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Making a Place at the Table: A Guide for Small, Rural, and Suburban Libraries

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Making a Place at the Table: A Guide for Small, Rural, and Suburban Libraries

Abstract

This article serves as resource for libraries in rural and suburban areas that are serving communities experiencing changes to their ethnic diversity, particularly an influx of immigrants from one central location with English as a second language (i.e. India, China, Syria, etc.). Within, resources include: research supporting the benefits of having a multilingual collection; common missteps and pitfalls in serving minority communities; examples of how to determine the community's needs; provides recommendations for finding community partners; and shares resources from the American Library Association and other organizations to find grants, develop collections, and conduct outreach services.

Keywords

Collection Development, Community Needs Analysis, Multilingual Collections, Immigrants and Public Libraries

Introduction

Librarians are keenly aware that that a library—especially a public library—is a place to find acceptance and equality, as well as where needs can be met. Librarians are also aware that communities are dynamic, and not just in terms of the size of the population. Race, ethnicity, and linguistics also play a large role in shaping a community into what it is and what needs the community has.

When reviewing professional journals and publications, there are many resources that support multilingual diversity within libraries, the importance of multilingual collections and services, and multiple success stories. However, it can be a struggle to find information on the process of and necessary resources for establishing multilingual collections and services when they are not already in place or the facility lacks the experience of the process. Historically, public libraries in cities have always had more diverse and dynamic populations. Thus, public libraries in cities have had more experience in adapting their collections and services when the population shifts. They have the benefit of building upon previous patterns, experiences, and projects of their predecessors.

However, as smaller suburban and rural communities see changes in their population diversity, the librarians are often at a disadvantage. Not only do librarians in smaller communities not know where to begin, they often face obstacles such as lack of funding, space, staff, and—particularly in predominately white communities—a fear of offending the community they are trying to serve.

In this article, the importance of establishing multilingual collections and why small libraries have a more difficult time establishing and managing those collections is discussed. More importantly, this article will discuss paths towards creating a collection that acknowledges and serves a diverse ethnic population through conducting a community needs assessment and partnering with the leaders of the respective ethnic communities. Furthermore, this article also provides information regarding: grants, resources from the American Library Association and their affiliated groups, and tools for collection development.

Background

As of 2017, the United States Census Bureau estimates that there are over forty-four million people living in America who are foreign born, and a little over half of those are not US citizens. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017) Data from the same year shows that Asia, Latin America, and Central America continue to be the largest regions for the United States' foreign-born population, particularly from Mexico, the Caribbean, India, and China. (US Census Bureau, 2017) Since the early twentieth century, public libraries have been serving the ever-changing needs of immigrant populations in a variety of ways. This includes: providing materials in languages other than English; literacy instruction; English-as-a-second-language courses; and partnerships with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to promote naturalization and citizenship materials (Burke, 2008, p. 164). Furthermore, Yunfei Du has discussed how multicultural library collections—in addition to their intended purpose of helping immigrants feel a sense of belonging in their new communities and further encouraging lifelong learning—are beneficial in helping the pre-existing community accept the differences of their new neighbors and increase their knowledge of the world (2016, p. 63). This is why it is important for public libraries to be aware of changes in the demographics of the community, as the ethnic make-up of the population plays a large role in determining library services.

In 2007, the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) released a set of guidelines for developing and promotion multilingual collections and services in information organizations. RUSA establishes that it is the responsibility of libraries to provide an equitable level of service to all members of their communities regardless of ethnic, cultural, or linguistic background (2007, Section 1.0 para 1). RUSA also stresses that this should not be seen as an “additional” or “extra” service, but that it is seen and presented as an integral part of the library's services (2007, Section 1.0 para 2). Commenting on RUSA's Guidelines, Du adds that “[m]ulticultural library collections may create a sense of belonging in their new communities for these new immigrants. Moreover, materials in their native languages help

patrons by offering lifelong learning for people for whom English is a second language” (2016, p. 63). In addition, a diverse collection helps the community as a whole accept differences and increase knowledge of the world (Du, 2016, p. 63).

Community Needs Assessment

Often in small suburban and rural public libraries, budgets are tight, spaces are small, and time for planning and collection development are limited. Because of these constraints, there is more pressure on smaller libraries to develop successful multilingual collections and services. Therefore, the first step in creating any multilingual collection is to establish communication with the multilingual community for which the collection is being created. It is not only the first step, it is the most crucial for success.

In 2002, researchers Dilevko and Dali published the results of a study they conducted of multilingual collection in Canadian public libraries. While they found many libraries that wanted to expand or maintain their multilingual collections, Dilevko and Dali found that a small portion of the libraries wished to get rid of their multilingual collections altogether. (Dilevko & Dali, 2002, p. 120-122) These multilingual collections were deemed unnecessary by the multilingual community the collection was developed for. Why? Because they were created without communicating with and working with the community. For example, a library may develop a multilingual collection that is largely children’s material, but the multilingual community may have a larger need for adult materials. By not consulting the multilingual community and assuming that community’s needs, the library wasted time, resources, and money without any real benefit.

Furthermore, communication and working with the community is a sign of respect. A “surprise” multilingual collection implies the assumption that the library staff—who, especially in rural and suburban areas, are more likely to be predominately white—knows the community’s needs better than

those who would use the collection. There are also some countries—such as China and India—that have many different languages, and immigrants from different regions of the country; the library may buy materials in Mandarin or Hindi for their Chinese or Indian community, but then find that Cantonese or Gujarati is the more common language. Communication therefore: removes any misconceptions and misunderstandings; helps narrow the librarians' focus on serving the multilingual community; and strengthens the community as a whole by fostering respectful information exchange.

One of the first steps in communication is *listening*. Librarians and library support staff should take note of how often they are asked about books in a particular language, about ESL classes, and other resources. This statistical information will help evaluate what the community needs and what languages are being used in the community. The statistical information can also be used when requesting additional budget funds for a multilingual collection and to begin a more formal needs analysis. This particular concept for evaluating patron needs can also help evaluate for non-multilingual needs, such as technology, services, and programs.

Once it has been established that there is a need, surveys and focus groups will also be important for gaining a better understanding of the community's needs. However, the most important players in a successful multilingual community are going to be the community itself and those who are already serving that community.

Community Partners

One of the first community partners that the library should seek out is the ESL programs in the school districts that the public library serves, providing an opportunity for public libraries and the school system to partner together. Furthermore, the school librarians will be able to develop their own multilingual collections and share resources and ideas with the public librarians on how best to serve the youngest members of the multilingual community.

The next step is to look to where the multilingual community is already gathering outside of the schools and library. Asian and Hispanic markets, mosques, temples, and churches serve as gathering places for previous immigrants and where newcomers to the area can find others who share a language, religion, experiences, and culture. Especially within the religious gathering spaces, there will be leaders who know their communities well and can share their experiences of helping newcomers integrate into the community. These community leaders, therefore, will be vital partners in the development of multilingual collections and services.

ALA Resources

Within the American Library Association (ALA), there are several resources available for libraries that are wanting to implement new multicultural, multilingual collections. One of the most prominent is the ALA [Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services](#) (ODLOS). In their mission statement, the ODLOS says that they work to support “library and information science workers in creating responsible and all-inclusive spaces that serve and represent the entire community”. (Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services, 2020) This covers diversity both in the library workforce and the community that the library serves. The ODLOS has a partnership the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs at the University of Illinois called “[Project Welcome](#)”, which is designed to teach library staff how to meet the information needs of refugees and asylum seekers. (Project Welcome, 2020)

ALA also has a toolkit called “[How to Serve the World @ your library](#)”, which is designed to help libraries start and improve English-language learning programs for adults at the public library. Another ALA toolkit is “[New Immigrants](#)”, which is a compiling of a variety of materials for serving new immigrants in a library setting, to include ALA Policy statements, reports, books, and more. In addition, the 2015 report published by the Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table, titled

[“Guidelines for Outreach to Immigrant Populations”](#), is another beneficial tool for establishing programs, collections, and mission statements as libraries strive to serve new immigrant populations.

The ODLOS also provides a list of ALA affiliate associations that are made up of librarians of color. These include: the American Indian Library Association, the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association, the Chinese American Librarians Association, and REFORMA, whose purpose is to serve Spanish speaking library users. These affiliate groups are especially beneficial as they present an opportunity to connect with LIS professionals who have first-hand experience of being in a minority group and also understand the constraints within which librarians have to work. These affiliate associations also have their own awards and recommendation lists, which is beneficial for ensuring that the library’s English language collection also represents our diverse world and avoids promotion of harmful stereotypes. There are, however, some limitations with the ALA affiliate groups. Notably, the multilingual group in the community may not be represented even within the ranks of ALA, especially if the country of origin is Eastern European or from the continent of Africa.

Collection Development

In 2007, the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) published the [Guidelines for the Development and Promotion of Multilingual Collections and Services](#). These guidelines aid library professionals as they develop their own multilingual collections, from researching what language to add, to formats to acquire, to how to catalog those materials.

The Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS) maintains a [Foreign Book Dealers Directory](#). This list of vendors is sortable by region of the world—Middle East, Africa, Asia, etc.—and allows the user to search by where the material is published. There are some limitations to the directory; namely, the directory cannot be searched by language. Nor is there a way to determine which

publishers produce books in specific regional languages, which is critical when purchasing for library users from India, China, and other countries that have regional language groups.

Grants

One grant offered by ALA is "[The American Dream Literacy Initiative](#)". Funded through the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, this \$10,000 grant is annually awarded to public libraries that wish to expand their services for adult English language learners or for adult education and workforce development. In addition, the South Carolina State Library offers a Planning Grant, which is used to perform a community needs assessment, strategic planning, and other preparatory planning or research for future library projects.

Other grants include the following from the [Public Library Association \(2020\)](#):

- The Charlie Robinson Award, a \$1,000 grant that is awarded to a public library director who—over a period of seven years—has been an agent for change in the public library;
- The EBSCO Excellence in Rural Library Service Award, a \$1,000 honorarium for libraries that serve a population of ten-thousand or less;
- And the Gordon M. Conable Award, a \$1,500 award honoring a staff member, trustee, or library that has shown a commitment to intellectual freedom and the Library Bill of Rights.

Conclusion

As staff of public libraries, we understand the importance and value of diversity in our institutions. We are also keenly aware that how we serve multilingual, multicultural patrons is crucial for ensuring the success of those users, for promoting life-long learning and literacy, and for meeting the needs of the community as a whole. We want to see our communities served equitably, and for all

members of the community to have a seat at the proverbial table. We want everyone to feel welcome when they enter a library. Smaller libraries in suburban and rural communities want the same thing as larger libraries in large urban communities: they want everyone who walks in to feel comfortable, to come back and use the library regularly, to meet the needs of the library users no matter what those needs may be. Smaller does not mean lesser, and with these resources any small, rural, or suburban library can do big, great things for their community.

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