

# Understanding Social Justice Through Practitioners' Language: A Grounded Theory Analysis of Interviews with Practitioners from Libraries and Their Community Partners

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## Abstract

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Researchers have recognized that aspects of social justice are present in library efforts by acknowledging the importance of using library programs and services to promote social justice and the significance of social justice for the LIS field. However, while public libraries have indicated a strong interest in reaching underserved communities, they may not yet possess a thorough understanding of various aspects of social justice, especially the concepts of equity, engagement, and empowerment, despite the increasing focus on social justice's centrality in the library science field. This work-in-progress study presents a grounded theory analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews that were conducted as part of an existing study with library staff and their community partners (staff who work at organizations with which the libraries partner to offer outreach programs in the community). The analysis explores and unpacks practitioners' language to demonstrate a complex, multifaceted portrait of how these practitioners describe equity, engagement, and empowerment. These practitioners express both broad and individual approaches to this social justice work in an effort to offer equal treatment to the whole community while also recognizing individual barriers. Moreover, they underscore the importance of a role for the community to play in achieving their own goals and strengthening connections between community members and institutions. This analysis yields a critical semantic foundation of social justice concepts, situated in practitioner understanding and prior research in social justice.

**Keywords:** children's librarianship; community; outreach; public libraries; social justice

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## Introduction

Public libraries are uniquely positioned to support the aspirations and needs of families with young children in underserved communities. Some public libraries have begun to use their outreach programs and services, offered outside of the library in community locations, as a way to reach and serve these families. To help develop and provide these outreach programs for underserved communities, libraries build partnerships with local organizations and agencies who also work with these communities (Mills, et al., 2019). When successful, these programs and partnerships can allow libraries to meet these families where they are and engage with them

through “newly constructed modes of interaction” (Mehra et al., 2017, p. 4228). These efforts possibly help to upend the power dynamics that can keep these families in underserved communities at the margins and begin to support social justice efforts that could help to empower these patrons. These connections between libraries and social justice are not new, as research has acknowledged the aspects of social justice present in library efforts and the importance of using library programs and services to promote social justice (Rankin, 2016) as well as the significance of social justice for the LIS field (Cooke et al., 2016; Jaeger et al., 2014; Jaeger et al., 2016).

While libraries have indicated a strong interest in serving their community (Campana et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2019), it is possible that there is not enough of an understanding of how social justice concepts can guide libraries in engaging and empowering these families. Moreover, though libraries are engaging with their communities and gathering data on needs and aspirations, not all libraries know how to translate this data into impactful and community-based program development (Campana et al., 2019a). Project VOICE (Value sensitive design of Outcomes Informing Community Engagement), an Institute of Museum and Library Services-funded grant (Campana et al., 2019b), is focused on designing and developing a social justice, outcomes-based planning and assessment toolkit. This toolkit is intended to support library staff who serve young children (ages zero to eight) and their families in underserved communities through outreach programs and services that emphasize the social justice concepts of equity, engagement, and empowerment. These concepts are based on a synthesis of social justice research (Campana et al., 2019b), building on Brownlee et al.'s (2012) work on social justice as undoing structural barriers that reinforce inequalities among people, as well as Kleine's Choice framework (2010).

### Literature Review

Broadly speaking, social justice can be understood as the idea that all individuals, no matter who they are or their status in society, deserve equal rights as members of society. Though slight differences in definition and manifestation exist across the library and information science field, one common theme is that social justice is about having respect for and honoring human rights, especially the right to information (Jaeger et al., 2015; Mathiesen, 2015), as well as acknowledging the role of power dynamics in continuing historic and institutional inequalities for various groups (ODLOS, 2020). Perhaps implicit in these definitions is the responsibility of public libraries to understand and address issues of discrimination due to race, class or socio-economic status, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, hair style, language and literacy level, and other factors that may play a part in exclusion or marginalization of communities or groups that libraries serve (Gibson et al., 2017). As entrenched institutional or cultural norms have the potential to make certain groups feel less valuable—a kind of “violation of justice”—the work to undo these structural barriers is central to social justice efforts (Fraser, 2009, as cited in Brownlee et al., 2012, p. 32). While the library field has begun to focus on their role in these efforts, other fields have been immersed in social justice work for much longer and, as a result, have established definitions of key social justice concepts (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011; Reisch, 2002). Because of this, this literature review pulls definitions from the social work, community health, and education fields as well as the library field to provide an interdisciplinary view of equity, empowerment, and engagement—the social justice concepts that serve as a foundation for Project VOICE.

The concept of equity is frequently placed at the forefront of social justice work in public libraries, especially when considering access to information (Jaeger et al., 2015).

Misunderstandings often exist between equality and equity, with equality often implying sameness for all (ODLOS, 2020). ALA's Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services (ODLOS) defines equity as the converse of this perspective of sameness, acknowledging there is a difference between individuals and groups, and placing an emphasis on taking individual differences into account so that a fair process and outcome are ensured (2020). Equity is often tied to a "redistribution" or "just distribution" of resources (Brownlee et al., 2012; Mathiesen, 2015), with Mathiesen (2015) noting that this "just distribution" is a model in which "every person has sufficient access to exercise [their] basic capabilities" and that access and capability are affected by complex and interrelated factors (p. 200). Brownlee et al. (2012), building off previous work by Fraser (2009), proposes that, in addition to redistribution, representation and recognition also play a key part in developing equity. "Representation" focuses on giving disadvantaged groups an active voice in institutions or agencies from which they may have previously been excluded, while "recognition" relates to a "cultural justice" that acknowledges historical marginalization of certain groups (Brownlee et al., 2012, p. 21).

Another key concept of social justice work in libraries is community engagement, considered to be one of the core values of public libraries today (Gibson et al., 2017). Gibson et al. (2017) write that community engagement should involve an "active" and "critical" approach, with an explicit acknowledgement of "the influence of social, cultural, financial, and political power on information access and information behavior," moving libraries beyond a neutral and apolitical stance (p. 752). Libraries Transforming Communities, a joint professional development initiative from the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) and ALA, defines community engagement as "the process of working collaboratively with community members...to address issues for the betterment of the community" (ALA, 2018). Other sources outside the library field echo the collaborative nature of community engagement, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (1997) writing that community engagement "often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices" (p. 9).

Empowerment, a third critical concept of social justice work, is embedded in service professions like librarianship (Maack, 1997). Though a single definition is lacking, empowerment is usually seen as supporting individuals and communities as they increase their autonomy and strengths and make meaningful choices for themselves (Adams, 2003; Lachal & Peich, 2017). In library work, empowerment can be understood as a way to give the community an active voice, allowing work or learning to be guided by the direction or values of the community, with public libraries assuming a role of facilitator, partner, or knowledge sharer (Maack, 1997). In doing this, libraries can work to leverage community knowledge and enable community members to be decision-makers and problem-solvers, an oft-overlooked position for communities (Lachal & Peich, 2017). Similar to the other social justice concepts, empowerment requires the recognition of the role of power dynamics and historical inequalities in the relationship and work done between public libraries and the vulnerable communities they may serve (Lachal & Peich, 2017; Maack, 1997). Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) acknowledge this, adding that empowerment is affected by both the capacity of an individual to choose for themselves and the "opportunity structure (the institutional context in which choice is made)" (p. 4). Kleine (2010) expanded on this to elucidate how an individual or community's "resource portfolio"—their capacity—is often limited by societal frameworks of exclusion or marginalization.

However, despite increasing recognition of social justice's centrality in the library science field (Cooke et al., 2016; Jaeger et al., 2014; Jaeger et al., 2016), public libraries may not yet possess

a thorough-enough understanding of how the social justice concepts of equity, engagement, and empowerment can be applied in their work with underserved and marginalized communities (Gibson et al., 2017). Indeed, while studies have revealed the presence of social justice in public library efforts (Jaeger et al., 2014; Rankin, 2016); the need for more critical and active work around social justice in libraries, especially around anti-racism, has become increasingly evident (Gibson et al., 2020). As Gorski (2016) notes, “enthusiasm is not enough” to fully understand and implement the change needed to address the vast societal and cultural problems encountered in the U.S. that negatively impact many underserved communities, notably those of color (p. 13). As a first step in providing a foundation for more active social justice work in the LIS field, this initial study explores the ways that library staff and their community partners, who work with underserved populations, describe and make meaning of the social justice concepts of equity, engagement, and empowerment.

### Research Design

This work-in-progress study aims to use a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 1998) to analyze transcripts from twenty, semi-structured interviews, collected during six site visits for Project VOICE during the fall and early winter of 2019-2020. These interviews (conducted both in-person and via phone) took place prior to nationwide library shutdowns due to COVID-19; therefore, this dataset does not include the full set of library staff participants recruited for Project VOICE. As part of the interview protocol, we asked the participants to define for themselves the term “underserved community” and to self-identify communities around their library that would qualify as underserved. In this way we were able to leverage our participants’ expertise about their communities, thereby situating their conceptual understandings of the concepts of equity, engagement, and empowerment in their own experiences. Moreover, this participant-generated approach enabled us to address a variety of types of diversity, including socioeconomic, racial/cultural, education level, and so on. The purpose of this work-in-progress study is to provide initial insight into how public library staff and their community partners describe these social justice concepts for themselves, what language they use, and how their language connects back to the research literature to offer insight into the current understanding of social justice among practitioners working with families and children in underserved communities. This research is guided by the following questions:

**RQ1:** How, if at all, do library staff and community partners participating in Project VOICE describe the social justice concept of equity?

**RQ2:** How, if at all, do library staff and community partners participating in Project VOICE describe the social justice concept of engagement?

**RQ3:** How, if at all, do library staff and community partners participating in Project VOICE describe the social justice concept of empowerment?

### Population

The population<sup>1</sup> of this work-in-progress study consisted of seven library staff (including one library administrator) from six library systems and 13 community partner staff (staff from organizations that libraries partner with to offer outreach programs in the community) from eight community organizations. The unequal distribution across these two groups is due to the fact that these Project VOICE library staff participants often work with multiple community partners

in their outreach efforts. We purposely recruited library staff who engage in outreach programs and services with families and children (ages birth to eight) in underserved communities; community partners who are involved with the library outreach programs and services were also recruited. Furthermore, we recruited nationwide in order to achieve greater variety across communities and library sizes. While the majority of this study's library staff population represented libraries located in suburban and city locales; at least two libraries were located in rural areas and smaller towns. Given that our recruitment strategies were more focused on the nature of the outreach program the library staff were offering and less on the nature of their job description, the final participant group represented a wide variety of job titles and descriptions, such as children's librarian or outreach librarian, that were not specifically tied to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)-related positions. Moreover, due to the qualitative nature of this study, we did not seek to control for any previous DEI-related training in our recruitment efforts, prioritizing instead the outreach work they were already doing in their communities and seeking to leverage that expertise as part of our study.

### Analysis

The analysis was completed using a grounded theory approach where participant responses were analyzed at the group level (library staff as one group; community partners as a second group) without comparisons between the groups because each group's perspectives may be quite different. Similarly, comparisons of the responses by demographic groupings (e.g., library service population, locale, cultural background of participants) were not done due to the limited size of the study population and exploratory nature of the study. The grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) thematic analysis was performed by three researchers across several phases. The first phase consisted of two researchers reading each transcript thoroughly. Afterwards one researcher conducted an initial cycle of open, line-by-line coding of the transcripts from both populations (library staff and community partners), eliciting codes from the quotes themselves, with the goal of highlighting each interviewee's implicit and explicit meanings in their responses (Gubrium et al., 2012). Following a review of the initial coding by the second researcher, the two researchers discussed the coding to negotiate any differences in interpretation. A second, categorical coding cycle was then completed by the first researcher to gather the initial open codes into common categories and definitions using the frequency and significance of the initial codes to guide the categorization (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Subsequently, the two researchers held a second discussion to arrive at an agreement with the category codes and then worked together to identify thematic codes based on the categories. Finally, the full codebook was subsequently handed off to the third researcher for overall validation and further discussions to determine consensus, after which the thematic codes were applied to the complete dataset. The goal of this approach to coding was not to achieve reliability on a set coding scheme; instead, this approach facilitated in-depth discussions among the researchers as to the various meanings and interpretations present in the transcripts around the concepts of equity, engagement, and empowerment (Harry et al., 2005). These adaptive and emergent discussions led to further refinements of the codes and themes, based on the various perspectives and lived experiences of the researchers and the crucial negotiations that arose in these discussions (Smagorinsky, 2008).

### Findings

Our thematic analysis addresses all three research questions and yields the following narrative

presentation of the broad findings. These findings present main themes, grouped under the concepts of equity, engagement, and empowerment, and delineated for each population group (library staff and community partners).

## Equity

### Library staff

Library staff (LS) talk about equity in terms of two approaches to their outreach work: broad and specific. In the broad approach, LS use the terms “equal,” “everyone,” and “same” to indicate their efforts to reach everyone in their community in the same way, with the intent of giving all people an equal chance to benefit from the programs and services they are offering outside of library walls in the community, emphasizing fairness and same treatment regardless of background. On the other hand, some LS discuss equity as an individualized process that is based on actual or perceived need, paying close attention to “places where people might need more resources” to “meet them at their point of need.” These LS are taking into account and, as a result, tailoring their work to specific aspects of a community’s identity, with the purpose of filling a gap in access. In fact, at times both approaches appear in the same LS response, presenting a tension in these discussions of broad and specific approaches. An example of this occurred when one LS shared, “We try to provide library services that are tailored to what people say that they may need, no matter where they are, their station.” Additionally, a second LS said, “[We are] making sure we are hitting people with all different socioeconomic backgrounds and we’re not just focusing on one area of community, but being out everywhere.”

LS see themselves as having a multifaceted, active role to play in equity, using verbs such as “provide,” “reach out,” “serve,” “make sure/ensure,” “identify,” “interact,” and others, underscoring an intent to serve and address access gaps, typically by connecting the community to tools, resources, programs, and so on. LS also express a sense of personal motivation and purpose to their outreach work, wanting to connect with the community on an interpersonal level as part of that purpose. They talk about a deliberate approach to incorporating equity into the planning, execution, and delivery of the program by drawing on their implicit knowledge of the community. For instance, one LS said, “I believe that [in] my work, in the way I communicate... and interact with the families, with the people that I’m seeing, I’m showing my commitment and my understanding of closing the gap.” There is a tension here, too, between their personal goals and the goals they see from the library as an organization.

Finally, LS point to two key aspects of equity in their role in outreach work. LS believe community voices should play a key part in incorporating equity into outreach services, with one LS pointing out, “It has to have their voice, or it has to come from them.” Coupled with this aspect is the recognition that not all community members can access what is being offered, due to a variety of barriers.

### Community Partners

Community partners (CP) talk about equity in terms of two approaches to their outreach work: broad and specific. In the broad approach, CP use the terms “equal,” “everyone,” “all people,” and “everybody” to refer to their effort to provide the same level of access to resources and tools for the community members they serve. CP believe all community members deserve this access and they develop these resources according to community needs as they are understood

by the CP. This equal approach is intended to provide everyone with the same access, by treating everyone the same regardless of individual factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and so on. On the other hand, some CP talk about a specific approach that recognizes the differing needs and amount of access present in the community being served, with one CP saying, "It's not necessarily the exact same for everybody; sometimes we have to reach out differently for different people to make sure that they can have the same chances for things." CP emphasize the value of truly seeing a community, recognizing what they actually need, and making an extra effort to fill gaps and address the barriers they face, their points of need, and so on, by leveraging various kinds of data.

CP also emphasize the importance of building trust as part of developing that community knowledge. For example, a CP shared, "It also helps us to get to know the families a little bit more and build that trust so that we can reach out and help with resources that they need." As part of that work, CP seek to recognize and understand the influence of societal and class structures on the community's capacity. CP also talk about their role in both broad and specific approaches to outreach work, using the verbs "provide," "reach out," "take time," and "make sure/ensure" to describe how they offer resources, tools, knowledge, opportunities, and so on. They reflect on cultural relevance, seeking to "match" their work with what people need, offering the support that families need while also recognizing that support must be differentiated.

## Engagement

### Library Staff

LS describe community engagement as providing opportunities and services that meet community needs while also taking into account community capacity and being respectful of boundaries and limitations. They see engagement as an effort to share power with the community, working with the community as equals, if it is within the community's capacity and desire to do so. LS also seek to know their community and work to encourage community involvement in programs and services, with one LS saying, "We want [to] make sure that they're involved and they have the opportunity to be."

LS express a sense of purpose when it comes to this engagement work: that of building trust and relationships with the community and being part of the community. This work takes an investment of time and a consistent presence, both valued by LS as encouraging and motivating the community through showing a sense of respect for the community. LS also look for instances when that engagement can be two-way, explaining, "We want to engage with people and have people engage back with us." LS believe that, by being part of the community, they gain knowledge that enables better relationships with, and active engagement in, the community.

In engagement, as in equity, LS stress the importance of being aware of community barriers when producing their outreach work, because these barriers can impede a community's ability and capacity to engage fully with the library. Families might be juggling more than one job, struggling to feed their children, as well as confronting other difficulties. This awareness by the LS is part of knowing the community better and providing an informed and thoughtful sense of engagement with the community. For instance, one LS shared, "We really try not to get in the way of their day, but [rather] add to their experience wherever they [might be] stuck." Finally, LS talk about the role of the community in this engagement work, sharing power with the community and

expecting community involvement in the various types of outreach work, explaining “Everyone [is] working towards a shared goal or vision for how a community could be.”

### Community Partners

CP look at engagement as consisting of building relationships and establishing trust within the community, placing a value on actively working to establish connections. They believe connections are part of forming trust, emphasizing a need for authenticity. They also recognize that engagement suffers when trust and connection are not in place. One CP shared, “If you don’t have a relationship with [a] student or parent, you’re going to have zero engagement; they’re not going to listen to what you’re saying; they’re not going to take the resources you’re providing them... they don’t trust you.” Instead, CP seek to work *with* community members, in a collaborative way, and view the community members as partners, especially in decision making and community strengthening.

Similarly, some CP talked about sharing vulnerability as a part of this work as well, describing that vulnerability is being present and open with the community about what’s going on. CP also point to a reciprocation on the part of the community as a result of that openness and vulnerability—within healthy boundaries—and they see this reciprocation as an indication of trust. Finally, CP discuss the importance of recognizing barriers to engagement that may inhibit relationship building and establishing trust. One barrier might be that CP may not be aware of their own lens of how they think the community wants to be engaged, versus developing a clear understanding of the community and recognizing a community’s history. A CP pointed out, “[We] need to take [our engagement] lens off and acknowledge engagement efforts on the family’s behalf in the increments that they’re willing to give us in that time and space that we share together.” Another barrier might be the presence of trauma in families’ backgrounds, compounded by a lack of familiarity on the part of the CP with that kind of background. Regardless of these and other barriers, CP remain optimistic about their capability to continue to build trust and engage with their communities. For instance, a CP explains, “Maybe they’ve trusted people and been burnt. So they’re going to be less trusting of us, but we have to still have the same expectations of trust building and acknowledge their efforts, whether they be minimal or grand.”

### Empowerment

#### Library Staff

When it comes to empowerment, LS see themselves not just as a provider of material support (tools, resources, etc.), but also as a community facilitator, using the terms “helper,” “motivator,” and “model,” among others, to describe their work in empowering their communities. LS seek to encourage community members to recognize their own strengths and capabilities, emphasizing that the everyday actions of families are integral to preparing children for later learning success. A LS pointed out, “[We are] making sure that families know your child doesn’t have to be enrolled into a fancy school to make a difference. The things you’re doing day-to-day are just as important, if not more important.”

LS also talk about wanting to make a difference in the lives of the community members they serve, even citing this as their motivation for doing this outreach work. Equally important is a desire on the part of LS to honor a community’s right to thrive, taking the standpoint that the



community is deserving of the resources the library has to offer, that they have a right to these services, and that they should feel welcomed by the library. One LS shared, "I see empowerment as providing that access, but [also] making them feel like they're welcome to and deserve the right to use those services." As part of this right to thrive, LS talk about wanting to provide a normalizing, positive environment in which to offer these services, one that honors a community's dignity and avoids introducing stigmas into the experience. LS discuss working to recognize personal privilege, also understood as bias, as part of these efforts as well, which may affect the ways in which outreach services are created and implemented. LS stress the importance of listening to peers who come from the community or who share similar backgrounds and can provide a necessary perspective on how to provide empowering outreach opportunities for a community in a positive way. Finally, LS discuss the role of the community in enacting empowerment, believing the community has the responsibility and capability to take ownership over their own outcomes with the programs and services that are offered out in the community. Essentially, a community must play an active role in taking the resources and support provided and then implementing them in their own community to make a difference. A LS shared, "Empowerment is letting them know that they are responsible and can take ownership."

### Community Partners

CP also discuss how the community plays a role in empowerment by setting goals, establishing independence, understanding their own capacity, and believing they can succeed. Explained one CP, "It's up to them; not handholding in the process, but actually [enabling them to] make the change and do it." CP place a value on the community recognizing their own capacity to make good things happen in their lives, in having confidence and a sense of ownership over what happens in their community, with one CP explaining, "Empowerment is just motivating them and giving them confidence in themselves and resources to do it themselves." CP locate their own role in this empowerment work, using verbs like "giving," "reaching out," "ensuring," "looking for resources," "finding folks in the community," "helping them see their capacity," "motivating," "giving confidence," "goal setting," and "simplifying and explaining."

Many of these verbs suggest that CP see their role as sitting alongside what they view as the community's role in their own empowerment. The CP want to lift up and support community members, help them recognize their own capacity as well as the inherent challenges, and seek ways to offer resources and support that enable community members to thrive and achieve their goals. However, CP also acknowledge that barriers can exist in their own expectations for the community and the community's capacity, such as the difference between what CP want for a community and what the community itself wants in terms of improvement. CP also recognize that empowerment does not always come easily; there may be internal or external factors that complicate the empowerment process. A CP shared, "Sometimes it just takes a little bit more to get people to empowerment. Sometimes it's because people just don't know or are afraid or don't want to, or sometimes there are systems in place that don't let them." CP point to the importance of meeting people where they are as one way to move past barriers to empowerment, emphasizing, "Empowerment means meeting people where they are at and helping them feel... like [they] can actually do it."

### Discussion

As discussed in the literature review, social justice can be understood as the idea that all individuals, no matter who they are or what their status is in society, deserve a certain equal

right as members of society. Similarly, public libraries and other community organizations have a responsibility not only to understand and address issues of discrimination but also to work to undo structural barriers that make certain groups feel less valuable in their communities and in society as a whole. The data in this work-in-progress study reveal that LS and CP use multifaceted, yet often convergent descriptions to portray equity, engagement, and empowerment. Examining the data through the study's research questions provides insight into how these practitioner-generated descriptions of these social justice concepts reflect or diverge from the existing literature.

## Equity

The data under research question one, which focused on LS and CP descriptions of equity, reveals that the descriptions offered by LS and CP in many ways align with much of the literature. For these practitioners, equity is a complex concept, one that requires developing an individualized process based on actual or perceived need and/or tailoring a program to specific aspects of a community's identity, while also intending to provide all attendees with an equal or same chance to benefit and thereby fill a gap in access. This connects with ODLOS' (2020) emphasis on recognizing and understanding disadvantages in the community and how these disadvantages can lead to exclusion within communities that can linger at a systemic level. Furthermore, both LS and CP point to their roles and motivation in equity-based outreach work, and how their efforts are centered around interaction and connection with the community. In this way they are emphasizing the significance of representation, as Brownlee et al. (2012) put it, acknowledging trust and cultural relevance to be important parts of this work. LS in particular highlight the importance of incorporating voices from the different communities, touching on Brownlee et al.'s (2012) use of the term "representation," to ensure recognition when nurturing equity for disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, when talking about their roles, both LS and CP pointed to their efforts to address access gaps for the community as a central part of their roles; in this way they are mirroring Mathiesen's (2015) belief that equity has roots in a "just distribution" of resources.

However, while the literature makes a clear division between equity and equality (ODLOS, 2020), some participant responses indicate a persistent interchangeability between these terms. Some describe an equitable approach as one that ensures the same for all (equality), rather than one that recognizes individualization based on differing needs (equity). Moreover, some participants discuss both broad and specific approaches to outreach work to try to meet the whole community. These approaches sit in tension with one another—on the one hand, trying to serve an entire community, and on the other hand, meeting a community where they are and recognizing individual needs and aspirations. To address this tension, Brownlee et al. (2017) discuss how providing support for reflection specifically on social justice concepts can help practitioners wrestle through internal conflict to hopefully arrive on their own to a deeper understanding of social justice and how to contribute or apply it. It is possible that an increased awareness of the literature related to equity, as well as opportunities to reimagine library outreach work from an equity perspective, would enable library and community partner staff to more deeply understand this concept and how it applies to their work in serving communities and families.

## Engagement

The data under research question two, which focused on LS and CP descriptions of engagement,

reveals that, here, too, the descriptions shared by these practitioners align in many ways with the literature. The LS and CP emphasize how, for them, engagement involves building relationships that are founded on trust and connections, understanding where the community is in terms of their barriers, and then playing an active role in helping to overcome some of those barriers, so that the community can feel engaged and supported. LS, in particular, highlight the importance of personal connections with the community to achieve authentic engagement. This echoes Gibson et al.'s (2017) and Mehra et al.'s (2006) calls for active involvement in the community by the library in order to better understand and engage with underserved groups. CP expand on this to offer the idea of sharing vulnerability as a way to build trust and promote engagement, an idea that we did not see in the literature, and one that offers a direction for further research to add depth to the existing scholarship in this area.

LS also point to partnerships with community organizations as a powerful method for building engagement, an idea that has been supported in the CDC literature (1997), as a way to “help mobilize resources and influence systems (p. 7).” In addition, LS underscore the importance of having an awareness of barriers within the community, as part of a larger role they play in engagement. This role includes meeting the community where they are, helping without being in the way, and providing opportunities for involvement and engagement despite barriers. In this way, LS are putting into action some of Gibson et al.'s (2017) recommendation that community engagement involve an “active” and “critical” approach. At the same time, LS also expect the community to play a role in this engagement process, as the staff share power with the community and seek community involvement in outreach work. While the literature similarly emphasizes collaboration with the community as part of engagement work toward community improvement (ALA, 2018) we did not specifically see this kind of reciprocal expectation of community involvement reflected in it. Again, this offers an interesting additional area for future research into actors' expectations around roles and interaction. On the other hand, we did not see Gibson et al.'s (2017) emphasis on community engagement—requiring a clear recognition of the role of historic and institutional power dynamics by libraries doing work in underserved communities, especially those of color—illustrated in the data. Since CP and LS express an intent to recognize and understand societal and class structures affecting power dynamics when discussing equity, future research is needed here as well, to surface these practitioners' awareness of and actions to upend these power dynamics in their outreach work with communities.

## Empowerment

Finally, the data under research question three, which focused on LS and CP descriptions of empowerment, shows a third way in which the participant data is in alignment with much of the social justice literature. LS talk about empowerment in terms of their role as community facilitator, similar to Maack's characterization (1997), trying to make a difference in the community they serve and honoring that community's right to thrive and receive services and programs. LS also highlight the importance of sharing their struggles and understanding barriers, which echoes Kleine's (2010) Choice Framework, and the concept of a “resource portfolio” that can affect how much a community can move past barriers based on their capacity. LS also discuss the community's role in empowerment, believing the community has the capacity and capability to enact change for themselves. CP, too, see a role for the community in goal setting and recognizing their own capacity. Both characterizations reflect the literature (Adams, 2003; Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Lachal & Peich, 2017), especially in terms of achieving goals through their own efforts and actions. Additionally, CP want to instill confidence in community members,

building relationships with them and motivating them, connecting back to Lachal and Peich's (2017) conceptualization of empowerment in supporting individuals and communities as they increase their autonomy and strengths and make meaningful choices for themselves.

In this way, much of the data from this work-in-progress study sits in agreement and alignment with much of the existing social justice literature, indicating that some work has already been done in moving the field toward a more equitable, engaged, and empowering approach to community-based outreach work. However, certain new themes—an interchangeability of equity and equality; an approach that is both broad and specific and therefore perhaps embodies some tension of scope and goal; an expectation on the part of the practitioner that a community play their own role in facilitating engagement; and an interest in sharing vulnerability with a community as part of building trust and relationship—offer intriguing additional avenues for inquiry that could lend depth and nuance to existing social justice theories around equity, engagement, and empowerment in community work.

### Limitations

As with any work-in-progress qualitative study, there are limitations, primarily related to the population and the restrictions placed on the study by the events of COVID-19. As noted in the research design section, the population does not include the full study population because the case studies were cut short by COVID-19 quarantines. Given the small size of the participant group, it is likely that the descriptions portrayed here are not fully reflective of the field as a whole. Regarding the interviews themselves, with a few exceptions, the interviews were conducted individually with each participant. However, for three interviews, participants were interviewed together due to their request or time constraints. In each of these exceptions, interviewee responses were considered separately during our analysis.

### Implications and Conclusion

LS and CP describe the social justice concepts of equity, engagement, and empowerment, in complex and overlapping ways, which present both broad and individual approaches to this work that seek to offer equal treatment to the whole community while also recognizing individual barriers, and underscore a role for the community in achieving their own goals and strengthening connections between community members and institutions. These findings offer the following implications for practice. Regarding LIS curriculum, social justice-focused courses are increasingly being offered and research is contributing to shaping and developing the curricula for these courses (Cooke, et al., 2016; Cooke & Sweeney, 2017). This research can benefit from practitioner-generated descriptions that offer a starting point for in-depth discussions in the classroom; in other cases, these descriptions can expand existing perspectives on how social justice concepts can impact and shape the work of future librarians. Similarly, regarding professional development, this study offers conceptual descriptions that will likely resonate with and offer a way for these practitioners to reflect both on their ongoing work and on how they might meaningfully incorporate the social justice concepts of equity, engagement, and empowerment into their outreach work with families and children in underserved communities. Moreover, LS can use the CP descriptions of these concepts to help facilitate conversations across organizations and look at how to collaboratively build social justice outreach programs and services.

This study offers opportunities for future research as well. Because this work-in-progress study

includes only a portion of the whole Project VOICE population; additional research is needed to explore how the remaining population describe equity, engagement, and empowerment compared to the themes from this initial study to assess fit and relevance. Furthermore, a theme raised by one participant—recognizing personal privilege—offers an intriguing avenue for future research to explore the role, identified by this participant, of knowledgeable peers who can possess insider knowledge of a particular community. It's possible that this nascent aspect of empowerment might be prevalent across the entire participant group, as well as across all three concepts. Overall, this research into the ways that LS and CP describe and make meaning of social justice concepts—equity, engagement, and empowerment—provides the field with practitioner-generated descriptions that can inform future outreach work and have a positive impact on academic and practitioner pursuits toward meeting communities where they are and enacting change.

### Endnote

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<sup>1</sup> As noted above, the population included in this paper's study is a subset of the Project VOICE population, due to a change in study activities related to COVID-19. However, for the purposes of this paper, this subset will be referred to as "the population."

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