children requiring after-school care without parental support. Existing workplace dynamics, staffing structure, and changing leadership (four directors over the past six years), directly impact the provision of PL service. Additionally, the PL service has no formal policy structure for the provision of library services. The opportunity to experience twenty-first century public libraries in a competitive environment, which is present in larger countries, is not available in the Cayman Islands prohibiting the development of an inclusive PL construct.

### **4. Methodology: Importance of participant observations/participant researcher: my role and perspective as a practitioner**

In my current role as the Director of Public Library Services for the Cayman Islands, in the absence of benchmark library research on public libraries in the Caribbean in general and in the Cayman Islands specifically, and given the low-level expectations of library service exhibited by the Caymanian library user, my perspective as a participant observer/participant researcher on a limited work contract (two years) is advantageous and allows for an objective analysis of library service provision in support of civic capacity. The principles outlined in evidence-based library and information practice (Eldredge, 2012) provide the context for the development of twenty-first century library roles. The construct of possible service directions is readily available through research on best practices from the collective professional community as well as from the leading international professional library organizations.

### **5. Findings: Discussion of the themes as related to social justice**

Civic engagement is defined as "deliberate, consistent, and purposeful outreach to create an environment in which people of all ages and from all backgrounds feel they have a voice and a role in decisions and actions that affect their lives" (Urban Libraries Council, 2011). An appraisal of the existing social themes affecting Caymanians, as identified from the participant observer/participant researcher perspective, reveals the following as influencing the provision of PL

services: 1) a need for improved civic engagement; 2) dependence on/impact of foreign labour, 3) a need for a strong Caymanian cultural identity; 4) existing social factors impacting personal/professional growth; and 5) information access and human rights laws. Caymanians face a multiplicity of obstacles with respect to these dynamics including physical isolation, incomplete educational opportunities and limited employment prospects. Additionally, globalisation research shows that large immigrant populations are often perceived as a potential threat to the native population in terms of political and economic power (van Tubergen, Maas, & Flap, 2004). The present ethno-cultural diversity that exists in the Cayman Islands along with the prevalent ethnic nationalism undercurrent contributes to an increasingly diminished national identity (Reeskens & Wright, 2013). Additionally, the non-Caymanian workforce impacts the family dynamic through cross-cultural personal relationships. The transient nature of the immigrant population along with the “perceived” competition for jobs creates a tenuous relationship between Caymanians and non-Caymanians (Kaya & Karakoc, 2012). A significant deficiency exists in the application of higher order information literacy skills to continuing education and knowledge management on both a personal and professional level. Caymanians rely on information freely available on the Internet. Information access is further impeded by the omission of copyright law in the present legal structure of the country. Opportunities occurring as a result of these conditions include the cultural interaction provided by the large non-Caymanian population and the abundance of niche business opportunities present in a geographically isolated country. Additionally, positive developments in the Cayman Islands education construct are evident in the recent focus on national educational performance and on progressive educational initiatives including the implementation of a new strategic plan for education that incorporates community, business and parental interactions (Ministry of Education, 2013).

## **6. Social Justice Implications for Library Services**

An expanded PL service role directly impacts civic capacity, Caymanian/non-Caymanian cultural conflict, cultural and individual identity development, and information literacy in the Cayman Islands. Additionally, the previously identified limitations of the Cayman Islands with respect to size and isolation provide an ideal setting for PL services to impact the cultural, social, political and economic growth of the country. Applying appreciative inquiry theory (Bushe, 2001), as a construct for identifying outcomes through questioning suggests the primary PL service focus questions: how can the PL provide opportunities for and support active civic engagement, how can the PL enrich the cultural experience, foster understanding and celebrate the unique cultural composition of the Cayman Islands, how can the PL contribute to and support the assimilation of the historical Caymanian identity and the contemporary Caymanian identity, how can the PL expand individual professional opportunity for Caymanians, and how can the PL assist Caymanians in their understanding and application of both the information access law and the human rights law. Correlating these questions to library user expectations identified by

international library organizations (ALA (Levien, 2011), the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP, 2010), and IFLA (IFLA, 2010), shows that the provision of twenty-first century library service in the Cayman Islands should follow four key strategic directions. The first direction focuses on building social, political and cultural connections between the library and the community. The second direction focuses on expanding library capacity through a redesign of existing spaces and the creation a staff learning culture. Direction three focuses on service transformation by defining core PL services and collections, by creating partnerships with other community/government agencies and by providing access to community information. The final direction focuses on becoming a learning partner and amplifier institution within the community as well as encouraging entrepreneurship and providing point-of-need learning for library users. These four directions and their corresponding goals align the provision of PL service in support of civic capacity and alter the PL service identity to embrace a new role as a social change catalyst. Table two identifies the implementations that support achievement of all four of the strategic directions (SD) as correlated to the five previously identified social justice themes.

<b>Table 2</b>
<i>SD1 Implementations in support of the five identified social justice themes</i>
Provide a sustainable community lecture series using key community partnerships Provide access to information databases in support of community information needs Provide access to collection materials that support community information needs Develop library authored subject web guides Develop a materials collection policy that ensures access to cultural, social and economic information resources in a variety of formats Support educational initiatives through programming/referral to ensure community transfer of education information Provide access to a community published information including government documents and gray literature Implement social media to expand the collective community conversation Establish a community calendar for educational and community events Develop a comprehensive writing/sharing stories programme with community partners encouraging public discourse Develop a materials collection policy that ensures access to cultural and social information resources in all formats Provide access to materials that meet the educational, entertainment and cultural needs of the Cayman Islands Start a Caymanian Voices project with monthly meetings to encourage writing and publishing Develop a digital collections framework Develop an online community/consumer database on businesses and organizations in the Cayman Islands Develop an in-house staff training programme using staff meetings, team building and peer led instruction units Expand in-house education programmes into online courses Train library building managers to develop community-based library collections from

36 *Kaurri C. Williams-Cockfield*

<p>library user input          Establish a private sector PL Advisory Board to provide community input on library services          Establish a professional library association</p>
<p><i>SD2 Implementations that support civic engagement and the social factors impacting personal/professional growth</i></p>
<p>Implementation of a national information literacy curriculum for working with schools and community organizations          Establish community training centres in all six libraries          Coordinate with the National Workforce Development Agency (NWDA)          Train staff to provide point-of-need instruction</p>
<p><i>SD3 Implementations that negate the impact of Foreign Labour and support the development of a strong Caymanian identity</i></p>
<p>Establish a genealogy collection, provide genealogy training, implement a web based family images database          Develop a local genealogy and family history webpage within the PL website structure          Work with higher education providers in the country to establish an associate's degree in information science          Provide access to information on continuing education opportunities through the online branch          Provide access to catalogs and documentation on local educational offerings and distance education partners          Develop library website to collect community narratives on experiences and issues throughout the year          Develop a demographic profile of small business in the Cayman Islands          Develop a small business support plan in coordination with community business organisations          Participate in the annual heritage day festivals in all districts          Develop PL displays to coordinate with the heritage day festivals          Partner with community organizations to provide art and cultural exhibits in the George Town Library          Establish an annual genealogy conference          Establish an international cultures in Cayman event that coincides with the genealogy conference          Provision for a genealogy/family history librarian in the new organizational chart          Revise existing PL Law to reflect contemporary library use and users          Bring PL policy in alignment with governmental and cultural mores          Establish sustainable literacy programmes for all ages          Maintain existing literacy programmes (PlayReadLearn!, Summer Reading Challenge)          Establish a library sponsored book club for adults          Work with community partners to establish outreach and after-school programmes          Introduce a literacy programme for nursing homes using BiFokal kits</p>
<p><i>SD4 The implementation of information access and human rights laws</i></p>
<p>Provide access to legal and government information, and resources the support socially excluded population segments          Partner with the Freedom of Information office for training on how to request information through FOI          Provide library services in support of socially excluded population segments across core services plan          Ensure that the technologies for information access by socially excluded populations is</p>

available in libraries Provide access to library policy, procedure, data and reports online in support of freedom of information Provide technology for digital information access to socially excluded population segments
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## 7. Conclusions

As the Director of Public Library Services, I have daily access to the interactions between library staff and library users. This immersion provides opportunity for first-hand experience of the provision of library services during all hours of operation as well as across all library facilities. As an expatriate living in a foreign country for two years, my position as a cultural outsider provides the needed objectivity for authentic analytical observation. The PL service is a department in the Ministry of Education, so access to national educational performance data and operation is readily available. Additionally, serving as a Rotarian provides opportunities for weekly discussion on national topics with representatives from the diverse cultural mix of peoples living in the country. Input from and observation of these combined experiences provide the foundation for the four strategic directions. The strategic directions and implementation plan are part of the year one execution and advance the complete restructuring of the Cayman Islands Public Library Service with respect to library service provision. While year one actions have done much to stabilise the system in preparation for the new the new role, staffing and budget issues continue to impact the time frame for full implementation. A realistic estimation of full implementation is closer to eight years given the current economic climate and the stress being placed on the government to reduce operational expenditures and downsize personnel numbers. Considering the size of the plan, and in light of the need to educate the community on the potential of PL service, the recommendation is to focus on the initiatives supporting Caymanian cultural identity and small business development, as both provide direct opportunity for increased library advocacy and partnership building.

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