Minding the *Gap*: Cultivating Intercultural Skills by Incorporating Social-Justice Competency in LIS Curriculum

Rajesh Singh[a] and Shari Lee[a]

[a]St. John's University, USA

singhr1@stjohns.edu, lees2@stjohns.edu

ABSTRACT

Implementing intercultural skills and the development of cultural intelligence in library and information science (LIS) education is the first step toward promoting social justice, not only in the LIS field but also within the wider community. This action requires that LIS programs review and revise their course curricula, program content, and educational approaches to prepare future LIS professionals to recognize and fearlessly challenge social injustice. This study aims to demonstrate the importance of cultivating intercultural skills and emphasizes the need for including social justice in LIS education. A case is made for utilizing the revised ALA competencies in this endeavor. The study also demonstrates how an LIS program at St. John's university incorporated social justice competency in its revised program goals and discusses its implications for making a meaningful change both in the profession and the wider community.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

social justice; education programs/schools; curriculum; community engagement; specific populations

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

EDI; diversity; inclusion; cultural competency; LIS education; ALA core competencies

INTRODUCTION

The concept of working for social justice requires difficult but necessary conversations about race, racism, and destabilizing whiteness; enfranchising Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), as well as all others who use/work in library spaces; working for diversity, equity, and inclusion; and most importantly, knowledge of how to practice social justice in LIS pedagogies and practices as information professionals. While there has been an increase in conversations about social justice in recent years (e.g., Cooke et al., 2016; Gregory & Higgins, 2017; Rioux & Mehra, 2016), library and information science (LIS) education needs to move beyond performative "diversity" efforts and toward measurable, significant, and lasting change. It is not sufficient to just mention social justice and diversity issues within the field. Cultural diversity within the profession demands that intercultural skills are developed within LIS programs, workplace, and the larger community. Indicators of an intercultural skillset includes a respect for diversity, understanding cultures through cultural engagement and experience, using accurate cultural generalizations, avoiding stereotypes, understanding language usage, nonverbal behaviors and cues, communication styles, cognitive styles, as well as cultural values (Bennett, 2016). The development and application of intercultural skills and cultural intelligence within LIS education is the first step towards taking meaningful action toward the promotion of social justice in the LIS field and beyond. This requires that LIS programs review and revise their course curricula, program content, and educational approaches to enable future LIS professionals to fearlessly challenge social injustice (Mehra, 2021; Poole et. al, 2021; Singh & Rioux, 2021).

This study aims to demonstrate the importance of cultivating intercultural skills and emphasizes the need for incorporating social justice competency in LIS education. It also discusses the revisions made to the LIS program at St. John's university when the social justice competency was incorporated into the curriculum and discusses the implications for making meaningful change in the profession and the wider community.

BACKGROUND

Intercultural Skills in LIS Context.

Intercultural skills are of interest within the LIS profession, as information professionals are often required to work with diverse communities with equally diverse needs. The following list includes areas of study related to intercultural skills and concepts that are of interest to LIS researchers:

- **Diversity in collection/services**: A successful librarian is able to recognize and evaluate bias and/or whiteness in their collection/services and eliminate this bias by adapting their collections/services to fit the needs of their multiculturally diverse community of patrons (Gavier & Scobey, 2001; Mortensen, 2019; Pawley, 2006; Wickham & Sweeney, 2018).

- **Cultural competence**: A successful librarian is culturally competent, and a successful information organization will promote cultural competence training to enhance inclusivity (Erickson et al., 2019; Ouvrard-Prettol, 2017; Overall, 2009).

- **Diverse programs and services for marginalized/underserved populations**: A successful librarian offers a wide variety of programs and services that are tailored to the needs of

marginalized and underserved populations and creates outreach programs and partnerships to get these populations involved with the library (Eastman & Prince, 2021; Leung & Jeffery, 2021; Mi, et al., 2014).

- **Intercultural skills**: A successful librarian has an intercultural skillset and is able to effectively use their cultural knowledge and intercultural communication skills to interact with patrons (Cooke, 2017; Ryan & Qayyum, 2012; White & Martel, 2021)

- **Diversity in LIS workforce**: Historically, the LIS workforce has been predominately white and female. A successful information organization recruits and retains a diverse staff (Hastings, 2015; Honma, 2005; Larsen, 2017).

- **Racial battle fatigue**: Successful librarians understand the racial battle fatigue that their colleagues of color face and should create safe environments for their colleagues as well as take racial battle fatigue into account in the recruitment, mentoring, and retainment of librarians of color. This holds true for LIS faculty in universities and colleges (Chancellor, 2019; Cooke & Sanchez, 2019)

- **Privilege**: A successful librarian understands the concept of privilege, can recognize their own privilege, and attempt to eliminate privilege from libraries by making equitable services and access to resources (Martin, 2020; Smith & Hanson, 2019).

- **Intersectionality**: A successful librarian understands intersectionality, recognizes their own intersectionality and that of their patrons, and implements an intersectional mindset in their organization. The LIS education should also address intersectionality for future information professionals to carry into the workforce (Chou & Pho, 2018; Ettarh, 2014; Hackney et al., 2018; Villa-Nicholas, 2018).

- **Microaggressions**: A successful librarian is aware of what microaggressions are, holds themselves accountable, and recognizes if they or a colleague are experiencing microaggressions. A successful information organization will have a plan in place to address microaggressions to create a more inclusive environment (Alabi, 2015; Sweeney & Cooke, 2018; Wheeler, 2016)

- **Structural/institutional policies/racism**: A successful librarian addresses and combats structural and institution racism and information organization has policies set in place that combat both structural and institutional racism to provide for more equity (Davison, 2020; Matthews, 2020; Sonnie, n.d.).

- **The importance of cultivating intercultural skills in LIS education**: A successful LIS graduate education program implements the cultivation of intercultural skills into their curriculum to create culturally competent and culturally intelligent future information professionals that can communicate with diverse patrons (Adkins et al., 2015; Cooke & Jacobs, 2014; Poole et. al, 2021; Mehra, 2021; Nilsen, 2004; Roy & Long, 2019).

The Need for Social Justice Education and Training for Information Professionals.

Professional organizations play an important role in cultivating intercultural skills in information professionals. Many LIS-related professional associations promote social justice and have equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) statements that promote intercultural skills and cultural competency in the workplace. For example, the American Library Association (ALA) has outlined its commitment to EDI by providing a comprehensive list of resources, standards and competencies, and opportunities for involvement in equity, diversity, and inclusion projects across a spectrum of professional activities. As the accrediting body for graduate LIS programs in the U.S., Canada, and Puerto Rico, the ALA highlights the importance of equipping information professionals with social-justice skills and competencies in two of its educational standards (ALA, 2019), noting that "the role of library and information services in a diverse global society, including the role of serving the needs of underserved groups" (I.2.6), and underscoring the importance of responding "to the needs of a diverse and global society, including the needs of underserved groups" (II.2.4). Furthermore, the 2021 ALA Core Competencies of Librarianship intentionally incorporates the concepts of social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion throughout the document and as a separate category.

Diversity is also a core value of the Society of American Archivists, which emphasizes that "the archives profession must constantly work toward creating anti-oppressive environments that encourage participation from people across the spectrum of experience" not only within collections, but also within professional associations, institutions, and education programs (SAA, 2020, Core Values of Archivists section, para. 11). The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) sets diversity standards for cultural competence within academic libraries in order to advance work with diverse populations and maintain a diverse workforce (ACRL, 2012). There are 11 standards that all revolve around cultural competence and intercultural skills, these are: cultural awareness of self and others, cross-cultural knowledge and skills, organizational and professional values, development of collections, programs, and services, service delivery, language diversity, workforce diversity, organizational dynamics, cross-cultural leadership, professional education and continuous learning, and research (ACRL, 2012).

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has adopted similar language, demonstrating its commitment to social justice. This is referenced in their official statutes. For example, 2.3.2 mentions "the belief that people, communities, and organizations need universal and equitable access to information, ideas, and works of imagination for their social, educational, cultural, democratic, and economic well-being" (IFLA, 2008, p.2). IFLA also drafted an article in celebration of the World Day of Social Justice, which argues that libraries are social-justice institutions due to their two general goals for providing access to information and services to the community, primarily in regard to building job skills (IFLA, 2019). The piece ends with a plea, asking for "the recognition, the partnerships and the support" (p. 8) to strengthen their capacity to facilitate social justice. These professional associations prominently stress the need to equip information professionals with intercultural competence and intercultural skills by providing comprehensive social-justice education and training to in order to bridge social inequities to serve people from multicultural backgrounds.

INCORPORTAING SOCIAL-JUSTICE COMPETENCY IN PROGRAM GOALS AT ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

The literature review in the preceding sections illustrate the importance of cultivating a social justice mindset in future information professionals by equipping them with intercultural skills and competencies. The example below demonstrates how the LIS program at St. John's university incorporated social justice as one area of competency and discusses the implications for making a meaningful change in the profession and the wider community.

Context.

The ALA Core Competencies (ALACC) for Librarianship are the set of skills and knowledge areas that the organization deems essential for information professional to perform their work effectively. In 2021, ALA revised these competencies; one major change was the addition of Social Justice core competency. The inclusion of social justice as a core competency recognizes the critical role that librarians play in promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion in their communities. Overall, the revised competencies outline specific skills and knowledge areas that librarians should possess to effectively serve their communities and address issues related to social justice, including cultural competence, community engagement, and social responsibility regardless of their specific title and/or role.

Revising the Program Goals to Include Social Justice.

The 2021 ALACC provided the necessary impetus for revising the program goals at St. John's university in Fall 2022. While comprehensive revisions were made to the program goals, this study focusses specifically on how social justice was incorporated as one area of competency in the revised program goals.

With the addition of Social Justice to the ALACC, the obvious impact on the LIS program raised two questions: Should Social Justice/EDI be a program goal? If so, how should this be incorporated into the curriculum to ensure that this competency is achievable for students? It was unanimously decided to include social justice as a program goal, particularly because of the emphasis ALA now placed on Social Justice/EDI. This decision was further supported by the current trend indicating that employers increased their LIS job opportunities for candidates with social justice/EDI knowledge and experience by 46% in 2021(SJSU, 2022, slide #7).

Regarding the second question, one option was to add a course with an EDI/social justice focus to the core requirement. This could be a course that was already offered, or one that would be created specifically to meet the stated need. However, in reviewing the course offerings at the time, it was determined that three existing courses would meet the program ALACC requirements. These courses were:

1. Social Justice in the Information Professions (Spring)
2. Cultural Competence for Information Professionals (Summer)
3. Materials & Services for Diverse Populations (Fall)

Since all three courses were considered to independently meet the requirements for the social justice program goal; the decision was made to offer the students the option of taking any of the three courses listed above as a means of fulfilling the social justice requirement.

Satisfying this area of competency requires that students demonstrate an understanding of their own cultural identity, including positionality related to power, privilege, and oppression, and an awareness of how these abilities influence the ways in which one interacts within the community and among decision makers. Adding Social Justice as an area of the competency is significant because it is now a requirement for graduation and is supported by the addition of the Social Justice program goal to the curriculum. To meet graduation requirements students must take one of the three elective courses listed above, which now comprise the newly unveiled Advanced Certificate in Social Justice in the Information Professions.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Library school programs have an important role to play in promoting social justice in the field. This study highlights how a LIS program incorporated social justice competency in its revised program goals to ensure how future information professionals could be equipped with intercultural skills. The other LIS programs could adopt a similar or a different approach by identifying strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities in their curriculum content, pedagogical, and assessment approaches in cultivating intercultural skills in future information professionals.

By incorporating the ALA core competencies, which now includes social justice, into their program goals or objectives, library schools can take a giant step forward in preparing the next generation of librarians to be effective advocates for social justice and equity in their communities. Including social justice into the program goals or objectives of library school programs would indicate that LIS education was now ready to address a long acknowledged, and growing, concern among library directors and library science educators – that today's librarians need unique skills, knowledge, and abilities to provide the cutting-edge library services this country's growing number of distinctly urban environments require (Wayne State University, 2008). Incorporating social justice in the curriculum would, therefore, provide a valuable avenue for improving employment viability of the students as well as faculty development and teaching.

Implications.

Curriculum: Library schools would enhance program outcomes and improve student viability in the job market if they updated their curriculum to reflect the ALA core competencies, including the social justice competency. This could mean developing new courses or updating existing ones to include social justice issues and to facilitate the development skills, such as cultural competence, community engagement, and advocacy.

Student learning outcomes: Students would benefit if library schools developed student learning outcomes that align with the ALA core competencies, including the social justice competency. This would ensure that students graduate with the skills and knowledge necessary to be effective librarians and advocates for social justice.

Field experience: Library programs offering field experiences, such as internships or service-learning projects, should consider providing students opportunities to apply the ALA core

competencies in these real-world settings, such as working with diverse communities or partnering with local organizations to promote social justice.

Faculty development and Teaching: Library schools can provide faculty development opportunities to encourage faculty to incorporate the ALA core competencies, including the social justice competency, into their teaching and research. This would help ensure that social justice is integrated into all aspects of library school programs.

REFERENCES

Adkins, D., Virden, C., & Yier, C. (2015). Learning about diversity: The toles of LIS education, LIS associations, and lived experience. *Library Quarterly*, *85*(2), 139–149. doi: 10.1086/680153

Alabi, J. (2015). "This actually happened": An analysis of librarians' responses to a survey about racial microaggressions. *Journal of Library Administration*, 55(3), 179-191.

Bennett, M.J. (2016). Intercultural competence for global leadership. *IDR Institute*. https://www.idrinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Global_ICC_IDRI.pdf.

Chancellor, R. L. (2019). Racial battle fatigue: The unspoken burden of black women faculty in LIS. *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science*, *60*(3), 182–189. doi: 10.3138/jelis.2019-0007

Chou, R. L., & Pho, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Pushing the margins: Women of color and intersectionality in LIS* (Ser. Series on critical race studies and multiculturalism in lis, number 3). Library Juice Press.

Cooke, N. A. (2017). *Information services to diverse populations: Developing culturally competent library professionals*. Libraries Unlimited.

Cooke, N. A., & Jacobs, J. A. (2018). Diversity and cultural competence in the LIS classroom: A curriculum audit. *Urban Library Journal*, *24*(1), 1–19.

Cooke, N. A., & Sánchez, J. O. (2019). Getting it on the Record: Faculty of Color in Library and Information Science. *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science*, *60*(3), 169–181. doi: 10.3138/jelis.60.3.01

Cooke, N. A., Sweeney, M. E., & Noble, S. U. (2016). Social justice as topic and tool: An attempt to transform an LIS curriculum and culture. *Library Quarterly*, *86*(1), 107–124. doi: 10.1086/684147

Davison, A. (2020). Combating systemic racism: Compassion, empathy, and reaching out to others are key to addressing discriminatory implicit bias. *AALL Spectrum*, 29–31

Eastman, J., & Prince, J. J. (2021). Lighting the way: Providing timely resources for underserved populations. *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children*, *19*(1), 34–35. doi: 10.5860/cal.19.1.34

Erickson, S., Rondeau, S., & Sweeney, M. (2019). "Drops of diversity": How a small academic library is working to increase cultural competence. *College & Research Libraries News*, *80*(11), 608–626.

Ettarh, F. (2014). Making a new table: Intersectional librarianship. *In The Library With The Lead Pipe*. https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/making-a-new-table-intersectional-librarianship-3/

Gavier, M. J., & Scobey, S. E. (2001). Enhancing and promoting library services to attract diverse populations. *Colorado Libraries*, *27*(4), 12–15.

Gregory, L., & Higgins, S. (2017). Reorienting an information literacy program toward social justice: Mapping the core values of librarianship to the ACRL framework. *Communications in Information Literacy*, *11*(1), 42–54

Hackney, S.E., Handel, D., Hezekiah, B., Hochman, J., Lau, A., & Sula, C.A. (2018). Visualizing identities in LIS literature. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, *59* (1/2), 10-32. doi: 10.3138/jelis.59.1-2.04

Hastings, S. K. (2015). If diversity is a natural state, why don't our libraries mirror the populations they serve? *Library Quarterly*, *85*(2), 133–138, doi: 10.1086/680152

Honma, T. (2005). Trippin' over the color line: The invisibility of race in library and information studies. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 1(2), doi: 10.5070/D412000540

Larsen, S. E. (2017). Diversity in public libraries: Strategies for achieving a more representative workforce. *Public Libraries*, *56*(3), 32–36.

Leung, M., & Jeffery, M. (2021). It takes two (or more): Developing partnerships to serve marginalized populations. *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children*, *19*(2), 28–30. doi: 10.5860/cal.19.2.28

Martin, M. H. (2020). Checking your privilege. *Alki*, *36*(3), 5–6.

Matthews, A. (2020). Racialized youth in the public library: Systemic racism through a critical theory lens. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library & Information Practice & Research*, *15*(1), 1–17. doi: 10.21083/partnership.v15i1.5348

Mehra, B. (2021). Social justice design and implementation: Innovative pedagogies to transform LIS education. *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science*, 62*(4)*, 460–476, doi: 10.3138/jelis-62-4-2020-0094

Mi, M., Stefaniak, J., & Afonso, N. (2014). Community needs assessment to reach out to an underserved population. *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, *33*(4), 375–390. doi: 10.1080/02763869.2014.957075

Mortensen, A. (2019). Measuring diversity in the collection. *Library Journal*, *144*(4), 28–30.

Nilsen, K. S. (2004). LIS education for multiculturalism and diversity. *Feliciter*, *50*(1), 17–18

Ouvrard-Prettol, E. (2017). What cultural competence means for librarians: How to cultivate this important skill to positively impact our patrons. *Young Adult Library Services*, *15*(2), 27–28.

Overall, P.M. (2009). Cultural competence: A conceptual framework for library and information science professionals. *Library Quarterly*, *79*(2), 175-204.

Pawley, C. (2006). Unequal legacies: Race and multiculturalism in the LIS curriculum. *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 76(2), 149-168. doi:10.1086/506955

Poole, A. H., Agosto, D., Greenberg, J., Lin. X, & Yan, E. (2021). Where do we stand? Diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in North American library and information science education. *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science*, *62*(3), 258–286. doi: 10.3138/jelis.2020-0018.

Rioux, K., & Mehra, B. (2016). Introduction. In B. Mehra & K. Rioux (Eds.), *Progressive communication action: Critical theory and social justice in library and information science*. Library Juice Press.

Singh, R., & Rioux, K. (2021). Leveraging social justice pedagogy to counter racism: Conceptualizing an advanced certificate in social justice for information professionals. *Education for Information*, 37, 203-217, doi: 10.3233/EFI-211506.

SJSU, School of Information. (2021). MSLIS Skills at work: A snapshot of job postings 2022.
    PowerPoint Presentation.
    https://ischool.sjsu.edu/sites/main/files/fileattachments/career_trends.pdf?1655307854

Wayne State University, Library and Information Science Program. (2008). *Educating urban
    libraries summit: Final report*.
    https://sis.wayne.edu/about/urban_libraries_final_report.pdf