

When Just Having the Books Is Not Enough

Article



by Chad Heck, November 2019

When I first entered librarianship, publishers were only just beginning to expand to audiences that were more diverse. In an effort to provide books that represented their students, librarians purchased these materials and the shelves gradually became more diverse. However, just having more diverse books is not enough. We are also compelled by our code of ethics to provide equitable access to our resources. Providing this access is where I failed my students.

A year ago, Max Mutchnick donated a copy of Jill Twiss's *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* to every primary school library in the state of Indiana. In the book, Marlon decides he wants to spend the rest of his life with another boy rabbit. The stinkbug proclaims that boy rabbits cannot marry other boy rabbits. The other animals, in a show of support for Marlon, vote out the stinkbug so that Marlon can have his happily ever after.

After hearing about these donations, I began to look in the OPACs of elementary schools around Indiana to see if copies made it into the collection. Every library's collection development policy should have a section on donated materials, and usually the criteria for adding donated materials to the collection are the same as for purchased ones. Twiss's book had mixed reviews, which certainly could help explain why so few libraries added the book. Also, the donation came at a particularly busy time for mandated state testing, so some librarians may not have gotten around to evaluating the donated copy.

In addition to being a high school librarian, I am a sponsor for my school's Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) club. I asked my students what they thought. The topic then turned to representation in libraries and my students' overwhelming did not feel represented in the libraries of their primary and middle schools. The students decided that they needed to engage with the librarians at their former schools. After they talked to a half-dozen librarians and received assurances that they would evaluate *Bundo* for inclusion in the collection, we debriefed.

When discussing our takeaways, one student told me something that forever changed my practice. He said, "But Mr. Heck, I don't feel represented in your library either." I immediately became defensive. How could this be? I had always taken great care in including materials with people of diverse genders and sexual orientations in my collection. Representation has been an issue close to my heart, and now this teen is calling me out. The situation definitely hit me in my core. I immediately took the club members to the OPAC and showed them where they can access a list of LGBTQ+ titles as well as lists for materials of various races, ethnic groups, and religions. In the end, this was not an issue of *having* the materials, it was an issue of *access* to the materials.

Access is more than just the ability to check materials out. If I book talk a book, I increase access to it by increasing its exposure. Elements such as placement, displays, bulletin boards, and book clubs can also affect how much exposure a book has. Increased exposure means increased access. I realized that when I book talked LGBTQ+ books, I glossed over some of the sexual orientation or gender identity elements because I did not know what reaction I would get, and not knowing made me uncomfortable. I also did not know how to appropriately handle the inevitable giggles or groans. However, the GSA members made me realize that what I was doing was a form of censorship. I was limiting access to materials in the collection because of my own discomfort.

Having the books is not enough. We must embrace our entire collections and make sure that everyone who comes in can find the books that represent them. Inclusive book talks and displays are a huge first step. Building relationships with our readers is essential. Since being called out by my students, I have reflected on my practice and adapted. My worst fears, that students would react inappropriately, did indeed happen. However, just like any other inappropriate behavior in the library, I addressed it and moved on. Perhaps most importantly, multiple times a student has pulled me aside and asked, sometimes in a whisper, for more books with LGBTQ+ characters in them. And that made all of that discomfort worth it.

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