

Purpose:

The purpose of this brief is to explain the need to have diverse books in the school library.

Background: Diversity in the school library collection is essential as students begin to figure out who they are and seek to understand the world around them. Students need to have books that reflect their race, religion, experiences, gender identity, language, and voice. Some will endeavor to make sure this does not happen. Julia Stephens (2011) states: "Librarians and teachers are doing Spanish-speaking populations no favor by encouraging them to get by without learning English (p. 2)." Stephens goes even further and states, "Multicultural groups who seek to divide the country into a bilingual society do not uphold America's ideals. School librarians' collection development policies are being affected by a Hispanic lobby, which includes library organizations such as the ALA affiliate Reforma, an association that promotes library services to Latinos (p. 2)." In my professional capacity, I spoke with a media specialist who has a parent seeking to remove books about a diverse topic they found objectionable. The library materials this parent found objectionable are in all Palm Beach County elementary school media centers. The books are part of a carefully curated collection of LGBTQ-friendly books and were paid for by a grant from the Centers for Disease control.

Despite the best efforts of some to curtail it, diversity in the school library collection is crucial. In a Reading Rockets YouTube video, Dr. Rudine Sims states:

We need diverse books because we need books in which children can find reflections of themselves.....Children need to see themselves reflected, but the books can also be windows. You can look through and see other worlds and see how they match up or don't match up to your own but, the sliding glass door allows you to enter that world as well. That's the reason that diversity needs to go both ways. It's not just children who have been underrepresented and marginalized who need these books. It's also children who always find mirrors in their books and therefore, get an exaggerated sense of their own self-worth and a false sense of what the world is like (Reading Rockets, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Doors").

It is crucial to be able to pick up a book and see your experiences reflected in those of the character.

Current state

In 2019 Library Journal conducted a Diverse Materials Survey. The results of the survey are promising. They showed that library collections are moving towards meeting the needs of our diverse communities, but there are still gaps and room for improvement.

Encouraging is that 92% of respondents are seeking to add materials with African American or black characters, but only 60% are seeking to acquire books with Arab or Middle Eastern protagonists. There is room for improvement in the area of "own voices." "Own voices" means that not only does the have characters who are diverse, but someone from that group also writes the book. Only 58% of libraries that responded to the survey were aware of that term (Vercelletto, 2019, pp. 33-34).

"She gasped when she saw a girl wearing hijab on the cover,' says Deborah Vose, recalling a seventh-grader who wandered into her library one afternoon and stood, captivated before a display of books. Staring at the cover of *Brave*, the 2017 graphic novel by Svetlana Chamakova, the student grasped and exclaimed, 'Someone who looks like me (Ishizuka, 2018, pp. 28)!

This quote from a 2018 School Library Journal Article shows just how critical diverse books are to our learners. To illustrate the power of how vital "own voice" books are to children, I have this example. Last school year, I ran a book club for 5th-grade boys at Seminole Trails Elementary School, a Title I predominantly African American school. The book we read was *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes. A novel by an African American Author with an African American protagonist. The majority of the group were reluctant readers. At our first meeting, I assigned 50 pages. The groans of the boys were audible. By the next day, every member of the book club asked me if they could read further. The boys were sneaking the book during math class. The mother of one of the boys, a teacher at my school, came up to me and said, "Kristopher doesn't read, but he can't put this book down. How did you get him to read?" The answer was simple; I gave him a book with characters that looked and sounded like him. These two situations give us the ability to surmise just how important it is for our students to see themselves represented in the books that they read.

Conclusion:

Diverse books alone cannot save us. We must consider the quality of the books we are selecting while making sure that the books feature diverse characters and reflect "own voices." We must also audit our current collections for diversity. One of the most disheartening findings of the School Library 2019 Diversity Audit was, only "9% of responding libraries have conducted a diversity audit. Even more disheartening, only 14% plan to run one in the future (Mortensen, 2019, p. 28)." Adding diverse books can only take us so far. Librarians need to continually look at our collections and audit them to make sure they are meeting the needs of our learning communities.

To go one step further, we need to have our learners represented in the faculty and staff of the schools our students attend. Tommy Vinh Bui in his blog for ALA, says, "studies show that a diverse staff invigorates and strengthens an organization and energizes

internal operations. The success of an organization is diminished when it cannot include a full chorus of voices and perspectives that fall within a rich kaleidoscope of demographics and cultural and social backgrounds (2019)." We owe it to our students to see themselves in the books we select and who is on staff at their libraries.

I leave you with this quote from Donnalyn Miller. In a Facebook post on November 10, 2016, she said, "I believe that literacy is vital to ensure the prosperity of our citizens and the strength of our democracy. I also know that reading offers validation for our experiences and fosters empathy and awareness of others who have a different experience than ours."

References

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