Investigating an International Exchange of Best Practices: An Institutional Ethnography Approach

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Abstract

As educators, it is the responsibility of teacher librarians to prepare students to become productive and responsible members of society. In this age of information, jobs require cognitive, personal, and interpersonal skills such as "innovative thinking and solving skills, effective communication skills, teamwork, and the ability to manage information effectively" (AASL, 2009, p. 7). In order to prepare students for living and working in today's world, traditional instructional practices and beliefs of teacher librarianship have to change and adapt to meet the needs of the learners. This research investigates an international exchange of best practices between German and American teacher librarians as an effort to learn about changing practices of teacher librarians. The context of institutional ethnography offers a critical approach for understanding the institution that is teacher librarianship and the organization of professional practices of teacher librarians on an international level.

Keywords: school libraries, school librarians, Germany, institutional ethnography

Introduction and Research Purpose

As educators, it is the responsibility of teacher librarians to prepare students for their future and prepare them to become productive and responsible members of society. These necessary "life skills" will enable students "to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (UNICEF, 2003). In this age of information, jobs require cognitive, personal, and interpersonal skills such as "innovative thinking and solving skills, effective communication skills, teamwork, and the ability to manage information effectively" (AASL, 2009, p. 7). In this role teacher librarians serve as instructional partners to create engaging and relevant learning experiences for students to prepare students for living and working in today's world. In order to prepare students, traditional instructional practices and beliefs have to change and adapt to meet the needs of the learners. School librarians are in the position not only to serve as leaders in this movement, but also as advocates for students' future (AASL, 2009; Asselin, 2005).

It is this necessitated change in practice that led the researcher to question the practices of teacher librarians on an international level and led to the institutional ethnography approach to this research. Institutional ethnography is an empirical approach to research that combines theory and method in order to understand and uncover what practices constitute an institution, how discourse may be understood to compel and shape those practices, and how norms of practice speak to individuals (DeVault & McCoy, 2002). Institutional ethnography's focus on the day-to-day work life of individuals, as well as its emphasis on describing how individuals choose to interact with and within their institutions, provides a methodology for explaining and gaining insight into the actualities of professional work lives.

This report of the investigation is from the institutional ethnography approach, as it offers a critical method for understanding the institution that is teacher librarianship and the organization of professional practices of teacher librarians on an international level. The research questions addressed by institutional ethnography are about common problems and experiences and the "desire to make changes is implicit in the frame of inquiry" (Crispin, 2009, p. 34). Therefore this research questions if there are similarities in the experiences and practices of teacher librarians across international boundaries in efforts to meet the needs of 21st century learners as imposed by the institution that is school librarianship. As teacher librarians all over the world strive to equip today's youth with the knowledge and skills needed to meet the demands of life in the 21st century and beyond, it is important to examine the work of teacher librarians. This research proposes institutional ethnography as a method for understanding the institution and the practices within the field of school librarianship as illustrated in this study.

Institutional Ethnography

Social researcher Dorothy Smith developed institutional ethnography as "sociology for the people" (Smith, 2005). Institutional ethnography is an empirical approach to research that combines theory and method to form a frame of inquiry to examine actual people, their work, how it is shaped, and the conditions of their work (Given, 2008). Smith (1987) explains institutional ethnography as a "way of seeing, from where we actually live, into the powers, processes, and relations that organize and determine the everyday context of that seeing" (p. 9).

Institutional ethnography aims to explain questions about experiences that are a "problematic," which Smith (1987) defines as "a possible set of questions that may not have been posed…but are latent in the actualities of the experienced world" (p. 91), in that they cannot be fully explained by studying the experiences themselves. These are experiences characterized by underlying tensions, contradictions, or other problems (Campbell & Gregor, 2002) that seem to be generated beyond the individuals involved. The research questions addressed by institutional ethnography are about common problems (Given, 2008) and in order to learn about a problematic, the institutional ethnographer must take the standpoint of the people whose experiences are being explained (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). Rather than adopting a frame for study, institutional ethnography begins with people's experiences of and in the institution and takes it direction from there, determining how the inquiry will relate to the institutional establishment or other aspects to the ruling relations (Given, 2008).

An institution, within institutional ethnography, refers to activities organized around a distinctive function such as the law, education, health care, or social work. People's actions are coordinated by the institutional practices that hook them into the institutional function. Therefore, the institution is the coordination of people through the institution's broad organized practices, working across time and geographic spaces. Institutional ethnography explores how it works through learning from the people who are having their actions coordinated and experiences organized. An institutional ethnography inquiry advances from the actualities of people's lives, and from their own perspectives (DeVault & McCoy, 2006; Smith, 2005).

While institutional ethnography begins with the experience of the individuals in a local setting, it aims to "go beyond what can be known" just at the local level (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 59). Smith (2005) assumes that social life is produced through the routine interactions of all participants in a social setting and moreover claims that the routine actions of individuals are connected to routine actions of people in other settings. Activity in any setting is therefore coordinated locally and extralocally. Smith asserts that this extralocal organization of activities takes place when individuals' actions are hooked into social relations, or sequences of actions that connect the work of individuals beyond their local place to the extralocal ruling relations of the institution, which affect the local experiences (Smith, 1987).

The goal of institutional ethnography is to build empirically informed arguments based on real-world practices occurring in the institutional setting and provide a way to examine practices for the people that actually experience the situations (Campbell & Gregor, 2002; Leckie, Given, & Lushman, 2010). Institutional ethnography has been utilized in research in many settings and field of study and it is especially relevant to human service settings, such as librarianship. Additionally, institutional ethnography is also known as a feminist methodology as it evolved to study everyday practices of professions that are historically dominated by women, which is also the case with profession of teacher librarian.

Method

Institutional ethnography is a systematic recursive mode of inquiry. While usually there is not a planning phase for the inquiry, there is a sequence of steps to guide the researcher. First, the researcher identifies an experience that constitutes the point of entry for the inquiry, then identifies some of the institutional processes or elements that are shaping the experience, and finally investigates the processes or elements in order to analytically describe how they shape the experience (DeVault & McCoy, 2002). Universality and generalizability are not matters of sampling or research design in this approach. Rather the institutional analysis describes and maps nationally or internationally consistent social relations. While local differences may be observed, the institutional analysis shows how local differences are variations in generalized ruling practices of the institution (Devault & McCoy, 2006; Smith, 2005).

It is account of the experience that establishes the entry point for the inquiry and directs the researcher to the "problematic." The entry point for this research was the experience of meeting two German librarians and learning about school libraries in Germany. This experience led the researcher to a "problematic," or "a possible set of questions that are latent in the actualities of the experienced world" (Smith, 1987, p. 165) and "sets out a project of research" (Smith, 2005, p. 227). In ethnography research conducted in work settings it "is not uncommon for a study to be developed in response to a vague but nagging and persistent concern about a situation whose determinants seem to elude those people most affected by the situation" (Stooke, 2010, p. 289). This study developed in response to the researcher's questions about the practices of teacher librarians on an international level and if teacher librarians share common practices, experiences, and difficulties.

People are not the objects of analysis in institutional ethnography, but their accounts provide an analytic point of entry into the institutional relations. It is important that when conducting institutional ethnography research that the researcher have knowledge of the context of the inquiry beyond what the informants can tell them. In this investigation the researcher had the benefit of her experience as a teacher librarian and as a researcher in this area. The informants in this case are not only the two German school librarians, but also the multiple teacher librarians interviewed in America and Germany.

Rather than adopting a frame for study, institutional ethnography begins with people's experiences and often begins with identifying the institutional processes or "documenting what people are doing, or what people can tell the researcher about what they and others are doing in relation to the situation" (DeVault & McCoy, 2002, p. 751). This research integrates three forms of data collection: participant observation of the everyday work, interviews to clarify and follow up on observations, and textual analysis.

Institutional ethnography works from and within people's everyday experiences in their workplace. In institutional ethnography the researcher "inquires, investigates, examines, and observes," but does not impose (Given, 2008, p. 434). The researcher learns by encountering the actualities through observing or talking with those that are directly involved. Therefore this research was conducted in two phases and began with observing and

documenting the practices, or work, of teacher librarians in both the United States and Germany. First during the fall of 2010, the researcher along with two German school librarians visited 15 schools across the state of Florida - six elementary schools (grades K-5), three middle schools (grades 6-8), and six high schools (grades 9-12). These schools were selected based on the recommendations of their district supervisors and state professional organizations as libraries noted for excellent programs. The purposively selected schools span a range of grade levels including elementary and secondary schools located in differing socio-economic communities (Johnston, 2013). The researcher also requested that the teacher librarian schedule the visit for a time that they would be actively instructing students, yet also have time to talk and answer questions as well.

Utilizing participant observation method and an observation questionnaire (see Appendix A) the researcher and the two German teacher librarians observed and commented on various practices they observed at each site. There were questions relating to operating procedures, the collection, technology, facilities, instruction, and services offered. The researcher and the participants also observed what types of activities were going on in the library and what roles the teacher and the teacher librarian were undertaking. Informal interviews were also conducted to talk with the teacher librarians at each site. The researcher and the two participants filled out an observation questionnaire for each school that was visited. These responses were then entered into a spread sheet by question and respondent. Using participant observation allowed for the researcher to reflect on her observations and experiences of not only the site visits, but also on the two participants' experiences.

The researcher met with the two participants each evening after the school visits to conduct an informal debriefing with the two German teacher librarian participants. Utilizing an interview questionnaire (see Appendix B) and following semi-structured interview protocol allowed the participants to expand on their responses and also ask the interviewer questions. Additionally, by conducting the interviews as a group it allowed the participants to interact and bring about richer dialog (Creswell, 2009). The two participants were also asked questions in regards to the practices they observed, the feasibility of implementing in their school libraries in Germany, and challenges they expected to encounter. It also provided a time for the researcher to clarify items for the two participants. It should also be noted here that the two participants spoke fluent English and all interviews were conducted in English. These interviews were all recorded and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Finally, the Goethe Institute Librarian In Residence program that sponsored the German teacher librarians' trip to the United States required the two participants to blog about their experiences and interactions with school libraries and teacher librarians on the program website and this text too was analyzed.

In phase two of this investigation, the researcher performed site observations of a variety of school libraries in Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Berlin, including both elementary and secondary schools, and visited two government established library departments that provide services to school libraries. Throughout the time in Germany both German teacher librarian participants travelled with the researcher, which provided for many informal discussions about their experiences as school librarians and with other school librarians in Germany (Johnston, 2013).

During the school visits the researcher completed the same observational questionnaire that the German teacher librarians completed during their school visits in America. The researcher also conducted informal semi-structured interviews with the German teacher librarians to ask about the observed practices, if they have benefited from the ideas brought back from the United States, and what successes or challenges they have experienced with implementation. Analyzing the ways individuals speak of their daily practices can reveal the interests and discourses active in the ongoing coordination of these activities. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The researcher

also drew upon her notes from informal conversations with the German teacher librarians, which led to richer descriptions of their experiences in implementing the best practices. Finally the researcher, as a participant observer, again documented and reflected on her own observations and experiences.

Analysis and Findings

Data collected in institutional ethnography studies can analyzed in two ways: "first to learn concretely about the issue of the situation being investigated and second to identify institutional processes active in the coordinating and concerting of work" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 51). Work in this case is defined as "what people do that requires some effort, that they mean to do, and that involves some acquired competence" (Smith, 1987, p. 165). One of the challenges in institutional ethnography research can be that often people talk in a "professional language" about their work that may not be understood by an outsider. The researcher's 13 years of experience as a teacher librarian provided her with valuable knowledge as an insider in this area and seemed to encourage the teacher librarians to share personal experience stories and work practices.

This exploratory research utilizes inductive qualitative content analysis, in that themes and categories emerge from the data through the researcher's careful examination, interpretation, and constant comparison (Glaser, 1965; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researcher immersed herself in the interview transcripts and let the themes emerge on their own. Utilizing open coding, notes and recurrent work practices were written in the text while reading it. The content was analyzed three times and topic headings were written down to describe all aspects of the content, both manifest and latent. The headings were then written down and then the list of topic headings were grouped according to those that were similar under higher order themes. Then through the abstraction process and researcher interpretation, each category or theme was given a name using content-characteristic words taken from the professional literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researcher then followed this same process with the observation questionnaires, and the blog postings of the two participants, while also comparing them for similarities and differences (Glaser, 1965). The themes represent consistent phrases, expressions or ideas that were common among the participants and were derived directly and inductively from analyzing the observation questionnaire, the interview transcripts, the personal account blog postings from the two participants, as well as the researcher's participant observations.

To strengthen credibility, the researcher implemented member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) throughout the data collection and data analysis. The researcher thought this vital because even though both participants spoke fluent English, there was always the risk of misinterpretation. The participants were provided written copies of both the observation questionnaire and interview questions ahead of time for translation. Also the researcher thoroughly explained both questionnaires to participants and rephrased and interpreted as necessary throughout visits and interviews. Participants were asked to review transcribed interviews to verify their accuracy, as well as the list of themes that emerged, to again ensure that their true meaning had been correctly represented (Creswell, 2009).

Themes related to practices of teacher librarians emerged: collaboration, reading promotion, technology, learning environment, and advocacy. The various practices were then categorized. Conversely, challenges were also noted in each category. "Technology" was the most common theme and practices categorized included using technology for instruction, social media participation, testing, and for administrative purposes. Common challenges noted included lack of funding for technology, lack of up to date technology, filtering issues, internet access issues, and the role of the teacher librarian in regards to technology. Second most frequent were practices categorized as "Collaboration," including working with teachers to teach information literacy skills, working with other professionals in the building, such as the technology specialist, and with students in groups and individually. Yet, the absence of

collaborative practices was also revealed, as well as struggles with convincing teachers to collaborate and the importance of principal support for collaboration. The "Advocacy" category practices included advocating for the program and for the students, publicizing the benefits of the school library program, working with the principal and teachers, fundraising, and gaining support from various stakeholder groups, such as parents. Reading promotion practices included comprehension testing and reward programs, programming created by the teacher librarian to promote and reward reading, scheduling author visits and other events. The category of "Learning Environment" was the least common and practices related to creating a physical space conducive to today's learner and their needs were categorized here. Finally the challenges listed in each category were examined to determine if they could be attributed to a ruling relation.

All informants were also asked about following the standards and guidelines set forth for the profession and the impact or the lack of them had on their work. The responses were varied with American teacher librarians expressing the benefits and drawbacks to having standards and guidelines. In the case of the American teacher librarians all spoke of the *AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (2007) and *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (2009) from the American Association of School Librarians (AASL). Most spoke positively that the standards gave them direction and criteria on which to base their practice. Yet, informants spoke of increased pressure to implement the standards, a lack of time to fulfill roles, and the disconnect between what is expected and what is the day-to-day reality of the teacher librarian. In Germany, the teacher librarians were much more focused on the need for standards and expressed frustration in that they lack direction in practice, a lack of understanding of their role by principals, teachers, and students, and most of these challenges were blamed on lack of support from the federal government and a lack of regulations. Yet the participants and informants expressed that their state school library associations (State Working Groups) are working to develop standards and are calling for more awareness and responsibility to be taken by government authorities in regards to regulations for school libraries in efforts to provide direction and coordinate activities of teacher librarians across multiple sites.

Conclusions

This investigation began with the problematic, which questioned the practices of teacher librarians on an international level as they strive to adapt to meet the needs of 21st century learners and if teacher librarians share common practices, experiences, and difficulties in these efforts. The primary function of the data collection was to first acquaint the researcher with the work and the concerns of teacher librarians on an international level. In institutional ethnography the focus is on looking for "how things happen *here*, in the same way they happen *over there*" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p.69), as was the goal in this research – to examine the practices of teacher librarians in various locations to learn if teacher librarians are employing common practices and do they experience the same ruling relations. It was found through analyzing the data from both the American school library visits and the German school library visits that the same recurrent themes or categories of practices did emerge, which are essentially the underlying tenets of the institution of teacher librarianship - collaborating to teach students, integrating technology, promoting reading, advocating for programs and students, and creating a learning environment.

As illustrated in the data common challenges also exist in teacher librarianship that span international boundaries. These common challenges indicate that there are what institution ethnography defines as unseen ruling relations that can explicate the power structures and ruling relations that shape and organize the practice of school librarians (Crispin, 2009). Many of the "concepts identified in contemporary sociological studies have been constructed by an apparatus, which consists of a variety of bureaucratic, legal and professional organizations. These concepts are used to rule people" (Deveau, 2008, p. 6) and co-order and coordinate the activities and actions of people in and across various and

multiple local settings (DeVault & McCoy, 2002). Ruling relations were expressed in the work of the teacher librarians in many ways, especially in the areas of collaboration, technology, and access. Comments from both American and German teacher librarians indicated ruling relations that impact the institution of teacher librarianship such as the principal or headmaster, national and local agencies, the government, and professional organizations.

Implications and Future Research

The common practices and ruling relations identified as part of the institution of teacher librarianship indicate that as a profession, teacher librarians around the world are all struggling with similar challenges, signify a need for increased international partnerships for research to investigate institutional factors that shape teacher librarians experiences and practices, and a need for international communities of practice that provide opportunities to learn from, share expertise with, and support one another to develop greater knowledge and strengthen the practice of teacher librarianship throughout the world.

The identification of the ruling relations provides important information for practicing teacher librarians by making power structures visible and they can then utilize this information to strengthen their library programs. Institutional ethnography research won't bring solutions, but the approach is meant to offer the kind of map that could help teacher librarians see what they are up against and where they might want to focus their efforts (DeVault, 2006 p. 295). Additionally, this approach can give educators who prepare future teacher librarians a glimpse into the reality of the work of teacher librarians and plan coursework for developing best practices and instruction on dealing with and overcoming challenges. Future teacher librarians need to be prepared to understand the impact of ruling regulations on their work and how to work within the institution to negotiate the these power structures.

Institutional ethnography makes an important contribution to the field of LIS research development through its ability to connect issues across multiple sites, uncover how institutional factors can shape practice in sometimes unrecognized ways, and provide information to foster change at the local level. Smith's (1987) institutional ethnography approach has been adopted in a variety of professional and human service disciplines, particularly education and nursing, yet has not been widely used to investigate librarianship (Leckie, Given, & Buschman, 2010) or school librarianship.

Institutional ethnography provides a way to explore this problematic, but more research is needed to uncover and further describe institutional factors that shape teacher librarians experiences and practices. First, this project and research should be replicated with other countries and is currently being conducted by the researcher. Additionally the perceived disconnect between the day-to-day work of school librarians and the institutional guidelines from professional organizations provides an area for future research. Institutional ethnography focuses on the work and how the work is shaped. This knowledge can provide teacher librarians a clearer view of how to work within the institution to achieve the goals of teacher librarianship: "producing successful learners skilled in multiple literacies" (AASL, 2009. p. 5) and to become responsible members of society.

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Appendix A: School Visit Observation Questionnaire

School Information

How many students?	
Grades ?	
What kind of social background? Homogenous?	
Teaching methods / Curriculum traditional or modern?	
School library operating hours	

Other observations:

Organizational Model / Finances

Who is maintaining?	
• School	
• City / District / County / State	
• Shared Facility	
• Financial and personnel support from?	

 Other Observations:

Personnel/Scheduling

How many people working?		Who is doing what?
• Librarians		
• Clerks/assistants/aids		
• Volunteers (students, parents)		
• Are classes scheduled on a fixed schedule?		

Other Observations:

Collection

How are materials arranged?	
Variety of formats? (print, nonprint, periodicals, software, DVDs, audiobooks)	
Variety of types of materials collection (fiction, nonfiction, biographies)	
Reference collection?	
Reading level indication? (AR, Reading Counts)	
Lending conditions	

Other Observations:

Technology

Number of computers? Networked?	
Internet access? Filters?	
Subscription databases?	
Other types of technology? (interactive whiteboard, DVD player, projector, ebook readers, audio book players)	
Computers for checkout? (Laptop carts)	

Other Observations:

Facilities

Room	
Accessible for all?	
Good flow pattern? Including circulation desk?	
Effective signage?	
Displays of student work?	
Available seating for whole class?	
Areas for multiple purposes? • Whole group instruction • Area for small group instruction • Independent work areas • Quiet informal reading area	
Technology work area for students? Lab?	

Other Observations:

Services for teachers and students

Reserve Collections / Media boxes	
Interlibrary loan	
Books about teaching methods	
Textbook/Class set management	

Other Observations:

Usage – What activities are going on?

Whole group instruction? Who is instructing? What is the topic? Who is the audience? Methods?	
Is this standards based instruction tied to AASL/curriculum standards or storytime?	
Does teacher remain when class is in the library as a co-instructor or leave the librarians as the sole instructor?	
Individual Checkout? Are students in there individually to checkout or only as a whole group class?	

Are students using the computers?	
Are students using the reference section?	
Are there small groups working together with or without supervision?	
Are there independent students just reading for enjoyment?	
Are there teachers using the library?	
Individual support for students	
How often do teachers use the library for their lessons?	
Reading promotion programs	
Media literacy programs	

Other Observations:

Describe the library Instruction observed:

Collaboration with other libraries?

Other Comments or Observations:

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Do you have anything you would like to ask me to clarify anything you saw on your visit?

2. What did you think about the library you saw today?

3. What are your reactions to what you saw today?

4. What did you think about what the students were doing? The teachers? The librarian(s), other staff?

5. Of what you saw, what aspects would you like to implement back in school libraries in Germany? What resources would you need to do that? Would you need help? If so, what kind?

6. Of what you saw do you think would not work in Germany? Why not?

7. Comments:

Biographical note
Melissa P. Johnston is an assistant professor at The University of Alabama in the School of Library and Information Studies, where she coordinates the school library media certification program. Johnston worked as a school librarian for 13 years in Georgia before completing her PhD at Florida State University's School of Library and Information Studies. Johnston's research interests include school librarians as leaders, the school librarian's role in technology integration, and the education of future school librarians. She frequently publishes in a variety of journals that focus on school library issues and research.