

# Little Free Libraries: A View from the Back Road

**Olson Beal, Heather K. and Burrow, Lauren**

**ABSTRACT:** Commentary piece in response to Schmidt, H. and Hale, J. (2017). Little Free Libraries®: Interrogating the impact of the branded book exchange. *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 3, 14–41.

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Earlier this year, the *Journal of Radical Librarianship* published a provocative critique of Little Free Libraries, the non-profit organization dedicated to the proliferation of small libraries meant for the free exchange of books among friends, neighbors, and community members (Schmidt & Hale, 2017). Even in deep East Texas, where we are professors of education at Stephen F. Austin State University, a regional comprehensive university, we saw the piece and followed the resulting discussions that took place in social media and in the press. Because we are both bibliophiles and because one of us owns and loves a registered Little Free Library (LFL) and the other recently completed a LFL-related service learning project as part of a university-school partnership, the piece first piqued our interest. Then, it drew our ire.

Thus, we start this essay in confessional mode: when we first saw Schmidt and Hale's piece, we were defensive. We are not the things Schmidt and Hale accuse us of being! We are not members of the privileged class who seek to replace traditional brick-and-mortar public libraries with private LFLs. Our community's LFLs are not located only in gentrified neighborhoods and book deserts. Little free libraries in our community have not grown as the public library budget has decreased. Our LFLs are not all full of books from the traditional whitewashed "canon." We are not guilty. We immediately kicked around the idea of writing a response piece. We had to defend ourselves and our LFLs.

Then we took the time to read the piece carefully and discovered that we learned a lot about the Little Free Library organization and about some of the problems that Schmidt and Hale astutely identify. However, because we live in a rural community in East Texas, our personal and professional experiences with LFLs diverge in important ways from the LFLs in metropolitan Canadian cities described in their piece. This essay seeks to describe our rural community's LFLs and how they differ from what may be found in urban, metropolitan areas. We focus on five main issues raised in Schmidt and Hale's piece: location, accessibility, partnerships, community building, and LFLs contents.

## Location

We live in a rural county with a population of approximately 65,000 that covers almost one thousand square miles. The city proper has a population of approximately 34,000 and is 2.5-3 hours away from two major metropolitan areas (Houston and Dallas). Within this one rural county, there are nine independent school districts ranging from 151 to 6,500 students total. In addition to traditional public school options, the county also has two early college high schools, a university-based EC-5 charter school,<sup>1</sup> four Pre-K-6 or Pre-K-8 private schools, and one K-12 private school. There are two public libraries in our county—one in the largest city in the county (Nacogdoches), which is also where the university is located, and another

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1 This is a university-based Pre-K-5 charter school which serves as a Field Based Center for the College of Education and provides hands-on and observational experiences with children for university students in Elementary Education, Kinesiology, Music and other university instructional programs.

in a town of 613 that has reportedly limited hours which we were not able to ascertain for this essay.

The eleven Little Free Libraries in our town are located in diverse places. The largest one is located at a local bicycle shop across the street from our local university, which is near the center of town. One is located at a popular city park, also near the center of town. One is in front of a small city museum, one is inside a pediatric dentist's office, and three are located in the front yards of private residences (one of which belongs to one of us). The other four Little Free Libraries are located at public school campuses: three elementary campuses and one middle school campus. The local school district is a Title I school district, which is a federal designation signaling that at least forty percent of the students come from low-income families. One of the elementary schools with a LFL has a student population that is 92% economically disadvantaged, 26% English as a Second Language (ESL), and only 13.5% White (Texas Education Agency, [n.d.]).<sup>2</sup> A second elementary school with a LFL has a student population that is 93% economically disadvantaged, with 41% ESL and 15% White (Texas Education Agency, [n.d.]a). Thus, our rural community's LFLs differ from those in Schmidt and Hale's piece because they are not located primarily in wealthy areas.

## Accessibility

Our local library is an amazing resource for our community. It offers a wide range of programming for young children through retired adults, as well as our many Spanish-speaking residents. Some of the types of programming they offer including, but are not limited to: Spanish-English conversation tables, Makerspace, computer courses, crafts, community book clubs, poetry readings, family movies, story time, coding courses, Lego Club, Minecraft sessions, and a teen library advisory board, which is a leadership program wherein local teens help library employees put on events for younger children. In short, we love our local library.

Its one shortcoming is its hours. Our library is open from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm on Mondays and Thursdays, from 9:00 am to 5:30 pm on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and from 9:00 to 5:00 on Saturdays. It is closed on Sundays. Therefore, there is one day of week when it is totally inaccessible and numerous weeknights. We think this is important to note in this conversation about public libraries and LFLs.

Furthermore, there is no public transportation available in our county. There is one single taxi. In September 2017, Uber began to roll out services in our town. We have very few sidewalks and no bike lanes within the city. Once you get outside of the city limits, county residents travel on two-lane (one in each direction) highways where the speed limit is 75 mph. In short, transit is difficult here if you don't have reliable, personal transportation. And it is not safe to walk or bike on the roads inside or outside the city limits.

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<sup>2</sup> The two references from the Texas Education Agency may not be accessible outside the US.

Our community's LFLs are accessible in ways that our beloved public library is not and cannot be. We have heard of many residents who now have access to books who otherwise would be unable to routinely visit the local public library due to transportation issues, non-overlapping schedules, etc. One frequent and anonymous LFL visitor left the following in a handwritten note, thanking the LFL owner: "I am a single mother who can walk here with my baby, but cannot make it to the library during its hours. This little library is a lifeline for me." At two of the elementary schools, the school librarians are huge LFL supporters because they love the idea that students from the neighboring areas can walk up at any hour, including on the weekends, and access books on campus.

Another benefit to LFLs is that they can be accessed without having official identification. Our community is home to many undocumented people who may be scared to use the public library because they have to produce official identification in order to get a library card. Books taken from LFLs also do not have to be returned and do not accrue late fees, another issue which may be burdensome for low income individuals and families. Library fees may seem small, but 38% of our county lives below the poverty level, with an additional 14% living at 50% below the poverty level. At this level, seemingly small library fees may act as a barrier to frequent public library use. Furthermore, the school librarians have reported that many students have expressed relief/thanks for not having to worry about "fines" for lost, misplaced, damaged, or late-returned books from the LFL; the intent for students to keep the books as long as they want/need is always emphasized through written signage located near the LFLs and/or verbal confirmation by adults associated with the LFL. Thus, our community's LFLs provide a service that our public library cannot.

## **Partners or competitors?**

In our rural community, numerous LFLs work together with both our public library and with several of our public school libraries. Our public library runs the LFL in the public park—taking care to restock it and maintain it. Our public library also supports one of the elementary campus LFLs by stocking it with old books and sharing social media posts from the elementary school on the main library page.

Schmidt and Hale also express concern that politicians may look to the growth of Little Free Libraries as a rationale for cutting municipal library budgets and cite a story from Vinton, Texas, where just such a situation took place. We share Schmidt and Hale's concern and do not support such cost savings measures. In fact, our municipal library's budget has grown by 16% between 2014 and 2017, which is the same time period over which the majority of our Little Free Libraries have cropped up. Thus, our public library and our eleven Little Free Libraries peacefully coexist and support one another. However, Schmidt and Hale's piece raised our awareness of this issue. We will remain vigilant so that our municipal library's funds are not cut due to the misguided notion that LFLs are substitutes for public libraries.

## Community building

Our community's LFLs have served as catalysts for community building and as teaching tools in pre-service teacher education courses. In an informal way, the LFL in one author's front yard has served to build and nurture community—both in person and virtually. The LFL has a Facebook page which is updated when new books arrive. It has increased dialogue between neighbors and community members who stop by. Several young children have left thank you notes and coloring pages in the Little Free Library.

In a more formal way, the elementary school-based LFL was built in direct response to the school's request for a project that would serve as a tangible reminder of the school's commitment to literacy in the surrounding community. The placement of the LFL was strategically chosen at the front of the school and four benches were purposefully installed because the school was well-aware that families from the neighboring apartments frequently come up to the school on the weekends to access the free wi-fi. The school wanted the LFL and its surrounding reading area to send the message that the community is *always* welcomed at the school and that the benefits of school do not cease on the weekends.

We also shared a summertime community-wide LFL tour with community members in a biweekly newspaper column that we co-author with a third coworker. In the column, community members were encouraged to get out of our bubbles and visit some places and spaces that we do not typically frequent by making stops at all eleven LFLs. We invited community members to visit the LFLs and to take time to sit underneath a tree or in a shaded area and enjoy a book. We also encouraged them to try to meet and greet other people who they encounter while visiting the LFL. This fall, the second author is asking her pre-service teachers to complete the tour as a hands-on way to learn about the various neighborhoods in which they teach.

The proliferation of LFLs in our rural community has taken place alongside other community-wide literacy efforts. For instance, the Rotary Club created a mobile library that stops at numerous city parks throughout the summer months so that children can access books during the summer while their schools are closed. There is no fee associated with use of the mobile library and no expectation that the books be returned. The Rotary Club is also currently working on rolling out LFLs in doctors' and dentists' offices because they are spaces which are frequently visited by families. We are gratified to see these kinds of community-wide literacy initiatives taking place and believe that the LFLs are an important part of those initiatives.

## Culturally relevant LFL contents

We appreciate Schmidt and Hale's critique that many LFLs are repositories of mostly books that depict white and affluent characters. While we do not have data to speak to all the LFLs in our town, we can provide information about two of the eleven since we are the ones

primarily responsible for stocking them. The first is located in one of our yards. We take great care to stock the LFL with culturally diverse and age appropriate materials. Our house is located across the street from the biggest high school in the county and two-tenths of a mile away from a popular public park where many high school students park rather than paying to park at the school campus. We get a lot of foot traffic around our house and, therefore, our LFL. Because of this, we mostly stock the library with young adult books. Occasionally, LFL visitors stop by and drop off children's picture books or books for other ages, but that is the focus of the library because that is what is relevant to the population. We have also stocked the library with books that we knew were being required for summer or school-year reading as well.

The second library is primarily stocked from the numerous book donations that the pre-service teachers collected from around the community, through university social club fundraising, and from their own hometowns. As part of the course in which they completed the book collections, an emphasis was placed on appreciating the importance of and intentionally showcasing diverse authors and characters in books for young students. Therefore, the pre-service teachers sought out and requested diverse donations. Efforts to fill the LFL each week are currently supervised by the second author and intentionality is used to ensure as diverse a range as possible. However, with the reality of children's publishing in the United States being that only about 21% feature non-white characters and only about 12% are written by authors of color (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2017), we readily acknowledge the challenge of stocking the LFL with bilingual and culturally diverse books. In an attempt to *create* authors of color and further connect the community to this LFL, the second author has had her pre-service teachers lead writing activities at the LFL site school with the young elementary school students. These young, diverse writers' short poems and stories are routinely integrated into the LFL's weekly rotation of featured books.

We cannot speak to the contents of the other nine LFLs in our community. However, now that Schmidt and Hale have identified that this is a problem elsewhere, we are committed to working to encourage dialogue with the other LFLs owners in our community about the number and quality of diverse books in their LFLs. We are considering integrating an assignment into a pre-service teacher education course in which our students would survey the contents of the community's LFLs and propose improvements in this area, if necessary. Thus, we agree that this is an important issue and urge the LFL organization to consider adding the inclusion of culturally diverse and population-relevant books as an organizational objective.

In summary, we appreciate the concerns raised by Schmidt and Hale, but believe that our rural community's libraries tell a different while also still valid counter-narrative. Our experiences with LFLs, as well as our reading of Schmidt and Hale's critique, have led us to the following lessons learned that may be useful to school and community librarians, as well

as LFLs owners.

First, our experience suggests that LFLs and local libraries should coordinate efforts and support one another, particularly if issues of de-funding or low attendance arise. Working *with* libraries can increase LFL contents through sharing of books, improve the suitability of stocked book topics/types through helpful guidance from knowledgeable librarians, and make literacy-accessibility a 24-hour, 7-day reality within a community as LFLs can be promoted as after-hours library spots. Second, working *with* schools and building *on* school campuses can serve as a tangible, visible promotion of schools' intentions to encourage literacy in the communities where their students come from and to provide a non-traditional source of rich, authentic, and culturally relevant literature produced by students at the elementary schools being serviced by the LFL. Third, all community and school librarians *as well as* LFL stewards should commit to seeking out books that feature multicultural characters, diverse topics, relevant content, etc. It is critical that those in positions to stock libraries and LFLs ensure that the available books meet the reading needs and interests of their users. Intentional fundraising or purposeful donation-seeking can assist LFL-owners in diversifying their content. For suggestions on popular and appropriate books for diverse youth, we suggest consulting sites like:

- <https://www.leeandlow.com/>
- <http://weneeddiversebooks.org/where-to-find-diverse-books/>
- <http://www.sweetpeagirl.com/book-reviews>

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