

Becoming More Inclusive Starts with Us

By Elizabeth Barrera Rush

The most rewarding and successful thing I ever did as a librarian was to give every student the opportunity to select their own topic for research. My goal was to teach relevant research skills, to give the students the ability to discern which method of presentation was best in the context of their topic, and to have them communicate their findings to an audience. It just made sense that if a student would draw upon their own life experiences, a self-selected topic would make it easy to practice the skills I wanted them to learn.

However, for two years, I had a difficult time convincing the students that personal interests or curiosities were valuable, important, and legitimate places to begin an information quest. For me, this begged the question, what caused my students to believe that the things that were important to them were not worthy of being studied in school? Why did I have to work so hard to validate each child's uniqueness? By the third year, I saw that they finally understood that when their topics were meaningful to them, the project was easy and fun. An added bonus was that students who went to school together for many years, were able to find a new appreciation of each other's natural gifts, talents, cultures, fears, hopes, and dreams. I believe it is because they had never had the opportunity to discuss or share like this in school before.

In the School Library Connection article, "[Thinking about Anti-Bias Education](#)," Anita Cellucci states that after, attending "two days of workshops with Teaching Tolerance (now Learning for Justice), a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center [she walked] away with a clearer understanding of the work that needs to be done to move our schools toward anti-bias practices. [She] also walked away a bit overwhelmed with thoughts about having these critical conversations with [her] colleagues and the outcomes that might come from these interactions. As challenging as these issues are to confront... this is all necessary work that each of us must contribute to and grow with...It is imperative that in order to begin to understand and shift our thinking, we must think about our own implicit biases. If we do not do so, our subconscious bias will interfere with how we respond to others."

Addressing your own biases can be difficult, perhaps because we are not always aware they exist within or outside of ourselves. Steven Thurston Oliver, associate professor at Salem State University says in the podcast *Teaching Hard History*, "The only way to work effectively with students from diverse backgrounds is to become more multicultural yourself" (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/podcasts/teaching-hard-history>).

I recently happened upon a Parks and Recreation event in Downtown San Antonio. It was a small, but impressive oil on canvas art show, featuring the works of Lionel Sosa, and a documentary titled, *Living in My Skin*, by Lionel and Cathy Sosa (<https://video.klrm.org/video/living-in-my-skin-part-1-4tj5jf/>). The project featured the experiences of Black men and boys who currently live in the city of San Antonio. The website reiterates the message in the film, "The Black population of San Antonio is only 7%, yet it hosts the largest MLK march in the nation... 63% of [the] citizens are Hispanic, making us a majority minority city. Many perceive San Antonio to be culturally enlightened and highly evolved. Is it?" The project "shines a light on today's reality." For me, a Hispanic woman in San Antonio, this film demands my attention as I become aware of the growing number of hate crimes in this country. Furthermore, it is imperative that we acknowledge that this is nothing new to Black Americans. By simply viewing this film, you may gain a perspective that you have never had before, about the ongoing difficulties that come in everyday life as a result of having dark skin.

Interrogating history can be an avenue to increasing educators' skill sets and an opportunity for awakening a self-awareness of how we are meeting the needs of students while working with them. By facing the difficult history of enslaved, Indigenous, non-Christian, and LGBTQ+ people throughout the world, we can build a foundation for understanding the root causes for the crimes and discriminatory laws that are being directed against Black, Latinx, and Asian Americans, as well as Jews and Muslims, and LGBTQ+ people today.

Listen to the podcast, "Teaching Hard History." It gives insight into the history of Black Americans and how the free labor of enslaved people built the wealth of this country and how Black Americans continue to suffer financial and social injustice today.

The "Welcome to Queer America" episode of the Learning for Justice podcast, *Queer America* provides a history of the LGBTQ+ rights movement and an understanding of how that community was rejected by the women's and Black rights movements, giving rise to a movement all its own (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/podcasts/queer-america>).

The website of the Anti-Defamation League has a wealth of information and resources to help educators learn about extremism, and provides materials for delivering anti-bias education and fighting hate (<https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/lessons>).

When you are armed with facts from history, you will be prepared to go one step further to ask yourself two possible questions: "If I were that person, what would be most

visceral to me?" and "If I were a descendant of that person, how would I feel about learning this history?" Spend time in reflection and introspection. By doing this, you will prepare yourself to open a forum for dialogue among your students.

Finally, take time to see my interview with Gail Lukasik, author of the book *White Like Her: My Family's Story of Race and Racial Passing*. Gail shares, very candidly, what it was like for her as an adult to discover that her mother was a Black woman, passing as white, and how her realization that she was a biracial woman put her in position to consider how she would identify herself racially. Gail now enjoys visiting schools and libraries, opening up discussion about race and racism, and seeing how the dialogue creates understanding among people.

Understanding is the key to breaking down barriers of fear and hate. Celebrating diversity defeats bias. If we can help children see each other's unique life history, we can also help them to see the similarities in their hopes for the future. To do all of this requires continuous and intentional actions to learn about people and their history, and today is the day to begin.

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