Access to Information at Indigenous Public Libraries and the Role of Institutional Structures

Alison Frayne, PhD

Contemporary Indigenous public libraries play a critical role in providing access to information in Indigenous communities. My research focuses on the relationship between rights and access to information for individuals and communities within the context of Indigenous public libraries. I use a qualitative case study methodology of the Six Nations Public Library (SNPL) in Ohsweken, Ontario, Canada. Interviews were conducted with SNPL patrons and library management and with off-reserve participants from government and library associations.

I analyse four themes, library governance, rights, library value and access to information, which are outcomes of the SNPL case study findings. This analysis reveals that access to information at SNPL is embedded in a complex inter-relationship of governance that limits funding, recognition and support for this library. This research also demonstrates that access to information is an Indigenous cultural right through international human rights, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, a key finding is that Canadian human rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982, do not support the full access to information at Six Nations Public Library and requires more discussion. In addition, while access to information for this library is an Indigenous cultural right, this is not recognized by the federal government in Canada because it is not included in the mandate of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) (as it was previously known) charged with administering the controversial Indian Act, 1876, and funding social and economic development on reserves. While the case study shows that Six Nations Public Library promotes culture, literacy, well-being, social justice and Indigenous cultural rights, without access to resources including through federal funding Indigenous librarians struggle to meet the information needs of their communities.

I use the key findings from this case study to evaluate an adapted capability approach framework based on the human rights and poverty work of Amartya Sen and Polly Vizard. This framework incorporates substantive freedoms, and meta-rights and their obligations and the degree to which they support access to information as a basic human need. This dissertation contributes to scholarship by demonstrating that Library and Information Science discourse is limited regarding the relationship between rights and access to information at Indigenous public libraries.