Unpacking Black School Librarianship

Jean Darnell
duchessofmycastl@gmail.com

As a Black school librarian in Texas, there's one set of rules for my colleagues and another for me. It's the daily wondering "What will they fire me for today?" or "How will my accomplishments be ignored and/or usurped?" or my least favorite "What passive-aggressive, prejudice affront will I have to 'give the benefit of the doubt towards'?" It's knowing that "traditions" and "family" include a history rooted in my oppression as seen in the yearbooks with so few people of color. The excitement I felt at seeing those black faces plummeted when I realized those faces belonged to the food service staff. Or worse, the black-faced student who thought it costumed fun to pose as an Eddie Murphy character from a movie with his face shoe-polished or otherwise smeared black, like disgraced Virginia Governor Ralph Northam. After all, it's tradition and it comes from an acceptable time period in society.

As an educator for almost twenty years, I hesitated to even join this opportunity because the engrained slights and negative experiences I have endured can nonchalantly be thrown into the category of "she's just a bitter employee" or "she's just an angry Black woman." But you see, that right there is an issue. I'm not allowed to be upset by intentional ugliness. I have to consistently turn a blind eye to injustice. Writing this article threatens my entire career because I will more than likely be labeled "difficult" when I am really searching for equality in professional growth and job protection when I speak up about sensitive topics like implicit bias and racism. How can I tell my new employer that I left my old place of employment because of silent racism? How can I explain that I *know* when my accomplishments are being ignored? I have to go high when they go low.

Being a Black school librarian and bringing my whole self to work is taking a class on how racism can damage Black students' mental health so that I can be more empathetic to myself and others.

Quite honestly, if former First Lady Michelle Obama can be labeled as "an angry Black woman," I didn't have a snowball's chance at escaping the same stereotype. I don't even wear or own pearls! All jokes aside, in her memoir, *Becoming*, she states, "Even when it's not pretty or perfect. Even when it's more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own" (Obama 2019).

This is my story as a Black school librarian in America in 2020. It isn't a rosy picture. It's written from the perspective of the thorn to keep everyone humble and to keep my story true to me and those I serve.

Creating Inclusive Programs

So how does this history of oppression translate to my role as a school librarian? In several ways. I've had to create inclusive programs that address the setbacks to Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) caused by predominantly white institutions (PWIs). These PWIs suffer an acute and debilitating lack of self-awareness and community for BIPOC students, regardless of whether they exist in the public or private sector, academic or corporate sector, or secondary or postsecond-

ary education. These institutions are a blight across the board in America, no matter the setting.

For example, when the novel *The Hate U Give* was released, I collaborated with an English teacher to bring her classes down to the school library to connect the book to an article on privilege written thirty years prior. The teacher had the students annotate the article on white privilege in education, titled "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh (1989).

The instructor (a white woman) warned me that she intentionally chose McIntosh's article because it was an article she said "woke her up to the bullsh-t her privilege granted her." She was so inspired that she wanted to "do that to the campus," and I was the "perfect person to connect the realism of life to the article." The students were shocked that nothing had changed since the article was published. In fact, they'd gotten worse. They were shocked. I wasn't. My everyday life of racism away from academia prepared me for thirty years of snail-slow progress. Being a Black school librarian and bringing my whole self to work is taking a class on how racism can damage Black students' mental health so that I can be more empathetic to myself and others.

During the book talk and excerpt readings, an invigorating discussion developed among the students about prejudices, discrimination, and the mental exhaustion from both. The pinnacle moment came when a quiet male student raised his hand to pour out his humiliation and horror when traveling, how he's always pulled aside, patted down, and was at one time bullied by a TSA agent for being Hindu. It was one of the first fissure cracks in the discussion about diversity and was a first step in healing on the campus.

That moment was brought to the campus by a Black school librarian.

After such an authentic teaching experience, I made sure to add multiple copies of *The Hate U Give* to our collection, and others, like *Internment* by Samira Ahmed, were new "shelf members" in the library. Adding *Internment* to our collection is what motivated the aforementioned student to speak up about his experience at the airport. It was only after pulling him aside that I learned this recounted scene from *Internment* inspired him to speak:

We all look like ants marching in this dust straight into a giant trap where we'll be stuck or where we'll be fed poison that we inadvertently spread to the rest of the group. I bite my lip, but I don't even feel it. What's that thing people always say about history? Unless we know our history, we're doomed to repeat it? Never forget it? Isn't that the lesson? But we always forget. Forgetting is in the American grain.

Someone yells out ahead of us. There's some kind of tussle. "NO! NO! NO!" I hear a boy scream and then see him run away from his mom—I suppose it's his mom—a middle-aged woman wearing a bright-blue turban-style hijab. The boy, with curly chestnut-brown hair, is maybe eight or nine years old. She runs after him and grabs him, speaking to him in Arabic. The crowd parts around them. Then her son hits her in the face. There's a collective gasp from the crowd. When the woman reaches up to her cheek, the boy breaks free, pushes against anyone standing in this

Young people know the power of video footage to combat the usual white bias seen in the retelling of racially charged incidents and are using social media to spur on protests and action against racial injustice.

> way, and starts running back toward the main gate, where the buses entered. He doesn't get far. Three Exclusion Guards draw guns and aim them at him. A kid. They're pointing their weapons at a kid. A fourth guard grabs him and pins him to the ground. I'm frozen. I literally can't move. (Ahmed 2019)

Understanding the Trauma of Discrimination

Bringing my whole self to the library means that I understand the trauma of being discriminated against, receiving "uncouth violence" at the hands of authority figures, and having to defend helpless students against educators who present *To Kill a Mockingbird* like it's a national treasure, when from the Black perspective, it's a blight on our history that supports a "white savior" mentality that most BIPOC are completely done with.

Why reach back to the colloquial racism of our past with books like *To Kill a Mockingbird* when modern, relevant, and engaging books like *On the Come Up* by Angie Thomas address the injustices of our legal system with a context students can see on any screen?

Why reach back to the colloquial racism of our past with books like *To Kill a Mockingbird* when modern, relevant, and engaging books like *On the Come Up* by Angie Thomas address the injustices of our legal system with a context students can see on any screen?

The main character, Brianna, faces an unjust suspension when a rogue white officer body slams her to the floor in retaliation for a search-and-seizure shake-down upon entering the metal detectors at her school. The story directly mimics a news report not long ago that made national news about a white officer body-slamming a girl from her desk in class. It sheds light on the fact that more students of color are suspended than white students, especially young Black girls, which I blogged about in my post "Erasing Black Girls' Education" (<www.awakenlibrarian.com/2020/03/erasing-black-girls-education.html>). More importantly, it shows how young people respond to the archaic mindset of prejudice that keeps Black Americans stuck in a post-slavery, Jim Crow America.

Young people know the power of video footage to combat the usual white bias seen in the retelling of racially charged incidents and are using social media to spur on protests and action against racial injustice, the same way television was used during the 1960s civil rights movement when white and Black freedom riders were beaten. Videos can sometimes save Black lives (R.I.P. Philando Castile), and also help in speaking more truth to injustice from the Black perspective (i.e., video doesn't lie).

Not only does this perspective represent what's happening now, it represents your students. More importantly, **it aligns with the AASL Standards.**

From the Think Domain of the AASL Standards:

> Learners contribute a balanced perspective when participating in a learning community by:
>
> 1. Articulating an awareness of the contributions of a range of learners.
> 2. Adopting a discerning stance toward points of view and opinions expressed in information resources and learning products.
> 3. Describing their understanding of cultural relevancy and placement within the global learning community.

From the Create Domain of the AASL Standards:

> Learners adjust their awareness of the global learning community by:
>
> 1. Interacting with learners who reflect a range of perspectives.
> 2. Evaluating a variety of perspectives during learning activities.
> 3. Representing diverse perspectives during learning activities.

From the Share Domain of the AASL Standards:

> Learners exhibit empathy with and tolerance for diverse ideas by:
>
> 1. Engaging in informed conversation and active debate.
> 2. Contributing to discussions in which multiple viewpoints on a topic are expressed. (AASL 2018)

To Kill a Mockingbird doesn't offer a range of perspectives. Neither author nor intended audiences know what it's like to be Black and on trial in America. But I know what it's like to be accused and viewed guilty when I am innocent. And so does any BIPOC student. I know what Angie Thomas thought about when she wrote the scenes for Brianna. I know the perspective her books offer.

Much like this article, being seen matters. Being heard matters. Being represented matters. Being treated like your humanity is essential, matters.

EDI Lesson for Grades 6–12

One of the facets of Black librarianship I enjoy the most is when I inspire students to get involved, not just sit back and whine about injustices. Recently, Yelp said it would start flagging businesses accused of racist behavior (Gross 2020). Having been racially profiled in businesses before, I wondered if there was a positive and more effective way to get students involved in this bit of modern civil rights. I created a lesson designed to have students examine and get involved in their community to break the systemic racism present.

> *Inspiring students to fix the wrongs they see in life not only directs their purpose and focus, but also opens doors for civic engagement and duty.*

E. R. A. S. E. (Grades 6–12)

End

Racism

And

Stereotypes

Everywhere

Student Purpose: To establish opportunities for learners to adjust their own perspectives and values while evaluating differing perspectives and how these varying perspectives affect their community.

Librarian Purpose: Cultivate partnerships within the school and local community (including families, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, public and higher education libraries, businesses) to promote engagement and provide a platform for equality, diversity, and inclusive (EDI) initiatives.

The library will address EDI for students from the aspect of civil and social justice. This lesson

addresses BIPOC students who want to advocate for social justice causes specific to their own community.

With the help of current students, restaurants and businesses within the community are rated with an EDI score based on a points rubric centered on the following categories:

- Are the owner and/or employees welcoming to all customers?
- Does their restaurant/business cater to a certain type of customer?
- What community outreach initiatives does the restaurant/business take to support EDI?
- Does the business have visible diversity within their employees (this includes disabled, racial, and gender-specific diversity)?
- Does the business establishment offer coupons for the economically disadvantaged?

The rubric would be based on frequency and categorized as follows:

Rarely or Not at All (0 points)

Some of the Time (1 point)

Usually (3 points)

Always (5 points)

*The rubric will include an open-ended response section for specifics. A reviewer's race/gender will be required.

Technology Component: The findings will result in a website posting the EDI rating and true narrative posts/reviews of their experiences. Those restaurants with satisfactory ratings will receive a "EDI Excellence" display sticker and a 3D-printed trophy of excellence.

Artistic Component: Students will create a video diary documentary series of their experience, seek an audience with city leaders, and present their EDI ratings to foster "restorative dialogue" for those businesses receiving unsatisfactory ratings.

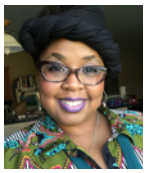
Community Involvement: The community will sponsor uplifting events to encourage local businesses to improve communication and equity within the community via a library series titled "Are Your Values My Values?" that features EDI guest speakers, business owners, city officials, and advocates.

The perks of this lesson are embedded, but the biggest pay-off is shifting the learning outside of the classroom and applying it to life as we know it. Inspiring students to fix the wrongs they see in life not only directs their purpose and focus, but also opens doors for civic engagement and duty.

Conclusion

Showing up as my whole self is being welcomed by Black students, who were in disbelief to have a Black school librarian based on the joy on their faces. I received immediate support and love from them, and not from the grown-ups who should know better. These brilliant and wonderful students almost went their first 18 years of life having never had a Black school librarian. That meant from age 5–18, every book they read, lesson they had in the library, and encouragement for the love of reading was from a person that never endured the silent racism every BIPOC faces *regularly*. There's an empathy, an ownership, and a shared experience Black school librarians can give every student. Period.

Black school librarians know all the thorns of life because we've had to bandage our own wounds from every poke, prod, and hollow-point of surviving in a predominantly white field. Very rarely is the stage set and ready for all the veracity that is being Black in America. I'm grateful for this opportunity to enlighten the world with my experience because it's as necessary as the oxygen we need to survive. Supporting Black school librarians is like putting the oxygen mask on yourself first before rendering aid to others when the plane is decelerating at rapid speed.



Jean Darnell *is a retired librarian in Houston, TX. She's been an educator for 19 years. Her current career passion is becoming an EDI advocate for librarians and schools. She is a member of AASL and serves on the 2020 Caldecott Book Selection Committee. She is also a member of the 2020 PBS NewsHour Education Advisory Board. Her blog,* Awaken Librarian, *is available at <https://awakenlibrarian.com>.*

Works Cited:

AASL. 2018. *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. Chicago: ALA.

Ahmed, Samira. 2019. *Internment*. New York: Little Brown Young Readers.

Gross, Jenny. 2020. "Yelp Says It Will Mark Pages of Business Accused of Racist Conduct." *New York Times* (Oct. 9). <www.nytimes.com/2020/10/09/business/yelp-racism.html> (accessed Dec. 4, 2020).

Obama, Michelle. 2018. *Becoming*. New York: Crown.

Thomas, Angie. 2017. *The Hate U Give*. London: Walker Books.