From Condescension to Collaboration: How Public Libraries can Address the Literacy Needs of Immigrant Populations

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Abstract

Though the attitudes towards improving literacy among immigrant populations have changed, many of the practices and challenges remain in public libraries in the United States today. Originally, literacy efforts were focused on English instruction and "Americanization." Though there were some programs that highlighted the importance of offering texts in languages other than English, these collections were difficult to maintain with an almost entirely white and American workforce. Today, libraries should change how they interact with and serve immigrants on both individual and institutional levels, with an emphasis on collaborating with the community to ascertain and address their needs.

Public libraries are cognizant of the multifaceted nature of literacy. As educational institutions, they take on the tasks of expanding the vocabulary of preschoolers, teaching illiterate adults how to read, and guiding students through the research process. As information professionals, library workers help people fill out government documents, navigate new technology, and develop skills to evaluate information sources. Increasingly, attention has been given to public libraries as community centers, collaborative sites where people engage their newly acquired or strengthened literacy skills to solve the problems of their social context. Libraries today are embedded in that context and tailor their outreach and educational programs to those most in need. Oftentimes, in the United States, those people include immigrant populations.

Immigrants have long concerned libraries, though the focus of this concern has shifted over time. Initially, these newcomers were assimilated by their public libraries, becoming literate in the linguistic, cultural, and moral standards of late 19th and early 20th century white Americans. Some libraries moved to support the literacy skills of immigrants' native languages, but this approach came with its own issues, many that still challenge library operations today. Finally, with the modern commitment to diversity and inclusion, immigrant patrons find themselves as partners of their local institutions, engaging in mutual acculturation as libraries attempt to address more varieties of literacy. This paper explores the historical shift from condescension to collaboration, the enduring complications of creating a multicultural institution, and ways to further the enrichment of all patrons.

Both public libraries and immigration from non-English speaking countries saw wide expansion in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and librarians instantly were drawn towards bettering what they saw as a helpless demographic. "Their

calling," as educated Anglo-Saxon Americans, "was to convert the poor and huddled immigrant masses to a philosophy of self-determination through reading and books" (Asher, 2011, p. 46). The desire to assist immigrants was genuine, especially in the midst of growing nativist sentiments, but it was also based on the fear of an uneducated and immoral influx of people (Novotny, 2003, p. 344). Because of this fear, the services libraries extended towards immigrants "were mostly aimed at assimilation or 'Americanization,' which mainly involved English language education and citizenship education." (Asher, 2011, p. 44) This "Americanization" involved instruction on topics–wholly unrelated to the the traditional literacy skills of reading or speaking–such as law and order, America's attitude towards other countries, and being a good sport, as outlined in an issue of *Library Journal* from 1920 (Lim, 2009, p. 12). Assimilation was deemed necessary, because it was believed that "the downside of the American melting pot (loss of language and culture) [was] more than made up for by the upside (social mobility)" (Hartman, 2005, p. 2). In the face of an increasingly multicultural country, difference was seen as dangerous, and literacy took the form of standardization.

On the other hand, some librarians in this time period saw the inclusion of foreign language texts as a tool, rather than a hindrance, for assimilation. Such librarians "insisted on having foreign language collections in the public library not only to give relief to immigrants but also to guide them to become faithful library users" (Lim, 2009, p.12). By helping these new patrons navigate and become comfortable with the library in their native language, they would be more likely to partake of the English texts and programs. Though certainly a step towards acknowledging the needs and wants of immigrant populations, this inclusion could only go so far; "the library's purpose of moral uplift remained. Translations would be provided for the best *American* and *British* writers, for example, Dickens, Shakespeare, and Kipling" (Novotny, 2003,

p. 345). This paternalism, combined with "the added difficulties in acquiring materials, cataloging them, and providing services in foreign languages," limited the scope of how immigrants could be served and "could be overwhelming to libraries with insufficient staff expertise" (Novotny, 2003, p. 349). With these challenges and biases in tow, librarians engaged their immigrant populations in their native languages, at times with a religious zeal. Asher (2011) describes this focused fervor:

> "If public libraries were intended to represent safe space for self-education, then the librarians who worked there would make themselves knowledgeable of the assimilation requirements and stock their shelves with the materials that would attract, entertain, and educate the populations they were called to serve" (p. 45).

Unfortunately, this desire to acquire foreign language texts often failed to result in stable collections, according to Novotny (2003): "While the library administrators professed the best of intentions, and in fact strove to acquire more foreign-language materials, they were unable, or unwilling, to maintain the sizeable foreign-language collections they inherited" (p. 348). The shelves were usually empty, as immigrants scrambled to get their hands on the select few books available in their native language, and even with budget increases, the supply could never catch up with the demand (p. 349). Whether it was from an ignorant over-prioritization of English materials or the inadequate language skills of staff, the result was the same; providing access in foreign language texts was not enough to address the literacy needs of entire immigrant populations.

One hundred years later, there is still the temptation, as decentralized facets of American government, to prioritize the needs of citizens and English speakers over those of immigrants and see the challenges of a multilingual library as "messy, unfamiliar, unpleasant, and uncomfortable" (Dali & Caidi, 2017, p. 90). Public libraries have a duty to acknowledge their role as a site of learning, not just of literacy skills, but as "a place [for immigrants] to confirm

that they are welcomed in this country, or to recognize they are still aliens in this strange land" (Lim, 2019, p. 19); libraries cannot simply act as a repository of foreign or native texts, nor as a deliverer of standardized English and American culture. "If we go to great lengths to help immigrants become more like their hosts while the hosts have no intention of becoming more like the immigrants, then there is no true acculturation" (Dali & Caidi, 2017, p. 95). Indeed, Wang et al. (2020) insist that there are two types of obstacles that make it difficult for libraries to connect with immigrants, namely "institutional barriers on the part of the library and the immigrant's own personal barriers" (p. 8). In order to serve the immigrants in their communities, public libraries will not only have to provide more resources but also change the way their policies and staff engage with the literacy of immigrants.

"Many users, daunted by the complexity of information organizations, give up before realizing libraries' full potential" (Cassell & Hiremath, 2018, p.319); add to that complexity a new language, strange customs, and a different legal status, and it's clear that immigrant populations need to explicitly be welcomed into and educated on the ecosystem of the public library. Fisher et al. (2004) identified that immigrants need to learn that public libraries are free and safe for them to use, before they ever even understand how to access the available resources. To build this trust, libraries and immigrant communities need to work together to create a useful and accessible space. As Fitzgerald (1995) put it, "If the many communities interested in reading and issues of diversity could cross boundaries and learn and teach with each other, the potential for progress might increase" (p. 184). This collaboration must include accurately assessing the literacy skills of immigrants, hiring multilingual employees, and allowing immigrants to have a say in what collections and programs are implemented.

Before attempting to teach new forms of literacy, libraries must recognize and utilize the prior knowledge immigrants bring to the setting. Like most adults born in this country, immigrant patrons can be assumed to have some handle on language, cultural practices, etc. A meta-analysis of studies comparing ESL readers and native English readers in the United States "indicated that the two groups' cognitive processes were substantively more alike than different" (Fitzgerald, 1995, p. 180), and another study found that immigrants, especially those who are well established in the country, are less likely to check out non-English titles than might be expected (Burke, 2008, p. 40). Therefore, if progress is to be made with this underserved group, they must not be treated as "the specter of the uneducated, impoverished, embittered masses" (Novotny, 2003, p. 344), but rather as individual patrons with varying strengths, weaknesses, and interests. Because language barriers may obstruct communication, it is all the more vital to "find out what the user already knows to avoid pedantically reteaching familiar skills" (Cassell & Hiremath, 2018, p. 324). Unfortunately, those same language barriers make it difficult for monolingual librarians to accurately assess the literacy of immigrant patrons.

One common solution to this issue is communicating through these patrons' children. The children of immigrants often learn English much quicker than their parents, due to their interaction with native English speakers in public schools. However, due to their difficult position of being caught between two languages and cultures, "they may appear to have oral mastery of both [but] lack academic command or nuanced understanding of either;" the outcome of this misunderstanding is often "unintended discrimination from librarians and teachers who assume a more complex linguistic knowledge than the young person actually possesses" (Asher, 2011, p. 45). Librarians then need to include children in their assessments of literacy and not assume that the children have superior skills compared to their parents. As Lim (2009)

encourages, “Thus, in addition to providing services for the immigrant children and expecting them to be bridges between the library and the parents, public libraries should develop better ways to approach the immigrant adults as well” (p. 19). What seemed like a solution just brings helpful but unprepared librarians back to their original problem.

To get to the root of understanding an immigrant’s literacy skills and gaps, libraries need to employ multilingual and multicultural workers. To be explicit, libraries need to employ *more* multilingual and multicultural workers. In a 2003 survey, 93% of libraries surveyed had staff with proficiency in multiple languages, and yet, “immigrant patrons [still] expressed a desire for … bilingual and bicultural staff,” along with signage, informational brochures, and materials in foreign languages (Burke, 2008, p. 33). Of course, all librarians, in accordance with the field’s commitment to equal access and treatment of all patrons, can and should “sympathetically consider the literature, history, art, and culture of the foreign-born” (Novotny, 2003, p. 344), regardless of their own linguistic or cultural background. However, it’s clear that there is a greater need for library workers who speak languages other than English in order to meet the needs of immigrant patrons. Efforts like the “We Speak Your Language” program in the Multnomah County Library system, where assistants cover 80 different languages in a homogenous white and English-speaking area, show how actively connecting with immigrants in their native language increases other areas of library participation, including circulation and programming (American Library Association, 2019). To replicate this program, the profession must contend with the fact that 83% of librarians and 68% of library assistants are white and non-Hispanic (Barrows, 2020). Major outreach and promotion must be done among immigrant and racial minority communities by both library schools and public institutions in order to better communicate and connect with every possible patron.

Assuming that such a drastic shift in librarian demographics will not come quickly, current librarians need to collaborate with immigrant patrons to appropriately build their collections; "involving immigrant community members in library plans and purchasing decisions of foreign-language materials is therefore something that should not be overlooked" (Dilevko & Dali, 2002, p. 130). Novotny (2003) shares the story of a librarian in the early 1900s who, unable to find Hungarian texts to purchase, gave library money to the next patron who inquired after a Hungarian book, asking them to buy whatever they wanted. This patron, with their knowledge of the Hungarian community and culture, was able to bring back dozens of titles (p. 349). Though unlikely to hand over cash these days, libraries can still utilize the interest and expertise immigrants have over their own language. Even among patrons who had knowledge of English, something as simple as an introductory video filmed in a native language did more to "[enhance] desire to study in the library, use library services, and consult library staff for assistance" than the English resources they could full comprehend (Zhao & Mawhinney, 2020, p. 1116). The importance of teaching and engaging immigrants in their native language cannot be understated.

The focus on immigrant literacy is not restricted to reading and language; similarly, libraries can work with local individuals and organizations to develop programs and services that meet the physical, social, and technological needs of immigrants. Because many immigrants are not yet literate in the social systems of the United States, "libraries often collaborate with immigration agencies and other organizations to provide information about employment, housing, legal, health care, and other services to immigrants" (Wang et al., 2017, p. 8). By surveying the community to learn "details about the population, ethnic and national representation, religious affiliations, labor unions, fraternal and social organizations, and businesses," libraries have long tailored their reference services and outreach programs to the

particular needs of immigrants (Lim, 2009, p. 15); there's a reason why the American Library Association promotes guidelines for working with and including Spanish-speaking patrons (Reference and User Services Association, 2020) and Canadian libraries have focused their multilingual efforts on expanding Cantonese collections (Dilevko & Dali, 2002). By interviewing people well-versed with the struggles of immigrants, the library may discover that the OPAC is unusable due to language and technological differences, or that "some immigrants are suspicious of giving their personal information to the library for fear of being deported" (Burke, 2008, p. 34); such discoveries could result in classes on computer usage and online privacy, which would then encourage higher usage of traditional library services. The issues may be new, but these collaborative practices date back to the early 1900s (Asher, 2011, p. 45). It's clear that extra care and cooperation is necessary to address the multiplicity of literacies among immigrant populations.

As libraries build partnerships with the immigrants they serve, they must remember that they have the institutional power and responsibility to reach out and provide. Before the need even arises, "hosting cities and counties need to prepare useful information in a language, format, and level appropriate to [immigrants]" (Assefa & Matusiak, 2018, p. 746). Waiting for requests for foreign texts or English classes before thinking of offering them, as well as offering them but doing little else to make them accessible, shows that little has changed in libraries since the early 1900s. Inclusive practices, programs, and policies "should be there from the start, not thrown in for reasons of trendiness and popularity at a moment of need; they should be part of the foundation, part of the core" (Dali & Caidi, 2017, pg. 89). The collaboration between libraries and immigrant populations will require effort and compromise from both groups, but the impetus for change and improvement lies with the former.

If public libraries are concerned about the literacy of immigrants, they must address the needs of this population on both the personal and the institutional levels; foreign language collections must be maintained, the skills and gaps of patrons must be identified on an individual basis, and input from immigrant organizations and community members must be incorporated. Though "some of the methods that libraries employed in the Progressive Era (such as close attention to community demographics and building bilingual collections that serve immigrant families' needs) remain valuable today" (Asher, 2011, p. 48), there is still work to be done on the attitudes taken towards diversity, inclusion, and immigration. As librarians concern themselves with the literacy of immigrants, they should also strengthen their own cultural literacy.

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