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ABSTRACT

An issue in the 21st century is how public libraries can be strategic and impactful to achieve greater equity. Based on a qualitative meta-analysis of chapters from the authors' book *A Librarian's Guide to Engaging Families* published in 2021, this article presents a framework of social justice to strengthen library services to engage underserved families in student learning. Three themes include: 1) Public libraries welcome underserved families using targeted universalism and active inclusion strategies. 2) They take bold leadership to rectify historically imbalanced inequities by removing barriers and reallocating resources. 3) They respect family roles/agency and uphold community economic development.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, public librarians have been extending their traditional roles as community information providers while embracing new responsibilities as leaders in promoting social justice and social equity for underserved families (Lopez, Mehra, and Caspe 2021). They are developing effective information services by collaborating with families that have been trapped in interlocking modes of systemic oppression and culturally constructed marginalization, and have directly experienced realities that public librarians have not (Jaeger, Shilton, and Koepfler, 2015; Mehra and Davis, 2015; Mehra and Rioux, 2016). However, public library efforts to operationalize social justice attributes of fairness, justice, equality, equity, inclusion, and mobilization of disenfranchised families and communities has not been easy. Library staff confront a White-IST (white + elitist) legacy and cultural inheritance of racism (amongst other "–isms" such as sexism, ableism, etc.) in the United States (Cooke and Kitzie, 2021; Mehra, 2005; Mehra, Sikes, and Singh 2020). Owing to a checkered past, problematics of the "only information

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

access" approach and solely information-focused model in libraries (of all kinds) have led to librarians' marginal role in helping to bridge families' sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical debilitating circumstances, especially those from low-income and disadvantaged groups (Beamish, 1999; Mehra, Bishop, Bazzell, and Smith, 2002). Additional challenges have included continuing disparities in access, limited engagement of families with libraries, and lack of training to co-develop relevant services to support people's individual, social, and community empowerment (Mehra 2022a).

In this regard, the research questions moving forward in the 21st century are: Who are public libraries serving? How are they reaching and engaging underserved families (and what can they do in the future)? How can public libraries be strategic and impactful in their efforts while collaborating with families and children to achieve greater equity and inclusion? How can they make a difference in the lives of all families, and especially the underserved, in ways that are outcome-based and meaningful to them? This article explores a consolidated framework of social justice that begins to address these questions. The framework encompasses elements using family engagement as the lens to identify strategies that are intentional, systematic, action-oriented, outcome-based, and community-embedded (Mehra and Sikes 2021). To address our research questions we adapted a new approach – a qualitative meta-analysis – using 20 case studies from the authors' book *A Librarian's Guide to Engaging Families* (Lopez, Mehra, and Caspe 2021) that provide "thick descriptions" of libraries that build pathways for more equitable and strengths-based family engagement. Related themes threaded through the narrative include: equity and access (beyond equality), inclusion (instead of exclusion), asset-framed approach (instead of a deficit mind-set), action-oriented (instead of passive bystanders), proactive in changing imbalance power differentials (instead of neutral, i.e., biased toward status quo), raising up (instead of belittling), and change agency ("helping people help themselves instead of "helping people" as if they are needy and helpless (Mehra, Rioux, and Albright, 2010).

This article defines the concept of "underserved" as those individuals, groups, communities, and populations that are not adequately serviced by the library and impacted by its offerings and do not use the library services – or rarely use it. They are beyond the current reach of the library (Skinner and Gross 2021). By underserved families we refer to those whose interests and needs are not prioritized in the delivery of the library's services. Often the complexity and diversity of their experiences as well as the strengths gained through them are rarely recognized. The views and voices of these families are excluded by virtue of their culture and language, socio-economic position, gender and age as well other characteristics. These "potential users" might or might not include "underprivileged" families, though historically racial/ethnic minorities were excluded (or felt excluded) from the public library owing to sociocultural and sociopolitical challenges associated with racism and white

privilege (Mehra 2022c). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the public library solely catered to a white middle-class majority that controlled its purse-strings through their tax support (Mehra and Sikes 2021; Wiegand 2015). However, today contrary to popular opinion, in many contemporary communities the "upwardly mobile middle and upper-middle class" can be underserved even though they might not be underprivileged (Futterman 2008, 42). Hence, it is important for the public library to recognize all those who it is not serving adequately and find novel and strategic ways to connect with these populations and families to try to convert them to "actual users" (Arant and Benefiel, 2003). This article adopts a broader meaning of the term in its inclusivity and focus on underserved families.

Literature review

In order to contextualize the value of the social justice framework presented in this article, we briefly highlight key trends in family engagement within and beyond the public library space. Family and community engagement in libraries is best described as a system in which libraries share responsibility with families to guide and support student learning. From this standpoint, families are the experts on their families' lives and their children's academic, social, and emotional growth and work in collaboration with practitioners – like librarians – to ensure pathways of success in school and beyond. For public libraries, family engagement is about building positive culturally responsive and sustaining partnerships with families and communities. The notion of culturally responsive and sustaining partnerships is important as too often institutions, like libraries, are laden with deficit thinking that view children and their families' backgrounds as deficiencies that obstruct student learning, rather than as assets (McWayne, Doucet F, and Mistry J 2019). Authentic and equitable partnerships between families and libraries affirm students' and families' cultural knowledge and build upon it to develop programs, policies, and practices that bolster student learning.

Family and community engagement in education and learning more generally is associated with a wide array of positive outcomes for children and youth, including improved school readiness, language, literacy, and math skills, as well as academic achievement, and college going identities (Longo, Lombardi, and Dearing 2017; Weiss, Lopez, and Caspe, 2018). Family and community engagement is also a matter of equity. Because family and community engagement has its greatest impact on families who are often the most underserved, family engagement is one of the most important ways to reduce inequalities and disparities that exist within our educational systems and communities (Dearing and Kreider H 2006; Jeynes 2015). Moreover, as free institutions, libraries offer services and resources to bring about educational justice. Communities adversely impacted by poverty often offer families fewer

quality out-of-school services, such as afterschool programs or camps, which make it difficult for families to complement in-school learning with quality out-of-school-hours learning opportunities (Duncan and Murnane 2014). Public libraries, by virtue of providing a safe and orderly space where students can find homework help and explore new interests and where families can relax and learn together, help close the "opportunity gap."

In recent years, a number of important trends in family library partnership have emerged that showcase the power that family and library collaborations have to build equitable communities (Lopez and Caspe 2021). The pandemic and renewed call for racial justice has made this work more important than ever before. First, libraries promote lifelong learning. They are places where there are services offered across the lifespan. For young children, Storytimes introduce them and their families to math and literacy through books and other activities. For school age children, in-person and online homework help and a variety of interest-driven programs fill the hours while school is out. For parents and grandparents themselves, adult education programs, English and GED classes, citizen preparation, and computer literacy workshops support important job and civic skills. Moreover, librarians are increasingly becoming media mentors, helping families get digital access and make choices about media appropriate for their family. Second, libraries promote opportunities for family learning where families learn together around families' interests, curiosity, and creativity, without the pressure associated with grades. Programs such as knitting and quilting demonstrations, to coding workshops, and STEM makerspaces expand reading, inquiry, and idea sharing among family members. Moreover, within these opportunities are spaces for parents and children to develop strong bonds and relationships. The physical space of the library – with its quiet, peaceful, nonchaotic atmosphere – creates a natural setting for parents and children of all ages to spend time together.

Finally, libraries build supportive family and community relationships. Peer and social networks among families within a community is one of the strongest predictors of family well-being and community cohesiveness (Small 2009). Libraries are spaces where people come together and engage in conversations with each other and become active in the community (Klinenberg 2018). Many libraries create space for essential dialogue, reflection, and community building (Lankes, 2021), especially for those new to the United States – immigrants, refugees, and asylees – to share their hopes and dreams. And libraries not only draw families into the library space, but leave the brick-and-mortar building, to reach families in the community where they are, to ensure they are reaching those most underserved.

While we have described a deeply inclusive approach to family engagement in libraries our intent is at odds with troubling trends. Conservative parent groups and right-wing media have called for the removal of more than 1,597 books about race, gender, and LGBTQ+ issues from public and school libraries

(American Library Association 2022). The recent censorship challenges and attacks on school and public libraries represented in the banning of books based on materials that certain communities (or parents) might consider offensive to their sensibilities, values, and religious beliefs goes against the American Library Association's Bill of Rights that ascribes to meeting the needs of all people, not a select few (Knox 2015; Laine 2016). Much of this effort has been driven under the mask of increasing parental rights. But these efforts do not empower all parents; rather, they represent voices of a vocal minority fearing a loss of power and favor in this country (Scaiffe, Zygmunt, and Cipollone, in press). To be clear, our focus is on family library partnerships that champion equity as an essential element of family and community engagement and stand with families for equitable educational systems and outcomes (NAFSCE 2022).

Conceptualizing the social justice framework

Figure 1 visualizes the social justice framework explored in this article to develop public library services with underserved families. A key meta-level attribute underlying the development of this framework involves an understanding of "with" instead of "for" in relation to underserved families and their communities. It represents a collaborative spirit and asset-based practices toward external stakeholders upon which the public library initiatives furthering social justice should be built upon. This shift in approach is in response to past limited public library efforts to develop relevant and meaningful information services "for" their communities that perpetuated (and operationalized)
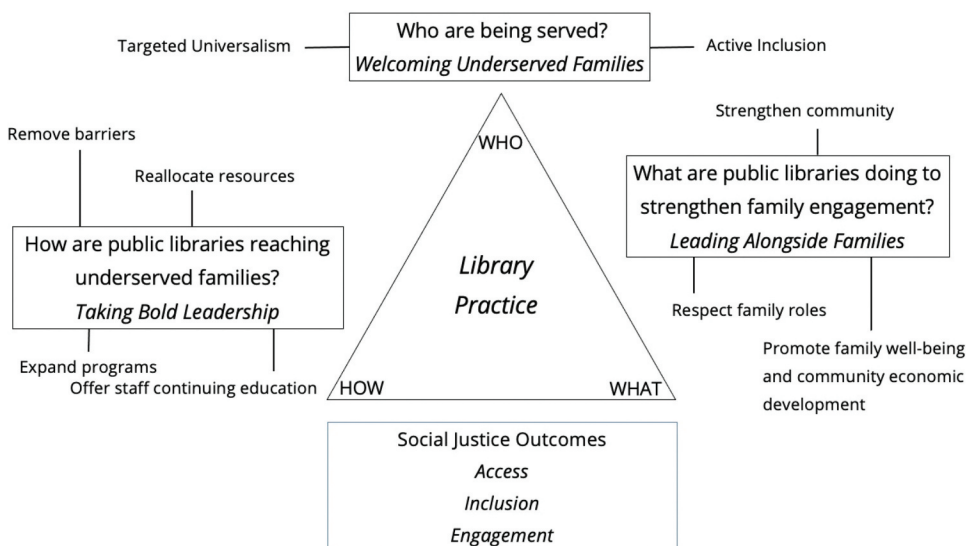

Figure 1. Social justice framework for family engagement.

a deficit approach toward families without recognizing their assets and strengths, furthering their marginalization (Mehra, Sikes, and Singh 2020).

The three interrelated elements expounded in the social justice framework include: the "who" element (specific family stakeholders or constituencies being served), the "how" element (the specific public libraries' efforts reaching out to underserved families), and the "what" element (the thematic motivations of their activities). These elements have been integrated in contemporary strategies that represent a paradigm shift in the field of information more relevant in the 21st century and a social justice roadmap for adopting information and communication technologies for development in the field of information (Mehra in press; Tang et al. 2021). Here, they have been extrapolated and integrated in a framework in reference to public library services and practices that propose taking bold leadership decisions (e.g., to further access and critical literacy intersections), leading alongside families (e.g., for symbiotic engagement and mutual learning), and achieving social justice outcomes (e.g., toward equity and inclusion). This framework should be regarded as exploratory and an effort to encourage further research on the evolving forms of social justice and family engagement in public libraries.

Methods

This article presents a framework of social justice based on an analysis of articles and case studies from the authors' book *A Librarian's Guide to Engaging Families* (Lopez, Mehra, and Caspe 2021). The purpose of the book was to document library practices that support and promote family engagement in student learning, especially among those underserved by community institutions. It consists of 22 chapters organized around three themes: knowing families and their communities; building partnerships with families; and leading for impact. Each section contains case studies and brief librarian reflections related to the theme. Altogether they describe in detail library practices prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and several examples of parent voices gathered through interviews and focus groups. The chapters include recommendations for strengthening library practices, training, and continuing education, all of which are relevant in today's library environment. Alongside the book's publication the authors were invited to present at two webinars. The interest of webinar participants on social justice issues prompted a deeper analysis of the book to highlight what Mehra (2022) calls the potential of libraries to integrate the attributes of social justice into the practice of information-related work. Although libraries have addressed issues of access, service provision for all, social responsibility, and other elements of social justice in their work, they have not until recently centralized the construct (Mehra 2022b). This led us to reevaluate the cases in the book to come out with

the goal of creating a social justice framework for family engagement in learning.

We adapted the functions of qualitative meta-analysis (Levitt 2018; Timulak and Creaner 2013) in order to identify thematic patterns in the design and implementation of family engagement from a social justice lens. We use the term "adapted" for two reasons. First, we limited our analyses to one book because there is a paucity of research on family engagement in public library settings. We used 20 case studies and reflections from the book and excluded the theoretical and methodological chapters. The cases and reflections had data that matched the goal of our inquiry. Most of the case studies used qualitative research methods such as interviews, focus groups, and participant-observation; a few used surveys or mixed methods. They contained either a description of a library's program or of several libraries where a particular program or service was being implemented. Second, we used librarian reflections about services offered for children and families. Although they were not research articles, they were based on library staff participation and observations and offered detailed information of their services. In a few cases, they included findings from library survey data and evaluations of specific programs. The reflections helped identify additional library cases and examples of positive social justice impacts.

The three research questions that guided our analysis formed the elements of the proposed social justice framework. They are: Who are being served? How are public libraries reaching and engaging underserved families? What are public libraries doing to strengthen family engagement? These questions operationalized in pragmatic ways our broader research inquiry into how libraries can be strategic and impactful to achieve greater equity and inclusion and make a difference for underserved families. We organized subcategories for analysis to include the following: (1) family demographics (2) outreach activities, (3) organizational changes, and (4) family engagement opportunities/practices (Table 1).

Findings

Table 1 illustrates the application of the elements and their subcategories in the context of the case studies analyzed for this article (from Lopez, Mehra, and Caspe 2021). Using Chapter 7 (Brooklyn Public Library) as an example, our process began with operationalizing the subcategories that would align with the "who," "how," and "what" of library practice. We identified first, the library's patron focus (incarcerated persons and their families); second, the outreach efforts and organizational changes to engage families (through existing library services, community partnership, and program expansion); and, third, the library's family engagement practices (virtual visits to the incarcerated person, a reentry program, and referrals to community resources). Next,

Table 1. Application of elements of the social justice framework in the context of the case studies analyzed in this article.

Case Authors [Book Chapter in (Lopez, Mehra, and Caspe 2021)]	Data Collection Method	Who are being served?	How are public libraries reaching underserved families?		What are public libraries doing to strengthen family engagement?
		Family demographics	Outreach activities	Organizational change	Family engagement practices
Lopez & Caspe [Ch. 3]	Interviews	Latinx, immigrant	School partnership	Fines eliminated	Physical space Spanish books Homework help Social connections Adult learning
Taylor, Pratt & Whelan [Ch.4]	Survey	White, upper income, well educated; Latinx and other ethnicities; Low-income	Family resource centers	Intentional recruitment of underserved families for future participation	Parent-child interactions Parenting advice Parent resources Social connections
Williams-Cockfield [Ch. 5]	Documentation, participation, and interviews	Rural, white Minority groups of other ethnicities	Community and school partnerships	Goals to review policies for greater inclusion, staff training and services outside the library	Book reading Events to bring awareness of immigration and refugees
Risley [Ch.6]	Participation, observation, and reflection	Low income, Latinx Rural Homeless	Community venues	Fines eliminated Allocation of resources toward vulnerable families	Early education Meal program Parents as teachers
Higgins [Ch.7]	Participation, observation, reflection, evaluation	Incarcerated	Library Community partnership	Expansion of pilot to more libraries	Virtual parent-child interaction Reentry program Referrals
Lemmons & Chambers [Ch.8]	Participation, observation, and reflection	Black grandparents, seniors and youth	Community and school partnerships	Operational tactics	Intergenerational teaching and learning Transmission of cultural and familial values Expansion of "grandparents" to include seniors Social connections

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Case Authors [Book Chapter in (Lopez, Mehra, and Caspe 2021)]	Data Collection Method	Who are being served? Family demographics	How are public libraries reaching underserved families? Outreach activities	Organizational change	What are public libraries doing to strengthen family engagement? Family engagement practices
Subramaniam & Clegg [Ch.9]	Applied research using interviews, focus groups and observation	Low-income Latinx	Community and school partnerships	Use of participatory design	Parent-child interaction Families as designers of learning experiences
Roque & Widman [Ch.10]	Applied research using focus groups, participant observation and documentation	Low-income Diverse families in one site Latinx in another site	Community and school partnerships	Program opened to children of all ages Staff relationship with whole family and not just one family member Provision of transportation	Families create their own digital stories Computational literacy Parent voices in program design
Hilburn & Stahl [Ch.11]	Participation, observation and reflection Surveys	Rural	(No information)	Program across departments – children and adult department collaboration	Parent voices in program design Parent-child interaction Social connections
McNeil [Ch.12]	Participation, observation and reflection	Immigrant & refugee Latinx	Community partnerships (cultural institutions)	Strengths-based approach to services Diversified programming	Early education Physical space Social connections Parent voice Parents as experts and teachers
Guernsey [Ch.13]	Focus group	Low-income	Community and school partnerships		Parent voices in access and use of digital resources
Thomas & Walker [Ch.14]	Participation, observation and reflection	Low income	Community partnership	New ways to address barriers: (1) Staff training for early literacy programs (2) Staff training on evaluation and data use for improvement	Responsiveness to parent needs and interests through assessments Early education
Celano & Neuman [Ch.15]	Synthesis of research, longitudinal and evaluation studies (mixed methods)	Low-income	Community partnerships Going out to community (e.g. laundromats)	New policies (e.g. space, noise, programs) to focus on parent engagement	Physical space Early education Digital literacy Parenting advice Referrals

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Case Authors [Book Chapter in (Lopez, Mehra, and Caspe 2021)]	Data Collection Method	Who are being served? Family demographics	How are public libraries reaching underserved families? Outreach activities	Organizational change	What are public libraries doing to strengthen family engagement? Family engagement practices
Forehand [Ch.16]	Participant observation	Homeless	Community partnerships	Resources (e.g. space, staff, programs, training) allocated for homeless	Early education Referrals
Todd-Wurm [Ch.17]	Participation, observation and reflection Evaluation surveys	Refugees Incarcerated Rural	Community partnerships	Expansion of program to rural areas in Texas	Early education Parent-child interaction Parent as teachers Parenting resources Social connections
Jones [Ch.18]	Surveys Participation, observation and reflection	Low-income	Community partnerships	Elimination of fines	Educating families on new policy Access to collections
Toro [Ch.19]	Participation, evaluation data, and reflection	Low income Diverse (Native Hawaiian)	Institutional partnerships	Developing trust with families Giving up some power in codesign activities	Early education After-school programming Family STEM & Makerspace projects Parent voices in program design
Mehra and Sikes [Ch.20]	Synthesis of research on rural communities	Rural Seniors	Business and community partnerships	Continuing education to improve services for children and families	STEM and digital programs Information to support local businesses Collections brought to seniors in community settings
Smith [Ch.21]	Participation, observation and reflection	(No information)	Community partnership	New position created for an inclusive services librarian Better broadband access in smaller community libraries Staff training to build capacity of small and rural libraries	Early education Parent-child bond Celebration of cultural heritage
Brown [Ch.22]	Participation, observation, survey data, and reflection			Remove barriers to access collections during COVID-19 pandemic Expand digital resources	Family oriented outdoor activities New roles for families as historians of the pandemic

we created categories to capture common threads among a diversity of practices across the cases. For Brooklyn Public Library these practices included active inclusion, reallocating resources and expanding programs, and promoting family well-being. Lastly, as shown in Figure 1, we created a third tier of themes to summarize our responses to the three questions, namely, welcoming underserved families, taking bold leadership, and leading with families. We also included information about data collection methods used in the cases and reflections to give a holistic overview of our process.

Discussion

This section discusses select themes expounding the social justice framework that were generated from an analysis of the findings summarized in Table 1.

Who is being served?

Using demographic data, libraries are welcoming underserved families by using targeted universalism and active inclusion strategies.

Targeted universalism. Librarians pride themselves in welcoming everyone and in offering their services to all. However, social justice goes beyond treating everyone in the same way. It is about ensuring – rather than taking for granted – the access and engagement of individuals whose historical, social, cultural and biological differences unfairly impact them and shape their experiences and realities with community institutions (Jardine and Zerhusen 2015). Through "targeted universalism" libraries can provide the informational needs of both dominant and marginal groups, yet pay attention to those who are often neglected (Powell 2009, 2021). They can intentionally channel library assets – for example, community connections, technology, and staff – to those who need them most. Table 2 shows the specific social and cultural characteristics of families that libraries in our sample sought to serve.

Active inclusion. Social justice involves reaching out and making the library a space where underserved and neglected families feel they are valued and respected, a space where they belong (Garner 2022). This begins with a deep appreciation of every individual's value (Guinee and Gustina 2022). Every person has knowledge, talents, and strengths that can contribute to family and community well-being. Sarah McNeil, a senior librarian at Denver Public Library writes, "The library has moved away from a deficit-based model, asking what parents and families need, and toward a strengths-based model, asking how the library can provide experiences and learning opportunities for families to be their best selves" (McNeil 2021, 132).

Active inclusion involves strategic partnerships to reach those families who do not use library services. Nearly all the case studies we examined described library partnerships with schools, businesses, and community agencies. At the

Whitehall Public Library (Pennsylvania) the library director partnered with a number of community agencies to identify and learn about how the library could better serve refugee families, many of whom were not using its resources. With the support of a grant the families with young children were transported to the library for a five-week early learning program. Parent-child workshops included conversations with local professionals about parent concerns such as nutrition and child development. Over time the library has become a hub where families can go to connect and feel safe (Todd-Wurm 2021).

Active inclusion is intentional. Across the United States public libraries are beginning to address homelessness. It is estimated that half a million people experience homelessness on any single night with families with children comprising one-third of the total (National Alliance to End Homelessness n.d.). Homeless families are typically headed by young single women with limited education who have young children. Children who are homeless are more likely to experience health and emotional and behavioral problems and experience school mobility with resulting lower academic performance (Ibid.). Libraries are beginning to respond to the homeless crisis. The Nashville Public Library, for example, mobilizes its connections with community services to help homeless families improve their living conditions and engage more fully in their children's learning. The library has created community partnerships so that families have access to social services and mental health counseling and streamlined housing assistance. It has also created opportunities for family engagement through its early childhood program which offers dinner in one of the branch libraries followed by Storytime, free books, and parenting information (Forehand 2021).

Active inclusion serves the information needs of those who are largely invisible in society. Nearly half of all adults living in the United States have experienced incarceration in their family (us 2018). Incarceration affects the lives not only of the person in jail or prison but also the women and children who make up their families. The impact of incarceration is especially felt by Black and low-income families. Contacts with an incarcerated loved one is often difficult and expensive and disrupts a family's social and economic conditions (Ibid.). Public libraries are taking steps to promote family cohesion among the incarcerated. The Brooklyn Public Library's TeleStory is a virtual video visit that connects families with an incarcerated parent or other family member. The free one-hour visit takes place in a comfortable library meeting

Table 2. Characteristics of underserved families.

Social Characteristics	Cultural Characteristics
Homeless	African American
Immigrants/refugees	Latinx
Incarcerated	White
Low-income	
Middle-class	
Rural	
Seniors	

room with children's books and toys. The children's librarian and other staff begin the video visit with a children's literacy activity – reading, singing, playing with a finger puppet – and family members interact in a setting that destigmatizes incarceration (Higgins 2021). An evaluation of the program found that families who used the program found it more enjoyable than going to the prison facility, where visits could be demoralizing, time-intensive in terms of transportation, and generally unpleasant (Pitts and Smith 2021).

How are public libraries reaching underserved families?

Using data from outreach activities and organizational change, public libraries are taking bold leadership to potentially address and rectify historically imbalanced inequities that have favored White and middle-class patrons (Mehra and Sikes 2021). Our cases revealed that libraries instituted organizational changes that:

- Remove barriers such as the elimination of fines for overdue books and materials
- Reallocate resources to serve neglected families
- Expand programs that benefit neglected families
- Offer staff continuing education

Librarians are in a profession of public service that requires an obligation for social responsibility and inclusivity. Being a champion of the library's mission to serve the community demands a sustained effort to remove the barriers to equitable access to informational resources. It involves thoughtful and deliberate efforts to reimagine and create opportunities for access to and engagement with the library's informational assets. As with other educational institutions, libraries are questioning their assumptions about their services for children and families and recognizing the class, cultural, racial and other barriers that get in the way of access and participation (Caspe and Lopez 2018). Questions such as "Who do we need to serve?" (Risley 2021) and "What can we do to ensure our patrons receive the tools, materials, education, understanding, and empathy they need to find success?" (Thomas and Walter 2021) are inspiring strategies to increase equitable access and participation.

Remove barriers. One of the strengths of public libraries is their flexibility and adaptability to change. "Are fines disproportionately impacting patrons of different socioeconomic statuses?" (Jones 2021): That was one of the questions that San Diego Public Library tackled in reviewing its fine policies. Data collected indicated that fine policies largely affected low-income residents, the group who stood to gain the most from the library's free educational

resources. A multiyear process of data collection and advocacy eventually led to the elimination of fines. This made a huge impact on the library and its patrons, with increases on library card applications and circulation, and the reinstatement of library privileges for thirteen thousand youth while not experiencing an increase in lost library materials (Ibid.).

Reallocate resources. At the San Mateo County Library equity means serving the entire community, and not just the economically advantaged who already use library services. The library system has made it a priority to reach out to the families that are most disconnected from its services. It finds opportunities to deliver services beyond the library building and enrich many public spaces – WIC clinic, medical waiting rooms, public housing, and playgrounds and parks – with books and resources. The library system has channeled its resources to ensure equitable access by creating new early childhood programs with a strong family engagement focus, offering fine-free library cards for children and teens, and organizing a year-round free meal program in vulnerable communities (Risley 2021).

Expand programs. Leadership to make libraries more inclusive involves reimagining how information-related work can change power differentials between the haves and have-nots and improve the lives of the underserved and disenfranchised (Mehra and Sikes 2021). Providing high quality programs that boost early literacy and learning helps to close the gaps in educational resources available to children in underserved communities. In 2019 children's programs accounted for 53% of all public library programs serving more than 81 million attendees across 3.1 million children's programs (Pelczar et al. 2021). Celano and Neuman (2021) challenge librarians to "unlevel the playing field" and "tip" library programs toward children in disadvantaged circumstances. Based on their decades-long research they found that in order to help the most vulnerable young children, libraries have to take a more expansive view of literacy development. The librarians in their studies focused not only on reading books during Storytimes but also on integrating activities – song, games, play, STEM projects – where vocabulary is developed and the language of science and mathematics introduced. Through two-generational learning opportunities parents develop and enhance the skills to guide their children's literacy development and meet their informational needs.

Offer staff continuing education. An understanding of families and communities affects the perceptions and relationships librarians have with them and the ways they can build relevant collections and programs that "tip" resources toward the disadvantaged (Caspe and Lopez 2018). Training and assessment enable librarians to support families with the tools, informational resources, and empathy that contribute to well-being. Rural libraries serve families that often find it difficult to find information that is timely, accurate, and relevant (Mehra and Sikes 2021). A university partnership with four regional library

systems in Tennessee designed an online master's degree program for resident library paraprofessionals to enable them to take leadership in addressing the needs and interests of rural communities. Positive outcomes from this training included family-oriented learning experiences such as Story Walks, Beginning Coding Club, and the use of NASA STEM kits (Ibid.)

What are public libraries doing to strengthen family engagement?

Using data from family engagement practices, leading alongside families reflects an effort to change from doing *for* families to doing *with* families (Nikolchev, Ponce, and Lopez In press). Our cases surfaced three aspects of what this looks like in practice:

- Respect family roles
- Strengthen community
- Promote family well-being and community economic development

Respect family roles. Leading with families entails designing learning experiences with and for families. This approach questions traditional hierarchical roles in education, including public libraries. It emphasizes that parents are active, dynamic creators of learning experiences and possess the knowledge and expertise to contribute to the mission of libraries. Case study libraries provided the opportunities for parents to take different roles – experts, change agents, teachers, learners, and co-designers. The opportunities largely fell into two major categories:

- Focus groups and informal conversations to learn parent ideas and experiences
- Children's programs to support parent roles as teachers, learners and designers

Leading with families means recognizing *families as experts* who bring their knowledge, talents and skills to improve library services. Three Maryland libraries (Harford County, Baltimore County, and Carroll County) participated in a project to learn about parents' perspectives on digital media and how they use its various forms in children's learning. With the help of an external facilitator they held focus groups with low-income families, not all of whom were library users. Through the group conversations the librarians gained valuable information about how to design outreach, collections, and programs (Guernsey 2021). In this way they could become effective media mentors and contribute to closing the gaps between those who can use digital media as a resource and those who cannot.

By being responsive to the interests and needs of families, libraries acknowledge *families as change agents*. Parents are change agents as they teach children to acquire literacy skills. They are change agents as they expand their own learning and participate in library programs to enhance their personal and professional development. However, they also have the capacity to change library practices. At the Benson Memorial Library (Pennsylvania) family programs emerged from parents' desire to address the barriers presented by age-segregated programs. For parents with multiple children one child might be eligible for one program while the other might not; some parents wanted to join their children in the programs; others also struggled with the choice of programs when children were functioning above or below their age level. The parents' perspectives prompted the adult librarian and the children's librarian to cross boundaries and to create programs for the whole family – programs such as trivia night, family crafts, local history, and dance (Hilburn and Stahl 2021). By focusing on families rather than age groups, the library overcame embedded age-based specializations and transformed itself to promote intergenerational learning and bonding.

As digital media permeate education, *families as designers of learning experiences* is particularly noteworthy in library efforts to promote digital fluency. Digital fluency goes beyond being an informed consumer of digital media to becoming a producer of content. Family Creative Learning is a program where children and their parents learn to code and in the process gain "computational literacy" skills, referring to the ability to create, express, and invent with technology (Roque and Widman 2021). Boulder and Denver Public Libraries piloted the program to help them meet their goals such as building relationships with the Spanish speaking community and increasing awareness of library resources among low-income and culturally diverse families. Through the use of the ScratchJr platform families designed their own stories and used song and movement to animate their stories. In the process of learning they also brought their own funds of knowledge to storytelling. Creating stories enhanced literacy development, affirmed the cultural experiences of the families, and fostered an environment of learning across generations.

Strengthen community. One of the attributes of social justice is inclusion, the sense of belonging to a community. Libraries bring people together and provide a physical space for social support as well as information exchange (Klinenberg 2018). These informal networks are advantageous for relieving stress, finding help, and gaining access to community services. The sociologist Mario Luis Small (2009) asserts that the truly disadvantaged in society are those without the connections and organizational contexts in which those connections are made.

Public libraries are institutions with a wide range of community connections. By leveraging these connections they can extend their services and achieve a greater impact in their communities. When The Black Caucus of the American Library Association launched Reading is Grand, a family literacy

program to connect grandparents with children and youth, libraries that received grants to implement the program reached out to the community including schools, faith-based institutions, and senior centers. Partnerships with senior centers extended the notion of grandparents to include elders who could share their wisdom with younger generations. Through intergenerational storytelling, elders who felt disconnected from youth were able to share the history and cultural heritage of their communities and youth gained advice on goal setting and creating pathways to success (Lemmons and Chambers 2021).

Libraries use their collections to raise awareness and engage community members in a dialogue about important issues. By designing activities around books libraries can develop a deep understanding of diversity. Books provoke insights that allow readers to connect intimately and emotionally with the lives of different people across time and space. Blount County (Tennessee) is a predominantly white community whose school district and public library, along with other community agencies, organized a community-wide reading of *Refugee* by Alan Gratz. Inspired by a middle school student's recommendation of the book, the school district connected with the Blount County Friends of the Library to secure Gratz's book for four middle schools and engaged the Blount County Public Library on developing activities to raise awareness and educate the public about diversity. The library sponsorship of a book talk and writing workshop by the author and the use of its space for a cultural festival and display of student projects related to the book contributed to meaningful conversations on immigration, culture, and identity in a community lacking diversity (Williams-Cockfield 2021).

Promote family well-being and community economic development. Many of the neglected families that libraries seek to serve face challenges to family well-being, including poverty, unemployment, incarceration, high housing costs, and food insecurity. Family well-being includes the health, safety, and financial stability of all family members (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2013). Libraries contribute to family well-being by providing

- a safe and comfortable physical space for children and families to relax as well as to bond as they learn and have fun together
- information and access to community services
- continuing education resources that prepare family members for better employment and careers

Libraries are for people. They offer a safe haven for quiet and relaxation for families living with the stresses of crowded homes, poor cooling and heating systems, and few resources. They are welcoming spaces to help build emotionally close parent-child relationships. Nurturing relationships in the early childhood years foster a healthy sense of belonging, self-esteem, and well-being. The Family Place Libraries offer a well-designed space for play and

exploration among children and parent-child interaction. Comfortable seating for parents enables them to observe their children, make friends with other families, and browse through parenting materials (Todd-Wurm 2021).

Libraries serve as active resource brokers. They connect parents to social and health services, provide meals for eligible children during the summer months, and expose them to cultural institutions through free museum passes. At Denver Public Library one summer program offered excursions to the art museum and botanical garden that included passes and transportation. This provided an opportunity for families who might otherwise feel intimidated or not welcome to explore new interests and to share a common community experience with other families (McNeil 2021).

Libraries offer a wide range of assistance to support family economic well-being and community development (Mehra, Bishop, and Partee 2017b, 2018). Individual, family, social, and community economic development are strongly interconnected. At the micro-level (for individuals, family units), these range from entrepreneur education opportunities on finance management and workforce development to personal finance, tax preparation, and budgeting. For example, the Blount County Public Library in Maryville, Tennessee, identified a gap in family economic opportunities and limited support in their community. Librarians began offering a wide range of programming for adults in workforce training based on assessment and gap analysis of small businesses' skilled and unskilled employee needs and expectations (Mehra and Sikes 2021, 2021; Mehra, Bishop, and Partee 2017a).

At the meso-level, public libraries develop resources and programming especially tailored to specific family groups based on geography, race/ethnicity, national origins, age, etc. when these groups have specific human information behavior dynamics (e.g., information needs, information seeking practices, etc.) in local and regional settings. For example, the Texas State Library and Archives Commission is helping libraries increase their broadband access. It has assisted 145 library locations in Texas – mostly smaller community and rural libraries – obtaining higher internet speeds at lower costs through the federal E-rate discounts. With these connections libraries support workforce and technology training among the unemployed and underemployed as well as small business owners (Smith, 2021).

At the macro-level (i.e., societal), public libraries have been quite successful in partnering with local governments, academic institutions, not-for-profit organizations, and even corporations and industry, to create, design, and develop resources for and with families across urban, semi-urban, rural, and semi-rural locations (Mehra, Sikes, and Singh 2019, 2020). For example, Brooklyn Public Library has made significant contributions to local economic development through the involvement and participation of families cohesively linked to improvements in their early literacy and school readiness programs and small business workforce

support (The Urban Libraries Council 2007). The library is also committed to active inclusion and offers incarcerated persons and their families a comprehensive set of supports including an early childhood virtual visit that promotes family literacy and a reentry program with extensive partnerships that facilitate education, job training, and career development (Higgins 2021).

Social justice outcomes

Public libraries are striving toward more access, inclusion, and engagement of underserved families and communities. When their efforts are well planned, action-oriented, and collaborative they make a difference in the lives of children and families. Libraries will have different ways of operationalizing and measuring their successes and areas of improvement. The reviewed cases suggest three social justice outcomes: access, inclusion, and engagement.

Access refers to the ability to obtain and use library services. The outcomes that surfaced from our cases (Table 3) suggest that changes in library policies make a difference in terms of greater access to collections and services. For example, the borrowing of library collections by youth and families increases when library fines are eliminated.

Inclusion incorporates both access and equity. It is about providing opportunities to learn and participate in community among those who are not served by the library based on persistent cultural, historical, and social barriers. By intentionally being inclusive the case study libraries saw outcomes on participation and gaining new information, especially among families in difficult circumstances (Table 3). For example, library outreach to homeless families provides opportunities for family engagement in early learning and access to social services.

Engagement is an act of experiencing attention, interest, and emotional involvement in library collections, programs, and services. From an ecological perspective family engagement encompasses the relationship of parents and children, of librarians and families, as well as of families and the larger community. The cases surfaced a number of engagement outcomes on these various levels of relationships. For example, families connected with peers and community and developed positive relationships with librarians who were perceived to be friendly and respectful. Families were also able to empower themselves through the opportunities for continuing education, designing their own learning experiences, and giving voice to how they wanted libraries to better serve them (Table 3).

The case study libraries recognized that while they had made progress on their goals their efforts had to continue to change and improve. As one librarian wrote, "The nuanced, more effective, and authentic experiences that have resulted from our work in our communities have changed lives,

Table 3. Reported outcomes from case studies.

Outcomes	Case Authors [Book Chapter]
Access	
Families access collections and services though policy changes (e.g. fines, pandemic waivers)	Risley [Ch.6];Jones [Ch.18]; Thomas & Walter [Ch.14]; Brown [Ch.22]
Families access library services in venues other than the library itself.	Risley [Ch.6]; Roque & Widman [Ch.10]; Celano &Neuman [Ch.15]
Inclusion	
Families participate in library-based early education programs and activities.	Lopez & Caspe [Ch. 3]; Taylor, Pratt & Whelan [Ch.4]; Risley [Ch.6]; Lemmons & Chambers [Ch.8]; Roque & Widman [Ch.10]; McNeil [Ch.12]; Forehand [Ch. 16]; Todd-Wurm [Ch.17]; Toro [Ch.19]; Smith [Ch.21]
Families gain information about and access community resources and services.	McNeil [Ch.12]; Thomas & Walter [Ch.14] Celano &Neuman [Ch.15]; Forehand [Ch. 16]
Families participate in activities honoring diversity of historical experiences and cultural heritage.	Lemmons & Chambers [Ch.8]; Williams-Cockfield [Ch.5] Toro [Ch. 19]; Smith [Ch.21]
Families in difficult circumstances – e.g. homeless, low-income – access library collections and services.	Taylor, Pratt & Whelan [Ch.4]; Higgins [Ch.7]; Forehand [Ch. 16]; Todd-Wurm [Ch.17]
Engagement	
Families bond and support children's learning through library programs.	Taylor, Pratt & Whelan [Ch.4]; Smith [Ch.21]; Higgins [Ch.7]; Roque & Widman [Ch.10]; Hilburn & Stahl [Ch.11]; Celano &Neuman [Ch.15]; Brown [Ch.22]; Smith [Ch.21]
Families and librarians have positive relationships.	Lopez & Caspe [Ch.3]; Roque & Widman [Ch.10]; Hilburn & Stahl [Ch.11]; McNeil [Ch.12]
Families engage in adult education activities.	Lopez & Caspe [Ch.3]; Taylor, Pratt & Whelan [Ch.4]; McNeil [Ch.12]; Mehra & Sikes [Ch.20]
Families connect with peers and community.	Lopez & Caspe [Ch.3]; Taylor, Pratt & Whelan [Ch.4]; Hilburn & Stahl [Ch.11]; McNeil [Ch.12]; Celano &Neuman [Ch.15]; Forehand [Ch. 16]; Todd-Wurm [Ch.17]
Families are proactive in learning(have voice in programming; participate in programs based on interests; design their own learning experiences)	Roque & Widman [Ch.10]; Hilburn & Stahl [Ch.11]; Subramaniam & Clegg [Ch.9]; Roque & Widman [Ch.10]

changed our organization, and changed our county. And the work is just beginning!" (Risley 2021).

Conclusion

This article provides an initial framework of social justice operationalized in terms of its "who," "what," and "how" elements to develop public library services with underserved families. Taking bold leadership in extending access and critical literacy while leading alongside families in engagement and learning together can help develop social justice outcomes of equity and inclusivity. The methodological approach in the

application of a qualitative meta-analytic using case studies and librarian reflections can provide insights to other editors of collections to further revisit and develop the value of their works. The content-focused assessment of the approach in its social justice dimensions of collaborating with underserved families is of much significance to designers and developers in other educational settings such as early childhood and afterschool programs. The framework can also play an important role as a tool to guide in the training of librarians, collection developers, and service program designers and others as they navigate the complexities of engaging with families in their local and regional settings.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

M. Elena Lopez is an independent researcher whose work focuses on the ecology of learning, which includes the home, school, and community. Trained in social anthropology she is interested in the dynamic interplay of individual agency and system factors in promoting educational equity. She has worked at the Harvard Family Research Project and Global Family Research Project where she initiated research about the roles of public libraries in supporting family engagement in children's learning. She has also served on the Mountain View (CA) Library Board where she advocated policy improvements for greater access to library resources and services. Her publications include the reports *Public Libraries: A Vital Space for Family Engagement* and *Ideabook: Libraries for Families*. She is co-editor of *A Librarian's Guide to Engaging Families in Learning*.

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