

Know Better. Do Better

Feature



by Matthew C. Winner, September 2019

It took me several years in education before I really started to see the students I was teaching. I had always seen a class of learners in front me. I had always valued their uniqueness, their individual passions, their distinct voices in our classroom community. But it wasn't until midway into my ninth year, long after earning tenure and a master's degree and National Board Certification, that how I viewed my students became so profoundly changed. This article is my attempt at communicating in words that which has been working in my heart since I first saw my students with this new clarity.

The late Dr. Maya Angelou said "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." Now finishing my fourteenth year in education, I've been learning a lot. And not unlike during my childhood, much of what I'm learning is coming as a result of a misstep or mistake.

My hard work to innovate in the school library and to participate actively in our online learning community coalesced in 2013. I had been working extensively with engaging and supporting mathematics learners through video games, culminating in co-authoring a book published by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) on supporting mastery of national math standards by playing specific games on the Nintendo Wii. My curiosity of and interest in gamification also led to co-founding the Level Up Book Club, a short-lived online community of like-minded educators interested in exploring and putting into practice the principles of gamification. Meanwhile, our school library's presence expanded into the global community through the incorporation of video conferencing tools to collaborate with colleagues and students in TEDx-inspired projects. Student voices were amplified in celebration of World Read Aloud Day, International Dot Day, and Poem in Your Pocket Day as we connected with classes, shared projects, and asked about school life in other parts of the globe. This resulted in a number of accolades, including recognition from the American Library Association (ALA) and an invitation to visit the White House as part of the Champions of Change program. Advocating for video games in the classroom felt like advocating for kids like me, growing up on video games and imaginary worlds, not always knowing or feeling like you were good at the "school" part of school, much as you loved the recess part. Getting video games into classrooms felt like giving educators a new vernacular for communicating with students and that felt like it had the power for a lot of good.

Video games had long been at the center of my interests and incorporating gaming into classroom instruction reframed the way I approached student engagement. But when catching up with friends in Chicago at ALA Annual a colleague inquired what might be next for me and I confessed that I wasn't sure. I'd been listening to a fair number of podcasts but felt that the media platform was relatively barren of shows addressing the interests of school librarians. Specifically, I loved the format of a particular pop culture podcast I had been listening to for years and wondered what it might be like to recreate something in that same format that focused instead on children's literature and the library. That July, I published my first episode of the Let's Get Busy podcast, named after my Busy Librarian blog, and set about recording interviews with authors, illustrators, and librarians as a means to capture genuine and sincere conversations about children and children's literature. I saw the show as an opportunity to enrich libraries and the lives of readers by getting good books and talented authors and illustrators into schools and school libraries.

Just two months later, I began work at a brand new elementary school and had the privilege of starting a school library program from the ground up. I brought my passions into my instruction, much as I had in the past, and in the winter of my second year there I started a podcasting unit with my fifth graders. Many of them were new to the term "podcast" much less the format itself and so I turned to my episode archives to share with them samples of my previous conversations. By this point had published over one hundred episodes and felt like I was hitting a stride. I had made a habit of using author photos to accompany each of the episodes so that the names of guests could be associated with faces. As a child, I never knew the faces of authors, much less their names. This choice on the podcast homepage was intentional because I valued the opportunity for readers to know the individual behind the book they love.

But, this is the place where our story takes a turn because this is the place where I started seeing in a different light that which had been before me all along. That podcast archive page with all of the past guests facing out? That was a wall of impressively talented people. Their books made the *New York Times* best seller lists. Their book covers were adorned with shiny medals. Their books made state book lists and best of lists and all the other kinds of lists. But, an overwhelming number of the faces behind those books looked just like me.

White.

Now, this is to say nothing of the diversity represented in what kinds of stories they told, what backgrounds the individuals came from, their age, their religion, or gender identity, or any number of other distinctions. But as I scrolled through that wall of faces, I couldn't help but feel like it was communicating a message.

- "These are the kinds of people who make the books I like."
- "These are the kinds of people I am willing to invite onto my platform for a discussion."
- "These are the kinds of people whose voices matter to me most."

What silent messages were being transmitted to my students? And was I okay with how these messages were speaking for me and my values?

It was around this same time that I learned about the term "diversity audit." Used commonly in business to evaluate employment practices against the makeup of a company's workers, my diversity audit of the podcast entailed going through the episode archive and recording ethnicity and gender on a master spreadsheet for each guest. I modeled my audit after a two-part blog post by teacher Jessica Lifshitz published on Lee & Low's blog entitled, "Having Students Analyze Our Classroom Library to See How Diverse It Is." The work I conducted in my examination of the podcast archive is crude and flawed, relying on how the guest self-identifies on a bio on their website or social media account, but the data served the internal purpose of helping me to see representation across my guest list. I had to know better before I could do anything to elicit change.

I have always been critical of my instructional practice. I take strides to push myself, to challenge and innovate my practices. I want to see children, and I want them to be seen and valued in my classroom. When I think about this turning point moment, I am flooded with feelings of shame and of blindness and of privilege.

I held the results of the diversity audit up against my school profile and 2016 data from the U.S. Census Bureau. That year, those identifying as White made up 61.3% of the population. At my school in central Maryland students identifying as White made up for 18.8% of the population. But, on the Children's Book Podcast (then called All the Wonders) in 2016? Authors and illustrators identifying as White made up 89% of the guest list.

This is where my journey started and where I need to leave you, because after this moment, when I started to know what I didn't know. It's the moment where I felt the calling to do better, having begun to know better. This knowledge has not only affected how I book the podcast and who I consider for future episodes, it's also at the forefront of my mind when:

- Determining how I allocate the book budget to add to our current collection
- Selecting books to read aloud in our library
- Narrowing down titles I pull when a teacher requests a set of books on a given topic
- Displaying books throughout our library
- Recommending books to be nominated for our state book award
- Booking authors or illustrators for school visits
- Advocating for authors or illustrators at our state library conference
- Promoting titles from our book fair
- Promoting our summer reading program

In my experience, you cannot tell someone to make a change like this. It's a shift in mindset. It is something that challenged me personally. And in that challenge I saw opportunity for me to grow. But, I can tell you that it helped me to see my students more clearly in every aspect of my program. It made me uncomfortable about all of the places I fell short, but hopeful for all of space for me to learn. I have since shared Lee & Low's Classroom Library Questionnaire with colleagues as a way to invite self-reflection and discussion among colleagues. I've discussed statistics around the diversity gap in children's literature when with colleagues or when presenting at a state conference.

And I am continuing to help others to know better so that, like me, they can begin the work of doing better.

Resources

Part 1 - Having Students Analyze Our Library to See How Diverse It Is: <https://blog.leeandlow.com/2016/07/07/part-1-having-students-analyze-our-classroom-library-to-see-how-diverse-it-is/>

Diversity Audit of the All the Wonders Podcast: <http://www.matthewcwinner.com/single-post/2017/11/08/Diversity-Audit>

Lee & Low Classroom Library Questionnaire: https://www.leeandlow.com/uploads/loaded_document/408/Classroom-Library-Questionnaire_FINAL.pdf

Jalissa Corrie of Lee & Low on the Diversity Gap in Children's Literature: <https://blog.leeandlow.com/2018/05/10/the-diversity-gap-in-childrens-book-publishing-2018/>

The Children's Book Podcast Episode Archive: <http://www.matthewcwinner.com/single-post/Episode-Archive>

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