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Exploring Community-Initiated Libraries in New Zealand (Dr. Brenda Chawner)

Background:

- New Zealand – geographically isolated
 - 4.9 million people → 15% Maori, 12% Asian, 7% Pacific Islander
- 66 public library systems and over 100 volunteer-led independent libraries
 - Volunteer-led libraries found in both rural areas and urban centres
- Major research gap in examining volunteer-led libraries (purpose of this research)

Objectives:

- Understand factors leading to the success of volunteer-led, community-initiated libraries
- Examine economic & social values of these libraries
- Explore interactions between volunteer-led libraries & the public library system

Methods:

- Case-study, visitation-based.
- Visited 16 volunteer-led libraries
 - Both rural & urban; 4 regions in North NZ and 4 regions in South NZ
- Limitations included the small sample size & that the majority of research was done in 2015/2016 (possibility that some of this information found has changed since then)
- Challenges included finding accurate information on opening hours of libraries, opening hours being limited and volunteers being suspicious of purpose of research

Findings:

- History very important to some of these libraries
 - Newspaper ad shown from 1839 searching for library volunteers
 - Demonstrated early tradition of communities having these.
 - National Library service had historically provided subscription services to these libraries → would provide the books on loan to the libraries, who would in turn loan to patrons.
 - Challenge when this service stopped: how would the libraries find books?
- Key Library Characteristics:
 - Standalone buildings with specific hours & processes (no “little free library” cupboards)

- Each located in a self-contained community (near something else – eg. medical centre, café) → patrons visiting the library already had another reason for being there
- Sense of pride in being volunteer-run with no interest in joining the public system
 - Many had waitlists to become a volunteer
- Strong community support (example: local businesses providing service to libraries free of charge – building bookshelves, providing electrical services)
 - Sense of community identity nestled in the library
- Resilience & resourcefulness (volunteers)
- Generally English-only, but each with unique local material
- Some had hierarchy of volunteers (eg. designated “librarian)
- Main focus: recreational reading
 - Less concerned with balancing the collection & more concerned with ensuring books were of interest to the community
- Main access through browsing. Some had catalogues, some larger libraries used Dewey.
- Important: minimal barriers to joining – strong sense of low-barrier entry
 - Some only required a phone number to allow borrowing (so people on vacation could join)
 - Most had no fines; had attitude that if a book goes missing, it goes missing. Some had voluntary fines.
 - Proximity to other services allowed for easy accessibility
 - Low-tech, approachable systems (eg. hand-written loan cards)

Similarities & Differences Across Libraries:

- “Pseudo-public libraries” – look like real libraries
 - Some had children’s spaces
 - Some had teen/YA material
 - Tried to find volunteers with specific backgrounds (eg. teachers) to curate these collections
- Low-barrier returns
 - Relationships with local businesses allowed patrons to return books elsewhere when the library was closed
- Biggest difference = opening hours
 - Tendency to arrange opening hours/volunteers based on needs of population
 - eg. Found that fathers were bringing their children on Friday nights so arranged to be open at that time & have male volunteers available (as fathers preferred to speak to male volunteers)
- Most set up with formal governing structure with a committee, regular meetings & AGMs

Funding & Collection Development:

- Every library had some form of fundraising
 - Most had a membership fee or fee to borrow books (eg. 25 cents/3 week loan)
- Collections developed through donations, through books bought through funds from membership/loan fees, through relationships with local booksellers
- Some had funding directly from council
 - Direct - \$\$
 - Support-in-kind – council owned the building, provided computer, electricity, etc.
 - Key factor: volunteers not shy about asking for support
- Core priority = books
 - Strong focus on importance of literacy
 - Some libraries had magazines, puzzles, newspapers. Very few had AV material.
 - Belief that there should be no barriers to reading

Outcomes:

- Main purpose of these libraries = connecting books with readers
 - Books must return investment → collections reflect interest of user group, not necessarily balance
- Emphasized importance of library as a safe space to volunteer
 - No sense of “helping less fortunate”; more focus on helping people that volunteers feel connected to & creating connection

Issues with volunteer-led libraries:

- Based on nostalgic, idealistic view of libraries
- Limited collections do not meet information needs (would then complement the local public library)
- Little understanding of privacy

Closing Remarks & Takeaways:

- Important to note that in NZ, the concept of user-pay is widely accepted & normalized (so charging to borrow books is normal)
- Community support indicative of symbolic value of libraries
- Low-barrier entry huge factor in the success of these
- Some public libraries used volunteer-led library spaces to provide programming – no sense of competition between public & volunteer-led libraries
- Most volunteers = retirement-age

- Next steps will include talking to users, surveying rural NZers about their information needs