
This project creates a professionally printed and bound book to collect youth-created texts and images from public library programs in a long-standing African-American community with high levels of poverty and crime. The project was conducted to empower the numerous voices of the young people of a struggling community library by drawing on community strengths in an area most often defined by its weaknesses.

Two cameras were loaned to McDougald Terrace Branch Library in Durham, North Carolina, and texts and photographs created during the daily programming were collected. These texts included highly personal poems and descriptions of self and community. The final book was professionally printed in color and paperback bound, and two copies of the final book were given to the public library collection. McDougald Terrace library closed in October 2013 and the book remains a patron-created document of its final months. Final written reflections consider future directions of the project to other libraries and agreement on project success by McDougald Terrace’s librarian.

Headings:

Libraries & community

Public libraries -- Cultural Programs

Libraries & blacks

Young adults’ libraries -- Activity programs

Children’s libraries -- Activity programs
PUBLISHING IMAGES AND TEXTS CREATED BY YOUNG UNDERSERVED PUBLIC LIBRARY PATRONS TO STRENGTHEN VOICE

by
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Rationale

How can public libraries empower African-American youth in developing an authentic voice? This is a professional question that this project’s final book and this accompanying reflection attempts to address.

The problem of African-American educational and economic poverties is clear across several indicators. Census poverty means for African-Americans were at 25.8% of the country’s population compared to 11.6% for white residents of the United States (U.S. Census Bureau Poverty Rates, 2013, p.2). This socioeconomic deprivation largely determines an African-American child’s school site and their experience of literacy and numeracy education. Breakdowns for mathematics/reading reveal strong disparities between white children and Hispanic/African-American. The 2013 Nation’s Report Card showed only 14% of African-American 8th graders considered “Proficient” at mathematics, compared to 45% White. Similarly, only 17% of 8th grade African-American youth read at a “Proficient” level compared to 46% of White youth (Nation’s Report Card, 2013). These disparities are even higher at a 4th grade level age.

These educational experiences feed the economic disparities. At the time of writing, African-Americans have a 13.4% unemployment rate compared to 6.7% for White Americans. This is a persistent difference across the past three decades, never dropping below 4% (DeSilver, 2013). Yet of the 2.3 million incarcerated individuals in the United States, a remarkable 1 million are African-American, with harsher sentencing
and arrest rates. This is a damaging ecology with serious consequences for the children even peripherally involved, in terms of their expectations of themselves and the expectations others may develop of their potential.

Educators such as Alfred Tatum have attempted to provide pedagogical routes out of this ecology by introducing historical and contemporary texts authored by black writers to support both fundamental self-image/identity processes and literacy motivation (Tatum, 2009). Most schools, and libraries however, survive on the annual black history month, with its library displays and a brief classroom focus on this or that figures. James Banks proposes a more integrative approach that transforms curriculum from annual add-ons to “enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse ethnic and cultural groups”, or even more, to “make decisions on important social issues” (Banks, 2009, p. 19). This integration of multiple social viewpoints into previously homogenous curricula creates rooms more affirmative development of racial identity. This is essential for younger children and adolescents, argues Beverly Tatum, in developing an identity that understands the challenges of the black social experience but can share these difficulties among themselves, while valuing their own and their community’s contributions (Tatum, 2003). One way out of the damaging ecology, then, is to affirm the strengths of black youth at a crucial young time of identity development. This is the motivation for this project.

**Approach**

This project provides a forum for young African-Americans to document both the strengths and weaknesses of their community and then to see that work in a form (bound print) usually reserved for others. This project supports not school but public libraries,
however, and this is to its advantage in having the time and flexibility to approach identity and community support without the limits of curriculum. I selected a public library with a significant African-American community at a low socioeconomic level. I made contact with the librarian and agreed to provide cameras for the young patrons to document their lives and the programs they enjoy at the library, while also collecting texts coming from those programs. I then designed a book using those materials and had it professionally printed and bound in color by an online printing vendor. The books were then donated to the library’s collection.

**Aims**

I had four primary aims. These guided the selection of the community, the design of the final book, and my interaction with the site librarian:

1. To empower young patrons of the chosen community by strengthening their voice
2. To give the selected community the equipment and opportunity to create a printed document of themselves
3. To test the generalizability of the project beyond the single chosen site

Additionally, for sake of personal convenience, the site must be within Wake or Durham Counties, in North Carolina.

**Site Selection**

The first step was to choose a project site. To satisfy these requirements, I chose McDougald Public Terrace Branch Library in Durham, NC. McDougald Terrace is a
public housing project built in 1953 with multiple generations of inhabitants. Durham County is 38.8% African-American, a full 16 percent above North Carolina’s state average (U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts, 2013), with a county poverty rate of 18%. Yet McDougald Terrace has a poverty rate of almost 50%, with an entirely African-American community form its creation in the 1950s as an intentionally segregated housing development (Open Durham, 2012).

Past employees of Durham Public Libraries (DPL) have refused to work at McDougald because of the gang activity and crime levels. This is not an entirely exaggerated concern. A bullet recently struck the library and lodged itself in a wall next to the library entrance after an armed incident nearby. The library uses a small set of rooms inside the Durham Housing Authority building, with a main space for the very small collection and 12 PCs, a large storage room for the programs and a kitchen.

The branch library is open only part-time, with two part-time library assistants and one librarian who divides her time between McDougald and the main library, Heather Cunningham, running all programs. The library is open only from 2pm to 6pm, weekdays only, with programming every day attended by anywhere between three and twenty kids from the McDougald project. Their ages range from 5 through to late teens, with uneven attendance.

**Cameras**

I purchased two low-price digital cameras and loaned them to the library for the entire period of the project. Cunningham loaned out the cameras to interested young patrons for a short time and told them to take whatever pictures they chose. Additionally, the cameras were used during the larger daily programming to document in-library
events. The McDougald patrons took almost all of the pictures, with a small number by Heather and myself. This fits the project aim of having the community patrons document their lives and their experience of the library site.

**Programs**

An important foundation of the project was to capture the existing programming of the library and use the book to document these programs. McDougald has a busy programming schedule, with each event beginning at around 4pm after school and continuing for around an hour. The themes varied: literacy, science, race and identity, self-expression, emotions and calm. All were done very cheaply, with snacks provided. Due to the low incomes of the McDougald families, many of the kids were hungry by the end of the day. The final program was a lengthy and expensive workshop (grant funded) with the Chapel Hill-based educational slam poetry group the Sacrificial Poets. The patrons were encouraged to use the cameras to document the programs. Cunningham passed on scans of much written and typed material from these programs, mostly moving and revealing poems. Many of them found their way into the book.

**Design & Print**

Once the text and images were collected, I designed the book using Adobe InDesign, emphasizing color, simplicity and the work of the McDougald Terrace patrons. I then exported the file as a pdf to the self-publishing site Lulu. Ideally, the book would be published as a large hardcover, but project expenses prevented this. Instead, I chose a larger format color paperback, 9 inches by 7 inches, printing four copies, two for McDougald’s collection and two for the master’s requirements. The final book cost
through Lulu.com came to around $35 per copy, not including shipping, a reasonable and achievable cost for future uses of this project model

**The Library**

McDougald Terrace Branch Library closed down in October of 2013. The DCL press release stated that the motives were “budgetary as well as related to staff allocation” (Durham County Library, 2013) and all programming was moved to DPL’s Stanford Warren library nearby. It should be noted that the Durham Housing Authority begins a process of “revitalization” of McDougald Terrace after receiving a $300,000 Choice Neighborhood’s Initiative grant from the federal Housing & Urban Development agency (Durham Housing Authority, 2012). Plans involve a mixed-income neighborhood and infrastructure improvements. The role of McDougald’s current resident remains uncertain. It is possible that this very troubled sixty-year old public housing community may be dispersed around Durham and beyond during the “revitalization”.

**Archiving**

The young patrons took hundreds of pictures during the project but not all were used, due to space or the restrictions on using faces in the book. This left many hundreds of vibrant but unused pictures. These pictures, at a hub for the community’s children, may become an historically useful archival set. At the time of writing, I am attempting to have the pictures archived by Durham County Library to make them available to both historians and other interested parties, including, if possible, the residents themselves.

**Final Reflection**

The following paragraph is by Heather Cunningham, McDougald Terrace Library’s librarian, after considering the success of the book project:
The final book did reflect the strengths of the library's community because it showcased the work of the kids who frequented the McDougald Terrace Library. The kids who regularly participated in library programs are the same kids who participated in the McDougald Book Project. These kids are eager to learn, read, write, and explore new things. The pictures they took of their community and during library programs reflect their view of the world they live in. Their writings and poems provide a intimate view of their personal thoughts and emotions. The kids in this community have obviously been through some difficult situations, but the production of this book gave them a voice and illustrates their drive to succeed despite their circumstances (personal communication, November 6, 2013).

McDougald Terrace was an active library, with regular programming and a small core of younger devoted patrons and a larger group of older, more casual patrons. Some programs attract less than five patrons, others as much as twenty. Cunningham promoted the use of the cameras to the regular patrons. I made two flyers for display within the library. The attendance at the programs did not rise or fall, but continued at its usual levels. We began promoting as the cameras became available and I began collecting text materials from the writing programs. One opportunity for further projects is to adequately advertise the book project at least a month before it begins to attract more patrons to the programs. Nonetheless, we collected a large number of photographs, far more than we could use in the book.

McDougald Terrace’s programming was its most impressive quality. If a chosen site did not have strong programming the project lead would have to help arrange much of the programming in partnership with the librarian, while still attempting to capture the culture of that library in the book. This programming would have to draw on the strengths of the local community, involving as many of the young patrons as possible. If the library, due to leadership or funding, could find cost-limited ways of running such
programs after the end of the book project, this would be a valuable legacy for the project.

One limit to the McDougald Terrace project was the use of patron’s faces in the final book, an extension of DCL’s advertising policies involving children. A workaround for this could have been asking the parents of involved patrons to sign a release allowing use of faces in the book. Problems could quickly arise: suspicion of legal documents, logistics of attaining a signature, reliability of patrons taking the forms to their parents. These limitations did not work against the project, but focused the selection on representative images.

Finally due to time constraints, I alone was responsible for the final design of the book. With more time, a design process could have been implemented that integrated community input. For example: all of the photographs could have been presented and chosen by the community or the design of individual chapters or pages could have been created by individuals or groups. These and other options could have been explored if more time had been available. This would have further extended the integration of the project community into the final book.
Bibliography


