FEATURE

Black School Librarianship

Navigating Race and Creating Change

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When I was approached about serving as the content expert for this issue of *Knowledge Quest* on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), I was apprehensive about what was being asked of me and what I would then ask of several of my colleagues, all of whom I consider friends. Conversations about EDI make me uncomfortable because I have had enough of them to know that this work is often very narrowly defined, restrictive even. In my experience, EDI work does not truly interrogate policies rooted in racism or ask people to do the internal work required to develop new competencies and change practice. Moreover, I have felt silenced and unseen by EDI conversations meant to embody the voices and experiences of people like me.

When asked to take this project on, I was skeptical. I wondered how five Black women school librarians could shape a more expansive and genuine conversation around EDI in school librarianship. But I was being entrusted with setting the agenda. I shifted my thinking to visualizing what this *Knowledge Quest* issue could be. It became clear, any conversation about EDI and school librarianship had to also be a conversation about identity. Whether any of us like it or not, who we are as Black women, standing in front of students, in our libraries, and in our greater school communities is just as important and as much a part of the conversation as the actual work.

When this issue of *Knowledge Quest* arrived in your mailbox, certainly you noticed a significant difference. The cover of this issue is black. This is not a statement about the racial identity of me or the contributing writers. Instead, this intentional departure from the graphics for which readers are accustomed is meant to draw you in immediately, signaling not only its importance but its urgency. In this issue, Adrienne Almeida, K.C. Boyd, Jean Darnell, Erika Long, and I share our experiences teaching in our various school libraries and bringing to bear who we are as Black women educators.

In "Leading a School Library as My Authentic Self," Adrienne Almeida talks about her student-centered approach to reinvigorating the school library. A former English as a new language teacher at the New York City Department of Education, Adrienne has more than twenty years of classroom experience and intimate knowledge of how to capture the hearts and minds of teenagers. With seemingly small policy changes and affirming collection development decisions, she invited students to be collaborators in reimagining the school library space. Her efforts were rewarded with major praise from students at the end of her first year.

K.C. Boyd is nationally known and widely recognized for her transformative library program in Chicago Public Schools and staunch advocacy for school libraries and school librarians. With almost twenty-five years of experience, K.C.'s work has touched the lives of students and librarians across the country. In "Advocacy: 2021 Style and Beyond," she discusses

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the importance of school librarians being respected literacy partners who are essential to academic success and turning frustration into strategic advocacy efforts.

Veteran librarian Jean Darnell is an expert at inventive lessons and programs. A firm believer in the power of young people to change their communities, she has created lessons that promote civic engagement, including a thoroughly organic lesson, E.R.A.S.E. (End Racism And Stereotypes Everywhere), that was a direct response to businesses' racial profiling practices in her school's local community. Jean does not shy away from embedding advocacy skills and grassroots organizing in her teaching. In "Unpacking Black School Librarianship," she shares the difficulty she's endured trying to empower her students to become active and engaged citizens while challenging school traditions.

Erika Long, a seasoned librarian at Metro Nashville Public Schools, brings her deep knowledge of books and relationships with authors to the forefront of her school library. In "Making a Mark on White Space: My Experience as a Black School Librarian," she discusses the lack of diversity in school librarianship and the delicate balance of standing firm in one's Blackness while building relationships with students and leveraging limited resources to provide rich experiences that prioritize #OwnVoices books.

My Story

My decision to become a librarian is one that seemingly fell into my lap in the summer of 2011. I had been complaining to a friend that I was getting bored in my work and needed to figure out what to do next. I had been working as a project manager for a charter school network for six years. Even though I had earned my Master's degree in social work from the University of Chicago three months after starting the position and continued in the role after my degree, I was certain I did not want to be a social worker. I enjoyed working in the charter network's management office and collaborating with educators across the network's four campuses. I wanted to be in schools working directly with students, but I did not want to be a classroom teacher. My friend casually suggested I look into becoming a librarian since I loved reading and liked working in education. It was a reasonable suggestion. Also, I had loved libraries my entire life. I was excited about the possibility of working in a school library, a place that had nurtured my own love of reading in my formative years. It did not take long to find Dominican University's Graduate School for Library and Information Science program, now the School of Information Studies. I entered the program the spring semester of 2012, and my library journey officially began.

As I matriculated in my graduate studies, I regularly followed the blogs of K.C. Boyd (<http://missdomino.blogspot.com>) and Jean Darnell (<www.awakenlibrarian.com>). They represented the kinds of librarians I wanted to be, innovative thinkers meeting the needs of students where they were.

During my final year of library school, I started researching school librarian positions; the prospects were grim. Chicago Public School librarians were facing job loss due to budget cuts. A professor suggested I look into private school jobs, specifically independent schools via the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). Upon graduating from library school in 2014, I interviewed at several independent schools, mostly on the East Coast, and accepted a position not long after the start of the recruitment season.

Despite having worked in public education for eight years prior to becoming a school librarian, everything in the independent school world was wholly unfamiliar to me, and I struggled. Though I had always been someone who could comfortably and confidently navigate tough situations, I was unprepared for the inner workings of independent schools. My struggles consumed me. I worked in a constant state of anxiety. I worried about being "too Black," not open and engaging enough, or not friendly enough. I worried about racism. I worried I did not understand the complexities of wealth and private schooling. Though I had earned undergraduate and graduate degrees from a liberal arts college and a private research university, my friends were mostly people of color and financial aid recipients like me. I worried whether I was the right "fit," a word I would come to hear often during hiring season. Some of my worries were rooted in my fear of the unknown, while others were validated. I experienced a variety of microaggressions, from having my credentials openly questioned, to hearing hints of being a "diversity hire." I have felt the heavy hand of "tradition" that reinforces a school culture that marginalizes students and faculty of color. There is no handbook for being Black in a private white institution. Yet, Black librarians not only show up in these spaces, we also work to improve them—sometimes to our detriment. We are agents of change in spaces not meant for us and that are sometimes hostile to us.

This year marks my seventh year as a school librarian at an independent school. With each passing year, I settle into being a private school librarian more, not fully comfort-

able, but definitely more confident. My identity as a middle-aged Black woman, daughter of immigrants, born and raised on Chicago's South Side and South-Central Los Angeles inform my teaching and programming. It's embedded in the way I think about the work of a school librarian, from teaching information literacy skills to collection development to all of the other hats I wear in my school community. I no longer avoid sharing my story with students, but instead welcome opportunities to unpack my beliefs when asked.

As a middle school librarian, I work with students ages 10–14. They are in the midst of developing their own identities and questioning their and others' belief systems, all while going through the physical manifestations of puberty. "As children move from ten to eleven, major changes begin to take place. In their cognitive growth, children seem to be challenging all their assumptions about the world" (Wood 2015). During this critical time of forming new understandings of the world, students need adults around them to be honest with them to build trusting relationships, especially when conversations have the potential to be uncomfortable or controversial.

Information Literacy Now Is a Better Prepared Citizen Later

The core of my library teaching is helping students become critical information seekers. In sixth grade, students embark on a yearlong research project on a topic of their choosing. Students move through a full research cycle using the Inquire Shared Foundation from AASL's *National School Library Standards:*

> I. Inquire: Build new knowledge by inquiring, thinking critically, identifying problems, and developing strategies for solving problems.
>
> I.A.1. Learners display curiosity and initiative by: Formulating questions about a personal interest or a curricular topic.
>
> I.A.2. Learners display curiosity and initiative by: Recalling prior and background knowledge as context for new meaning.
>
> I.B.1. Learners engage with new knowledge by following a process that includes: Using evidence to investigate questions.
>
> I.B.2. Learners engage with new knowledge by following a process that includes: Devising and implementing a plan to fill knowledge gaps.
>
> I.B.3. Learners engage with new knowledge by following a process that includes: Generating products that illustrate learning. (AASL 2018)

It is during this project that I have found questions about identity, experiences, and beliefs arise most. Each year, students select topics ranging from light-hearted explorations of sports and animals to more playful topics such as dance and fashion to the most-complex topics involving social movements and historical atrocities. Though the topics are vast, inevitably, I am asked questions about my personal beliefs and opinions. Though I anticipate these moments when they reach the information-seeking phase of their projects, I still hesitate before answering. I still feel anxious about how much to share and how it will be received. I worry that answering questions about my beliefs will get me into trouble. I fear that a student will go home and tell their parents my response to a question, and out of context, it will not be understood in the spirit in which I answered the question. However, I remind myself that my beliefs are mine, and if I stay rooted in my truth, I am positively contributing to a student's growing sense of the world. Moreover, if I share not just what I believe, but why, hopefully, I am helping students develop a foundation for rigorous interrogation of what is presented to them and a profound respect for facts.

Collection Development Must Be Exhaustive

In addition to teaching information literacy, I have the absolute joy of sharing a love of reading with my students and shaping a library collection that is reflective of the world and responsive to their developmental needs. Using Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor of books providing readers windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors as a guide (1990), I purchase, display, and book-talk books that are racially and culturally diverse, #OwnVoices, LGBTQIA, offer global perspectives, address societal ills, prioritize forgotten voices, and are thematically germane to middle school. I scour book blogs and social media accounts. I communicate with my network of librarians and publishing friends. I read book review sources faithfully. I connect with professional librarian groups. Most importantly, I read as many books as I can.

School librarians cannot build a reading culture or help students broaden their reading interests and worldviews if we are not reading broadly and diversely. We cannot expect students to want to read outside of their comfort zones if we are not reading outside of our comfort zones and actively promoting fresh voices in literature.

This year, I am piloting a revised reader's profile project with my fifth-grade students based on the Explore

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Shared Foundation from the *National School Library Standards:* "Discover and innovate in a growth mindset developed through experience and reflection" (AASL 2018). Students are developing a personal reader's profile that asks them to explore their favorite books, authors, and past readings to find common themes in the literature they enjoy. They are researching their favorite authors to learn about their lives and make connections to their own lives. They are using the information gathered to determine what attracts them to those books. How do the books make them feel? What are they learning about the world? Who is present in those stories and who is missing? Specifically, they are asked to interrogate their reading choices as a means of broadening their future book selections.

Once they have developed an understanding of what attracts them to specific books, they will build a reading list comprised of stories and genres they love but written by authors and featuring characters who do not share their racial identity or cultural heritage. They are building a reading list that offers them everything they love in a story, through a new (to them) lens. It is my sincere hope that students develop an appreciation for a wider range of perspectives.

EDI Is for Everyone, Especially YOU

School librarians are no strangers to flexibility and taking on tasks in addition to the job of librarian. Oftentimes, we are advisors and coaches. We supervise lunch, study halls, recess, arrival, and dismissal. We manage technology and archives. We advise clubs, serve on committees, and are woven into the fabric of school life beyond the library. So, it can be easy to get pulled into ongoing EDI work too, especially if you are vocal about issues you or your students face.

At the start of my career, I was reluctant to engage in this work given all my struggles.

> It's work to be the only person of color in an organization, bearing the weight of all your white co-workers' questions about Blackness. It's work to always be hypervisible because of your skin—easily identified as being present or absent—but for your needs to be completely invisible to those around you. It's work to do the emotional labor of pointing out problematic racist thinking, policies, actions, and statements while desperately trying to avoid bitterness and cynicism. (Brown 2018)

EDI work is arduous but necessary. I quickly realized the importance of being a part of this work, not just for school improvement, but in support of and in service to students who look like me and others who are marginalized in the community. Students of color need adults in their school who look like them and who they know understand their experiences. Moreover, they need the adults who don't look like them to do more, to carry the weight of creating an equitable and inclusive school. Librarians are uniquely embedded in schools and share the responsibility for this work.

Last summer, the Black@ movement on Instagram catapulted independent schools into the spotlight. Black alumni, former faculty and staff, and current Black students submitted detailed accounts of racist experiences they endured during their tenures at their institutions. It forced many schools to look inward and reckon with actions and longstanding policies that created an abusive climate for Black students and employees. My school was among the many institutions called out and called in. The message was clear: Our school needs to change. But what does that change look like? How do you change institutions that were never created for the education of Black children?

Like many educators and institutions, we read books, engaged in uncomfortable conversations, and recommitted to EDI work with revised plans. Reading books have become the normal response to Black injustice (Johnson 2020). However, schools must push beyond the perpetual cycle of ONLY taking the first step. Schools must change policies and take actions that shift school culture. We owe it to our students to do more than just read and talk about it.

The Future Requires YOU to Do Better

As you read this issue, it is my hope that my words and those of my dear colleagues, Adrienne Almeida, K.C. Boyd, Jean Darnell, Erika Long, and I resonate. I hope our words and our work give you many moments to pause and reflect on your students, your school library, your colleagues, and your role in your school community. How are you showing up for students? Are you showing up for all students? How are you making sure students feel seen, heard, and safe? How are you developing cultural competencies? Are you speaking up and speaking out when injustice happens in your school?

As Dr. Bettina Love has offered, you need to be more than allies; you must be co-conspirators (2020). You must put something on the line in the pursuit of creating an antiracist school culture. Every school librarian would agree that students are the heart of school librarianship. If you truly believe this, then YOU must take action.

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