

Empathy and Equity in Library Programming

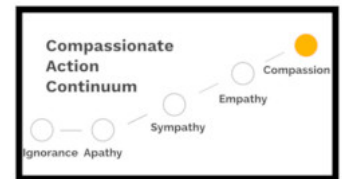
Feature

"Knowledge is only power if knowledge is put to the struggle for power. Changing minds is not a movement. Critiquing racism is not activism. Changing minds is not activism. An activist produces power and policy change, not mental change" (Kendi 2019, 209).

School librarians are uniquely positioned to make an impact on the lives of our students, and, in turn, an impact on our communities because we have access to learners beyond the conventional classroom. Our roles are inherently interdisciplinary. If we can commit to understanding the intersectional identities of our students and how those identities interact with the history of power, privilege, and important social issues, then we librarians will have a much better chance of realizing the potential of our positioning to create knowledgeable citizen activists.

The Intercultural Development Inventory (<https://idiinventory.com>) has a framework called the Intercultural Development Continuum which "describes a set of knowledge/attitude/skill sets or orientations toward cultural difference and commonality that are arrayed along a continuum from the more monocultural mindsets of Denial and Polarization through the transitional orientation of Minimization to the intercultural or global mindsets of Acceptance and Adaptation."

This continuum can be used to describe organizational mindsets as well, so in order to fully realize the knowledge described by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, one has to work to sustain the Adaptation perspective. Acceptance is a purely ideological position, and positive change doesn't happen without Adaptation.



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We knew this continuum could specifically apply to the work we were immersed in at our schools, and a shift in vocabulary helped us make the necessary changes to our practice. We need to grow our students from Ignorance and Apathy all the way through Sympathy and Empathy to get to a place of Compassionate Action.

Before this realization, our goal in the past had been empathy—growing empathetic citizen students through reading and civil dialogue, and it's important to describe and reflect on where we've been in order to understand where we want to go.

Champlain Valley Union High School

At Champlain Valley Union High School in Hinesburg, Vermont, Peter created an elective class called Story as an Essential Experience. The basic premise is that through theme- and choice-based reading, students will build empathy. It sounds simple, yet there was no class at the school that touted empathy building as its explicit purpose. It has long been talked about that books create an empathetic response, and many terms have been created to capture it, like Rudine Sims Bishop's "Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors" (1990), and Uma Krishnaswami's "Children's Book Prisms" (2019). These sentiments have recently been confirmed through research. Berns et al. (2013) proved that stories positively affect the way the brain learns and processes information. "In short, if someone is simply told or exposed to a piece of information, a small section of the brain activates to process that input. In contrast, when information is acquired through story, the brain's empathy centers light up, almost mimicking the brain activity of someone who'd actually experienced the same described event or emotion" (Langella 2019).

The first iterations of Peter's class went relatively well. Students were reading newer, more relatable, more diverse books, and Peter could tell through their reflections that the students were building empathy. But that was it. The sections of the class would end, and Peter would be left to hope that the students' empathy would continue to grow through college or work and into adulthood.

Empathy is not action-oriented. It's a feeling. It's a mindset. Peter needed to find a way to help the students transform their empathy into compassion, which is about acting and doing.

With the help of the Social Justice Standards from Teaching Tolerance (<https://tolerance.org>) this year's class was different. The coursework had four distinct parts based on the standards: Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action. The identity exercises were inspired by organizations like Seed the Way (<https://seedtheway.com>) and the Dialogue Arts Project (<https://dialogueartsproject.com>), and they helped students better understand who they were, what they valued, and how those identities and ideals impacted their place in society before they opened up their minds to new learning. The students then read and immersed themselves in *How It Went Down* by Kekla Magoon during the Diversity portion, as all of the students in class identified as white. The story is about the shooting of an unarmed black teenager, Tariq Johnson, by a white vigilante. During the Justice segment, students researched topics like gun violence, racial disparities in both police shootings and incarcerations, income inequality, generational poverty, and gang violence, among others. The students were then asked to take action on an injustice they felt strongly about.

One student zeroed in on the idea that guns kill people. She researched gun homicides and found that, in general, cities, states, and countries that have access to the most

guns suffer from the most gun homicides. This then led her to think about the school's policy that no guns are allowed on campus, and the contradictory presence of an armed school resource officer (SRO). She wondered why the SRO was allowed to have a gun when guns are supposed to be prohibited. This led the student to research about police-on-student violence and many organizations that advocated for the removal of armed officers in schools and the addition of counseling personnel.

The journey for this student continues. She's informing students, she's gaining allies and building a coalition of activists, including a partnership with the student-led Racial Alliance Committee that Peter advises; and they plan to present their case to the district school board very soon.

This is just one example of how reading a book in the library can turn into compassionate action.

U-32 Middle & High School

It was June 4th, 2018, about forty miles away at U-32 Middle & High School in East Montpelier, Vermont, and, thanks to the advocacy and activism of the school's student justice organizations, they were about to join a growing list of Vermont schools to raise the Black Lives Matter flag. When the buses rolled into the student drop-off area that morning, two flags unfurled from the back of one of the buses—a Blue Lives Matter flag, and the battle flag of northern Virginia, known to most Americans as the Confederate flag.

There was clearly ignorance in the community.

In Teaching Tolerance's guide to Responding to Hate and Bias at School, we are reminded that, "Hateful acts at school are dangerous, disturbing, and disruptive. But keep this in mind: A bias incident does not define a school. It is, in many ways, a test of the school's culture and climate. How you respond is the true measure of a school's character" (2017, 5). While raising the Black Lives Matter flag was an important step to recognize both the historic oppression of black people and the current injustices still present in the community, Meg knew that something was missing, and she decided to be the person who would try to bring everyone together to talk about it.

With help from student leaders, Meg and her Seeking Social Justice club began to host community dialogues during their school's callback period in the middle of the day. Topics included hate speech, free speech, microaggressions, allyship, and advocacy. Students could self-select to attend, and a conversation began percolating within the school. It then became clear that many faculty members were not comfortable having the types of conversations the students were asking for, and so Meg, club advisors, and the student leaders facilitated faculty professional development. They were trying to model the philosophy of Courageous Conversations (<https://courageousconversation.org>) and the idea of brave spaces, discomfort, and non-closure.

They were making strides, but two things were happening. First, much the same as at Champlain Valley, empathy was building without a plan for action, and, second, the ignorance and hate pushed back. The Confederate flag started showing up more and more on campus. There were shirts and hats and stickers and screensavers on school-issued laptops. Students who wore it or displayed it began referring to their heritage and free speech protections.

Meg knew that the conversations needed to shift. They were stuck in a place of Polarization when they wanted to be at Acceptance or Adaptation. They needed to move from sympathy and empathy to compassionate action. The students in Seeking Social Justice decided to advocate for a district-wide policy banning hate symbols like the flag and the swastika, and Meg reframed their facilitated dialogues to help students better understand the history, meaning, and impacts of both the symbols themselves and the act of banning something. Monthly conversations with the greater community began in partnership with school administration and funded through a Vermont NEA grant Meg secured to support extending these conversations to community stakeholders. Bruce Pandya, "a junior who authored the proposed policy and presented it on behalf of the student group, said 'taking a stand against hate' was non-negotiable and elevating the convenience of some students over the safety of others is unacceptable" (Delcore 2019).

The school board rejected the policy change, testing the resolve of those involved. Meg and the students stayed the course, holding more conversations, training more student facilitators, and inviting expert guests to add layers to the dialogue. Finally, on January 15, 2020, over eighteen months since the raising of the Black Lives Matter flag, the school board amended its policy on student self-expression: "It is the sense of the [Washington Central Unified Union School District] Board that symbols, lettering, or insignia associated with organizations that promote hatred or violence or that support white supremacy, such as Confederate symbolism, and the swastika, interfere with the orderly operation of our schools" (Allison 2020).

The students met in the library. The librarian helped. They made a real change.

Final Thought

As Dr. Kendi said, "knowledge is only power if knowledge is put to the struggle for power." We librarians are part of that power. Through books and brave conversations, we can harness student voice to help them move beyond empathy to a place of compassionate action.

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