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Theory of the Informationally Underserved: A Pragmatic Model for Social Justice

ABSTRACT

Introduction

Pragmatic research epistemology calls for a purpose, a problem to be solved. Observations of urban students' poor standardized test scores and weak research dispositions inspired examining the impact of student learning without "the information-transformational-formational challenge of learning"¹ that active school library programs (ALSP) provide. This paper presents dissertation research² that constructs the theory of and model for the informationally underserved (IU). These are students who learn in classrooms without access to a library's wealth of books³ or information literacy learning experiences⁴ that support individual interests and readiness levels.⁵ The subjects are entering 9th grader students. The study focuses on how deficient school library resources affect academic achievement and independent learning dispositions that empower inquisitiveness and critical thinking.⁴

Theoretical Foundation

The deconstruction of this social justice issue employed concurrent mixed-methods research procedures through a cultural pragmatic lens.⁶ Emerging from this is the IU theory and model. Crowley⁷ suggests that the "true test of any theory lies in analyzed experience." The experience, in this case, centers on these research questions: Is academic performance compromised if students are without an active school library program? Do students without access to school libraries in elementary and middle school perform significantly less than proficient on standardized tests? How, if at all, do students without active school library programs characterize their information worlds⁸ and everyday information practices⁹ with their academic performance? In what

ways does the lack of library use prior to 9th grade influence a student's intellectual desire for knowledge?

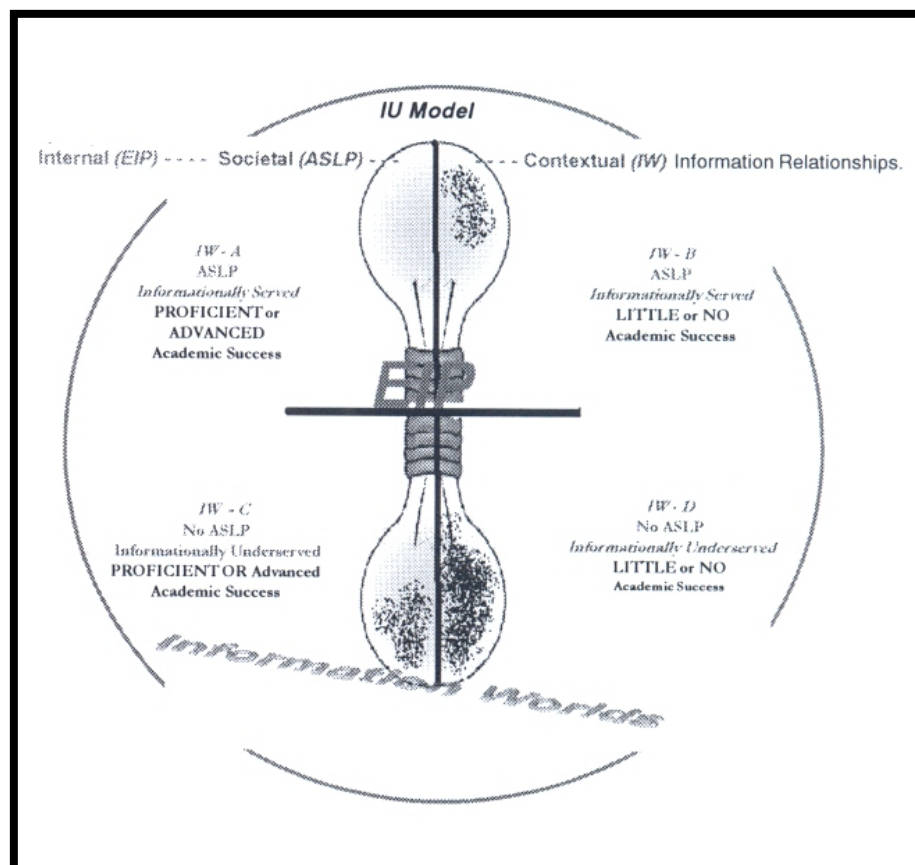
The school library impact studies^{10,11,12} provide ample data about the positive impact of ASLP on standardized test achievement. However, there is little research on the opposite: Whether or not little or no access to ASLP prior to high school has a relationship with poor standardized test performance. Though some SLIS studies control for free-and-reduced-lunch factors,^{10,11,12,13} overall, adolescent situational, behavioral and internal contexts and perspectives have not been explored. The theories of information worlds (IW)⁸ and everyday information practices (EIP)⁹ provide a framework for defining and describing the IU's under-resourced educational contexts and weak information literacy skills.

Research Methodology and Findings

The quantitative component of this study mirrors the school library impact studies^{10,11} by employing a Likert scale survey instrument and a non-parametric research hypothesis. Ordinal independent variables, or the students characterizations from the survey are compared with a scalable dependent variable,¹⁴ or a standardized test score. A convenient sample of 119 ninth graders provides data to examine a range of factors including middle and elementary school library availability, frequency of use, public library access and cell phone utilization. The analyzed data is plotted on the IU four-quadrant model's light bulb symbol. The trending bottom right data points show a slight negative, but not significant, correlation between students without school libraries and "needs improvement" or "warning" standardized test scores.¹⁵ The weak negative correlation may be due to the nature of the convenient sample who have better school library access than the national 37%, who have middle and elementary school libraries and librarians.¹⁶

The concurrent module investigates the phenomenon of the possible marginalization of those educated without libraries. The thirty minute, semi-structured interviews queried students

without ASLP about their conceptualization of a library's body of information and their information use within the "small world" of the school classroom, the "meso world" of school information literacy learning resources and in their IW: situated, interrelated contexts that constantly interact and are impacted by social norms, social types, information value, information behavior and boundaries.⁸ EIP information seeking, use and practices⁹ also serve as coding themes.⁶ The findings are an expression of the coded data derived from IW and EIP experiences and practices. Emerging themes include the IU's classroom learning resources include textbooks, guided reading books and limited free reading books. Access to technology is intermittent. Little or no information literacy instruction is offered. They tend to use family members, public libraries and bookstores to locate non-school related information. The respondents share an earnestness for finding and using information for personal interest and school success. However, further research on the IU, especially those who lack these positive community or family supports, may further expose the injustice of learning without school libraries.



Model of the Theory of the Informationally Underserved

- 1) ***IW-A*** or the informationally served: experience ASLP access and academic success.
- 2) ***IW-B*** or the informationally served: experience ASLP access, but have little or no academic success. The scope of this research does not include this cohort. Their learning issues require different research.
- 3) ***IW-C*** or the informationally underserved: experience little or no ASLP access yet had academic success. Results suggest family support and public library access contribute.
- 4) ***IW-D*** or the informationally underserved: experience little or no ASLP and poor academic success. Note the darkest shading symbolizing the poor standardized test score trend.

By triangulating IW and EIP theories with SLIS survey methodology, a three dimensional, holistic information profile⁹ emerges: From his or her external and ever changing information environments -- to observable information customs or habits -- to internal, information needs and wonders.

Objectives

The theory of and model for the informationally underserved express a dynamic problem that equates “social justice” with “intended consequences.”⁶ This reflection on the informationally underserved “concretize(s) the abstract” in order to “lead to actions based on principles of equal access to information, balance in library collections, and mediation between information seekers and content.”¹⁷ The facile replicable research methodology should be applied in other contexts such as rural and suburban IU or to examine high school test scores; strengthening the SLIS research and enlarging the foundational theories. The goal is to inform educational decision makers about the “ethical consideration(s)”¹⁷ regarding funding and support for school library programs. The purpose is to lessen the social injustice of this inequitable access to in order to advance thoughtful participation in a democratic society⁴.

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30 Word Abstract

Poor test scores and weak information literacy dispositions inspired examining the impact of learning **without** libraries. Information worlds and everyday information practices theories frame mixed-methods research advancing equitable library access.

