

Social Justice in the Library is Critical

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The core values of librarianship (ALA, 2004) include access, democracy, diversity, the public good, and social responsibility. These values demand that librarians advocate for our patrons, struggle toward equity, and support the basic tenets of social justice. These values professionally bind us to advocate for the social equality of all people. Jennifer Wooten, a Teen Services Librarian at King County Library System's Downtown Renton and Renton Highlands Libraries, saw a need for programs made for youth of color, and in particular, that address police shootings of innocent black men and women. Leah Griffin, teacher librarian at University Prep in Seattle, saw middle and high school students rife with anxiety about social issues taking place across the country, but with limited outlets for activism, or means by which to express their ideas.

Librarians have always been motivated by the needs of their patrons, and in today's difficult political climate, we must address issues of social justice and equity. We have adjusted our practices to meet these needs, and will describe ideas for displays, programming, and curricula that have been successful in our libraries with the hope that you might be inspired toward social justice in yours. This paper will outline several areas where librarians can address social justice in connection to their communities.

Representation is important and has a deep impact on the communities that libraries serve. Patrons should be able to see themselves through collections, staffing, programming, and publicity (i.e. flyers for events reflect the community). While the greater library community contends with the overwhelming whiteness of librarians (per Rosa and Henke (2017), 86.7% of librarians identify as white), those of us on the ground can still contribute to equitable representation. In addition to seeing oneself appropriately and respectfully represented in the collection, patrons should be able to read about, and empathize with, the experiences of others. This means that a collection ought not necessarily be representative of the community it serves. For example, in a school or public library with a primarily white population, the librarian might consider purchasing a seemingly disproportionate number of books featuring minority characters and authors as a way of ensuring there are not merely enough mirrors for minority students, but also enough windows for the majority of patrons.

This same philosophy can be applied to displays. Underrepresented groups ought to be featured more in library displays, and not only when associated with events like Black History Month, or Pride Month. These populations do, in fact, exist all of the time.

Interactive displays can also engage patrons. At the University Prep Library, we created a "legislation station" where students could voice their concerns on pre-addressed postcards to be sent to Washington Senators Murray and Cantwell. Students were empowered to use their voice without being told what to say. This interactive display could be adapted to address local, or even library specific, patron

concerns.

Librarians can also reinforce the importance of social justice with their presence. At KCLS, Jennifer attends Social Justice Club at the local high school, and at University Prep, Leah regularly attends Gender and Sexuality Alliance. Both also attend community events where social justice and equity are the focus. For example, the city government where Jennifer works coordinated a unity march which brought together city officials, the mayor, police chief, pastors of local African American churches, and a community organization working with youth to address issues such as police bias, housing inequity, and the school to prison pipeline. Jennifer was able to attend and walk with the youth group in support of the work being done to bring the community together. Through your presence, you can quietly show your support of the community. You become a safe person who can be trusted with resource requests, or recommendations. This action for social justice requires nothing but your time.

The library community is not the only entity having this conversation. In many communities, non-profit organizations, city departments, and businesses are doing the work of social justice. Jennifer Wooten took advantage of the wealth of knowledge in her local community and offered a seven-week series of social justice conversations just for youth. She partnered with Kiana Davis, an instructor at a local community organization helping disenfranchised youth earn their GEDs. Ms. Davis, also a published poet, led a powerful poetry program that focused on identity and the impact of racism on young people's lives. She also used her connections in the community to help find a wide range of presenters for the other programs in the series. Youth in King County were able to see their neighbors, adults in their own community, who are doing the hard work of social justice, and having a measurable, positive impact on their community. Calling out problems is not enough: We must show young people that it is possible to make change. We can do that by introducing them to others in the community that live the mission of social equity.

Teacher Librarians have tremendous opportunity for implementing social justice into their school's curriculum. At University Prep, the ninth-grade students do a unit on energy, in which they learn about different energy sources, and develop informed opinions on State and Federal energy policy. At the end of the unit, Leah teaches students how to locate relevant bills, and contact their representatives in support or rejection of specific legislation. Students must write an email, or develop a call script that integrates evidence of their learning. This legislative action can be adapted to history units where current policy may be repeating harmful historical trends, English classes where exploration of identity runs into conflict with executive orders, math classes where groups are targets of discrimination or violence at statistically significant higher rates.

We believe that social justice is inextricably tied to librarianship. Our hope is that each reader can identify one action from this article that they can implement into their practice. We are on the front lines of democracy, diversity, the public good, and social responsibility and we are uniquely placed in the community to show our patrons ways to positively impact social justice and equity.

References

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