

## Librarians as Paradigm Shifters for Justice

Feature

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by Maisha T. Winn, March 2019

The photo on the cover of my book *Black Literate Lives: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* is of my great aunt, Alma Jacobs, looking over the shoulders of a row of Black children. The children are completely absorbed in their books, wearing clothes that would now be described as "Sunday best." Behind them is a truck with the sides propped open to reveal shelves of books. This photo of my aunt and her library on wheels—book mobile—became in my childhood a visual reminder of values related to acquiring literacy by every means available. Getting books into the hands of children—no matter who, no matter where—remains a priority.

My family heeded this message. Aunt Alma was the first Black state librarian in Montana and very accomplished; I fondly recall accompanying her to the library in Helena, Montana, and spending time there while she worked. I often sat in the stacks, where I could take in the aroma of books and keep my eyes on her (and she could keep hers on me). I watched every transaction at the circulation desk with great interest in her joy and how she looked at people and listened intently. The only time my eyes tended to wander from her was when a group of nuns would sit together with their books. I was similarly mesmerized by the practices of these nuns—I recall six, but this estimate could be wrong. I am certain, though, that there were an equal number of nuns facing each other across the table and reading individually with a vibe that seemed (and, to me, felt) extremely communal. I yearned to move closer to catch a glimpse of their books' titles, but I felt sure this would be disruptive and probably inappropriate. So, I found joy watching them from afar, not unlike my periodic wonderings about the literacy experiences of my great aunt when she spread learning and connections through her bookmobile, and the thoughts, feelings, and dreams of the children captured in that photo with her.

Libraries—whether they exist in buildings or homes, on wheels, or none of the above—are sites of profound possibility; for dreaming, planning, and action. Janet Mock recently recounted her relationship with the library as a sanctuary where she took refuge from the relentless bullying she experienced growing up Black and queer in Hawaii.<sup>1</sup> In *Ron's Big Mission*, a children's book loved by my young sons, readers learn about physicist and astronaut Ron McNair's experiences of being denied library privileges in South Carolina, where Black people were prohibited from borrowing books from the library. In a documentary about his life, fashion editor, writer, and historian André Leon Talley recounts discovering *Vogue Magazine* in Durham, North Carolina, public libraries and becoming lost in visuals that inspired him to seek out the larger fashion world. The purpose of this essay, then, is to think about the school librarian as a "paradigm shift communicator" or the embodiment of justice-seeking pedagogy in schools (Winn 2018).

If libraries are sites of profound possibility, the librarian is—in my opinion—the conduit linking people to their purposes and dreams, amassing avenues and passageways unknown to we who lack their training. Librarians have opportunities to act as gatekeepers, too, not being welcoming about the library space and the books and resources that should be available to and thoughtfully shared with all who enter. Through my ethnographic research of a high school writing class, Power Writing, in the Bronx, New York (Fisher), I experienced this situation when class was held in a beautifully constructed library complete with gorgeous new books on dark wooden shelves. One of the student poets in the class had been instrumental in getting the school district to establish this much-needed school library, but the librarian, being very protective of the books and the space from the beginning, profiled every student as a suspect and determined that some students were unworthy of access to full spectrum of available literature.

After Power Writing class was over one morning, I heard a series of beeps. I looked at the teaching team, who clearly heard the same sound, and we realized students were walking through the library door scanner with...books! In defiance of her efforts to keep them from these resources, students were walking out of the library without checking books out to demonstrate their worthiness and refute her assessment that they would not value these treasures. While none of the adults condoned theft—and neither did the youth, normally—this scene presented an ethical dilemma. It felt no less criminal that a school librarian would hoard books away from specific children. What was the purpose of the school library, then, or the school librarian? School librarians, like classroom teachers, can be socialized into punitive cultures in schools. However, school librarians can and do actively resist these norms. Here, I offer four pedagogical stances for paradigm shifting toward justice that can inform the work librarians are doing in schools.

## What Do Libraries Have to Do with It?

My current work explores four pedagogical stances that are needed to ground a justice-oriented paradigm shift in school settings. These stances, History Matters, Race Matters, Justice Matters, and Language Matters are not new concepts; however, I argue that educators—and I consider librarians to be educators—must commit to these stances for the important work of cultivating purpose and belonging for all students to begin. These stances were generated by my critical participant ethnography of schools and communities that sought to establish a restorative justice culture. Restorative justice is widely known as an alternative to traditional forms of punishment in the criminal justice context, but it is actually a set of practices that shift stakeholders from retributive responses to harm and wrongdoing with reflection on three questions. Who was harmed? What are their needs? Whose obligations are these?

Several classroom and school communities have attempted to implement restorative justice in schools by using restorative justice circle processes as an alternative to suspensions and/or to support students re-entering school after a suspension (Winn 2018; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz 2015). However, restorative justice—if done correctly in schools—begins with building community as opposed to repairing harm; the former should disrupt the need for the latter.

The pedagogical stances are a part of the mindset work that I believe must precede the actual work of restorative justice. When I think about the work of a librarian, I imagine librarians cultivating what Kay Pranis (2012) calls the "restorative impulse." Pranis, a restorative justice theorist and practitioner, situates restorative justice in a larger movement acknowledging the interconnectedness of living things. While acknowledging this is "not unique" to restorative justice, Pranis asserts that "restorative justice turns out to be very practical as a way to promote a fundamental shift, even though it sometimes requires us to turn our habits upside down" (p. 34).

Another important concept of restorative justice is non-domination. The practice of restorative justice requires an equal voice for all stakeholders. If you are affected by a decision, you rightfully get to be a part of that decision. Restorative practice decisions are made by consensus, so one interest cannot simply be run over by another interest when there are several participants. Restorative approaches are fundamentally interwoven with the practices of democracy (Pranis 2012, p. 34).

School libraries and librarians embody this notion of non-domination and make knowledge and information available to all. In their call for students for the degree in library science, USC Marshall School of Business proposes "4 Signs that Library Science Degree is Right for You" which includes: You love research; You enjoy working with kids; You are technologically savvy; You always see opportunities for community improvement.<sup>2</sup> This final "sign," in particular, is one of the salient contributions librarians make to a culture of restorative and transformative justice. Creating library communities that are inviting and welcoming to dreamers, thinkers, and doers is an important and timely goal. Libraries, like other institutions, have a history of being inaccessible and/or unwelcoming to far too many people. However, much of this wrongdoing has been made right by librarians who are committed to creating community and leveraging library resources to support the work of others. The four pedagogical stances toward justice can serve as a tool for this very important and ongoing work.

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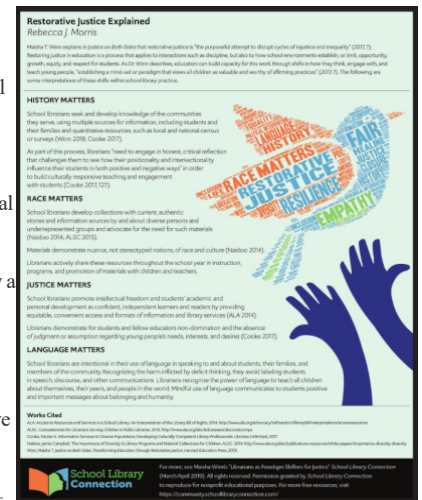
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See the companion infographic "Restorative Justice Explained" by Rebecca J. Morris [here](#).



## Notes

[1] Janet Mock spoke at the Mondavi Center at the University of California, Davis on February 5, 2018 as part of the Campus Community Book Project. This is where I

heard her tell this story.

[2] See <https://librarysciencedegree.usc.edu/blog/4-signs-that-a-library-science-degree-is-right-for-you/>.

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