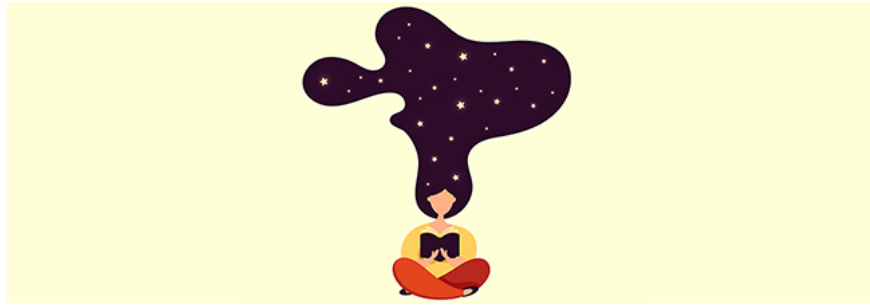


Finding Yourself in the Library

Feature



by Deanna Harris, May 2020

We often think of our libraries as safe havens for students: places where our students can see themselves reflected in the novels they read, places where they can freely research and inquire about topics of concern and interest, places open to all and free from judgement. How do we as school librarians create those ideal spaces?

Understanding and Awareness of Cultural Diversity

Our identities, our assumptions, and our perspectives affect how we interact, communicate, and work with our students and teachers. Who we are also affects our instruction in our classrooms and libraries. We need to understand ourselves better, increase our cultural awareness, and understand the diversity within our schools and communities to improve our library media programs.

I have had opportunities to attend professional trainings that have challenged my understanding of my world. In 2002, our school worked through *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne as we sought to understand and better serve our low socio-economic population. Using this book as a guide, our school focused on communicating better with our parents and building on the strengths of our students and our community.

In 2003-04, I participated in a year-long workshop, Conversations on Diversity. Teachers and staff from across the district read varied texts, learned Socratic seminar skills, and viewed video clips, all featuring a variety of cultures and demographics represented within our schools. The training exposed us not only to additional resources to use with our students but it also gave us a chance to try different instructional strategies to open conversations around race, poverty, and culture.

Twenty years ago, I also participated in a workshop that encouraged me to reflect on myself and the perceptions of who I am. How do I project those ideas to others? How do I receive assumptions about myself from others? How do I view others based on my biases, stereotypes, and perceptions? And ultimately, how does this impact my teaching and my work with my students?

Questioning and Reflecting

In the winter of 2014, I drew on all this professional learning to lead a session with my staff to promote better understanding of ourselves and each other in order to understand our work with our students. While my teachers and administration sat in a semi-circle, I shared my personal journey of cultural and diversity reflection:

"I am a white, middle-aged female. That's what most people see when they first look at me. Because of those identifiers, you may make assumptions about who I am as a white person, as a person in the middle of her life, and as a female. But those are only the things that you see on the outside. I am also a middle class, only child who grew up in eastern North Carolina in a rural community with a farmer and a teacher for parents. I am college educated, master-prepared, and I am a heterosexual, married Christian, and a slightly conservative realist."

Then I led my staff through visible characteristics—the things we immediately see about others—and the assumptions that we often attach to race, age, and gender.

In working through the visible traits, we discussed our assumptions about those areas. We asked ourselves, "What do we believe about white people and people of color?"

"What stereotypes about race do we harbor?" "How do those assumptions play out in our instruction?" In acknowledging age differences, we asked ourselves, "How are we prejudiced toward younger teachers or older teachers?" "What about the abilities of younger students versus older students?" In discussing males and females, we asked ourselves, "Do we have different expectations of male and female teachers or administrators?" "Do we cater to boys more than girls in certain subjects?"

We recognized that we form opinions about people—our students and teachers—from these first impressions, often based on our preconceived notions about those outward traits. So we asked ourselves, "Am I aware of my assumptions, perceptions, and biases?" "How do I counter those beliefs?" "How do I avoid negatively impacting my students and teachers?"

The next step was to discuss all the things we do not know about one another and our assumptions around those traits: birth order, socio-economics, education, geographical and regional influences, religion, politics, sexual orientation and gender identity, disposition. Through honest conversation, we faced our personal prejudices and preconceived ideas. Those thoughts can impact our interactions in our classrooms and libraries with students and teachers: "She's an only child; therefore, she must be spoiled." "Her family is wealthy, so she has had an easy life." "Her parents didn't finish high school, so they probably have low academic expectations for her."

While these statements are off-putting and inappropriate, they can unconsciously direct our interactions with our colleagues and students. With reflection and dialogue, our teachers and staff became more aware of their own biases and worked to rewrite the script in their own minds to better support our students.

Creating Diverse Print Collections

For the past two years, I have been conducting a diversity audit of my print collection. While I have purchased more titles featuring protagonists of color or various religions or LGBT characters, it's not enough just to grow the collection with diverse titles. I decided to dig deeper into the collection to determine if the existing books contain stereotypes and false narratives or outdated and inappropriate illustrations and covers.

I started with the historical fiction section, weeding books whose covers were stereotypical illustrations and caricatures. The book covers weren't just unappealing: they did not always honor our diverse students. Then, I went back through the section, reading plot summaries to determine setting, time period, and general story. I found myself asking questions about our collection:

- "Were all of our historical stories of African Americans slave narratives?"
- "How were our Native or indigenous people depicted in the novels?"
- "Were there prominent people of color depicted in other time periods, not just Civil War-era novels?"
- "What about Asian characters in war settings?"

With these questions, I pulled additional books that I needed to review and research to support keeping or weeding them from our collection.

Since beginning my diversity audit, colleagues in my district have shared additional suggestions for reviewing materials. This spring a group of teachers, students, and I will be pulling shelves of books and collecting data about diverse characters as well as authentic voices (i.e. books about Latinos written by Latinos, books about LGBT characters written by LGBT authors, etc.). This data will show us the diversity of our fiction collection and provide support for celebrating the strong, diverse novels we do have and for growing an even better, more diverse collection for our community.

Inclusive Instruction and Strategies

Over the past twenty years, I have collaborated with many colleagues to teach a variety of lessons, skills, and standards across many different subject areas. But over the past three or four years, I have started looking at my instructional materials through a cultural lens. For example, for a lesson I co-taught with a social studies teacher on the Industrial Revolution, I had printed images of child labor from the Lewis Hines collection at the Library of Congress. As I created stations around the learning, I laid out the photographs we were using and felt pleased with the lesson and activities. When I reexamined my materials through a cultural lens, I realized that all of the images I had printed were of white children. "Were only white children depicted in Hines's photos?" I went back to the collection and found additional photographs representing children of color.

I have made a concerted effort to include materials that reflect the diversity of our population, not just in the print collection but in all the resources we are using with our teachers and students. For enrichment lessons co-taught with my academically gifted teacher, we have pulled lyrics to a variety of songs and conducted seminars with students. From Loretta Lynn's "Coal Miner's Daughter" to Twenty One Pilot's "Stressed Out" to Stevie Wonder's "Stay Gold," we've used song lyrics to make connections with our students across race, gender, and socio-economic status. While the goal is breaking down the poem or lyrics to understand themes and ideas, music is universal and the variety of selections brings our community together, often appealing to and representing the variety of our student population.

Most recently I worked with my student library assistants to brainstorm our displays and bulletin boards for the spring semester. As we moved into the new year, our student group insisted on highlighting the Chinese New Year, a display of cultural icons and community events we had never emphasized in the past in an effort to connect with our Chinese students.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my professional journey and my school library program, I continue to build a program and a space which supports all of our students, a library and program where all students see themselves, find themselves, and can be themselves.

Cultural Awareness and Diversity Presentation

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1xqC0Z785WEgY8vQzsnpdR8fa3tmQw87244Qelx9QtuU/edit?usp=sharing>

Cultural Awareness and Diversity Presentation; Resources and Research on Traits

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pTjNmSkolA4XQwZtTH_a_YptEXSK2qAb58QUpGRjkk0/edit?usp=sharing

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