

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in the Elementary Library Learning Commons

By Beverley Bunker

I became an educator because I wanted to make a difference. It is this desire to create systemic change that still drives me today as a new teacher-librarian. During a secondment as Faculty Advisor in the SEL (Social Emotional Learning) cohort at UBC, I had the privilege of connecting with colleagues who were equally as passionate as me about instructional design, quality assessment practices, and inquiry. I learned more about the research behind SEL than I could have hoped for and feel deep gratitude for having worked with teacher candidates who innately understood its importance. However, perhaps the most important gift of these years was the time and space to explore my own biases and to learn how racism has drastically shaped every facet of our western society. Schools are tremendously busy places, and professional reading and dialogue can easily be overlooked while we are all trying to survive; however, in this post-secondary environment, I was free to read professionally and then bring it up casually during lunch conversation the next day with fellow seconded teachers. For the first time in my career, I was able to grapple with some big questions about cultural appropriation, intersectionality, and what this means for our practice in a system that was designed by white people and imposed on Indigenous people. I was surrounded by people who were engaged in learning about social justice and eager to put it into practice. I will forever be grateful for the three years I spent with these colleagues, who also became dear friends as well as the teacher candidates. Many of them taught me more than I taught them.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, I was wrapping up my secondment, I had started my teacher-librarian coursework, and I was planning to be on maternity leave in a few months. That year at home was quite lonely, given not only that I was a new mother, but that I felt a huge sense of loss for my colleagues and my own learning. There had been no opportunity to say proper goodbyes so I forged forward and hoped that my adventure into the world of teacher-librarianship would bring me a sense of purpose. Thankfully I loved my instructors and my course work. The catalyst for the work I'm currently doing in our library learning commons was my teacher-librarian specialist course through Queen's University; we engaged in a personal inquiry that was shaped by our own interests and questions. I had always been invested in SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) equity and I had experienced both the anger and grace of Indigenous teacher candidates while teaching a course on campus the previous year. I had also engaged in a lot of reading around racism and was inspired by works such as *So You Want to Talk About Race* (Ijeoma Oluo), *Between the World and Me* (Ta-Nehisi Coates), *White Fragility* (Robin DiAngelo), and *Unreconciled: Family, Truth & Indigenous Resistance* (Jesse Wenthe). All of this had me wondering why I had not seen more explicit support for social justice issues in elementary library learning commons. Based on informal observations, I had a hunch it was often lack of

confidence. I decided that I would actively explore ways we could better address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion as I moved into my new role.

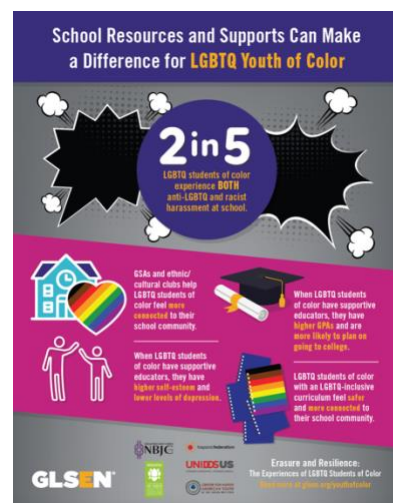
How might the teacher-librarian support social justice in the elementary library learning commons?

This became my overarching inquiry question. Often, more questions arose than were answered – such is the nature of inquiry! Based on my initial research and my desire to look beyond collection development, I decided to focus on the following sub-questions:

- How can the teacher librarian be an ally for BIPOC, LGBTQ+ and other marginalized members of the school community?
- What factors should we consider when curating and cataloguing diverse collections?
- How do we create an LLC where all students feel welcome, safe, and valued?

Why does this matter?

According to research in elementary schools by GLSEN & Harris Interactive (2020), 75% of elementary students report that students at their school are called names, made fun of, or bullied with at least some regularity. One in four students (26%) and one in five teachers (21%) hear students say bad or mean things about people because of their race or ethnic background, at least sometimes, and the number one reason cited among all students for personally feeling unsafe or afraid at school is personal appearance. Intergenerational trauma and intersectionality also play a role, although the positive impact of one supportive adult is significant, as can be seen in this infographic from GLSEN.



"A long history of violence and cultural erasure targeting indigenous communities has contributed to Native and Indigenous youths' experiences of discrimination and harassment at school from both peers and school personnel. These experiences may contribute to disparities in high school completion as well as troubling rates of substance use and suicide among Native and Indigenous youth. Similarly, LGBTQ youth often face unique challenges related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. LGBTQ youth often report experiencing victimization and discrimination and have limited access to in-school resources that may improve school climate" (Zongrone et al., 2020).

Although these studies are American, it doesn't take much to see that these same issues exist here in Canada. In addition to the substantial research that students from marginalized groups are suffering in schools, there is the added factor of who enters the education profession. The increase in educators of colour has not kept pace with the

increase in people of colour in both the general and student population in recent years (Ryan et al., 2007). This is problematic because it is difficult to empathize on a deep level with students from marginalized groups if we have not experienced the impacts of intergenerational trauma, systemic racism ourselves. Biases are deeply entrenched in our worldviews. It is not personal; it is simply the truth.

Why should teacher-librarians get involved?

With so many adults working in schools, surely someone who is more knowledgeable than me could take on these social justice issues... right?! While it may be true for you that others have more knowledge or experience, it is equally true that teacher-librarians need to invest in this work. We are in a unique position to interact with the entire student population of our schools. While an argument could be made for every standard in the *Leading Learning* framework, I have chosen to elaborate on specific facets of three standards to support why this work is necessary in our role.

STANDARD



Facilitating Collaborative Engagement to Cultivate and Empower a Community of Learners

Vision for Learning: "The LLC builds learning communities and is responsive to evolving school, district and global changes."

Teacher-librarians can support learning for social justice at an elementary school level through both the library program in primary years and collaboration time across all grade levels. We are meant to be involved in and connected to the school's vision for learning, so we need to take advantage of this position of influence to advocate for a vision that supports those students and families most in need of our support.

STANDARD



Fostering Literacies to Empower Life-Long Learners

Cultural Literacy: "LLC program contributes to the co-creation of cultural literacy."

We have a responsibility as teacher-librarians to help contribute to students' and staffs' developing understanding of cultural literacy. This includes cultural representation in our school collections, understanding of cultural celebrations and customs, learning about the history of Indigenous peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions' calls to action, and how we decide to share stories from cultures other than our own. Students, staff, and families should all be part of co-creating this knowledge.

Designing for Responsive Print & Digital Collections: "Print and digital collections are augmented by collaborative consultation with the school community to empower personalized learning."

Culturally responsive collections allow for inclusive representation of race, culture, sexual orientation, gender, religion, abilities, socioeconomic status, and family structures. The collection should be diverse and should evolve based on the needs of the school community. To do this effectively, community members - including students, staff, and families - need to be involved in the process. This could take many forms depending on your context, including written input for new purchases, focus groups, questionnaires, or a library learning commons leadership team.



Designing for Student Well-Being in the LLC: "LLC works to build a culture of equity and inclusiveness in learning opportunities and facilities. [It] ensures opportunities for student choice and voice in designing for well-being."

Student well-being should be a high priority in all school library learning commons. All students should feel safe, welcome, and valued in addition to being free to question and learn. Teacher-librarians as advocates for social justice will improve learning resources, opportunities, and access for all learners, including those from marginalized groups. This will pave the way for offering more student voice and choice over time, supporting the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of students.

If we want to be teaching and learning in spaces that are mindful of the past, grounded in the present, and looking toward the future, we need to invest in this work.

How can teacher-librarians take action?

Through deep and honest self-reflection, this inquiry helped me realize that while I had always considered myself an ally, I was unsure of tangible steps I could take as a teacher-librarian to create change. After engaging with the literature, particularly around racism and sexual orientation and gender identity, I developed this list of twelve actions that I aim to implement in my practice. I strive to be an ally, defined as "someone from a non-marginalized group who uses their privilege to advocate for a marginalized group. They transfer the benefits of their privilege to those who lack it" (Philips, 2020). Some days are easier than others, but this list has served as a useful guide throughout my first year as teacher-librarian.

1. Learn

It is your responsibility to educate yourself - do not place the burden on marginalized groups to "teach" you about their experiences.

2. Speak Up

Be an advocate for the needs and interests of marginalized groups on your staff and in your district. Teacher-librarians are involved in ongoing advocacy for resources and programming; use this avenue to speak up for marginalized groups.

3. Intervene

Do not tolerate anti-LGBTQ+ or racist language in the library learning commons or the school. Intervene when you hear it – complacency implies support.

4. Listen to the Community

Ask students what they want to learn. Involve the school community in decisions about the library collection and spaces.

5. Be a Role Model for Inclusion

Use gender neutral language such as "they" rather than "he" or "she." Do not make assumptions about students' identities based on appearances. Encourage students to share and be proud of their personal identities.

6. Make Information Accessible

Make information about racism, Indigenous and LGBTQ+ issues available and easily accessible always – not just for special events. Consider where this information needs to be placed to be visible to all.

7. Know Your District Policies

Many districts have policies in place for both the well-being of marginalized students and the curation of library resources. Get to know these policies and direct staff members to them when needed.

8. Teach for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Teach anti-racism and anti-discrimination practices. Teach LGBTQ+ and Indigenous content. Embed the First Peoples' Principles into lessons, both in the library learning commons and during collaboration time.

9. Teach Critical Literacy

Ask important questions to help students examine bias in literature as well as whose voices are not present. Ask them what they think this means.

10. Create Inclusive Book Displays

Prioritize the inclusion of LGBTQ+ and BIPOC authors and characters in book displays, especially when the theme is not related to oppression. Normalize diversity.

11. Promote a Visible “Safe Space”

Many districts offer training to support allies and anti-racism. Participate and then put up a sticker in the library so students know it is a safe space. Wear a pin so students know you are a safe person.

12. Offer the Space to the Community

If your school has a GSA or rainbow club, offer the library learning commons as a meeting space. Help facilitate and get to know these students. Connect with community groups to host events in the library learning commons that support issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

What About the Collection?

I went into this inquiry hoping to look beyond collection development and I think I did that. However, to ignore collection development as a teacher-librarian would be ridiculous; it is an extremely important part of our job. Santora (2013) explains that “book collections in early childhood programs should serve as “mirrors” that reflect the children, staff and families in the program and “windows” that reflect the true diversity of our world.” This quote speaks to me because we often think about our students, but we do not always remember to consider our staff or families. This inspired me to think carefully about book considerations in my first year, but it also drove me to invest in some very serious weeding. In one year, we weeded over 3,100 books and many more will be done in the next couple of months. Circulation statistics are important, but so are the types of information we choose to include and those we choose not to include.

Before



After

Some issues I have tried selecting and weeding

Self-censorship

Am I avoiding particular resources because they families feel sense of comfort more human rights of

Tokenism

Am I including books only to satisfy the need to be "diverse"? Are the characters and information multidimensional and authentic? Are they stereotypical or unimportant? Do I offer a variety of stories and information about marginalized groups?

Indigenization

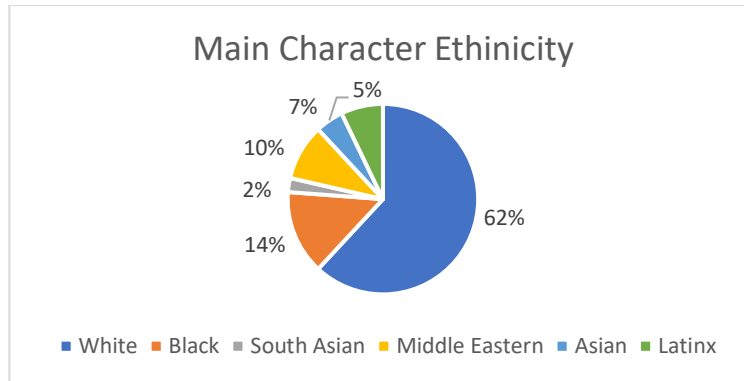
Am I intentionally trying to include Indigenous content, worldviews, and learning principles in the library collection and program? How can I help classroom teachers do this? How does my race affect my perspective?

Participating in our district picture book diversity audit has been eye-opening and such a rich learning experience so far. In the first 50 books I audited from a random sample, 38 of them were written by white authors. Interestingly, I also noted that six books included black main characters, while only one was South Asian. This is important because the majority of our 740-student population is South Asian; I have already taken this into consideration and have purchased more books that reflect the diversity of our students and their families. It has also made me wonder: To what degree does the number of books we have by American authors affect our ability to curate a collection reflective of our community?



to be mindful of when resources are:

topics, themes, or might make me or certain uncomfortable? Is my important than the marginalized groups?



We have a reasonable number of Indigenous books in our overall collection, and this year I will be part of a larger group of teacher-librarians in Surrey exploring how we might decolonize our collections and cataloguing of these resources. I also plan to introduce oral storytelling into our K-3 library lessons and to reflect on how revisiting a story can teach us something new each time because our identity is always evolving. This plan supports the First Peoples' Principles of Learning and will connect with our much-loved unit on place-based learning in the spring of 2022. Our K/1 classes were introduced to a variety of picture books to inspire our weekly walks around the school grounds, which then led to a mini whole-class inquiry on plants and flowers. This project was six weeks long and when surveyed at the end of the year, it was a favourite amongst students. You can find the learning story shared with classroom teachers and families below.

- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story
- Learning involves patience and time
- Learning requires exploration of one's identity



[Taking Learning Outdoors in the Library Learning Commons](#)

We have a handful of students who have specifically requested books with Muslim characters and we currently have little to offer them in terms of picture books and non-fiction. I am hoping to expand this part of our collection and to keep this quote from Khokhar (2020) in mind: "As we think about using storytelling as a tool to disrupt the often stereotyped, tokenized and single-story narratives associated with Muslims, we must first think and examine the types of stories that are usually told about Muslims in our classroom and school spaces. Often, the most common stories that we tell can be grouped into two categories: one, "saving the Muslim girl narratives" and two, "religious literacy."

Reflections on Implementing Inquiry Learning

Coming into a school in 2021, after the intense restrictions of Covid-19 the previous year, presented a unique challenge. Much of the year was spent genre-fying our fiction collection, making books more accessible to readers through baskets and thematic groupings, weeding, and inviting students into the space so they could start to see it as a place that inspires connection and collaboration. This was not always easy, as we were still trying to minimize large gatherings, but we made significant strides through library monitoring and opening the space at lunch and after school for those who wanted to be there. Given the restrictions nothing was formally advertised, but there was a marked difference in how students were beginning to see the space and their role in it. We also worked hard to connect with classroom teachers and promote collaborative experiences that support equity, such as exploring personal strengths through metaphor, using picture books and Bloxels to explore the concept of story, and introducing students to story workshop so they could share their learning in diverse ways. All of these were quite successful, and I'm sure we will be able to build on them this year. In small ways, we were also able to support classroom teachers in looking at diverse points of view in curricular areas. One example can be found here: [Grade 4 Social Studies – Who Came to Canada?](#)



Story Workshop in Gr. 2

After a year of life in the library learning commons and with a very energetic toddler at home, I can honestly say that I am exhausted but inspired. The work of diversity, equity, and inclusion is ongoing but so incredibly important in our library learning commons. I

know that I am committed to pursuing this learning for the foreseeable future; I welcome conversation and collaboration.

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