

Serving Black Youth Author Interview

Article

by Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Casey H. Rawson , June 2017

One of the new books from Libraries Unlimited that we're particularly excited about is [Libraries, Literacy, and African American Youth](#), edited by Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Pauletta Brown-Bracy, and Casey H. Rawson. This book tackles the issue of making libraries welcoming to Black youth and addressing the needs and desires of this population in the interests of promoting equity and social justice. The text covers key research concepts and provides illustrations of best practices by offering profiles of school (and public) libraries that are working to effect change. In their introduction, the authors say that rather than a how-to guide, they want their book to "spur dialogue and reflection about how libraries must change" in order to better serve African American youth. In the interests of building on this dialogue, Dr. Hughes-Hassell and Dr. Rawson were gracious enough to answer some questions for us about their work. Sandra and Casey have also created a [professional development workshop](#) for SLC on these same issues.

Tell us more about what motivated you to write this book. Why now?

Both of us have personal and professional experiences that led us to equity work, beginning with our experiences working in urban and low-income schools. We began writing this book around the same time as the Ferguson protests in response to Michael Brown's death. Racial inequity has always been an urgent issue in the U.S., but now, thanks to social media, both inequity and public responses to it are visible now in a way they've never been before. That means that police brutality, protest tactics, racial discrimination, and similar topics are being discussed in homes, workplaces, schools, and yes, libraries around the country. At the same time, our population continues to grow more diverse; the majority of public school students are now students of color. And educational and life outcome disparities for people of color continue to persist, and in some cases—like the racial wealth gap—even grow worse. It's easy to lose hope when you look at the long history of racial inequity and the bleak statistics illustrating how our society, including our schools and libraries, are failing youth of color. However, we believe that youth services librarians have enormous potential to work both locally and systematically to address racial inequity, and we have seen firsthand some amazing examples of librarians engaged in that work. We wrote this book in the hopes that it would help librarians confront the realities of race and racism in their work, but also inspire them to transform their practice to change those realities.

What is the most important thing you want librarians to get out of this book?

We want librarians to understand that not only can they be involved in racial equity work, they must be involved in this work to effectively serve today's youth. We also want them to understand the systemic nature of the inequities faced by youth of color, and how libraries have perpetuated some of those inequities. We hope the book will give librarians tools to critically examine their libraries' existing spaces, policies, collections, and services to identify barriers to and opportunities for effective work with youth of color.

"Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," "Racial Identity Development," "Enabling Texts." For someone who's never heard them before, these terms might seem a little intimidating. Why is it important for us to take the time to consider and understand these theories rather than just focusing on practice?

To paraphrase John Dewey, sometimes the most practical solution to a problem is to gain an understanding of the theoretical factors involved. Many librarians have not examined their practice from an equity lens before, and it can be difficult to know where to start. Luckily, plenty of researchers and authors—many of whom were or still are practitioners themselves—have spent years working with children and teens and figuring out what works (and what doesn't). Understanding their work can ultimately save librarians a lot of time and effort. More importantly, it can also ensure that we're not using trial-and-error approaches with the youth who need our best work. Another reason to emphasize theory alongside practice is that changing the strategies and resources we use with youth of color is necessary, but not enough. To really have a positive impact on youth of color, we need to shift our thinking as well. Too often, we view youth of color from a deficit perspective—focusing on what they lack instead of what they have and seeing educational and life outcome gaps as evidence of their failings instead of evidence that the system has failed them. This kind of thinking will never lead to true social justice.

What would you recommend as the first thing someone should do after reading the book (i.e., our first action step)?

We know it's tempting to jump right in and start changing things in your library; there's so much we need to do! However, the first thing we would encourage librarians to do is to examine their own racial identity, reflect on their own cultures, and identify areas where they may need more knowledge before implementing any professional changes. This is especially critical for White librarians, who may never have spent significant time thinking about their racial identities. It can be difficult to "see" the dominant (White) culture and the ways whiteness is privileged, but those are understandings that must be in place before librarians can attempt to understand and support children and teens from other cultures.

Your book and workshop focus specifically on Black youth. To what extent do you think the ideas you discuss are transferable to other groups of students and how do you think librarians should go about that?

Most of the theories we discuss in the book and in the workshop are applicable to students of all races, and many are also relevant to students who are marginalized in other ways (for example, LGBTQ students or English Language Learner (ELL) students). One thread that ties all of the ideas and theories in our book together is the idea that librarians should center the youth they serve in every aspect of their practice. This means getting to know them, viewing their differences as assets instead of deficits, and seeking to engage and sustain their home and peer cultures in the library. These practices aren't only helpful to Black youth, but to all youth. We do want to point out, though, that we are not advocating for a one-size-fits-all approach. While the same general theories may help librarians serve youth from a wide variety of backgrounds, how those theories get applied on the ground can and should vary with the particular children and teens being served.

You talk about what a number of libraries are doing successfully to address the issues of equity for Black youth. Are you hopeful about school librarians' ability to change for the future?

We couldn't do this work if we didn't believe strongly that school and public youth services librarians can make a real difference in the lives of children and teens of color. We've been excited to see prominent conversations in the field related to issues of diversity and inclusion. For example, a group of library practitioners and researchers just launched a new journal devoted to diversity in youth literature (<http://lis.stkate.edu/rdyl/>), there are daily discussions about equity work in libraries on Twitter, and professional organizations for school and public librarians are beginning to center diversity and inclusion in their standards, position statements, conferences, and other initiatives. We hope this signals a permanent shift in our priorities as a field.

What is an appropriate role for White librarians in equity work?

As White women ourselves, we have grappled with this question from the beginning of our work together. The reality is that the large majority of our profession is White, and that means that change can't happen without our collective commitment to equity. However, that doesn't mean that White librarians should automatically be taking on leadership roles in equity work. There are certainly times when we should "step forward" and use our positions of power and influence within the field to affect change. But there are also times when we should "step back" and center the voices and contributions of people of color—both our colleagues and youth. People of color should not be asked to shoulder the burden of teaching White librarians how to be anti-racist. So we see a large part of our role in equity work as educating other White librarians about race and racism in our country and in our profession. This is the work we've been engaged with through writing our book and through our partnership with Wake County (NC) Public Schools, where we'll be leading a year-long professional development series for school librarians and their collaborative partners starting in July (projectready.web.unc.edu). Ultimately, we believe that the role of White librarians is to recognize that "ally" is a verb, not a noun. "Ally" is not an identity we can claim, but rather a set of actions we can take to work toward racial justice. It's not an easy process or a short one, and we are definitely still learning! But it's absolutely necessary if we want to serve all youth effectively.

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