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BETTER COLLECTIONS, BETTER COMMUNITIES

The Challenges and Importance of Diverse Collections

Anna Snider

ABSTRACT

This article explores a variety of topics and real-world case studies associated with building diversity in collections and the relationship of collection development to communities served. It explores what the ALA Library Bill of Rights has to say on these matters, and applies many of its admonitions to recent examples of censorship. The ALA Code of Ethics is also examined in the context of diversity in collection development.

KEYWORDS

Collection development, censorship, ALA Library Bill of Rights, ALA Code of Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

One of the primary responsibilities of libraries is to make available to the community materials that represent a wide range of ideas, topics, opinions, cultures, knowledge, and stories. This idea is represented in the first two articles of the ALA Library Bill of Rights and is also one reason—along with a rejection of censorship—that librarians fight so hard to keep controversial books on the shelves ("Library Bill of Rights", 2006). According to the ALA, librarians are obliged to provide access to a broad scope of information—regardless of personal bias or public outrage—which means that librarians should work to build and maintain a collection of materials that represents a diverse assemblage of ideas. By doing so, librarians can better serve members of their communities by fostering growth in new areas of learning, helping to expand worldviews, providing representation of all members of the community, and ensuring equitable access to a multitude of information sources. Additionally, housing a diverse collection requires librarians to address and fulfill niche or unexpressed information needs, which can result in positive experiences for users who may be otherwise unable to meet their needs with popular materials.

While many applaud librarians' commitment to supporting an expansive array of subjects and voices, and many users have benefitted from this practice, the notion is continually followed by some push-back by user groups who feel that certain materials should not be made available by the library for varying

reasons. Even some librarians have fallen short of this duty, including by failing to address user needs through obtaining more diverse content and through letting their personal biases interfere with their work; however, most librarians still consider this to be a vital characteristic of libraries, one that certainly stimulates public discourse but works to achieve a greater goal of striving to better serve everyone in the community.

DIVERSE COLLECTIONS

The ALA describes a diverse collection as one that “address[es] popular demand and direct community input, as well as addressing collection gaps and unexpressed information needs,” so what does this look like for librarians (“Diverse Collections” 2006)?

To many of those serving children and teens, this means actively selecting and promoting books by authors with different backgrounds and identities as well as books that feature a diverse cast of characters, including differently abled people, ethnic minorities, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Kim Parker, assistant director of teacher training for a school in Massachusetts, believes that libraries’ diverse collections can impact the way Black students feel about themselves as they encounter verbal and written forms of racism at school and in the world. She states, “...I think that however we can disturb those notions, we can remind children of color that they are beautiful and they are powerful, and we can provide literature that affirms them” (Ishizuka, 2017, 30). Oftentimes, the factors for determining materials are driven by a librarian’s mission to provide users with equal representation—although the ALA does not intend for collections to feature “one-to-one equivalence” when selecting materials, just that there be clear acknowledgement of the equity and availability of diverse content (“Diverse Collections”, 2006).

Interestingly, while the Library Bill of Rights clearly names diverse collections as a responsibility of libraries, a study found that 72% of school and children’s librarians surveyed in the US and Canada identified that building a diverse

collection was a personal goal as opposed to a mandated obligation (Ishizuka, 2017, 29-30). For that reason, one white teen librarian stated, “it is my duty to not have the collection reflect my community, but rather to reflect the wider world” (Ishizuka, 2017, 29). This is also why one library in Medway, Massachusetts is beginning to focus more on providing Black representation in their collections. After receiving a donation from Medway Marches—“a local organization that has been working to promote diverse themes, awareness of racism and inclusivity within the community”—the library director initiated a goal of purchasing materials that represent people of color in books that are not directly related to “heavy societal issues” (McCarron 2021). Instead of portraying Black characters on the covers of romance novels or in adventurous tales, most of the titles featuring them focused on themes like “struggle,” which is one of the main reasons users of color like Angelica Crosby have struggled with identifying the library as a place of comfort (McCarron, 2021). Following the death of George Floyd, the library director became aware of this issue, realizing that although her library contained many titles featuring people of color, the collection was not as diverse within itself; therefore, she began taking steps to ensure that the collection would become more internally-diverse and nuanced over time.

RESISTING CENSORSHIP

In other libraries, including one in Denton, North Carolina, librarians are starting to make much-needed decisions to expand their children’s collection, which contains books mostly promoting heteronormative romantic relationships. A few years ago, as a way to increase awareness of non-heteronormative love, the children’s librarian at the Denton Public Library ordered several books with queer themes, including a copy of the popular children’s book, *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* by Jill Twiss, a story about a same-sex romance between bunnies. In an interview with me, the branch manager, Susan Craven, remarks that “the homeschool parents had a fit because the kids

were taking it. They wanted it off the shelf. I said ‘no’ because we needed to have diversity [displayed] on the shelf” (Craven, 2021). Accordingly, even while some libraries are dedicated to upholding this responsibility—and garnering trust and support from many users because of it—librarians also face the criticism it engenders.

As with many books that feature underrepresented groups, *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo*—which parodies another popular children’s book, *Marlon Bundo’s A Day in the Life of the Vice President* by Charlotte Pence—was not well received by some of the parents and ignited major backlash. Craven states:

My thinking was, ‘Don’t like it? Don’t read it!’ But I think their biggest beef with it was that the covers are similar, and they were checking out the ‘wrong one,’ so we ended up coming to an agreement with them and added a note to the front of the book that differentiated it from the other one. That calmed them down. The book is still here. (Craven 2021)

Like the parents who pushed back against Craven’s attempt to broaden the scope of their children’s collection, there are many other groups of people who have responded negatively to a library’s commitment to offer materials that represent ideas that may not align with some user’s own beliefs. Oftentimes, however, there is no easy agreement that can allay the calls for removal. In fact, one elementary school library’s decision to display books concerning gender identity became such a divisive issue that two different groups of parents were formed to try and approach the subject. “One side wants school officials to remove seven titles from elementary school libraries,” writes Vic Ryckaert, “and the other is arguing these books are vitally important to children who have questions and may be struggling with their identity” (Ryckaert, 2021). While there has been no further updates on the school’s decision concerning the books, one of biggest complaints expressed by the parents in

opposition of them was that the books’ availability in the library posed a threat to their own children’s morals—ending with a proposal that the books should be rehomed in the guidance counselor’s room so that only children who expressed an interest in them may “request the books along with help for any concerns or questions they might have” (Ryckaert, 2021). Alas, this is not the only instance of concerned citizens attempting to take control of collection management away from librarians.

One Missouri lawmaker is pushing for the creation of a board of non-librarians (“a parental library review board”) who would serve as dictators of “age-appropriate” materials (Kaur 2020). His proposed bill, the Parental Oversight of Public Libraries Act, involves the act of withholding funding from a library that “allows minors to access ‘age-inappropriate sexual materials’” (Kaur, 2020). In CNN’s article, this gets chalked up to censorship—which remains a constant instigator behind library-related controversies—but the bill directly inhibits a librarian’s right to diversify their collection. Through redirecting control of materials, you redirect control of the collections, and when materials are okayed or denied by non-librarians, more room is left for personal biases to cause the exclusion of certain themes and ideas—not to mention that these board members will also have a right to remove any current materials from the library if they deem them to be “age-inappropriate” (Kaur, 2020). One retired librarian, Nicole Cooke, expresses her disdain for bills that take rights from professional librarians, stating:

Librarians are professionals... Librarians have expertise in children’s literature, collection development, child development, psychology, readers’ advisory, reference services and other specialized skills needed to serve children and young adults in a variety of settings. In short, librarians are more than capable of selecting and purchasing quality books and other materials for

people of all ages. To imply otherwise... is to insult these skilled educators. (Cooke, 2020)

While Cooke's notions that librarians should be seen as more than competent when it comes to developing diverse collections that appropriately serve the interests of their users, there are still many libraries that tend to fall short. In fact, some librarians may not be as aware of their failure to ensure equitable access to a diversity of content on their shelves.

In an interview with Morgan Johnson, a page at Holly Springs Community Library, she discusses the lack of diversity in her library's collection due to a limited amount of space. "It is true that we do not have room in our stacks for another collection like foreign language. Our shelves are packed tight..." Johnson says, "[but] I just don't think [the library's overseers] see it as a problem or a priority." Johnson, who morally disagrees with the policy of not keeping foreign language materials at community libraries, says that this policy keeps the library from fulfilling a major responsibility for their users. According to the ALA, "Library workers have a professional and ethical responsibility to be proactively inclusive in collection development and in the provision of interlibrary loan where offered," but while Johnson's library offers a system that allows users to place holds on books at their bigger regional libraries, she believes that Collection Development should aim to include at least a few in-house books in a foreign language section ("Diverse Collections", 2006). "The accessibility to those materials is not equitable..." says Johnson, "If a patron only reads in Spanish, we would not have anything for them in that moment, whereas if a patron only reads in English, we have practically endless options available to them instantaneously. That's obviously unfair." Still, other librarians do not see it as a failure to provide equitable access to diverse materials since they believe that their interlibrary loan system will allow users to have access to a wider variety of information. In this case, the librarians seem to be under the

impression that they are fulfilling this responsibility, even while they may actually fail to do so; however, some librarians are not the least bit concerned with fulfilling this responsibility if building a diverse collection means promoting interests which oppose their own. There are not many popular instances of biased collection development because it is hard to identify when librarians are making purchasing decisions in their heads. Many news articles related to librarians who let their personal interests overtake their professional duties fall under the broader category of censorship—especially in the most recent case of Cameron Williams, an employee of Chattanooga Public Library who was fired for burning pro-Trump books on camera.

ETHICS AND COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

Still, many librarians continue to struggle with ethically considering materials for adding to their collection, which is why it is important to refer back to the ALA's Code of Ethics. It states, "Library workers must not permit their personal biases, opinions, or preferences to unduly influence collection development decisions," and serves as a guideline for separating personal inclinations from professional ones ("Diverse Collections"). Some believe one way to go about this includes adapting collection development goals to fit more user-oriented ones, which incorporates user input when weeding. Public involvement has already been mingled with library programming—where community members make suggestions about events or activities they would like to see happening at the library—and this has oftentimes resulted in meeting unexpressed needs of other members of the community. It is also something that academic libraries have been doing for years as a way to gather information needs from users to better assess what materials should be added to a special subject's collection: these are known as patron-driven acquisition strategies or PDAs (Ibacache, 2020, 179). Because of this, some public librarians envision a future of collection development that is more "engaging with the

public during each step [in order to reduce] after-the-fact wrath” of weeding out materials (Stephens, 2013, 42). This may be a viable solution for finding out the information needs the vocal members of the community, and it may also ensure that individual selectors consider more topics and voices than those they are familiar with; however, the ALA strongly commits to proactive collections development, which involves gathering and maintaining materials that concerns information which is not vocalized by users.

CONCLUSION

Considering its longstanding relationship with censorship, diverse collections have become a foundational reason for the success of libraries. While many librarians find that offering diversity of content makes them feel as though they are making a change in the lives of their users, others have forgotten the importance of this idea and may not be serving their users as best they can.

Additionally, with a history of public libraries housing collections that represent mostly the viewpoints of the majority—through purchasing more white-authored titles with heteronormative, cis-gendered characters—it can be a challenge for librarians to broaden their collections to incorporate more diversity. Just as well, it can be a challenge for many user groups to encounter diversity among the stacks, often retaliating against libraries and library officials when books in a collection do not fit their own morals.

Ultimately, as librarians strive for better ways to engage with and serve members of their community, the importance of building and maintaining diverse collections continues to serve as a way in which libraries can represent diverse perspectives and offer more equitable access to a multiplicity of information sources.

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