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The Future of Librarianship

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2023 Ella V. Schwing Award Winner (1157)

The Future of Librarianship

Lawndon Forte-Thomas

“Welcome to Greenville. The Blackest Land, The Whitest People” was a sign that existed in Greenville (Hunt County) Texas from 1921 until it was removed in the 1960s (Popik). My mother’s maternal grandmother, Lovie, decided to make Greenville her home in 1959 after leaving the small village of Ida, Louisiana. She brought with her three children, an infant grandchild, courage, and a desire to make something of herself and her family despite the disapproval of her mother and husband. She worked extremely hard for the next decade to obtain shelter, food, and clothing before her private employer agreed to help her buy her own house on Park St. In 2022, Park Street is still known as a part of town where not many Black families live. It is the same house my mother lived in when I was born and the address that allowed me to attend Lamar Elementary School. Apart from a few lunch ladies and a couple of students that lived in the area, the school was as white as the town, and Black students allowed to attend were expected to assimilate. I managed to thrive academically, but I struggled socially and developed some identity issues all while dealing with deployed parents. While on leave, my mother returned with a English-French Dictionary and proceeded to teach me a few words every night before bed. It was an ambitious attempt that didn’t produce the desired effects, but it was my first book and my first informal Black teaching experience. I am confident that having academic role models that have overcome similar racial and socioeconomic barriers can improve a student’s overall self-esteem, educational performance, and lead to an increase in the number of individuals that identify themselves as Black enrolled into institutions of higher learning.

My mother was the only granddaughter out of Lovie’s nine grandchildren in Texas and the first person from the house on Park Street to complete college. I have the same expectations with a few more privileges due to the sacrifices made by the women in my family. For instance, while attending the

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University of New Orleans, I was invited to apply for a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) grant. I considered my educational goals of going to a graduate school for Library & Information Science (LIS) while questioning if I should even apply for the grant being that “Science” doesn’t include librarians in most cases. While Black-identifying (BLI) students only make up about 7% of STEM graduates (Graham), numbers for BLI librarians are fewer, and I would prefer to work in a field that speaks to me personally. It was my relationship with BLI educators and literature that brought me back to college after a ten-year break, so I have chosen to stay on my current path of becoming a librarian. My goal is to provide those who seek information the means to find it and to support current and future students in their academic journeys. The role-model effect has influenced my decision to attend a university in a city where more than 50% of the population is BLI (QuickFacts: New Orleans City, Louisiana) and I will pass my experiences on to the pupils and patrons I encounter in my future career.

Alan Kruger and Diane Whitmore detail the findings of The Tennessee Star Experiment (TSE), initially conducted in the mid-1980s to determine whether students would benefit from smaller classroom sizes. In their 2001 working paper they suggest the race of the students and teachers involved was also documented. In 2018, Cassandra Hart, an associate professor of education policy at University of California, Davis used the same students of the TSE study to learn if their experiences had any effect on them pursuing further education. The role-model effect was the outcome of Hart’s research, concluding that the Black students introduced to Black educators by third grade were 13% more likely to have gone on to college after high school (Ahébé). I was introduced to the first BLI educator I met years after she retired from teaching. Her name was Mrs. Owens, and she was my mother’s paternal grandmother and grade school teacher, although, I believe her academic advice would have been the same for any small child with dreams of becoming an English teacher. She simply encouraged me to become more familiar with the English language through literature. My mother followed orders and took me to get my first library card shortly after this discussion and I can still remember my first visit to the public library. It was colorful, organized, and it felt safe. It had more books than I could ever read and yet I was assured that I could read all of them one by one if I promised to bring them back in good condition. It was better than Christ-

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mas, and I believe it has led me to want to work in a library because to date, I feel the same joy every time I enter a library.

Many college students do not become professional educators, but for those who do, it is essential to have academic role models and it can be more beneficial if the role models have overcome the same societal roadblocks common to many BLI people in America. In addition, BLI librarians make a difference in the educational success of BLI students by having academic and life experiences relative to both. Even in personal situations, there were many times that I needed help with things I could not articulate, and books offered me the verbiage to do so in addition to some good advice; but it was the knowledge of the librarians that led me to the right publications. I can only imagine my identity issues being repaired sooner with more exposure to literature tailored to and for BLI readers. Assistant Professor Constance A. Lindsay is conducting research that aims to create a high quality, diverse educational workforce. Students who attend schools with a diverse staff have shown greater promise to close educational attainment gaps. Although I have not met Lindsay personally, I am encouraged by her work to stay on the course of becoming an educator. Her contributions are not only advancing her career, but also inspiring me to want to be a part of the workforce she is aiming to create. It is nearly impossible to obtain a college degree without ever setting foot in a library yet only about 6% of librarians in America are BLI (admin). Since the late 1800s librarians have been predominantly white middle to upper class women because they could afford the training and they provided cheap labor. (“Why Are Most Librarians White Women?”) In 2022, this still holds true, but there are more opportunities available for women and people of color in academia.

While it can be argued that credentials are more important than race and ethnicity, it is important to note that Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs) have a higher retention rate among students of color than Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) (Lynch). This information provides some evidence that BLI students are more likely to return to school if they are taught by someone that has a similar identity. BLI librarian Lindsey Simone offers: “By truly realizing workforce diversity on par with our communities, library services, programming, and resources will be more tailored, equitable, culturally relevant, and inclusive. Then libraries will genuinely be for all, and the question of our relevance and funding

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issues will be diminished. The people in libraries (workers and patrons) will feel comfortable. They won't have to defend, explain, justify their existence, or that they deserve to be treated with human dignity and respect regardless of the darkness of their skin, and these socially prescribed and constructed identities and categorizations," in an article initiated by The American Library Association. School librarians focus on furthering students' development as lifelong learners, users, and producers of knowledge. Librarians must build relationships with teachers, other staff members, and students to build a safe and welcoming environment ideal for learning. As a descendant of enslaved members from America, I know that it was not always legal or safe for everyone to read or possess books. I wonder if by becoming a librarian, I will encourage more BLI people to find solace or careers in libraries. According to research already conducted, I can be sure that my presence will at least have an effect on their academic careers. I have much to learn from all of my professors despite their racial identity and I will apply my school and public experiences collectively to become a librarian that will have a role-model effect on students and assure them that it is possible to not only further their education, but also to become role models for others. There may not be as many grants and scholarships for LIS as there are for STEM careers but, I will be filling a void in the workforce as well as my personal life. Indeed, I think of LIS as a social science and a part of the humanities and art world which means I will come into contact with thousands of patrons in my career and I will always have the opportunity to access and share information and knowledge.

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