

Running head: A VOICE COMMITTED TO

A Voice Committed to Equity and Social Justice in the Public Library

Salamah Adjoua-Mullen

Molloy College

Drew Dudley, a leadership educator and speaker, defined leadership as moments in which one person can affect another individual's understanding of how powerful an agent for change they can be in the world. A social justice leader is a natural extension of this definition. This type of leader is a powerful agent for change who values diversity and equity within society, thus, can affect another person's understanding of multiculturalism and justice. Theoharis & Scanlan (2015) explained that leaders cannot just pick and choose which inequities they will address and which they will ignore. The first steps taken by an individual in a leadership position is important but acknowledging that privilege and oppression exists is a beginning. Another step a social justice leader can take is building relationships that recognize differences. Building relationships can break down oppressive barriers in organized systems. The following profile highlights one woman's attempt to make changes within the system she works in, the public library.

Syntychia Kendrick-Samuel, a public librarian II, is head of the Young Adult department (better known as Teen Space) at the Uniondale Public Library. She has worked as a librarian for approximately 15 years. She also resides in the same community as the library she is employed at. Mrs. Kendrick-Samuel is a well-established in the field of librarianship. She built up the Young Adult Department from humble beginnings and has won multiple awards for her programming, has acquired over \$15,000 worth of grant money for programming as well as presented at various conferences highlighting the importance of providing quality programming to teens. She is also a published author with works written for School Library Journal, VOYA magazine (Voice of Young Adults), and YALSA magazine (Young Adult Library Services

Association). Her writings are also featured in the books titled Connecting Cultures and The 21st Century Black Librarian in America.

Ms. Kendrick-Samuel spent her childhood growing up in Freeport, New York. Even though her community was diverse, the school she attended did not have a diverse teaching staff. In high school, she met, Mr. Crittendon, the librarian who happened to be African American. “That was the first time I realized that being a librarian was a real job” she explained (S. Kendrick-Samuel, personal communication, October 21, 2018).

The public library is seen as a place where equity, inclusiveness, and diversity abound. However, even library spaces should be examined for inequities. Ms. Kendrick-Samuel explained that hiring is one of the biggest problems in Long Island’s public libraries. The current hiring system discourages a diverse work force and people of color are predominately hired as support staff. To obtain a librarian position within Nassau County, one must live within the county, have a public librarian certificate and fill out a form. Based on how the form is filled out a number is generated. If applicants lived in the town where a position is open, they could be called off the list sooner. Due to Long Island’s segregated populations, people of color reside mostly in certain towns, thus adding another layer of difficulty of obtaining employment. “Are young individuals who currently work as pages, clerks in public libraries being groomed for librarianship? Does a library administration have a commitment to seeing a diverse work force?” Ms. Kendrick-Samuel asks. She admits that it is an uphill battle but works hard to hire individuals with a positive attitude, spunk, humility and those who want to learn about the community.

Since there is still institutional racism in public libraries, it is equally important to understand how public libraries oppress people of color. Ms. Kendrick-Samuel describes,

“Oppression happens when the community is not welcomed. When the attitudes of the people working behind the desks are of one of indifference or judgement. The biggest source of oppression is the limiting of access to library materials” (S. Kendrick-Samuel, personal communication, October 21, 2018).

The teen space is a unique place. It is always busy and packed with young adults who are doing homework, reading, hanging out or creating something. There are many regulars who visit the library daily. Ms. Kendrick-Samuels has created a sense of community by making sure that the staff knows the names of the teens. Not only are their names known but so are the parents, other close relatives, the school and grade they are in. In teen space, it is important to greet every person that walks in and take time to talk with the young patrons. Since, there is constant contact between library staff and teens, programming numbers for teen programs are very high.

“Numbers are high because we build relationships with young people. We hustle for our numbers by asking what their interests are. Here, teens can be themselves. We have Black, Hispanic and Haitian Americans, gay youth and teens with disabilities. All are encouraged to represent themselves” (S. Kendrick-Samuel, personal communication, October 28, 2018).

Using her position, Ms. Kendrick Samuel has committed herself to making changes within her department to embrace diversity and inclusiveness. She recognizes that oppression and privilege exist within society and that these dynamics influence institutions and the youth she works with. When you openly change how you participate in a system, you do more than

change your own behavior, you also change how the system happens (Zuniga, 2018). Even though changing how the system operates is difficult, Ms. Kendrick Samuel has attempted to change how she herself participates within the public library system. Ms. Kendrick Samuel can be considered a social justice leader because she strives towards making real, equitable change within her surrounding community.

References

- Shields, C. M. (2004). Dialogic Leadership for Social Justice: Overcoming Pathologies of Silence. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(1), 109–132.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X03258963>
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2), 221. Retrieved from <http://molloy.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.molloy.idm.oclc.org/docview/214369535?accountid=28076>
- Zuniga, Ximena, (2018). Working for social justice: Visions and strategies for change. In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, D.C. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. Hackman, L. Hopkins, B. Love, M. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zuniga (Eds.). *Readings for diversity and social justice*. (pp. 599-603). NY: Routledge.