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Actions Speak Louder Than Words- Why Creating a Plan, Rejecting Neutrality, and Recruiting a Racially Diverse Staff Are Effective Ways to Increase the Presence of Diversity in Libraries.

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Racially Diverse Staff Are Effective Ways to Increase the Presence of Diversity in Libraries.

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Abstract

The urge to diversify workplaces has spread nationwide. Although many institutions feel that formal statements and pledges are enough to satisfy the public outcry, actions such as setting up a direct plan to address the rejection of neutrality, to expand the access of materials, and actively hiring and promoting a racially diverse staff are less often seen. In America's libraries in particular, good-natured sentiments about how a modern, socially diverse library should look are met with half-hearted efforts. While some libraries, such as the Oregon Library Association, are making significant strides towards their intended directions, others, such as the Rural Branch Library in Mississippi, continue to wallow behind by clinging onto a collection of books which promote racist ideologies. The collection at the Rural Branch Library is the result of many contributing factors, however the lack of acknowledgment of the harm these materials bring is the result of maintaining a neutral stance on race relations issues. Another example of this is the lack of high-quality resources available in other languages that can serve the portions of communities who are not native English speakers. This can be remedied with the growing number of digital resources that are available in multiple languages for patrons who speak languages other than English and be beneficial to all users by exposing them to contemporary and diverse literature. Lastly, for libraries to show they are truly committed to the cause of creating an inclusive environment, they must actively participate in recruiting and employing people of color.

Keywords: Libraries, Diversity, Inclusion, Neutrality, Plans, Whiteness, Racism, Expansion

Introduction

In recent years, the term "Diversity" has become more and more prevalent in workplaces across America—the goal being the promotion of awareness and inclusion. Although there are different forms of diversity, for the purposes of this article, the focus will be on racial diversity within libraries. Increasingly, libraries as well as higher education institutions have made changes to their mission

statements, being vocal about the need for racial diversity. Nonetheless, the use of formal statements alone is not enough for libraries to reinvent their relationship with people of color; change can only be achieved through libraries creating plans that emphasize rejecting neutrality, expanding access to materials, and recruiting racially diverse staff.

The article, *The State of America's Libraries 2020: A Report from the American Library Association,* is a yearly report that overviews issues facing the library. The article addresses major issues including inclusion, as it states: "ALA was one of 100 voluntary national partner organizations that participated in the design of Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT)." TRHT is a plan whose goal is to bring everlasting change and address the effects of racism in American society (Zalusky, 2020). Further digging reveals the American Library Association's stance on the promotion of racial diversity appears to be supportive. According to the ALA's web page for issues and advocacy, the library's response to Hate and Hate speech was that libraries:

"…should be welcoming and inclusive spaces for all library users, library workers, and

members of the community. Each library user has the right to use the library free of

discrimination and loss of individual safety…" (Kpekoll, 2020).

Nevertheless, there are people who question whether or not these statements are simply 'pretty words' meant to shed a positive light on themselves to the general public, without taking responsibility nor taking further action.

This is speculated in the article *Recruitment, Retention, & Diversity in Libraries & Higher Education: Why Doing the Right Thing is Easier Said than Done*. The interviewer begins by asking questions about how committed libraries and higher education institutions are to diversity: "…what is being done, and, if not, what is going to be done?" (Stringer-Stanback, 2008). The article also discusses

a prevalent stereotype of librarians being old and white, and how "[t]he image of librarians needs to

reflect the diversity within the population of the United States of America" (Stringer-Stanback, 2008).

Diversity, Inclusion & Respect: Embedding Indigenous Priorities in Public Library Services,

explains the importance of inclusion in the library. It also examines a case study of the State Library of

New South Wales in Australia and how they developed an *Indigenous Services Business Plan,* which

works to promote diversity and inclusion. Under new management, the State Library of NSW decided to

recommit themselves to Indigenous services in order to "contribute to a vital national project of

reconciliation" (Thorpe, & Galassi, M., 2018). This would be achieved through the library evaluating

their past services, reviewing the literature within their collection relating to indigenous people, as well

as further developing their collections of indigenous archives. Other goals of the plan included: working

with cultural institutions such as the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum to

design library services, increasing access to patrons, and provide training to employees. After the plan

was approved, the first Indigenous Collection Strategy of the Library was developed and established.

According to the article, this plan "…aims to address historical gaps in the collection, while also setting

a plan to proactively collect contemporary Indigenous materials..." (Thorpe, & Galassi, M., 2018). In

order to increase the presence of racial diversity in libraries, this sort of direct and intentional plan needs

to be put in place.

> Protocols have also been implemented such as the State Library of NSW Innovation project
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> which guides staff on how to properly showcase and handle items that were collected without
>
> consent, and/or are items associated to traumatic events to Indigenous people. Other ongoing
>
> projects such as *Rediscovering Indigenous Languages* aim to preserve and revitalize Aboriginal
>
> languages (Thorpe, & Galassi, M., 2018).

Another example of a library enacting a direct, intentional plan is the *Oregon Library Association (OLA) Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, & Antiracism Toolkit*, a brochure which contains general information on the OLA's commitments to EDI Antiracism, collection development, intellectual freedom, advocacy, and professional development. The brochure advises library employees to read, evaluate, and take action, and asks the reader to consider questions such as: "[i]s my library conducting ongoing equity evaluations to determine whether library policies, procedures, services, programming, or collections unfairly impact or unfairly serve members of their community?" (Oregon Library Association, 2021). This brochure also gives the reader insight into how America's history of colonialism, slavery, and the notion of sub-races has contributed to the bigger picture of institutional racism. Furthermore, practices such as a rejection of neutrality and implementing a plan to recruit racially diverse candidates (Oregon Library Association, 2021) are important to cementing a library's stance on the rejection of racism.

The following illustrates that despite the pledges and statements previously cited by the ALA, not *all* libraries have taken a clear stance against racism and continue to remain on course with neutrality. The 2018 article, *Are We Still Transmitting Whiteness?* discusses how libraries in the early 1900s participated in fostering racist ideologies—such as the New Orleans Public Library which had a collection of racist literature, and actively held partnerships with groups like the *Daughters of the Confederacy*, who inevitably donated books with racist ideals. Over time, the growing collection of racist literature represented the idea that white Americans are superior and black Americans are inferior; their target audience was white children. The article calls this practice the "transmission of whiteness." In the context of this article, the author describes that: "[w]hiteness operates as the status quo and cultural benchmark against which all else is measured" (Wickham, & Sweeney, M. E., 2018).

Essentially, "whiteness" establishes that being white is the societal norm and is the portrayal of the average American and does not account for other racial groups' human experiences.

The article further suggests that the "transmission of whiteness" operates in a *modern* library setting through "the disproportionate representation of white authors and characters, storylines that center or normalize the experiences of white people, and overtly racist or stereotypical depictions of people of color" (Wickham, & Sweeney, M. E., 2018). In fact, it is estimated that only about 14.2% of all children's books include non-white characters—it is also estimated that 37% of the U.S. population is non-white (Wickham, & Sweeney, M. E., 2018). This is problematic because it deprives children of non-white backgrounds to see themselves represented, while at the same time preventing white children from learning about people with different experiences than themselves.

The article's main focus is examining a Rural Branch Library in Mississippi which serves an approximate population of 61% African-Americans, 25% Whites, and 3.5% Native Americans (the remaining 10.5% was not identified in the article). The library is in a very rural and poverty-stricken landscape, which itself is reflected in the library's small and outdated collection. The goal of the researchers was to analyze the library's easy reader and juvenile biography collections so see whether or not the youth collection was transmitting whiteness. When it came to the easy reader collection, there were a few mentioned titles which were problematic—such as a 1952 edition of a book called *Five Little Monkeys,* which displayed racist stereotypes of African-Americans, and a 1947 Little Golden Book of Disney's *Song of the South*, which portrays plantation life as idyllic for the black characters who are subservient to the white landowners. Out of the library's easy reader collection, only 2% of the authors were identified as non-white (Wickham, & Sweeney, M. E., 2018).

In terms of the juvenile biography section, there were several observations that spoke volumes. First, out of 141 juvenile biographies, 119 of the subjects were white, and only 16% were non-white.

There were also two books on confederate generals, one book which paints a "sympathetic portrait" of the former president of the confederacy, Jefferson Davis, but there was not a single book on a union general, or a single biography of Abraham Lincoln. Many of these books were decades old—the Jefferson Davis book was from 1963—and expressed sympathy towards the confederacy and their fight for "state's rights." Perhaps the most offensive of these books was a biography called *Confederate Spy: Rose O'Neale Greenhowl,* a 1967 biography described as "…an offensive, paternalistic view of slavery in which slaves are depicted as props for noble Southern Whites who are determined to save them from evil abolitionists…" (Wickham, & Sweeney, M. E., 2018).

Of the twenty-two biographies featuring people of color, sixteen showcase African-American subjects (such as Martin Luther King Jr and George Washington Carver), and only one features a Native American subject (Crazy Horse) and none that mention the local Choctaw Indians: "...many of whom use the library and whose lands extend into the county this library serves" (Wickham, & Sweeney, M. E., 2018). Considering that 61% of the local population is African-American and 3.5% are Native American, it is apparent that this library's collection does not provide materials which represent their community (Wickham, & Sweeney, M. E., 2018). As a result of the library's neutrality, their patrons, mostly made up of racial minorities, have a selection of books that sympathize with enslaving and dominating African-Americans, alongside biographies on African-Americans who fought for civil rights. The local Choctaw lack representation enitrely. Considering that this is the juvenile collection, it sends mixed messages of how institutions like libraries view people of color, and is antithetical to the goal of encouraging children—especially African-American children—to read, learn, and pursue their passions. Although a library should contain materials with different viewpoints, there is a difference between books that historically document viewpoints and sentiments from the civil war, and books that actively advocate for the enslavement of other human beings.

Alternative to the Rural Branch Library's neutral approach, is the idea of intentionally having materials in the library that serve and contribute to the betterment of the community. For example, *Spanish Language Children and Teen Books Focusing on Human Sexuality and Reproductive Health*, addresses the importance of having high quality materials available for Spanish speakers—particularly, having Spanish language resources on sexual and reproductive health for teen Latinas. Overall, the national average of teen pregnancies has declined 55% between 1990 and 2011 (Ladell, 2019), yet despite this, an article from the National Institute of Health, *Pregnancy Intentions and Teenage Pregnancy Among Latinas: A Mediation,* states that: "In 2006, the pregnancy rate among adolescent Latinas was nearly double the national average (127 vs. 72 pregnancies per 1,000 women aged 15–19)" (Rocca, Doherty, 2010). Many researchers agree that a lack of sexual health education combined with language barriers contribute to this problem. Moreover, the resources provided by the U.S. Health care system are primarily in English, making this information unusable to non-English speakers. Having conversations about sexual health between parents and their children is important for preventing teen pregnancy, and having books in Spanish on these subjects can assist and educate parents to facilitate these conversations. For adolescents met with parental disapproval when it comes to subjects such as sex, STDs, birth control, and LGBTQ+, it is important for them to have access to books in Spanish that address those topics; relevant titles include: *¡No es la cigüeña! Un libro que habla sobre niñas, niños, bebés, cuerpos y amigos* (It's not the stork! A book that talks about girls, boys, babies, bodies and friends), and *¿Qué pasa en mi cuerpo?, el libro para muchachas: La guía de mayor venta sobre el desarrollo escrito para adolescentes y preadolescentes* (What's Happening in My Body?: The Book for Girls: The best-selling guide to development written for teens and tweens) (Ladell, 2019). Furthermore, libraries have the opportunity to contribute accurate, quality resources to specific groups within their

own communities. This takes effort and recognition of problems that exist within the community,

however, and cannot be accomplished behind the guise of neutrality and lack of initiative.

One way for libraries to begin combating the lack of resources without the hassle of finding more

physical space within their library is through the use of digital materials and encouraging patrons to

utilize these services. *Expanding Access to Devices, Collections, and Services,* discusses many of the

free resources available online that libraries can provide to their patrons. LibriVox and Overdrive

Access 360 have collections of audiobooks recorded in other languages—highly beneficial to patrons

who speak languages other than English. Librivox, for example, has audio books available in forty-four

languages. This article also discusses how mobile devices can be used to read e-books, and while

smartphones can run apps that allow users to read e-books, users may prefer to utilize tablets/e-readers.

On top of that, depending on the kind of device that a user has, they may be unable to utilize apps that

are only available to different kind of operating system. As a result of this and the commitment to

provide access for all, libraries should be encouraged to lend mobile devices to their patrons, such as the

L.E. Phillips Memorial Public Library which is the first public library to check out iPads. The library's

goal in doing so is to increase their patrons' knowledge and experience in utilizing modern technologies.

Patrons of the library have cited several reasons as to how they utilized the iPads: gaining access to the

device's educational apps, virtually accessing a speech therapist, and trying the iPad before committing

to buying it. It is also important for libraries to recognize that "64% of low-income households do not

have a tablet" (Zalusky, 2020) meaning that many low-income households are inexperienced with

utilizing tablets, and are unable to access their library's e-resources. As for e-readers, there have been e-

reader lending programs implemented at many libraries, especially school libraries (Yelton, 2012) which

tend to have their own unique barriers in preventing students from accessing diverse literature.

In the article: *"What Are You Reading?": How School Libraries Can Promote Racial Diversity in Multicultural Literature* drew attention to how children have limited exposure to diverse books due to the increasing focus of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As a result of this, classrooms nationwide have had a decline in selecting multicultural fiction titles for youths. Despite that, students from many different racial backgrounds have expressed interest in reading more diverse books, while their school curriculum tend to enforce the readings of the standard, authorized texts: *Lord of the Flies, A Separate Peace, To Kill a Mockingbird,* etc. As a result, more contemporary, diverse books are less likely to be checked out by students: "A [school] district-wide analysis of circulation for tenth grade core literature texts from 2007 to 2011 revealed that while *Lord of the Flies* was checked out 6,779 times […] *The Joy Luck Club* only made it into students' hands 68 times" (Lafferty, 2014). As a result of the lack of awareness and exposure, students are deprived of reading materials that will allow them to learn about people from different cultural backgrounds, and children of color are prevented from having their experiences validated through books featuring characters with similar backgrounds as themselves.

The final important piece of having a plan to increasing diversity within libraries, is through libraries making an active effort to employ racially diverse candidates, which is discussed in *Directing Change: A Conversation with Black Library Leaders.* This article sheds light onto a 2019 study conducted by the Department of Professional Employees, which found that only 5.3% of library staff were African-American. The article showcases an interview conducted by the author, Christina Fuller—Gregory, who is a "DEI Consultant and co-chair of the PLA-EDISJ Task Force" and four African-American library directors: Joslyn Bowling Dixon, Jamar Rahming, Renita Barksdale, and Roosevelt Weeks. When asked the question: "What is the greatest challenge of being a director?" Joslyn Bowling Dixon's (JBD) response mentioned that her race plays a role in how smoothly her day-to-day activities can go: "I find myself having to justify and explain myself, as well as insisting upon respect for my

leadership position in ways that for my white director counterparts is assumed" (Fuller-Gregory, 2021). To the same question, Renita Barksdale (RB) stated that a big challenge for her is recruiting a diverse staff, which she finds to be important because: "Patrons will frequently visit a library when they see a staff person that looks like them" (Fuller-Gregory, 2021).

In the second question of the interview: "What must libraries do to not only hire, but retain and nurture the careers of librarians of color?" JBD responded: "Hire with clear intention to promote diverse staff…studies have shown that the most successful organizations are more often ones that embrace, support, and retain a diverse staff." Jamar Rahming (JR) responded that "…institutions need to exclusively rely on successful people of color in the industry to recruit other people of color." Roosevelt Weeks (RW) responded: "We must be intentional about helping librarians of color by giving them a voice, providing them mentorship, providing them with leadership opportunities when available, and creating a space in the library system where they feel supported and nurtured" (Fuller-Gregory, 2021). The importance of hiring a racially diverse staff lies behind changing the aforementioned stereotype that librarians are old white women and showing the community that people of all racial backgrounds are welcome in libraries. If libraries want to show that they are welcoming, diverse spaces, then what better way to represent that then through recruiting a racially diverse staff?

Conclusion

As can be seen, although libraries nationwide are making a point to verbally address the importance of racial diversity and representation in their institutions, not enough action is taking place to create meaningful change. Despite the statements by the ALA, libraries across the country are inconsistent with how they address racism, neutrality, and diversity. While some libraries have taken steps to formally reject neutrality and are setting plans and goals to be more inclusive, other libraries continue to hide behind neutrality, which is reflected in their collection

of materials. Instead, libraries have the potential to address serious concerns within their

communities just by adding high quality materials that can be read by non-English speakers in

their communities; moreover, the increased access to digital materials has allowed for patrons to

have a broader access to foreign language e-books and audio books. Overall, digital materials as

well as devices such as e-readers and iPads have become increasingly popular ways for patrons

to enjoy electronic resources as well as learn to utilize new devices and applications. These

devices are also helpful for school children to easily access diverse and contemporary literature,

as many schools tend to enforce the reading of authorized, pre-approved books that tend to be

decades old. Last but not least, is the importance for libraries to address racial representation in

their staff and hiring practices. The only way to create inclusive spaces in libraries is through

being direct, taking a stance, and performing the actions that are necessary to create change.

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