Review of the Democracy Spark Grants

Microgrant Pilot in British Columbia Libraries

SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue

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THE INTENT OF THE DEMOCRACY SPARK GRANTS

Concept Proposal

To understand the Democracy Spark Grants' learning journey, we need to start with its original intent. In the fall of 2019, the Democracy Spark Grant program was an initiative launched by Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue and the British Columbia Libraries Cooperative to explore the role of public libraries as democratic convenors. With advice from an advisory group of library staff and leaders, we offered libraries $1000 to support patrons in playing an active role in their democracy by building social connections and participating in actions that can make a difference. The program would include an evaluation component to gain insight into the impact of library programs that use democratic convening practices to help patrons build social connections and participate in their communities. The ultimate goal was to make our democratic culture more resilient by identifying and spreading democratic engagement.

Inviting libraries into the Democracy Spark Grant pilot was inspired by their generally positive reputation in communities and their relationship with diverse members of their communities who may be underserved by other democratic engagement processes. Libraries were established as places of democracy– for all people– and several libraries are experimenting with participating more strongly in community issues and democratic engagement. For example, libraries have supported the Democratic Engagement Exchange initiatives to increase voting participation, Toronto Public Libraries has incorporated democracy into its strategic goals, and ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities program has created resources to encourage libraries and their staff to lead dialogue and deliberation efforts in large and small library systems.

Using funding from the Vancouver Foundation, the grants intended to support public libraries in co-design programming with their local communities and/or make programming more accessible for underserved communities. Libraries were expected to provide core funding to encourage the development of sustainable programming, but the grant could be used for staff time and supplies as well as support libraries to administer and submit back evaluation data. Results would be compiled and shared publicly to increase awareness and support for diverse democratic engagement opportunities.

In the first wave of applications, we said the programs must meet the following requirements to receive funding:

- Convene the community in ways that lead to tangible, face-to-face, community action (information sharing activities did not count)

- The development of the programming includes co-development with community members

- The program should include a minimum of 6 hours of engagement with the public. This can be over one or several sessions.

- Staff time will be dedicated to coordinating the evaluation of programming and submitting data to the SFU Centre for Dialogue

- Library staff will attend the BCLA Conference in April
- Data will be submitted to SFU Centre for Dialogue by June 30, 2019

In addition to addressing the topics of climate change, social isolation or local solutions, the programming should also have had the following goals:

- Build social connections among participants and their local community
- Increase participants' sense of agency through experiential, solutions-oriented, activities (even where these impacts are incremental)

We also intended to host a session at the 2020 Library Conference for grant recipients for library staff to exchange ideas and discuss how library staff can spark greater democratic engagement.

The Reality...

Several factors affected the original intent of the program and its evaluation. These included the level of interest and the programming options proposed in library applications, as well as a global pandemic that closed libraries everywhere and the logistical realities of conducting and evaluation.

...Of Covid-19

Covid-19 had an enormous impact on libraries across British Columbia. By the end of March, library staff across the province were laid off, including programming staff that had intended to run our Spark Grant projects. On March 13, 2020 the BC Library conference, where we planned to run review workshops related to the Democracy Spark Grants, was cancelled. All libraries closed their doors to the public, and most did not open in any capacity until September 2020. In summary, every aspect of our Democracy Spark Grants and their evaluation were impacted by the pandemic.

The majority of libraries we offered Democracy Spark Grants to in January 2020 were unable to start or complete their proposed projects. Throughout spring and summer 2020, we heard that in a state of emergency like Covid-19, British Columbia libraries were focused only on their primary services. They focused on safely resume book lending, rehiring staff, computer access, and children reading circles running again. Some were franker with us and let us know that with so much stress and so many things up in the air, our Democracy Spark Grants were "just too small" for libraries to care about at this time. We also heard that the pandemic was even causing some library staff to rethink their previous advocacy that libraries should be "resilience centres."

As libraries did re-open, most of the 5 libraries that completed their projects chose to use the Democracy Spark Grant to do what they could to help with social isolation and mental health issues in the communities in ways that complied with health orders.

... Of the numbers

There are 235 libraries in British Columbia. We offered a pilot of 15 Democracy Spark Grants in the fall of 2019 and received 22 applications. We expanded the program to accept 18 projects. All libraries were notified by early January 2020 and encouraged to begin their programming as soon as possible, but only six

completed some or all of their projects in the first wave (3 finished their program ultimately, 3 finished part of it).

As libraries reopened in September 2020, we offered another 10 Democracy Spark Grants with almost no requirements. We received seven applications. We chose to fund all of them. Two of the seven withdrew because they could not complete the project.

Across the two waves, we received a total of 28 project proposals from 21 different library systems. We offered Democracy Spark Grants to 24 different projects. Of the 24, only 11 completed all or some of their proposed projects.

In summary, 9% of libraries in British Columbia chose to apply to the Democracy Spark Grant. Of those that were accepted to receive funding, 33% completed the entirety of their proposed projects.

...Of evaluations

To evaluate if an intervention has a change in participants, we need to be able to what they would report before doing an activity and what they would report after. While the grant's original intent was to see a change among community members, we revised the evaluation structure to focus on the library staff for logistic reasons. Their greater involvement in the projects made it more likely that we could see change.

In the first wave of Democracy Spark Grants, we invited but did not require library staff to participate in a pre and post-survey. Making participation in evaluations voluntary is research's best and most equitable practice. We did, however, require staff to ask library patrons who participated in the project to complete a survey at the end of their activity. Several weeks after we accepted them to receive the grant, almost no library staff took the surveys, even with several reminders. To encourage participation, we offered an honorarium in the form of a gift card of their choice for their participation. Honorariums increased our staff participation numbers significantly.

Due to the slow uptake in surveys in Wave 1, we decided to go against best-practice and make participation in the library staff surveys mandatory in Wave 2. We also removed the patron survey invitation requirement because Covid-19 meant that having participants complete a survey would be difficult.

Instead, we required library staff to participate in a 30 minute post-project interview. Two libraries in Wave 1 wrote blog posts about their activity which we include in the qualitative evaluation data, and all five libraries that completed projects in wave 2 participated in interviews.

Of the libraries that completed projects, 16 library staff complete the pre-survey and 14 completed the post-survey from 11 libraries. A total of 42 library patrons participated in post-activity surveys, but we have no record of how many patrons participated in projects.

We analyzed the pre/post surveys from the library staff and looked for stand-out findings from the participation surveys. We also reviewed what we knew of the completed projects against the original four

requirements of the Democracy Spark Grants. We also noted if the projects involved top-down teaching or included dialogic interactions among participants.

The analysis of interviews looked for patterns in what was said and similarities in how library staff expressed their answers. The interview analysis focused mostly on the role of libraries and project outcomes as well as connections to democracy. Finally, we reviewed emails and meeting notes from Fall 2019 to January 2020 to identify opportunities and sticking points from the project as a whole.

We are very reluctant to make any strong statements from the survey data because of the small amount of data. The information we received in interviews suggests it may be a more robust way to assess future programs.

THE GLASS HALF FULL

The results of the evaluation found some positive outcomes, a few lessons learned, and some core aspects of the program missed their mark. We begin with the positives.

Good Feelings All Around

There is no doubt in our minds that library staff and patrons loved the programs they created and conducted through the Democracy Spark Grants. Library staff in both waves were excited by their completed projects and felt like they helped make connections in their community. This was even more important in the second round when social isolation impacted library patrons who usually used libraries as part of their regular routine.

One staff person described the positive connecting role of libraries amidst Covid-19:

"We are a connective thing, but we're experiencing a time of very disconnectedness. So these types of programming are even more important now because people are feeling so isolated. So I think that [our program] solidified that feeling of actively doing something. You're not bringing people together necessarily in the same way that we could have done pre-COVID if we came up with this plan, which would have been even more fun to be all together at the library, creating these things together. That would be ideal. But we're not able to do that. So by doing this they're still feeling this connectivity with the library and the library's role ".

The patron survey results displayed below are based on the 42 library patron project participants that completed the survey. We do not know what percent of the total participants this represents; thus cannot be generalized to all libraries that participated or all BC libraries in general.

The library project participants that completed our survey highlighted their positive experiences. Of the patrons that did participate in the survey we found:

- 88% stated they were very satisfied with their library experience.

- 88% believe libraries have a major role to play in supporting the engagement of people in their communities.

- 95% indicated their involvement in the project gave them a more positive view of the role their library can play in supporting the engagement.

- 93% believed they had many chances to express their views in a way that felt comfortable.

- 97% felt respected and listened to by others in the program

Figure 1 illustrates the extent surveyed patrons were able to accomplish each outcome through their library project participation. Nearly all were able to develop relationships with other community members, hear a variety of voices, and learn about important local issues. The results demonstrate the positive experience experienced by participants.

Figure 1 Extent patrons were able to do each of the following in the library project
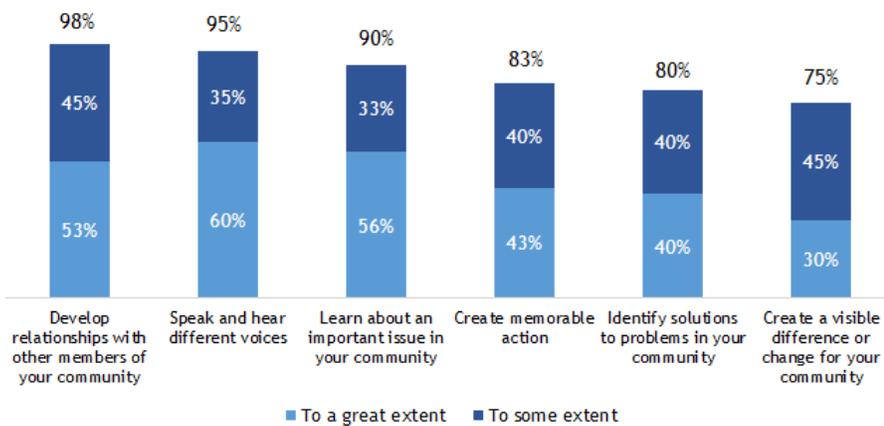
Figure 2 below, shows the percentage of project participants who strongly agree with each statement about libraries' role. Nearly 100% agreed to each statement. A significant majority strongly agreed that libraries build respect and connections between community members and get people engaged and aware of local issues. Less see libraries as playing a role in creating a difference or change. These results suggest that the patrons surveyed strongly believe libraries have an important role in their communities, and most believe libraries can make an impact.

Figure 2 % of patrons that strongly agree with each statement

| 78% | 73% | 70% | 68% | 68% | 59% |
| Libraries help promote mutual respect between people in my community | Libraries play an active role in building connections between people | Libraries help people get engaged in community activities | Libraries help raise awareness of important issues to the community | Libraries make things happen in my community | Libraries help to make change in my community |
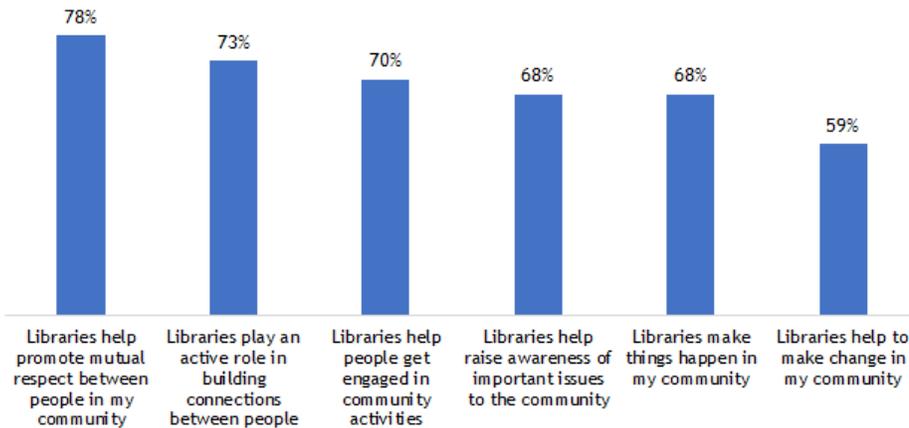
Those interviewed as part of Wave 2 often asked if there would be more funding opportunities like the Democracy Spark Grants, showing they appreciated having funds to put on programs. Some also described the joy that doing the project brought to their staff during a difficult time. They also described receiving thank you cards, thank you Instagram posts, or in gratitude person.

Completed Project Examples

The Democracy Spark Grants contributed to the Library staff's commitment to delivering good programming to their patrons on various topics. As we relaxed the requirements for Wave 2, they also provided the opportunity to address some of the significant challenges created by Covid-19.

The pool of completed projects included these main themes:

- **Holiday Connections**: Holiday Hello's run by the Coquitlam library resulted in nearly 3000 cards and gifts created by children in the community that the library gathered and distributed to seniors in care centres in the city. Schools joined in organizing their students to write cards to elders at a specific care home, craft groups knitted hats and other tokens, and one child even submitted 75 handwritten cards. Similarly, McBride used staff resources to teach elders how to use holiday email programs and JibJab videos to connect with relatives and create joy. They said it helped elders gain confidence in connecting online, lessened social isolation, and has resulted in some seniors accessing the library more often for technical support and online connection.

- **Sustainability Projects:** The staff member in Kaslo researched and created kits that patrons could take home and create sustainable products like beeswax wrappers and dishwasher tablets. They said it has inspired the High School Sustainability club to build similar kits. North Vancouver City Library created a workshop series where facilitators discussed different books, and each workshop incorporated a goal of setting personal climate mitigation plans into action. The workshops were hosted on Zoom and included participant presentations and commitments to one another.

- **Support for the Community:** The Richmond library hosted a series of mental health web events with different speakers followed by question-and-answer periods to help parents support their children during Covid. The series grew a previous program offering and resulted in the highest attendance of all their online programs, and created a stronger partnership with and service organization in their community. The library in [insert library] used the funds to buy an iPad and partner with community services to equip it and other devices with free internet access, which allowed ESL members and isolated seniors access to the internet from their remote community.

- **Reconciliation**: The Nelson library held a Learning Circle program devoted to engaging with Truth, Resurgence and Reconciliation ideals. Members read the same book and discussed how to inspire community action towards a more just and sustainable future. When the pandemic hit, they moved the program on to zoom and participants suggested created shared google docs to record their brainstorming session on how we can use this learning as a spring-board to the community.

THE GLASS HALF EMPTY

Superficial Evaluation Findings

The pre and post-program surveys asked library staff to identify their role in their community, rate their level of confidence in the impact their library can make, and what knowledge/skills they use to provide services to their community. While the survey results show libraries often strongly agreed with the questions we asked, our evaluation did not show, in any way, that participating in the Democracy Spark Grant might have impacted their opinions.

We asked all library staff that worked on a project to complete the pre and post-surveys. Libraries participated unevenly; some only had one staff member complete surveys while others had several. Thus the results can not be generalized. Comparing the pre and post-surveys results shows no significant change among library staff opinions for those participating in the surveys.

Overall, library staff agreed– before and after their participation in the grant– they play a major role in their communities, including building connections between residents, helping people get engaged, raising awareness about important issues and making change in their community. The surveys also illustrate library staff are very confident in their library's ability to provide access to information, provide a space to gather, think, question, create, converse, welcome newcomers and support marginalized communities. In terms of knowledge, most library staff perceive themselves as at least 'good' at designing public meetings, facilitating group discussions, leadership and public relations.

The following results were found in the post-survey when we asked library staff about the impact their project:

- 93% of library staff surveyed reported they expanded their understanding of the role libraries can play to support the engagement of people in their community as a result of their project.

- 86% of library staff surveyed indicated their involvement with the project gave them a more positive view of the role their library can play in supporting the engagement of people in their communities.

Figure 3 highlights the extent of library staff surveyed were able to accomplish each outcome through their project. All staff surveyed were confident their project raised awareness of an issue to at least some extent. Nearly all believed they could make a visible difference, create a memorable action and develop connections between participants.
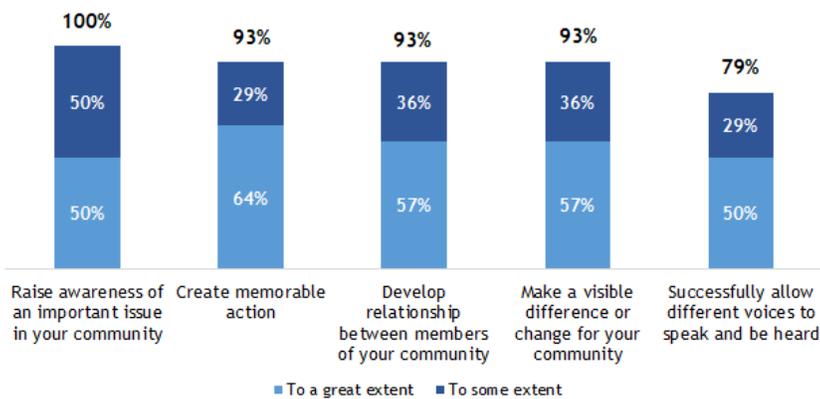
Figure 3 Extent library staff believe their project was able accomplish each of the following

Most libraries didn't end up meeting original requirements

The purpose of the pilot and the program was to test if a micro-grant model of project funding would create co-developed programs that led to tangible actions so that patrons could feel involved in solving challenges in the community and see the outcomes of their participation. The micro-grant were a tool to help inspire library staff to think about convening and dialogue in their work.

We reviewed the project proposals and what we knew about the completed projects and compared them to the initial grant requirements.

The original requirements were intended to create feelings of empowerment and belonging among library patrons as libraries chose to engage in the topics of climate change, social isolation or local solutions. The list of requirements below was also intended to help the libraries understand that a book display, reading club, or information sharing was not the intention of the grant.

These original requirements included:

- **Must include a minimum of 6 hours of engagement with the public:** This requirement helped define that the funding led to relatively significant programming. How the six hours were divided or not was entirely up to the library staff. For evaluation purposes, we estimated the number of staff public-facing hours and not whether a participant engaged with the library for 6 hours.

- **Build social connections among participants and their local community**: This requirement builds on the six-hour requirement to encourage programming to build relationships amongst the participants.

- **Can be used to increase accessibility**: This requirement emphasizes the library's role as a place for all people and the frequent need to expand services to meet their needs. This requirement allowed libraries to use the funds to advance how they serve as a first responder, a safe place, or a resource for those sometimes on the margins.

- **Can use a Co-Design or Partnership Process**: The intent of the democracy spark grant was meant to help patrons feel a sense of empowerment. Emphasizing co-development would allow libraries to respond to emerging needs or help their participants feel agency within the program itself. In our evaluation

process, we expanded this to include "partnerships" to highlight the Democratic Spark Grants as an opportunity to build partnerships with schools and community service providers. Most projects were closer to partnerships than convening.

- **Increase participants' sense of agency through experiential, solutions-oriented activities (even where impacts may be small or incremental):** This requirement also helped define the purpose of the suggested programming and a hands-on, action-oriented delivery model.

- **Must convene the community in ways that lead to tangible, face-to-face, community action:** The tangible action requirement encouraged participants to do something together and see the result of their interests or labor.

For this evaluation, it is too difficult to measure if the projects created community connections and a sense of agency among their participants. We also did not see a significant change in the library staff's empowerment or opinions of their or the library's role from their pre and post-survey results.

Of the 11 projects that were at least completed, the table below identifies how many completed library projects met each particular requirement. We have presented them this way to help protect library staff's confidentiality.

	Wave 1 (3 complete, 3 partial)	Wave 2 (5 complete)	Total (11 complete)
Spent 6 hours with community	6 (100%)	1 (20%)	**6 (55%)**
Convening*	4 (66%)	1 (16%)	**5 (45%)**
Partnership**	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	**5 (45%)**
Tangible Action ***	2 (33%)	3 (50%)	**5 (45%)**
Increased Accessibility (optional)	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	**5 (45%)**

We also found that

- 9 of the 11 projects were teaching-focused. These are centred on one person leading or teaching an idea or activity to those who attended.

- 3 of the 11 were structured to focus on a facilitated conversation amongst participants. These are centred on creating cross-talk among participants.

In summary, all of the projects met the original intent of at least one requirement, and most programs met more than one requirement, but only one project met all of the requirements. More than half of the projects missed completing one of the requirements. The majority used a single partnership with another organization

to create and deliver their project rather than co-develop with the community. When we looked at each requirement independently, we found only about half the projects met that requirement's original intent.

What we thought would be easy, some libraries found hard

Interviewing the five libraries that completed projects in the second wave provided valuable feedback for the grants and reiterated how staff see the role of themselves and the library.

It is also worth reflecting that only 9% of British Columbia libraries submitted a proposal for the microgrants and one innovative library system, which was part of our advisory, never applied. Unfortunately, we can not know if this application rate was because libraries did not hear about the opportunity or were not interested. However, we do know that we had broad geographic representation in those that did apply, which suggests that libraries did hear about the opportunity and, for unknown reasons, chose not to apply.

Very few Parameters

Several different libraries in Wave 2 shared that "Librarians like to copy each other. We pride ourselves on not having to reinvent thinking." This sentiment appeared in most of the interviews. They used this phrase to describe how they felt the open invitation to think up a new program with very few parameters was very difficult.

Several libraries said they used the Wave 1 ideas posted on the website to create their submission, adapting it as needed for Covid-19 safely. They appreciated seeing the ideas and adapting to their own circumstances. They may not have applied otherwise.

Since adapting the ideas of other libraries came up in a few interviews, we closed the loop with the 11 completed libraries by sharing their project ideas amongst the group. This excited the small rural libraries the most.

100 Words

One library also told us they were frustrated by the 100-word submission requirement. They did not see it as providing a low barrier to entry. Rather, one library shared their frustrations:

"I'm remembering the application process because I was the one tasked with doing the 100 words or something to it, right? It was a very small and it was just a very broad: do something great, right, and what would that be? And so our internal process was putting our heads together. It's really hard. I remember the-- we're at 108, oh, no. Like, I remember the back and forth. You'd think it's easier because it's shorter, but it's harder because every word has to be super powerful. Basically 100 versus 500 words. So every word has to be five times as powerful, right."

We also noted that several libraries in Wave 1 ignored the 100-word requirement and submitted longer descriptions of their intended projects.

Micro-Grant

We heard mixed feedback in our interviews and process about the size of the grant. Some appreciated that they could use the funds for programming to target adults because program funding for that age group is hard

to find. They appreciated being able to use the grants to respond to Covid-19 and the social isolation it caused.

We also heard feedback that it was difficult to judge the size of a project that could be completed for $1000. It provided a real training and learning opportunity. On person described,

"I was definitely naïve thinking I could get so much done with the money that I got. But it was great to have the flexibility to discover what it was actually going to be like. And I think it was great to have it as sort of a pilot project for future projects. I emailed SFU at some point saying, 'I don't know what we're going to do, like, can we get an extension 'cause this is taking a lot longer than I thought.' They said, yes, and then I realized, okay, so, like, these micro grants are really, like, they got to be short term and I have to rein in my ambitions a bit. I really think it was great to have access to that and try it."

They went on to say they would use this experience to improve their future funding applications and program ideas.

Evaluation Participation

We were somewhat surprised that Wave 1 library staff seemed very reluctant to participate in our pre-survey. When we offered them the award, they were sent a link to the survey with their SFU contract paperwork. After almost a month, only 2 of the 18 had taken the pre-survey. We decided to offer a $20 online gift card to anyone who took the survey to help motivate the staff. Within a week of offering the gift card, 16 of the 18 libraries had taken the pre-survey. Completion of the post-survey required several follow-ups with some libraries and the inclusion of another gift card.

We did require libraries to share a post-activity survey with their participants. Several library staff wanted to review all the questions in this survey before they would sign a contract. The post-activity patron survey was relatively seamless; some libraries chose a paper survey and others shared a link to the online survey.

To increase our data set, we made participation in the pre and post-surveys mandatory for Wave 2. We also replaced the patron survey with a 30-minute library staff post-activity interview. Requiring participation in evaluations tends to go against ethical research best practices, but this was communicated upfront as part of the application process. The requirement seemed to work well as the second wave completed their surveys quickly and scheduling interviews was relatively easy.

We did not ask libraries in Wave 1 or Wave 2 to submit any kind of final report for their project. This means we do not have data about how many people attended the programs in Wave 1 compared to how many people submitted surveys. In contrast, the interviews provided an excellent means to summarize what was done, some of the feedback libraries received, opinions about the role of libraries and staff, and some outcomes.

CONSIDERATIONS

Very strong library staff culture

Our interviews provided information and context about library staff's culture that built upon the information we received from our advisory group.

We started each of the five interviews by asking library staff what they felt was their library's role and their staff's role in their community. We asked them to reflect on how they would describe their role a year ago, before their project and Covid-19 and how they would describe it now (see interview guide in the appendix). No one described seeing their role or themselves dramatically differently after the project or Covid-19.

Librarians often used the same words to describe their role which points to a very strong ingrained culture among staff. They used the phrases "connect people," "help people," "access to information," "online access to government forms," and "connect community" a lot. Library staff from very different library systems talk, think and believe in the same ideals.

Asking, "what does democracy mean to you?" created an awkward moment in every interview. The question created awkward laughs, several seconds of silence, expressions of overwhelm, and a lack of confidence. For example one library staff person said:

"Oh, boy…. Yeah, I think that's-- people actually having power to make changes or a difference in the way things are. Boy, that was really lame."

With encouragement, the staff were able to connect their projects to democracy. Each connection was a bit unique to the specific project and generally fell into these general categories:

- Being a part of equity and the right to access information
- Creating accessibility to give people a voice
- Helping people who don't see themselves in the system
- Raising awareness of an issue in a fun way
- Helping people feel like they aren't alone

Below, one library staff summarized the connection between teaching seniors how to send funny greeting card videos to their family and a connection to democracy:

"Even government services– everything is just online. If you can't complain or make your point of view heard online nowadays, it's often just neglected. It's often just not heard. It's not listened to. I think helping seniors feel a bit more comfortable with technology– I mean, it sounds silly to say we help them find a voice with greeting cards–but giving them a little bit of confidence that they can use [the internet] and that we can help them if they want to send an email to their member of parliament. [Librarians] can help them with that."

The staff person also alludes to a perspective that subtly appeared in several of our library interviews. Library staff see themselves as supporting, not necessarily creating, agency among their patrons. They grow

relationships between patrons and staff so that library staff can be seen as resources to accomplish individual goals.

The connections described by library staff suggest they often create fun activities to help people and lower barriers between staff and their patrons. For example, this staff person noted the seniors who participated in creating funny greeting cards, now come into the library to use computers and ask other questions. The participants now see the library and its staff as resources for further use of computers and exploring the internet. This story shows how programs grow relationships that can then be used to support patrons in how they individually want to act on their agency. Library staff would never tell people to write to their parliament members, but they are there to help individuals if that's what they want to do.

Libraries are service providers first and foremost

Covid-19 helped clarify what the advisory members and library staff may have already known: that libraries are book service providers first and foremost. The pandemic made library staff recognize and stick to their priorities. In our interviews with library staff and informal conversations during the summer of 2020 it became apparent that libraries have a very specific order of priorities.

First, libraries provide access to books and reading materials. Second, they are a community service provider for internet and computer access. Third, they create fun programming to connect people and often in connection to the first two priority areas. Any other programming falls behind these top three priorities.

Our micro-grants not only fell behind these top three priorities and the small amount of money may also have been a factor in why libraries chose to skip applying or to end their projects. Our advisory was honest with us in July 2020 and let us know that, while juggling the top 2 or three priorities, an announcement for a $1000 grant to do programming above and beyond the priorities might not be worth their time. As the pandemic closed and laid off library staff, we also experienced how these small program projects are the first to be cut and resulted in only 3 of our 18 funded projects being completed in their entirety.

Democracy needs activities that are inherently non-political

As part of the evaluation of democracy spark grants and neighbourhood small grants staff have been conducting a brief literature review of non-political activities and public engagement. Leisure studies research and philosophy have explored how participation in local activities correlates to democratic engagement and strong civic behaviour. They do not necessarily need to overlap in the same program to support democracy.

In his book, Overdoing Democracy (2019), Robert Talisse writes, "the point of democracy is to foster valuable human relationships and lives that are devoted, collectively and individually, to meaningful projects that lie beyond the struggle of politics."

Despite the purpose of democracy, Talisse argues, our social lives have become structured by our politics and political identities. Where we go, who we engage with, and what we do in our everyday lives are increasingly geographically and socially segregated in ways that align with our political alignments. This increases polarization and decreases trust that those who disagree with us may also be rational, kind, whole human beings. To help this problem requires building what he calls "civic friendships," which are weak associations or awareness that those who differ from us are still full human beings. Civic friendships are best built by engaging with people through non-political activities that produce joy. Political respect, civic engagement,

skills for activating agency are often a by-product. Civic friendship helps create resilience when one is experiencing a political loss.

We need to consider that libraries could be viewed as one of the few spaces not defined by political allegiances and should be protected as such. We could damage democracy further by creating an association between library staff and certain kinds of political beliefs, values, or allegiance. Library staff are strongly aware and protective of their community trust and neutral role as well.

When we evaluate the Democracy Spark Grant projects through a lens that supports why non-political activities matter, we firmly believe the projects positively impacted communities and thus democracy. They epitomized spaces and activities that help people to see one another as thinking, caring, and full human beings who are not alone– an essential ingredient for civil society. They lowered barriers to accessing library staff as resources, created some new relationships between libraries and schools and brought joy to many.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Try a socket wrench instead of a monkey wrench

It is a fact that our findings in this report can not be generalized. Our data is from a handful of libraries in very particular circumstances. It is also a fact that we experienced several struggles managing the project and evaluating its impact, which suggests that an open-ended micro-grant model may not be the direction we should pursue in the future.

With these facts in mind, the suggestions below should not be understood as concrete instructions, but rather a series of directions we should investigate further. This includes encouraging future demonstration projects based on what was learned in this pilot.

A pilot of micro-grants in libraries suggest the following directions to explore for future possibilities:

Invite libraries into larger projects

Invite libraries into larger projects and engagement activities with the opportunity for staff to tweak the program delivery details to suit their local needs. Library staff want to be a part of projects. They also resist re-inventing anything when they could borrow or reproduce it for less work. Instead of offering open-ended funding, we suggest incorporating libraries as a delivery or convening space for products and ideas connected to larger topic-based projects such as climate change, anti-oppression, or municipal policy planning.

Build on library staff's culture

Embrace approaches that build on the already-strong library staff culture of service, response and creating good feelings among their patrons. Library staff know how to lower barriers with their patrons through fun programming and prioritize supporting individual agency. To borrow the words of Dr. Karine Duhamel, they "hold space" rather than "make space." This should be viewed as their strength rather than as a weakness. Libraries are already partnering with external organizations and we recommend finding ways to support and extend this work.

Provide facilitation training

Library staff know how to teach or moderate Q&A very well. They also know how to lead programming. They have less formal training in how to be a neutral convenor or a facilitator of differing viewpoints on a topic. Some libraries may welcome the opportunity to learn how the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue approaches facilitations to help maintain their association as a neutral space that encourages learning, the exchange ideas, and community building. Training can help staff maintain community trust that they are non-political.

Help library staff reproduce programming

Many of our interviews included discussion about how nice it was to see the projects created in Wave 1 to generate ideas for Wave 2. Smaller libraries appreciated learning what other small libraries did with the project since they do not have the same resources as larger systems. Regardless of the library system size, staff said they do not like to create from scratch if borrowing and adapting can save them time and resources.

Their priority to provide books and the internet also means any programming is always a lower priority, so the easier it is to deliver, the more likely they are to do it. This suggests they would welcome products like a "conversation kit" or "democracy game" to host and offer to patrons.

Support library programming funding in general

We were left with a question that if libraries received more funding for programming in any form, would they do better programming? Our impression was yes; they would. Thus we advise further reflection on whether or not microgrants offer the solution that fits the problem we are trying to solve. Greater networking and training of library staff for facilitation and programming ideas might be a different solution for the problem of democratic engagement at libraries. Or leveraging improvements in our democracy may be most effective by joining efforts to advocate for more robust library funding in general.