



by Kesha S. Valentine, March 2021

Librarians are always learning, it is part of what makes our work so exciting and fulfilling. Not only do we get to learn on the fly, but we also have the awesome responsibility of facilitating the learning of those around us—students, teachers, and if we are lucky, administrators and parents. We have the opportunity to invite discourse around a variety of topics like first favorite books or dynamic, new go-to research and teaching styles, and most importantly, we get to instigate self-discovery and awareness. Becoming a librarian might be likened to becoming the mayor of a small town. Your point-of-view and values shine as the dominant culture in the space and the atmosphere reflects what you have created. What values do you hope will be reflected in the atmosphere of your library?

One of the challenges and opportunities we have, while working to keep our practice fresh, is the journey toward becoming anti-racist, anti-bias educators, leading us to develop a program that focuses on and models equity. For me, this journey is closely connected to my very soul. It is easy to make policy changes at a philosophical level, but initiating and maintaining programmatic changes comes from more than boxes on a checklist.

It Is Personal

In the movie *Mona Lisa Smile*, Connie Baker (played by Ginnifer Goodwin) says that, "the horizon is an imaginary line that recedes as you approach it." I think of my journey in this work the same way. Multiple pathways exist towards becoming an anti-racist, anti-bias educator. The good news is that every step is moving us closer to our goal. On the other hand, and perhaps more intimidating, is the awareness of the numerous possibilities that exist, a notion that might serve as a catalyst for self-discovery. In my experience, I have noticed a two pronged approach is helpful. It is important to both, explore and uncover my own biases and privilege and to evaluate the systems at work in programs that have designed the outcomes we see now.

I have noticed the ebb and flow of my journey. At times, I can't get enough of brainstorming root causes and solutions and the satisfying need to take action. Yet, I find that there are also times when I must take time to reflect, a task not always suited for the faint of heart. Recently, I have been reflecting on the notion of privilege, including the idea that some of the privilege I am fortunate to operate in would not normally have been made available to someone in my circumstances. Essentially, I was able to purchase some privilege (though I still owe a great deal of money on it) through higher-education. Only now am I able to realize the full impact of these decisions I made at age seventeen! Humbling, to say the very least, but I am grateful. Even though it is offered, I do not accept a pass for being an anti-racist, anti-bias educator just because I am African American. Every day, I must deliberately examine my actions and word choices carefully to ensure that my language is welcoming and unassuming. This, I find, is the most difficult task.

It Takes Commitment

In order to continue moving forward I have had to learn a lot. I have committed to maintaining a conscious awareness of my contribution to the racist systems in place and their harmful impact on learning. I am also learning how to facilitate tough conversations and to encourage reflection when I hear of others who feel they should do more than their sphere of influence allows. Most importantly, I have to take action and question responses that lean to the status quo, because I know that is no longer an acceptable standard.

It Is Tough

When someone asks us to consider traits that make up our personalities, and challenges who we are deep down, it is natural to double-down and defend ourselves. It is

especially difficult when we consider the changes we have made along the way; one change, and then another, and another still are only part of the journey. Developing an anti-racist, anti-bias program is not easy. Peeling back the layers might not become easier merely because we have done it before. I have raised some awareness and made changes in areas that were important to me, and I think I can do more, because I cannot rest on last year's good news. I have to continue examining data and using it to tell the stories of our students and taking action to get students what they need because...

It Is about Them

As the adults, we can, and must, do what it takes to make our environment a place where all students want to be, feel welcomed, and are compelled to learn. Not just because they are told they are welcomed, but because it is how they feel. I am absolutely passionate about this.

To that end, I am challenging myself, and you, to:

- Always seek to gain a deeper understanding. Look for opportunities to learn in every situation.
- Locate collaborative partners. You can do some things, but you cannot do it all.
- Ask sincere questions. Talk to individuals you trust and listen to the answers—what is and what is not being said.
- Ask questions, of yourself and others, as you are ready to reflect on them. Be open to the answers, being defensive won't help you move forward.

Some personal encouragement for your journey

- No one is a time traveler. You can only begin where you are and move forward.
- Use your sphere of influence as a guide when you choose how to invest your time.
- Identify tasks and small objectives that move the main objective.
- It is about the students you serve. The work will still be hard, but at least it will be meaningful.
- Embrace every opportunity to lead this work, #librariansareequitywarriors!

This work is the most compelling I have ever encountered. I believe that this work may change the outcomes of countless scores of children. I am challenged every day to make myself better, to provide every opportunity a student might need, and to remove every explanation that indicates that different students have rights to different outcomes based on anything other than their choice. I know that no one can do this alone, however, our small consistent collective steps forward might be what we need to keep the ball rolling.

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