

Making the Invisible Visible

EDI Is More Than a Buzzword

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Alex Aspiazu (she/her) is a DC-area library assistant with experience in youth services and public librarianship, in particular with creating inclusive spaces that promote every child's artistic expression. She will soon graduate with her MSLS from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Antiracism and antidiscrimination work requires all of us to try our hardest to question and dismantle systems of inequality that have been in place for so long that we don't notice them in the day to day. The key is to make any invisible hardships that we notice visible, especially if we are not in the group affected by them, and begin the work of rectifying those imbalances. This is at the heart of EDI—which stands for equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives and practices.

How do we create EDI opportunities in libraries, other than basic inclusive hiring practices? How can we be an ally if we are not in charge of hiring? How do we level the playing field for everyone?

The ALA's EDI Task Force defines equity, in part, as a concept that "assumes difference and takes difference into account to ensure a fair process and, ultimately, a fair (or equitable) outcome," diversity as "the sum of the ways that people are both alike and different," and inclusion as "an environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully; are valued for their distinctive skills, experiences, and perspectives; have equal access to resources and opportunities; and can contribute fully to the organization's success."¹

Equity and *equality* do not mean the same thing. *Equality* means that everybody gets the same exact piece of blueberry pie. This works just fine when everybody ate the same meal. But if one person at the table didn't get to eat, and all the other food is gone, maybe they should get a little more pie? Deciding that we won't let our friend starve just because they weren't invited to the first dinner party and couldn't make it to most of the second is *equity*. We must make an effort to compensate for lost time or prior unequal distribution of resources to ensure that everyone ends up in the same place.

EDI is especially important in youth librarianship because it is important that kids see themselves and others reflected in the library setting, by interacting with diverse staff members, and being exposed to diversity and inclusion in programming and collections. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop introduced the world to the "mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors" theory, which outlines the powerful need that children have to see not only a variety of other people and possibilities in literature, but also, and perhaps most importantly, themselves.² Creating a world where children can envision themselves in many different roles is not only the purview of authors and illustrators, it is something we can do by inhabiting our roles in the profession with authenticity about our own differences and in open and enthusiastic support of our diverse colleagues.

One of the deep and abiding complications in our pursuit of equity for all is that librarianship has historically been overwhelmingly white.³ Many factors have influenced this, but the result of having a profession be so overwhelmingly monoethnic is that we don't generally reflect the communities we serve. This can lead to misunderstandings, snafus, and tokenism (when we expect the one staff member of a certain race, age, ethnicity, orientation, or ability to act as envoy for their entire group). At

worst, it can push well-meaning librarians or administration into awkward or defensive relationships with community members and create a “white savior” complex that can turn into a public relations nightmare.⁴

One of the best ways to avoid this is to engage directly with the communities around us to find out what they need, want, and expect from their libraries. To be successful EDI advocates, we need to be willing to speak up on behalf of those who don’t yet have a seat at the table, but we can’t and shouldn’t do that without engaging them first.

As an example, during an interview with a suburban library, I was once told by the three very nice librarians who were interviewing me that they didn’t have any Spanish-speakers in their community. Spoiler alert: as a Hispanic American, I can assure you that they did. They just had no idea where these people were or how to turn them into library patrons, so they jumped to the conclusion that there weren’t any in the area.

Assuming that our communities are homogeneous because of who is coming into the library is a common mistake—one easily solved with demographic research and a little outreach effort. Educating people about our services and then removing barriers to access is an achievable goal for library workers, whether a branch manager or front desk staff.

How can librarians to create more equity, diversity, and inclusion in our library spaces? We can examine our unconscious, or implicit, biases, which usually involves asking ourselves “*What do I believe about this person and why do I believe it?*” This examination of implicit bias is necessarily uncomfortable, but being honest with ourselves about our prejudices is the only way to stop them from affecting our behavior.⁵

It’s also important to examine and audit collections to ensure that we are providing our patrons with as many different options as we can. We want to offer materials that show children versions of themselves, that humanize people different from them, and that create spaces in their imaginations for them to envision a better, more compassionate, more inclusive future: theirs. &

References

1. American Library Association, “Final Report of the ALA Task Force on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion,” appendix IV, June 2016, https://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org/aboutala/files/content/TFEDIFinalReport_ALA_CONNECT.pdf.
2. Carol Westby, “Using Books as Mirrors, Windows, Sliding Glass Doors,” *Word of Mouth* 33, no. 5 (2002): 4–6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10483950221086338a>.
3. The ALA has not yet updated this page with the results of the 2020 Census, which will hopefully show some gains, but likely not huge ones: “Librarian Ethnicity,” American Library Association, July 30, 2013, <https://www.ala.org/tools/librarian-ethnicity>.
4. Colleen Murphy, “What Is White Savior Complex and Why Is It Harmful?” *Health*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.health.com/mind-body/health-diversity-inclusion/white-savior-complex>.
5. A fantastic way to evaluate our unconscious biases is by self-administering one of the many tests offered by Project Implicit at Harvard: “Take a Test,” Project Implicit, 2011, <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>.

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