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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND COLLECTIVE IMPACT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: PUBLIC LIBRARIES PROMOTING RACIAL JUSTICE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

This paper provides "leaps of faith" in reporting work-in-progress of ongoing research from a grant project connecting assessment and evaluation of existing civic engagement efforts to further racial justice, strategic planning and goal setting, and future operationalization of collective impact in public libraries of the American South. The project develops and describes the capacity of public librarians and communities to lead civic engagement and promote positive social change by advancing racial justice in their environments for diverse community facets (e.g., economy, education, etc.) and within their work settings.

1. Introduction

Public libraries have the potential to effect enormous social change in their communities. In the United States (U.S.), an enduring need for social change has been the eradication of the injustices in all walks of community life stemming from racism (Black & Mehra 2023). *Civic Engagement for Racial Justice in Public Libraries (RJ@PL)* is an ongoing, three-year grant project funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services' (IMLS) *National Leadership Grants for Libraries (NLG-L) – FY 2022 Guidelines* (Implementation – Project Type) (2022-2025) (IMLS, n.d.). RJ@PL is a leap of faith in developing and describing the capacity of public librarians and communities to lead civic engagement and promote positive social change by advancing racial justice in their environments for diverse community facets (e.g., economy, education, etc.) and within their work settings (Albright et al., 2023; RJ@PL, n.d.). The research-based collaborative project is a collective impact partnership between library educators, state library leaders, public library managers and directors, and library professionals and paraprofessionals working in the American South. The United States Census Bureau's (2019) demarcation of the southern region include sixteen states -- Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia. RJ@PL uses theory of change (ToC) to develop "promising practices" of civic engagement for racial justice and contextually relevant strategic information tools of collective action (e.g., roadmap, action plan, taxonomic framework of information responses). These tools for civic engagement can be used by public libraries in the American South to overcome problems related to racism in their communities via collective action. This paper provides "leaps of faith" in reporting work-in- progress of ongoing research connecting assessment and evaluation of existing civic engagement efforts to further racial justice, strategic planning and goal setting, and future operationalization of collective impact.

2. The Need for Change

At the heart of any endeavor using ToC is the identification of a needed social change. Racism has been defined as "a system of advantage and disadvantage based on social, historical, and cultural constructions of race and ethnicity" (Salter & Adams, 2013). Racism has been identified in many forms and one of the most comprehensive and durable forms is that of structural racism—a set of social, economic, cultural, political, and economic relationships that are systemically built into the structure of society and everyday life (Salter & Adams, 2013). The persistence of structural racism was highlighted in the global consciousness that was evoked through the George Floyd riots and protests of 2020 – 2022 in the U.S. and all around the world (Mehra, 2021a; Mehra, 2021b; Brundage, 2018; Kenix & Lopez, 2021). The Floyd murder protests prompted an investigation by the United Nations' (U.N.) Human Rights Council. They issued a resolution in July 2021 advocating for the "protection of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of people of African descent against excessive use of force and other human rights violations by law enforcement officers through transformative change for racial justice and equality" (U.N. Human Rights, 2021). The findings by the U.N. prompted self-reflection among organizations in the U.S. Library associations were among those organizations who began the call for social change. For example, the Public Library Association (PLA) issued a "Statement Condemning Systemic Racism and Violence Against BIPOC People" (PLA, 2021). Similarly, the American Library Association (ALA) also issued a press release where the organization "accepts and acknowledges its role in upholding unjust systems of racism and discrimination against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) within the association and the profession" (ALA, 2020).

3. Theory of Change and Collective Impact

RJ@PL was created as a response to the calls for change in communities and the library and information science (LIS) professions. The project was developed as a study using ToC that is also a collective impact initiative (Albright et al., 2023).

Theory of Change is a methodology and process developed by non-profit organizations: "Theory of Change is essentially a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It is focused in particular on mapping out or 'filling in' … the 'missing middle' between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved" (Center for the Theory of Change, Inc., n.d.). ToC projects are characterized by a deep understanding of the context of a problem and an examination of the underlying assumptions around the problem or need. ToC links the short-term, intermediate term, and long-term outcomes using a logic model and a careful sequencing of events to accomplish the desired social change (Weiss, 1995; Andrews, 2005; Reinholz & Andrews, 2020).

Collective impact is a typology of initiative characterized by a network of diverse stakeholders working towards a common goal. Kania and Kramer (2011) define collective impact as "long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Their actions are supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization."

4. RJ@PL as Collective Impact

RJ@PL consists of three phases conducted over three years (Mehra et al., 2023):

- Phase I - Needs Assessment (Year 1): Assessment of public library efforts to promote racial justice and civic engagement externally as a community agency and internally as a workplace.

- Phase II - Strategic Planning (Year 2): Operationalization of a responsive and participatory strategic planning process using a theory of change to develop action plans that further racial justice.

- Phase III - Implementation (Year 3): Implementation of key strategic components that

support racial justice in select domains of community life (e.g., economy, education, environment, public policy, health, information technology, law and justice, social welfare, and youth/family learning). This includes the development and implementation of information-based offerings in six/eight library settings to promote racial equity and civic engagement.

Basic contextualized information about the need for change and efforts of change in civic engagement for racial justice was collected during Phase I which has been completed. The project is currently in Phase II where strategic planning meetings with key stakeholder groups are being held on a monthly basis to develop and refine action plans for achieving racial justice in communities through public library civic engagement in the various domains. Phase III will commence in August 2024.

RJ@PL has four project objectives:
- Objective 1: To implement two quantitative online surveys and collect feedback from library staff about race-based concerns in their communities (1A) and within their work settings (1B). A third online survey will collect feedback from library community stakeholders in the 17 regions about race-relations in their environments (1C).
- Objective 2: To conduct qualitative focus groups/interviews with library staff from each region about their challenges to further racial justice in their external communities and in their internal work settings.
- Objective 3: To develop and refine community engagement frameworks and strategic action plans using ToC for external and internal relationship building during 12 online strategic planning workshops that will include prototype designs for particular domains with potential actions, resources, and promising practices.
- Objective 4: To implement select information-based solutions and programming that furthers civic engagement for racial justice in external and internal constituencies at six/eight exemplar libraries.

Objective 1 and Objective 2 have been completed, while we are underway with Objective 3. Objective 4 will be conducted during the third year of the grant.

5. Collective Impact: Conditions for Success
Table 1 summarizes how RJ@PL illustrates the conditions of collective impact according to Kania and Kramer (2011).

Kania and Kramer CI Success Condition	RJ@PL Program Element
Common Agenda "Collective impact requires all participants to have a shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions" (Kania & Kramer 2011, p. 39).	Project goal and rationale; agenda set by professional associations and social need. Theory of change as a mechanism to determine and drive change.
Shared Measurement Systems "Developing a shared measurement system is essential to collective impact." (Kania & Kramer 2011, p. 40).	Project logic model and goals and objectives.
Mutually Reinforcing Activities "Collective impact initiatives depend on a diverse group of stakeholders working together...by encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others" (Kania & Kramer 2011, p. 40).	Monthly workshops leading to selection of exemplar libraries showcasing projects (completed in year 3).
Continuous Communication "Developing trust… is a monumental challenge. Participants need several years of regular meetings to build up enough experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their different efforts." (Kania & Kramer 2011, p. 40).	Monthly online workshop meetings on Zoom to discuss project data and establish priority actions; Project strategic planning document for each domain available through Google docs; communication with an advisory board and diversity and domain taskforce (throughout the three-year grant).
Backbone Support Organizations "Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization and staff with a very specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative." (Kania & Kramer 2011, p. 40).	RJ@PL project team; funding support from IMLS; educational institutions.

Table 1. RJ@PL illustrating the conditions of collective impact (Albright et al., 2023).

An important note to consider is that in this study the assumption is that taking collective actions in the RJ@PL will lead to a collective impact. Phase 1 (Needs Assessment) involved collecting collective feedback about experiences and perspectives (via surveys and interviews/focus groups). Phase II (Strategic Planning) is helping to identify proposed actions and giving "voice" to southern public librarians in collective planning. Phase III (Implementation) will operationalize collective actions in specific settings.

6. Conclusion
RJ@PL serves as a testbed focusing on the southern public libraries and their selected communities located in its seventeen regions as a pilot with implications for national-level impact. By identifying and discussing strategic opportunities for interventions through civic engagement, public libraries can catalyze change and nurture racial justice in the creation of a just world.

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