South Carolina Libraries

Volume 2 | Issue 2 Article 3

10-1-2016

Looking for the Intersection: Public Libraries, Adult Literacy and Homelessness

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Abstract

Homelessness is a problem which has proven resistant to both short-term solutions and to efforts to address root causes. Illiteracy may be a major factor, yet few studies have addressed how a library's mission to promote reading intersects with the informational needs of adults experiencing homelessness. An understanding of literacy as more than a set of reading skills may help to guide librarians who wish to fully implement ALA's standard of facilitating access to information for all, including marginalized patrons and those who not read well. As public libraries respond to questions about their continued relevance in a digital age, an understanding of how libraries can contribute to solutions to community social needs, including homelessness, may help to broaden community support for more extensive and more inclusive library programming.

Keywords

public libraries, adult literacy, adult homelessness

Cover Page Footnote

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PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE

Looking for the Intersection: Public libraries, adult literacy and homelessness

By Deborah W. Yoho

More than 1.5 million individuals experience homelessness each year in American communities large and small. While striving to meet the standard of equal access to information for all, including the poorest and most marginalized families, public libraries face numerous challenges when coping with the needs of the homeless population, especially homeless adults.

A review of the literature yielded few studies addressing the information needs of homeless adults and no studies have examined whether illiteracy may be a barrier to meeting those needs. With little research to guide best practices, a library school curriculum may not consider how to serve this population. The complexities of homelessness are such that any librarian may feel unqualified to participate in community efforts to address the problem. "If public librarians are not introduced to concepts about dealing with the homeless and who they are in library school, they will most likely confront homelessness unprepared" (Lilienthal, 2011, p. 31).

As more and more government policy deals with social inclusion, community-building and the development of social capital (Hillenbrand, 2005), librarians have a role to play (e.g. Ferguson, 2013). For example, public libraries have become centers for career exploration, applying for employment (Rooney-Browne, 2009) and for access to technology (Jue, *et al.* 1999; Aabo, S., 2005). As public libraries respond to questions about their continued relevance in a digital age, an understanding of how libraries can contribute to solutions to community social needs, including homelessness, may help to broaden community support, especially among power brokers and business leaders.

What is Literacy?

One of the missions of a public library is to facilitate the advancement of a more literate society. An understanding of literacy is therefore incumbent on a librarian. At first glance, *literacy* may appear to be a concept everyone understands. The conventional dictionary definition of *literacy* is the ability to read and write (Costello, 1991), an interpretation of symbols.). But reading and literacy are not the same thing. Becoming literate is not about "sounding out words". The dictionary definition is autonomous, without context, and subsumes in the word *ability* a large set of specific tangible skills from alphabetics to comprehension. For example, if one sees the symbols *C-A-T* and can then say aloud *"cat"* and write *cat* without copying, one has read the word *cat*. (Notice this process includes the ability to see and hear). But what if the symbols refer to the Caterpillar equipment used by farmers and road workers? Or perhaps the word is offered by a librarian, in which case the symbols may refer to an outdated card catalog. It is only when the symbols *C-A-T* are placed in context that the conventional definition of reading incorporates meaning and becomes *literacy.*" Literacy is relative, not absolute, a combination of the ability to decode symbols with an understanding of context that is then applied to some use.

Another way to think of the distinction between reading skills and literacy is to

consider a common problem often mentioned by struggling adult readers: "I can read fine, but I don't retain it" or "I can pronounce the word, but I don't know what it means." These learners are struggling with comprehension. While some reading specialists include "comprehension" as a reading subskill, it really is not; comprehension is not a skill but the *result* of using reading skills within a specific *context*.

Literacy has often been equated with educational attainment (e.g. an individual's total number of years of formal schooling). Hillerich (1976) noted that grade designations as a standard of literacy have varied: UNESCO set the level at completing grade 4, (using this standard as a criterion for calculating a country's *literacy rate)*; the US Army at one time considered a recruit literate if he/she had completed grade 5; the US Census Bureau likewise adopted grade 5 as the standard, and the US Office of Education has varied its standard from grades 4 to 8. Yet persistently achievement testing to determine a level of reading proficiency as related to school grade has revealed that many students fall behind, and often stay behind, even though they are promoted from one grade level to the next.

Adult Literacy

Today most policymakers understand literacy as an "evolving notion" (UNESCO, 2006, p. 8). In the 1960s and 1970s the term *functional literacy* emerged, placing the ability to read and write into the context of everyday applications for survival within a culture, especially when considering the literacy skills of adults (Hillerich,1976). By the late 1980s, "…definitions of literacy broadened to incorporate the demands of globalization, including the significance of new technologies…" (UNESCO, 2006, p.154).

One of the implications of a globalized, technologically-driven economy is that the notion of what characterizes high-skilled workers is changing as well…"new basic skills"…comprise a broader range of both cognitive skills (the traditional three R's) along with a set of the so-called "soft skills." In fact, one can argue that most critical are those foundational skills that enable individuals to learn throughout their lifespan and, thus, be able to adapt to changing work conditions and demands (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstaf, 2002, p. 6).

In the US with the passage of the Adult Literacy Act in 1991 (and its reauthorization in 2014), the definition of *literacy* solidified by law to include the concept of *numeracy* (a basic understanding of math) and was expanded to include workforce readiness skills. The definition also includes the necessity of learning English as a second language if not native. A literate person was thusly defined as being useful to the economy. The legislation's definition of *literacy* squarely focuses on undefined functions:

" …an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential," (H.R. 751--102nd Congress: National Literacy Act of 1991. Sec.3).

Since this definition includes the achievement of individual goals and potential, the concept of *literacy* also becomes imbedded in self-efficacy. To be literate means to be self-supporting. Based on the language of the legislation, it can

be reasonably concluded that, according to the passed legislation, a literate person is defined as being useful to the economy.

Congress legislated a national survey (assessment) of adult literacy in 1990 and again

in 2000. The 2000 study, known as the national Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey (ALL), revealed that 52% of the adult population in the US between the ages of 16 and 65 scored at or below the basic literacy level (Kirsch, Braun, Yamamoto & Sum, 2007) deemed necessary to function "on the job or in society". The report also sounded the alarm that a score at the "basic" level is not adequate to survive in a global economy.

Looking for the intersection of Homelessness, Adult Literacy and Public Libraries

What is known about literacy among homeless adults and how should public libraries respond? Is there a cause and effect relationship and can libraries help? A few LIS researchers have considered homeless adults in the context of information behavior, or have investigated information poverty or information access among homeless adults. For example, Harvey (2002) found that homeless individuals identify the library as a place for reading and learning to gain knowledge as well as a safe place for respite and peace. However, this review of the literature yielded no studies to date specifically examining how adult literacy and illiteracy, homelessness, and public libraries might interrelate. The extent of illiteracy in the adult homeless population (as opposed to grade level attainment) is unknown. Published research appears to coalesce into three categories:

1. descriptions of how libraries serve or manage the homeless, without regard to literacy.

2. descriptions of the information needs or information behavior of homeless adults, again without regard to literacy.

3. descriptions of how public libraries are or can be involved in promoting adult literacy, but with no mention of homeless adults.

Hersberger documented the everyday information needs and information sources consulted by homeless adults in a shelter in North Carolina (Hersberger 2001). Later she considered whether the digital divide affects the homeless and their access to information. She concluded access to the internet may be irrelevant to this population because the study participants (all parents) instead relied mainly on other people for information (Hersberger, 2003).

In contrast, between 2008-2011 Le Dantec conducted several studies regarding the homeless and technology, beginning with homeless perceptions of technology (Le Dantec and Edwards, Apr. 2008). This study was conducted in two homeless outreach centers; books were not included as a form of technology. Later, another team looked at the use of computers in a shelter for homeless mothers (Le Dantec, et al. 2011). Whether any of the mothers in the shelter had difficulty using computers because of low literacy skills was not reported, but their need for technology was documented.

Several researchers (e.g. Ayers, 2006) have examined the ethical imperatives of service to the poor and homeless in the context of equitable access. Muggleton and Ruthven (2011) studied information access by homeless adults in Scotland. Like Hersberger, the study built on concepts of social context and efficacy. Lingel and Boyd (2013) considered the role of stigma and concluded "when information practices are understood to be shaped by social context, (then) privilege and marginalization alternately affect not only access to, but also use of information resources" (p. 1).

Weibel (2007) offered programming and collection development guidance for libraries fostering adult literacy, but was not looking at services targeted to the homeless. Likewise

Shen (2013) investigated library services to urban immigrants as related to strategies to overcome information poverty, but did not consider whether any of the immigrants had experienced homelessness and does not mention literacy.

Horning (2010) details the history and role of libraries in adult literacy, but includes no evidence about homeless patrons, other than to assert "…libraries have especially recently taken on literacy instruction for poor and immigrant patrons, information literacy instruction for all, and continued access to information of all types for everyone" (p. 162). (This study also included a discussion of varying definitions of literacy, including adult functional literacy.)

Addressing Homelessness in the Public Library

A considerable amount of anecdotal evidence is offered about how public libraries can or should manage or serve homeless patrons (e.g. Muir, 2011). A number of authors have described public library interactions with the homeless, including Cathcart (2008), Collins, Howard, and Miraflor (2009), Mars (2012), Milone (2011), Tashbook (2009) and Yi (2009), but none of these studies mention adult literacy programs developed for the homeless or the literacy needs of homeless patrons.

Lilienthal (2011) described a program of peer counselors for the homeless in the San Francisco public library, and stressed the importance of public libraries offering services, such as book clubs, tailored to the homeless. Book clubs have been started in a number of public libraries, including Charlotte/Mecklenburg, North Carolina and Alachua County in Florida (Keen, 2010). The San Francisco library also has the distinction of locating a professional social worker in-house, as does the District of Columbia Public Library and a few others.

The American Library Association has published a handbook for delivering public library services to the poor (Holt and Holt, 2010), and one writer offered the idea of homeless shelters as a service learning laboratory for social science students, including LIS students (de la Pena- McCook, 2015).

In 1990, the American Library Association adopted Policy 61, Library Services for the Poor (now renumbered Policy B.8.10.1) This "Poor People's Policy" was developed to ensure that libraries are accessible and useful to low-income citizens and to encourage a deeper understanding of poverty's dimensions, its causes, and the ways it can be ended. In 1996, members of SRRT formed the Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty Task Force to promote and implement Policy 61 and to raise awareness of poverty issues. Since then, the task force has

- mounted major conference programs
- secured policy support from ALA Presidential candidates
- initiated a SRRT resolution on poverty-related subject headings
- distributed resource information
- encouraged the ALA Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) Advisory Committee to create a Poverty Subcommittee
- published a first ever statement on class and libraries in *American Libraries*
- inspired the publication of *Poor People and Library Services* (McFarland, 1998), edited by former task force chair Karen Venturella

- coordinated poverty-focused surveys of ALA units and members in 2007

(www.ala.org/srrt/hunger-homelessness-and-poverty-task-force-hhptf)

In 2005, observing the 15th anniversary of Policy 61, the ALA Jean E. Coleman Outreach Lecture was offered by Sanford Berman, founder of the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) and a co-author of Policy 61. A review of the electronic transcript showed that the word *literacy* did not appear in the lecture. Berman began with an anecdotal report of exclusionary policies and activities in public libraries, such as shorter hours in poor neighborhoods, evidence of new libraries deliberately located where poor people would be unlikely to obtain access, local governmental legislation prohibiting "sleeping on tables" in the library, a report of an ALA official commenting to a reporter about issues of patrons with poor hygiene, and an attempt to offer organized, scheduled lectures to teach citizens "how to behave" in the library (Berman, 2005).

Berman balanced his lecture with examples of librarian activities around the country specifically reaching out to homeless populations. He spoke of librarians involved in advocacy and collaboration to build showers for homeless use, of a public library board member who told a reporter that homeless individuals had always frequented the library but never presented any problems, and of a public library director serving on a panel with the mayor and a low income advocate to identify what could be done to help the homeless. Then he asked: "Why this pronounced failure to adopt and promote ALA's poor people's policy? And why the rush to further burden and even criminalize people who already have next to nothing and certainly don't enjoy a level playing field? Why the cascading efforts to exclude them from public spaces, deny them fair access to library resources, and treat them as 'problems,' as pariahs?" Berman concluded by charging librarians and others to "first recognize their own attitudinal hang-ups".

Conclusion

Volumes have been written about the transforming experience of reading, whether for information or pleasure (e.g. Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer, 2006). Although some might suggest that illiteracy is endemic to adult homelessness, Juchniewicz (2012) showed that homeless adults who read frequently and critically "rewrite their lives, and subsequently their worlds" (p. 505). If society is to become serious about ameliorating the harsh circumstances of homelessness, more research is needed to establish how literacy and illiteracy may be related to the problem.

From book clubs to peer counseling, public libraries in many communities have done much to create wider access and offer programming for adults experiencing homelessness, but research is also needed to document the extent of the implementation of ALA's Poor People's Policy since 2005, when Sanford Berman challenged librarians to examine their attitudes towards poor people. Meanwhile public librarians, who represent the custodians of the resources necessary for the reading lives of this marginalized population, might give more consideration to how literacy and homelessness could intersect with library programming. Such consideration would allow for the adoption of a more thoroughly inclusive professional ethical stance on homelessness, and should be informed by a broad understanding of literacy across the lifespan. Library managers might also consider evaluating the local need for the library's involvement in the direct provision of literacy instructional programs designed for adults experiencing homelessness, as well as creating, expanding and/or strengthening existing programs such as book clubs, community

forums, and collaborative engagement with community leaders.

Access to information for all means *all.* As public librarians strive to live the highest ethical standards in their work, they must consider how to balance the needs of those who are easy to serve with those who are more difficult to engage. It's just the right thing to do.

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