

Reading in Mirrors: Using Genre to Ignite Practitioner Inquiry with Urban Public Service Librarians

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Abstract

Given various social issues that are known to arise in serving the public in public libraries, library service in these communities becomes embedded with literacy practices that are social. For African American librarians serving in libraries situated in predominantly African American lower-income enclaves, the social can often blend with the personal, given that the librarians share a cultural identification and history with the community members they serve. Given this cultural meeting point, questions around critical social theory (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005) and social literacies (Street, 1984; Brandt & Clinton, 2002) come to mind. What does it mean to be an educated, African American, community-based, educator in an inner city neighborhood? Who is literate in the interaction between a black librarian and a patron from an inner city neighborhood?

For the past decade, a literary genre emerging from Hip Hop culture, known as “street literature,” has been popular in public libraries. Patrons are reading street literature (a.k.a. “street lit”) prolifically, often borrowing many, many copies of books from their local public library (Doyle, 2005; Morris, et al., 2006; Morris, 2010; Sweeney, 2010). With street literature being a popular leisure reading genre of many readers today, what does it mean for a librarian to be a reader of this genre? How do librarians respond to this genre? How does the reading of this genre ignite inquiry within the professional stances and practices of the librarian toward his/her patrons? What issues about the librarians’ professional literacy practices emerge from book club discourse and how do the librarians reflectively unpack these issues?

This is a study of Philadelphia-based African American librarians who serve or have served in lower-income urban enclaves, colloquially regarded as the “inner city.” This group has been formed into a year-long book club that is reading contemporary and historical street literature as a means of practitioner inquiry for the purpose of professional development. This dissertation explores and unpacks the literary responses of street literature amongst the librarian group. This dissertation investigates what it means to be an educated, black literacy professional in urban settings and how when the librarian reads what their library patrons read (thus becoming a patron of his/her own workplace), meaningful and insightful spaces for practitioner inquiry rise up to impact the social literacies of black librarians in important ways.

The study aims to state the case that when librarians read what their patrons read, and reflectively question those readings “in community” with other reading librarians (i.e. in the form of a book club), genre becomes the catalyst for practitioner inquiry, and in turn, inquiry ignites a heightened sense of the impact of one’s professional literacy practices in culturally relevant ways (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lytle, 1996). This research holds the potential for informing educators in schools and libraries of the efficacy of becoming readers of their students’ and patrons’ readings, so that teacher and librarians are more literate about what kinds of stories are relevant, engaging, meaningful and impactful, for the reading communities they serve.

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