

The Big Opportunities of Little Free Libraries:

The Trend That's Serving Community Needs and Promoting Literacy

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Explanatory Summary

Library trends are distinguished from shorter-lived “fads” by their persistence and the influence that the trend has on the way libraries grow and thrive. They mark a change in the needs of patrons in a specific community or across the entire field, and affect how librarianship as a profession takes place. Despite their diminutive, “cutesy” name, Little Free Libraries are one such trend. They are not officially connected to any professional librarianship organization, but are of importance to public librarians. Public libraries and librarians should take note of Little Free Libraries because they offer a unique way to understand community needs, and because they can be a valuable resource in achieving library goals of increased literacy. These opportunities change the way that librarianship takes place and offer ways to provide better services in a timely manner. They encourage innovation and will assist in the constant updating of librarianship to match the needs of library patrons worldwide. Despite a lack of much-needed research, examples of Little Free Libraries responding to community needs and functioning as tools of literacy education can be seen via a review of the existing literature.

Little Free Libraries (LFLs) are small, free-standing structures, installed in public spaces that contain books, magazines, and other materials for users to take or borrow free of charge (Little Free Library.org, n.d.). They are accessible at all times and serve as a point of interaction and communication between various members of a community, who are invited to take and replace materials in the LFL as they see fit (Little Free Library.org, n.d.). LFLs aim to increase community interconnectedness and support the literacy education of local children, and have been embraced as a tangible expression of neighborly love for one's community

and city; they can now be found worldwide (Little Free Library.org, n.d.). They are installed by non-professional “stewards,” who build or purchase the structures and can choose to register them on a global map. Stewards also monitor and maintain the LFLs — the choice of what to remove or include is entirely up to their discretion (Little Free Library.org, n.d.). Additionally, there have been numerous expansions on the idea, including the Little Free Pantry and the Little Free Art Gallery, which demonstrates just how receptive people are to this service model (Lelyveld, 2019; Free, 2021). The popular acceptance of LFLs is, in fact, what makes them such a powerful litmus test of community needs.

A key piece of research by Sarmiento, Sims, and Morales demonstrates that Little Free Libraries offer librarians the opportunity for unprecedented access to embed themselves within the communities they serve, as a part of the “guerilla urbanist” movement (2017). This kind of embedded relationship makes libraries a more complete part of their communities, which in turn improves a library's ability to serve (Sarmiento, Sims, & Morales, 2017). Libraries seeking to become a more fully integrated part of their community should take notice of the mutable nature of LFLs, which make them a good indicator of the ebb and flow of community needs. For example, the weeding choices of the stewards who maintain them are a direct reflection of the values held by these specific members of the community, and while this cannot be relied upon to accurately reflect the needs of the whole community, numerous LFLs spread out over a wide enough service area can act as a kind of topical barometer (Kozak, 2019).

Additionally, LFLs are a potential point of contact between libraries and their constituents. In her work, Barela discusses the role that communities play in daily life (2014). Children spend 16% of their time in structured schools, and the rest is spent with families and

in their neighborhoods (Barela, 2014). Moreover, employed adults spend about 33% of their time working (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). In both instances the time spent in one's community is substantial, and that time is an opportunity for libraries to connect with their patrons. LFLs exist within the fabric of the community, offering a touchstone by which formal public libraries can participate in daily life. Informational marketing, such as hours of operation or services that are on offer at the central library, posted within a LFL goes directly to the target population without the intermediaries of email, billboard, or flyer. LFLs are highly visible, making them a more reliable and less intrusive part of the daily lives of community members than any other form of advertisement (Free, 2021).

Furthermore, the integrated nature of LFLs presents an opportunity for partnership between public libraries and LFLs centered around achieving the shared goal of increasing literacy. The caretakers of LFLs are enthusiastically engaged with increasing the interconnectedness of their communities, but lack the planning and organizing abilities to fully leverage the opportunities that LFLs represent (Sarmiento, Sims, & Morales, 2017). Most LFLs are located in affluent neighborhoods that already have access to well-funded public libraries; rarely do they exist in "book deserts" — neighborhoods where children may genuinely lack access to appropriate literature — which interferes with LFLs' ability to have a tangible effect on childhood literacy (Sarmiento, Sims, & Morales, 2017).

Currently, public libraries offer LFL stewards recommendations about appropriate book selections and bias-free weeding. This participation could be increased with programming designed to actively recruit stewards and encourage the construction of LFLs in poorer neighborhoods. It is not possible to have a branch library in every neighborhood, but a series of LFLs that are supported by the library and run by local volunteer stewards is entirely feasible. Members of the community are likely to engage with

the library in this way, but may have reservations about starting an LFL on their own. Offering training and guidance to those who are interested, as well as actively marketing to neighborhood leaders in areas that would benefit from this program, will increase community interest and confidence and ensure that LFLs end up in sites of greatest potential value.

There is currently a lack of critical research into LFLs, as their pertinence to public libraries has only recently begun to be recognized (Snow, 2015). This lack of information is an obvious barrier to libraries getting involved alongside non-professional stewards; it also puts libraries in a defensive role when it comes to controversy surrounding LFLs. Although they aim to increase community unity, occasionally the opposite occurs, such as in a 2018 case of political vandalism where an unknown number of individuals repeatedly defaced an LFL dedicated to Michelle Obama (Miller). The incidents unsettled residents who frequented the LFL and, because the identity of the vandals was never determined, provoked suspicion within the neighborhood (Miller, 2018). When conflicts arise, local news media may turn to the perceived authority — the official public library — for comment, and to those librarians who keep an eye on local LFLs and their effect on the community who would have an understanding of the situation in advance.

LFL stewards have also been criticized for their haphazard weeding style (Kozak, 2019). Stewards are not professional librarians, and do not have a code of ethics to which they must adhere. It is fully within their ability — and their rights — to include or remove content based on their personal opinions about what makes for appropriate reading. Further engagement between professional libraries and LFLs would serve to smooth over these critiques by providing greater structure and training to the weeding process, thereby decreasing instances of unintentional censorship.

Although the trend is in need of further research, initial findings clearly reflect the abilities of Little Free

Libraries to serve public libraries as sites of community access and as partners in shared literacy goals. Community-led directives like LFLs give librarians a

peek into the changing interests of their service populations and provide an unobtrusive way in which libraries can be more involved in daily community life. If offered the support of professionals, LFLs and the stewards who manage them have the capability to make significant changes in access to books among less affluent neighborhoods. LFLs can extend the library's goals as a cost-effective means of increasing childhood literacy access and have the potential to become significant community fixtures. A "backfiring" of the goals of community unity and criticisms over biased weeding practices are obstacles to LFLs effectiveness and continuing use, but can be addressed through partnerships with professional librarians. These charming installations will have a profound influence on how public libraries engage their communities and expand their service population, and have the potential to become standard partners with their traditional public library counterparts.

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