

The Role of Public Library in a Multicultural Society

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【 Abstract 】

A brief introduction on how a nation of immigrants is formed and the historical background of the United States changing from a Euro centric white population dominated society to a truly multicultural and multiracial society during the past few decades. The impact of the new immigrants on the U. S. society and the essential role of public libraries in a multicultural society.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Multiracial, Diversity, Diversity Awareness, Public libraries

A Nation of Immigrants

America is truly a multiracial and multicultural society. We have people from every corner of the earth living here together under one nation with equal rights. Our laws protect every citizen regardless of the color of their skin and the country of their origin.

The vast majority of people in the U.S. speak English, but some speak a different mother tongue at home. Many ethnic minorities wish to preserve their cultural heritage and language and they choose to send their young children to language schools on weekends. The government openly encourages the preservation of such diverse cultural heritage and takes pride in it. To understand how this multicultural society is formed, we must go back to the beginning of the U. S. history.

Ever since Christopher Columbus discovered Americas, many European countries wanted to follow his footsteps to expand their land holds in the New World. The Spaniards

and Portuguese first came to settle on what's now known as Central and South Americas. It was the Spanish explorer Pedro Menendez de Aviles who founded the first permanent European settlement in North America in the year 1565. He named the city St. Augustine that is still standing tall by the coast of north Florida. It has become a historical site and a tourist attraction.

The English people came much later. In 1607 about 100 colonists founded Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America. Jamestown is located near the mouth of James River of Virginia by the Atlantic coast. It is preserved and valued by American people as the founding place of the nation. In 1620 the Mayflower arrived at Plymouth. The English pilgrim founded Plymouth Colony on the northeastern corner of America. They named the area "New England". That was the beginning of the immigration movement from England to the New World.

Other European nations also wanted to seize the opportunity to colonize part of the New World. In 1621 the Dutch people occupied what's now New York and New Jersey and named it "New Netherland"; people from Sweden established "New Sweden" at the nearby state of Delaware. But neither had intention to settle there permanently, they only wanted to secure the land to insure the profits of their fur trade.

Many early colonists came to North America from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. The New World also attracted settlers from France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and other European countries as well. In the 1800's large waves of people began to arrive from southern and eastern European nations. Not all settlers came voluntarily. The English government had shipped convicts and criminals to North America as laborers. The European people transported "Black Cargo" from Africa to North America during the slave trade. Large numbers of black Africans were captured and shipped to North America and sold as slaves to work on plantations. When the colonists first came to North America, the only people who lived here were Native American Indians. But they were soon killed or chased westwards by the white settlers.

Most white Americans trace their ancestry to Europe. People from different European countries came here to build a new nation and formed a melting pot. At the very beginning, the ingredients for this melting pot were all white population with various old European cultures and traditions. African Negroes and Native Americans Indians were not equals to their white counterparts and had no citizenship rights. The Euro centric white population

dominated this country and formed a unified culture. It is not until much later the colored races were permitted to become citizens.

For a very long time, America was a country of oppression, inequality, segregation, and discrimination against all colored people. They slaved the African Negroes over two hundred years, killed many Native American Indians, and enacted laws to restrict the immigration of Asian. Chinese were only allowed to come as laborers to work on the transcontinental railroad, but were not privileged for citizenship. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the government put many Japanese Americans, including women and children, in internment camps. African Americans were treated as second-class citizens in many states for a very long time, especially in the Deep South, long after the Emancipation Proclamation.

Forming a multicultural and multiracial Society

In 1952 the Immigration and Nationality Act, for the first time, made citizenship available to people of all races. The civil rights movement in the 60's had awoken the conscience of most Americans. Many southern states removed the restriction and allowed blacks to vote. School systems began to desegregate and children of all races may attend the same school. Public school systems developed busing system to transport children away from their neighborhood schools in order to achieve racial balance. Laws by nature of racial discrimination were abolished and replaced by laws that protect all citizens regardless of race and color of their skin. The 1965 Amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act produced major changes in patterns of immigrants to the U.S. As a result these amendments, Asian immigrants increased dramatically after 1965.

Latinos or Hispanics are natives of Central and South Americas. They are the offspring of the mixed marriages of the early Portuguese or Spanish settlers and Native American women. Nowadays, hardly any Latinos are pureblooded Spaniard or Portuguese. But they speak the same language and formed their own culture. Due to the proximity of the geographic location and the political/economic situation, large waves of Latinos began to migrate to North America in recent years. Some arrived with legal papers and others simply came across the boarder illegally.

It is not until the 1960's the U.S. has truly become a diversified nation by means of

ethnic population. Today in the U.S. we have the world's most varied population in terms of ancestry. Our population includes descendants of people from almost every part of the world. The current U.S. population is about 282 million, 70% white, nearly 13 % each African American and Hispanic, 3.7% Asian and Pacific Islanders, and less than one percent Native American Indian. In other words, about 30% of today's U.S. populations are non-white or colored.

The role of government and libraries

The U.S. Constitution grants all citizens the equal rights. The government makes every effort to enact laws to protect all citizens from being discriminated. All government agencies, departments, institutions and organizations are mandated to have an up-to-date Affirmative Action Plan. The Plan not only protects everyone within the organization from being discriminated against because of race, age, gender, religion, and sexual orientation, it also assures a balanced workforce within the organization. Local governments promote minority businesses and sometimes award government contracts according to ethnic population proportion. Human Resources Offices make special effort to recruit ethnic minorities to make up the staff complement.

The U.S. government continues to encourage immigrants from all parts of the world. It consistently amends its Immigration Laws to allow more immigrants into the country. The government also openly encourages the preservation of cultural diversity and promotes celebration of different cultural heritage. Ethnic festivals are being celebrated everywhere throughout the year. Chinese New Year is one of the most popular festivals being celebrated in every Chinatown and Chinese American communities throughout the States. Many schools observe certain Jewish holidays and make them official school holidays. The Mexican communities celebrate Cinco de Mayo, and the famous Mardi Gras is celebrated in New Orleans every year. The government has officially designated the month of February the Black History Month; and the month of May the Asian Pacific Heritage Month. It's being observed from government to schools, libraries, and local communities.

The most important element in promoting cultural diversity for the society at large is through education. People of all races need to learn and understand different cultures and customs. They need to understand the difference and learn to value and appreciate each

other' culture and heritage. Libraries play a crucial role in bridging the cultural differences in society.

Different types of libraries play a different role. The Library of Congress has 29 million books and other printed and non-print materials from many lands. It is the nation's oldest cultural institution and serves as the research arm of the U.S. Congress. It also serves as a national library and frequent by scholars and researchers worldwide. Public library customers could also borrow books from the Library of Congress through interlibrary loan. Many universities and colleges offer area studies and some academic libraries have in-depth collection of such materials. However, these wealthy and in-depth collections are mainly used for scholarly work by a limited number of researchers and scholars.

The Role of Public Library

Public libraries play a rather unique role in the communities. They open their doors to anyone who chooses to walk in and use their facilities and services free of charge. People don't need a library card to visit the library and use their materials/services, though a valid library card is required in most libraries for checking out library materials for home use. Obtaining a library card is free and simple. Personal information on the library card application form is kept to a minimum. Many public libraries open for business seven days a week when budget permits. With telephone and computer hook-ups, it's no longer absolutely necessary for one to visit the library to obtain services; one could get it easily by phone or via the Internet.

Public libraries are unique in a sense that we are funded with public funding but our existence is not to serve the government and its policies. Public libraries are autonomous agents. We adhere to a higher standard of equal rights and intellectual freedom. We firmly believe that all people are created equal and we are committed to support freedom of expression and equal access to information. If the government attempts to censor or restrict the rights of readers in access of information, the library will make every effort to defend the constitutional rights of its readers.

Public library is a cultural/educational institution. Our goal is to promote and make available resources that fulfill the lifelong learning needs of our local residents. We are totally unbiased to political influence and public opinion. We respect all customers and treat them equally in spite of their age, gender, or race. We serve any walk-in patron or telephone

patron regardless of who they are. We always try our best to provide quality services to all. Our book selection policies are based solely on quality of the selected material and on accuracy of the information and we never exercise censorship.

Public library is where you meet common people from all walks of life. Over the past few decades, increasing number of new immigrants poured into the U.S. from various parts of the world. Many native-born Americans began to take interests in searching for their roots. They longed to understand the uniqueness of their own heritage. Some even began to learn the language that was spoken by their ancestors. They came to public libraries looking for information on different countries, its history, government, culture, religion, arts and music, and language. Noticing the demographic shifts and the nature of materials/services being requested, public libraries responded by developing and expanding library collections to include such resources and creating new programs and activities to meet the challenge and the needs created by this new phenomenon.

1. Collection Development

At the very beginning public libraries encountered numerous obstacles while expanding collections of this nature. Public libraries don't need an in-depth scholarly collection but a popular one to meet the demands of the general public. We need books for all age levels. We realized that we must develop an all around collection including history and geography, culture and arts, government and politics, religion and philosophy, and most of all, books in the languages of many new immigrants. Such books/materials are scarce and suppliers hard to locate.

Traditionally speaking, foreign language collections in American libraries are limited to Romance languages such as Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, and sometimes German and Russian. The recent trend tends to include Asian languages, Middle-Eastern languages, and languages of African nations.

Public libraries also lack of staff with language abilities to handle such book selection and cataloging of various foreign language materials. These obstacles were soon resolved when more and more foreign language book dealers surfaced. Some not only supply books but also provide cataloging services with a modest fee. Libraries in recent years have made efforts to recruit staff with language abilities to handle such materials and to provide face to face and/or telephone services. Books on such topics written in English

language have also increased in volume due to public demand. Not all public libraries can afford to purchase many duplicated copies of titles in area studies and foreign languages, some library systems began to rotate their collections. The rotating collection of books will stay at each branch library for four to six months. Inter-library and inter-branch loan can easily get books to the hands of the requester in a matter of days.

Some libraries also provide a multi-lingual on-line catalog. A unique on line service Babel Fish has the capability of translating text into several major languages. Many public libraries installed this feature on their on-line catalog. Users have difficulty reading English may utilize this free service.

2. Recruitment and Training

Public libraries have made a concerted effort in recent years to recruit ethnic minorities and staff with second language ability. American Library Association took a leading role by offering scholarship to encourage bright young men and women of ethnic minorities to attend library school and to join the library profession. For many years ALA offers Spectrum Scholarship to minority students attending library schools. They continue to track the scholars by offering Leadership Institute for Spectrum Scholars on annual bases. They also provide mentoring program to guide Spectrum Scholars to chart their career paths. ALA also has an able and diligent staff working at the Office For Diversity. It not only promotes diversity awareness among all libraries, it offers training and workshops during ALA conferences and takes a leading role in dealing with diversity issues and advocates for diversity awareness.

Public libraries also provide on-the-job training and diversity workshops as part of the Diversity Awareness Program. Attendance is mandatory for all staff members, especially staff in public services field. Cultural diversity workshops offer tips on how to help customers with language problem; it makes staff more sensitive to customers with a different cultural background and helps staff to better attend to customers' special needs. Such workshops not only help staff working better with customers, it also enhance the cohesiveness among a diversified workforce.

3. Exhibition and Book Displays

One of the best ways to promote a newly expanded collection in public libraries is

by way of book display and special exhibition. Some libraries even publish a list of newly acquired titles each month. Public libraries nowadays utilize the display techniques of popular bookstores. New books with shining book jackets are put on display face out. Most libraries have special display areas with attractive shelving and furniture. The area is usually well lighted and located at an eye-catching spot. A well-designed, attractive poster some times accompanies a book display. A sign to encourage customers to browse and check out books on display is a practical idea. Staff needs to maintain book display areas diligently and replenish books as often as needed.

Holiday book displays are rather popular. Ethnic holidays/festivals make excellent book display topics. Many local ethnic communities are more than happy to volunteer for the project. They bring in attractive ethnic art works, artifacts, handicrafts, books and pictures to set up the display. Sometimes they even offer to provide cultural programs for the general public.

4. Programming and activities

Public libraries provide programs and activities to all age groups. In recent years, public libraries began to offer children's story time in languages other than English or bi-lingual story times and they are quite popular among new immigrants. The bi-lingual story times are attended not only by children who speak a language other than English at home, many English-speaking children and parents also eager to attend bi-lingual story times. Parents want their children to be exposed to another culture and at the same time to learn a second language and meet new friends.

Lectures and Book Discussions on ethnic topics and biographies provide excellent opportunities for community members to exchange ideas, ask questions, and share valuable experience and insights. Books written by minority authors make good book discussion topics and are quite popular among all age groups. Family cultural programs such as poetry reading, films, concerts, and art exhibitions are welcomed programs and always well attended.

Some public libraries make it possible to have English as a Second Language Course or Citizenship Test course offered in the local libraries. The library also acts as a clearinghouse for information on tutoring services and courses for job skill training.

Conclusion

The reality of a multicultural/multiracial society in the U.S. is a rather new phenomenon and it's only formed within the past few decades. Although Native American Indians have been living here long before the European settlers arrived; African Americans have been living here for more than three hundred years. Latinos and Asian have been here for over a hundred years. But only since the 60's large numbers of Latinos and Asian came as new immigrants. At this writing, the U.S. Congress is heating up the debate on a new immigration bill. If the bill passed, another 10-12 million illegal aliens will be issued temporary work permits and eventually allowed to become citizens. Most of the 10-12 million illegal aliens are Latinos and some Asian. Many of them have been living in this country for quite a few years. Many have already used the free public services such as public schools and public libraries; some are reluctant due to their illegal status. Once the legal status is resolved, more will come to use the free services of public libraries. Moreover, one of the basic responsibilities of public libraries is to reach out for the underserved potential customers. With the ever-changing population pattern, public libraries will have to assume a much larger share of the responsibilities to assist new immigrants to learn the English language, to acquire work skills, and eventually to merge into the mainstream of the society.

The advancement of science and technology in the 20th century has pushed the world into globalization. With high-speed transportation and telecommunication, the world is getting smaller each day. Indeed we are all citizens of the world that consists of all human races. We must learn to live peacefully with each other and to respect and value other cultures as our own. Public libraries play an important role in advocating diversity awareness. We provide resources and necessary information to the general public. We help each and everyone to achieve the goal of social and economic equality and justice that ultimately will lead to a prosperous and peaceful society. It takes a dedicated effort to make the cultural awareness program successful in public libraries. Library administration and management must be totally committed to the diversity awareness program. Sufficient funds must be allocated for collection development and programming. Adequate training should be provided to staff at all levels. It takes everyone from the top management to the lower level staff to make the diversity awareness program successful in public libraries.