

Information Technology Services and School Libraries: A Continuum of Social Justice

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Abstract: This brief paper first develops a social justice typology that maps out conceptions of social justice and their relationship to library services. Based on this typology, it presents research findings that seek to understand what social justice principles facilitate the provision of information technology service in school libraries. This paper is based on data from focus groups of seven exemplary high school libraries in the state of New Jersey. Using a social justice framework, it was found that no single social justice principle guided specific actions of the school libraries studied; instead a process of moving between different principles of egalitarianism and utilitarianism based on resource availability was used by teachers and school librarians in providing information technology service to their respective schools. This research presents a qualitative methodology for studying social justice principles that addresses the sustainability of school libraries and their ongoing transformation and development as community information technology hubs and learning centers.

Keywords: social justice, library and information science, technology service, school libraries, information behavior, information seeking, information environments

1. Introduction

Though the concept of social justice is itself given many different interpretations, at the heart of social justice is the belief that all people deserve equal social, political and economic rights, treatment and opportunities and that even at the cost of broader social welfare, such rights should not be foregone (Zajda et al., 2006, p.6; Rawls, 1971, p.3). School libraries have long embodied principles of social justice, particularly in relation to the equitable sharing of information resources. The IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto (2006), an international document published in 35 languages, states that “School library services must be provided equally to all members of the school community.” One of the essential ways that school libraries guarantee such freedom and access to information is through the information technology resources they

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provide. The American Association for School Librarians (AASL) specifies equity of access to information and information technology as a key principle for learning in the modern age: “All children deserve equitable access to books and reading, to information, and to information technology in an environment that is safe and conducive to learning” (p. 2). The school library stands at the pinnacle of these issues as at its heart lies the promotion of social justice as embodied in concepts like intellectual freedom, learner empowerment, equity of access to information and information technology, and sensitivity to the specific information needs of library users.

2. Social and Distributive Justice: Philosophical Underpinnings

At its most basic level, social justice is “the constant and perpetual will to render each his due” (Miller, 2003, p. 76 quoting Emperor Justinian). Social justice, unlike the term justice itself, implies a connection to society and thus research and study on social justice often recasts the general idea of justice in terms of the recognition and redistribution of resources within a society in order to “render each his due.” Along these lines, Zajda et al. (2006) define social justice as “the overall fairness of a society in its divisions and distributions of rewards and burdens” (p. 4). Distributive justice is broadly defined as the just allocation or distribution of assets and liabilities (or strengths and weaknesses or benefits and burdens) amongst a society or group of individuals. (Roemer, 1996). Beginning with Rawls (1971) and extending through Dworkin (1981), Cohen (1989) and Sen (1992), several important social justice concepts have been enumerated under the umbrella concept of egalitarianism, a type of distributive justice that generally focuses on the equitable distribution of goods, resources, capabilities or other factors. Given the IFLA and AASL mandates for providing equitable services through libraries, egalitarianism is used in this paper as a basis for analyzing how school libraries provide information technology services.

3. Social Justice in Library and Information Science

While concepts such as freedom of information and access to resources are central to much of the professional and scholarly library and information science literature, social justice as a metatheory has not been “overtly expressed” in the LIS literature and as such, has remained relatively under-studied (Rioux, 2010, p. 10). Though there are several studies which have emerged in the LIS literature that provide methods for addressing a number of social justice principles directly (Mehra et al., 2004; Mehra and Srinivasan, 2007; Britz, 2004; Jaeger, 2007; Rioux, 2010) and there are some models for future social justice research in LIS have been put forward like the work of Rioux (2010) and Mehra et al. (2006), few have provided tailored methodologies for researching social justice principles. This research seeks to establish an appropriate methodology for studying the social justice principles that underpin the provision of networked information technology services in these exemplary high school libraries.

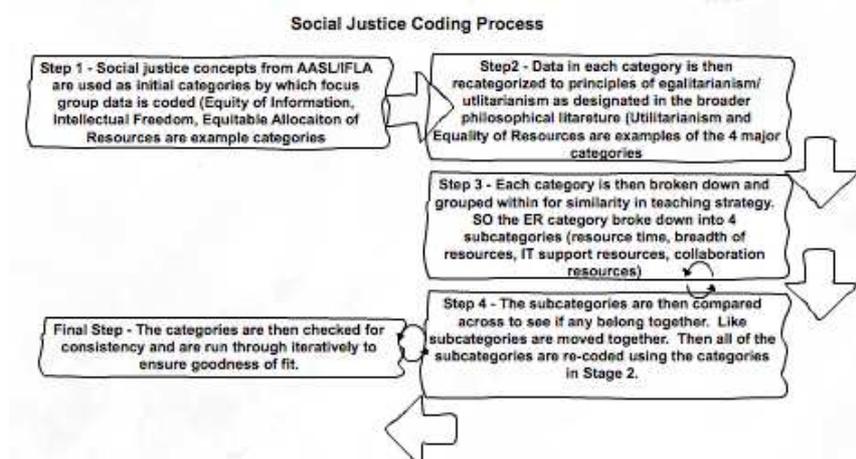
4. Method

The data source for the analysis of effective school libraries through a social justice lens was the study of New Jersey school libraries undertaken by the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries of school libraries in New Jersey in 2009-11 (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2010; Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011). Phase 1 of the study involved a voluntary survey of 765 school librarians (30 % of NJ schools) to identify staffing levels and credentials, teaching activities in the school library and professional activities; reading and writing related activities in the school library; administration of the school library; school library access; and school library budget; Phase 2 of the study used focus groups to deeply analyze those schools which reported the highest levels of collaboration (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 3-4). Several findings from these studies prompted the further analysis through the lens of social justice (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011). First, in Phase 1, a substantial number of school librarians in New Jersey actively provide a range of information technology related professional development activities to teaching faculty. Secondly, in Phase 1, school librarians wanted their school libraries to be exemplary in providing information technology to enable every student, regardless of their community and economic circumstances, to be able to efficiently and equitably access quality information and to learn the essential technical and evaluative skills, but to also use this information technology to develop their competencies at analysis and synthesis of information. Lastly, in Phase 2, the school library was seen to provide access to resources, technology, and information and instructional services that are sometimes not available in the homes of the school community.

Accordingly, our reflection on these findings prompted us to examine the extent to which social justice concepts and principles were embedded in the discourses surrounding effective high school libraries. Seven focus groups of the high schools represented in Phase 2 of the NJASL-CISSL study and were comprised of: 7 school principals, 29 teachers, 10 school librarians and 5 district administrators/curriculum supervisors. Participants in the focus groups were spread over different grade levels and subjects from grades 9 to 12. The sample was 60% female. There was considerable variation in median income for the areas each school was situated in, ranging from \$43,000 to upwards of \$120,000 (Todd, Gordon and Lu, 2011, p. 17-20). The semi-structured discussion sought to address three themes surrounding collaboration, engagement and provision of services by school libraries.

Against this backdrop, the transcript data of the focus groups from the 7 high schools were analyzed using the following approach. The first level of axial coding centered on identifying the social justice ideals as identified in the theoretical literature (see diagram below). For example, if a statement was made related to the empowerment created through lifelong learning, the statement would be coded “empowerment”. After several iterations through the data, common codes were collapsed under the specific social justice principle (as described earlier) that each belonged to, as shown in the Figure 1 below). As an example, those statements coded “empowerment” were collapsed under the category of “Equality of Access to Advantage” (EA). After this initial re-

categorization, each group of codes under a given social justice principle were subdivided, where applicable, into more tightly defined sub-categories. For example, “Equality of Resources” was split into 4 subcategories as the data under this category clearly fit into 4 separate clusters. Minor adjustments were then made based on the frequency of a category and the interdependency between subcategories. This step allowed for an re-evaluation of the goodness of fit of each piece of data under the top level categories. For example, some of the groupings under EA were disbanded and sent to more relevant categories during this stage of re-evaluation. The next section provides a description and examples of statements from each of the four final coding categories.



5. Findings

The **Utilitarianism** category contains those comments and strategies which support the greatest good for the greatest number. Various statements that show teachers talking about dividing instructional work around information technology between either themselves and a librarian or in a hierarchical fashion around the students themselves. Participants spoke of the importance of the co-teaching model in leveraging students to bolster learning:

“I’ve got 25 kids, how do I help 25 kids in one 42 minute class period?

But when you have someone else who’s on the exact same page that you are, the kids get so much more assistance and personal attention.”

In statements like this one, there is an acknowledgement that using such a model is the best case for the such constrained scenarios. In this example, the teacher has too many students and not enough time, thus a decision is made to use collaboration between the teacher and librarian to provide equitable access to information through a division of labor. A similar approach used in this category was the creation of a collaborative hierarchy amongst the students so that students could attempt to answer questions for their peers before bringing such questions up to the teacher. The teachers were clear in indicating that doing so alleviated some burden of their work that couldn’t get done otherwise:

«From the technology point of view it also is a very good collaborative atmosphere, kids are learning a lot about technology just by interacting with each other... It freed me up a little bit from that point»

The most salient aspect of these particular statements was that the teachers claim that using such methods are necessary to get the job done but that using these methods *was least desirable* and was the result of a limitation in resources of one kind or another be it time, equipment or teachers/librarians themselves:

“The importance of having one or two students and teaching them sometimes is valued just as equally as a class... students learn better sometimes during one-on-one than in large groups»

The **Equality of Resource (ER)** categories contain those comments and strategies that highlight different ways in which limited resources available are used to provide equitable technology services. These comments paint a very similar picture that connects to the Utilitarianism category. In this category, teachers spoke about how time and variety/quantity of technological resources (including both individual experts as well as physical equipment) either helped them in achieving more equal treatment of their students (in the cases where these resources were available) or hindered them (where the resources were “wished” for). For example:

“..because 42 minutes...six minutes to get them all seated, set, and ready, another five minutes to go over what you need to go over, if not longer, you only have about 20 minutes to grab it up and then they’re out...We just need more equipment...it’s just extends the bounds»

These statements supports the idea that the availability of these types of resources leads to freedom to be creative in terms of learning style, equitable physical access to such resources and freedom in terms of available information. Furthermore, the conversation in this category in conjunction with the Utilitarianism category implies that when these types of resources are available, teachers need not resort to more utilitarian teaching strategies. From the teaching perspective, information technology resource availability in the ER sense provides more equality to students (or teachers) than utilitarian approaches. It is also clear that the language used in this category places utilitarianism as a “last resort” that can be avoided in some cases through heightened resource availability:

“A special room with more computers and a technical expertise right there, hired to just oversee any problems that arise...We do the same thing with 27/28 kids in our classes that other teachers in private schools do with 12. It exhausts us,”

The **Equality of Access to Advantage (EA)** category starts to differ more dramatically from the other two categories as the language of the teachers/librarians pertains more to one-to-one type of learning situations. It is clear that teachers/librarians want to create this level of access to empower students to learn how to learn about information technology:

“Empowering students to be able to control their own learning to be responsible for it. To know how to go about it. How to figure out “how to figure out”. Giving them those 21st century skills that they’re

going to need to move forward. So, it's almost about empowering them with a skill set»

The language in this category moves away from dealing with resources towards creating opportunities for lifelong learning; teachers seem to be more concentrated in this category on providing the resources to empower students than on managing their resource limitations:

“Even though you have a resource the resource [person] directs you to where you need to go so you still need to be motivated to go there to listen, to internalize direction, so it fosters important thinking processes and life skills also.”

Remarkably, those teacher/librarians that spoke in these terms were generally more satisfied (commented less about) with the tangible resources they had available to them but were more concerned with the developmental resources (training specifically) that they needed:

“...what they're (library) doing in terms of professional development because in order for the students to be successful learners, the teachers need to be comfortable in educating the students and acting as support.”

These resources were seen as lifelong and welfare-based and as such would take themselves and their students to the appropriate level to deal with modern technology *beyond the school environment*. EA appears to be placed at a higher level in relation to the ER and Utilitarianism type approaches and seems to become a focus when these other demands of these other two categories are more or less satisfied.

Finally, the **Equality of Capabilities (EC)** category contains conversation centered on yet more specific needs that certain students/teachers might have with regards to information technology. Furthermore, the conversation here dealt with providing equal opportunities to those who are disadvantaged and to provide a comfortable and safe environment in which one could elicit the particular help required *on an individual level*:

“So many of our students in addition to their households not having Internet access, a lot of their households don't have a lot of things that teachers take for granted.... It's just that they know that they can get work done here that they can't at home...We need special resources....we looked at their skills...and matched those up with materials so we came up with this solution which helps the kids, it helps the teachers who are not particularly well-equipped to deal with that issue in their class»

Similar to EA, EC concerns seem to arise where many of the proceeding categories' concerns have already been satisfied. This is especially clear as the majority of these comments are voiced as part of future wishlists of the teachers, librarians and other participants. Where the EA category comments talk about providing resources for lifelong learning, the EC category comments talk about going beyond this and providing tailored support to enable individuals (students or teachers) with the tools necessary to use modern information technology:

“they’re all coming in at different levels and they need all kinds of resources and support...We have many students that utilize laptops and specific software in terms of they have to get information in...so I know that they always feel comfortable that they can go into the library and someone can really help them with their technology needs as well.”

6. Discussion

In analyzing how these categories relate to one another, there appears to be a pattern in how teachers and librarians serve their constituents with regards to information technology. Firstly, we see that when resources are limited, the libraries studied resorted to utilitarian principles in providing information technology learning. Teachers and librarians used collaboration and time techniques (block scheduling) to provide as equal a learning environment to their audience as possible. This approach meets as many needs as possible with limited resources but does so in a less contextual way as students are handled in groups rather than as individuals. The approach also is very passive and reactive as it addresses the many as opposed to the individual through collaboration and it makes the teacher/librarian a sort of last resort.

On the level of context, conversation in the ER category is more materials based as the conversation is about providing equitable access to as many relevant resources as possible. In doing so, it is more contextual than the utilitarian approaches as it provides as many avenues as possible to students with the hopes of some of those resources enabling some students. The commentary in this category is also passive and reactive but less so than the utilitarian category as providing information technology resources and materials (like a subject matter expert) gives students a chance to inquire about a specific need. Its important to note though, that the subject matter expert needs to have enough cycles to provide that information, hence this category is only somewhat more contextual and somewhat less passive and reactive.

The EA category commentary clearly provides more of a means based approach as these strategies attempt to empower students to learn how to learn for their own welfare and pursuit beyond the school environment. The EA category commentary is more contextual and active as the teachers and librarians are actively involved in meeting specific technological needs. Again, it seems that in order to achieve this level of action, it appears that the preceding categories’ concerns are generally met; so a school library that appears to provide for the issues sought after in the Utilitarianism and ER categories is then positioned to provide service that meets the requirements of the EA category. Lastly, the EC category commentary shows the most contextualized support as these comments addressed the specific deficiencies (special education, English as a Second Language) of the populations each library served. Additionally, these comments showed a much higher level of proactivity on the part of the libraries in meeting these needs by making the resources (material or human) and environmental conditions available to empower individuals with such deficiencies.

To sum this all up, it appears that teachers and librarians throttle between these social justice principles when providing information technology service. The tangible and intangible resources available to the teachers and librarians determine what principle they apply. It also seems that teachers feel that applying more contextual and more active/proactive measures is essential to achieving the most effective output of information technology learning. In line with the UNESCO-IFLA manifesto, teachers and librarians strive for the most contextual and proactive approach as they perceive this approach as providing the most effective output in student learning of technology. As was stated previously, the application of each more contextual/active approach also seems to entail the ability to implement previous approaches and as such can be said to provide the most socially just environment for learning of information technology in the school environment.

7. Conclusions

This research suggests that school libraries that provide exceptional information technology service do so by applying strategies that throttle between the various social justice principles discussed. There are some limitations of this research that are worth noting. Firstly, this typology suggested here is centered on focus groups from one particular study and as such will require further application in future studies to achieve external validity. Secondly, the coding for the production of this typology was done by a single researcher and as such will need further coder reliability to achieve stronger internal validity. To this point, this research is an attempt to initiate the investigation of the social justice angle in school libraries' provision of information technology service and as such is meant to be used to inform future research design. Thus, an overarching achievement of this research is to lay out a methodology for coding data using a social justice framework.

Thirdly, this typology provides a macro-level view of social justice principles; further studies that explore specific principles will be needed to more strictly operationalize each of the principles. Research from this particular angle is fruitful for school library research as it ties back the goals of school libraries as listed in the UNESCO-IFLA manifesto to the underlying social justice principles that enable these goals. The results of this research yielded a social justice typology that maps out the relationship between successful information technology service in school libraries and the corresponding notions of equality that lead to such service.

The method used in this research was particularly helpful in identifying and grouping social justice principles in the context of school libraries for a few reasons. Firstly, this method started by using social justice principles that were explicitly supported by several well-regarded library associations (AASL and IFLA) in their mission/vision statements. As these principles have been selected by designated representatives of the library community, they are most likely to reflect the various social justice principles that libraries historically and practically promote. Secondly, by reducing the data into the categories of egalitarianism, expanding them into separate subcategories thereafter and then

recombining them (possibly differently) into the same categories allows the researcher to question overlapping categories and definitions, thereby achieving a more consistent fit for the data to the principles. Lastly, analyzing rich qualitative data, as in the focus group data here, allows for the concepts of social justice to arise in context rather than as isolated statements or strategies. Thus, the findings presented here take into account the practical context in which social justice strategies and principles *arise* rather than prescribing blanket generalizations about what social justice principles to apply in specific situations.

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