ARTICLE

My Journey toward Equity-Minded School Librarianship

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As an elementary school librarian, I believe an essential objective of the school library is providing a welcoming space that serves my patrons. Through almost eight years of librarianship, my idea of a welcoming space has evolved. As a white woman, I drew from my own linguistic, cultural, and racial frames of reference as I began my career. I believe this is where I have been for a majority of my fifteen years in education, while activists have been working, collaborating, and making change. I could have stayed fixed in those perspectives and remained satisfied with the status quo.

Following the murder of George Floyd, my journey toward equity-minded school librarianship became more focused and energized as I increasingly dedicated my attention to the work of educators and activists of color. I took part in book studies, attended webinars, and engaged in conversations about white supremacy, racism, and other forms of bias, but I knew that this work only gained meaning through action. I worked to develop a critical eye to all aspects the school library, including the books in our collection, programming, library displays, language used, the physical space, and more.

In this article, I share what I have learned and ways I have applied this to my school library to create more-equitable experiences for my students, staff, and community. I hope sharing my story provides motivation or ideas for other school librarians to start or continue their own journeys toward equity-minded librarianship.

Guides on My Equity Journey

All journeys have a starting point. My journey to reevaluate the work I do in the school library largely started when I read Ibram X. Kendi's 2019 book *How to Be an Antiracist.* Kendi says, "there is no neutrality in the racism struggle…One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of 'not racist.' " (2019, 9). Kendi's description of assimilationist racism opened my eyes to see that all my school library signs were in English and my collection largely told stories of only dominant groups (2019, 29). The "good news" of this realization was that the racist and antiracist identities are not fixed; they can be changed through the decisions we make daily (Kendi 2019, 10). I had changes to make.

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While Kendi's book set me on the path to reevaluate many aspects of the school library, I hoped to find a clearer connection between these anti-bias and antiracist concepts and my school library. I needed other scholars and experts to deepen my understanding.

I next turned to the work of Rudine Sims Bishop to inform decisions in the school library. Her windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors metaphor highlights the fact that a student's reading experience is a crucial part of the school library's function by providing materials that represent "all the children from all the cultures'' and resources that might "help us to understand each other better by helping to change our attitudes toward difference" (1990). In addition, Gloria Ladson-Billings's tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy emphasized the importance of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness for Black students and other students from historically minoritized groups (1995, 160).

I applied these tenets in my school library by asking questions such as: What resources do I choose to highlight and why? Am I encouraging my students to critically examine the resources and concepts we cover? Do I spend time learning from our communities and connecting with them in ways that affirm cultural characteristics? Both Sims Bishop and Ladson-Billings helped me understand the ways that the characteristics of dominant groups are normalized and standardized in schools and libraries.

Django Paris argued for a culturally sustaining pedagogy that "has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers." The way Paris describes the need for a pluralistic society to embrace and encourage "both the many and one to remain vibrant" inspired me to recognize that our commonalities and differences are both assets that can bring us together (Paris 2012, 95).

Beyond the literature, I attended workshops and webinars with educators, librarians, and experts on anti-bias work that further informed my practices. In a webinar aimed at school leaders, educator and scholar Dr. Terri N. Watson outlined five Cs she believes are a school's responsibility: care, courage, critical reflection, commitment, and community (2020). Critical reflection, care, and community have been common themes in many resources I have examined, but the courage and commitment especially spoke to me as an educator and school librarian. These values

pushed me to try new things, rethink programming and services, and hold myself accountable to the work.

In the webinar "Talking to Kids about Racism" with Dr. Kira Banks's Raising Equity organization, educators and activists Britt Hawthorne and Tiffany Jewell helped me realize that I needed to continue to confront my own biases to transform my school library (Banks 2020). They also emphasized the importance of evaluating resources to identify the ways whiteness is normalized and centered in schools and society.

Each week's book choices during the month-long theme help my school community see diverse experiences and explore ways to connect with fellow students and our community.

Robin Porter outlined critical topics for evaluating classroom content in the #EdEquityVA webinar "*Culturally Responsive and Culturally Relevant Remote Instruction.*" These topics included types of female characters, whether problems faced by characters were resolved by "intervention of the dominant culture," or if characters were displayed in inauthentic, stereotypical ways (#EdEquityVA 2020).

This critical examination of resources was also emphasized in a webinar with Dr. Sarah Park Dahlen, who encouraged attendees to examine a character's visual portrayal and problematic images and ones to celebrate (Dahlen 2021). A *School Library Journal* webinar led by Donalyn Miller, Autumn Allen, and Erin Entrada Kelly stressed the importance of examining your bookshelves. As Allen put it, "be critical and think about what is normalized in the messages that we're sending" with our book collections (2021).

Lastly, Juliana Urtubey, a contributor to the Antiracist Educator Spring Web Series, suggested viewing students as "linguistically gifted" who speak more than one language (2021). This shift in the language I use can help to sustain students' identities and cultures, instead of framing language through an English-only lens.

So many in education and beyond have provided research and expertise on the goal of creating more-equitable spaces and experiences for our students. This work helped me see the next steps I could take—from learning to doing.

My Actions

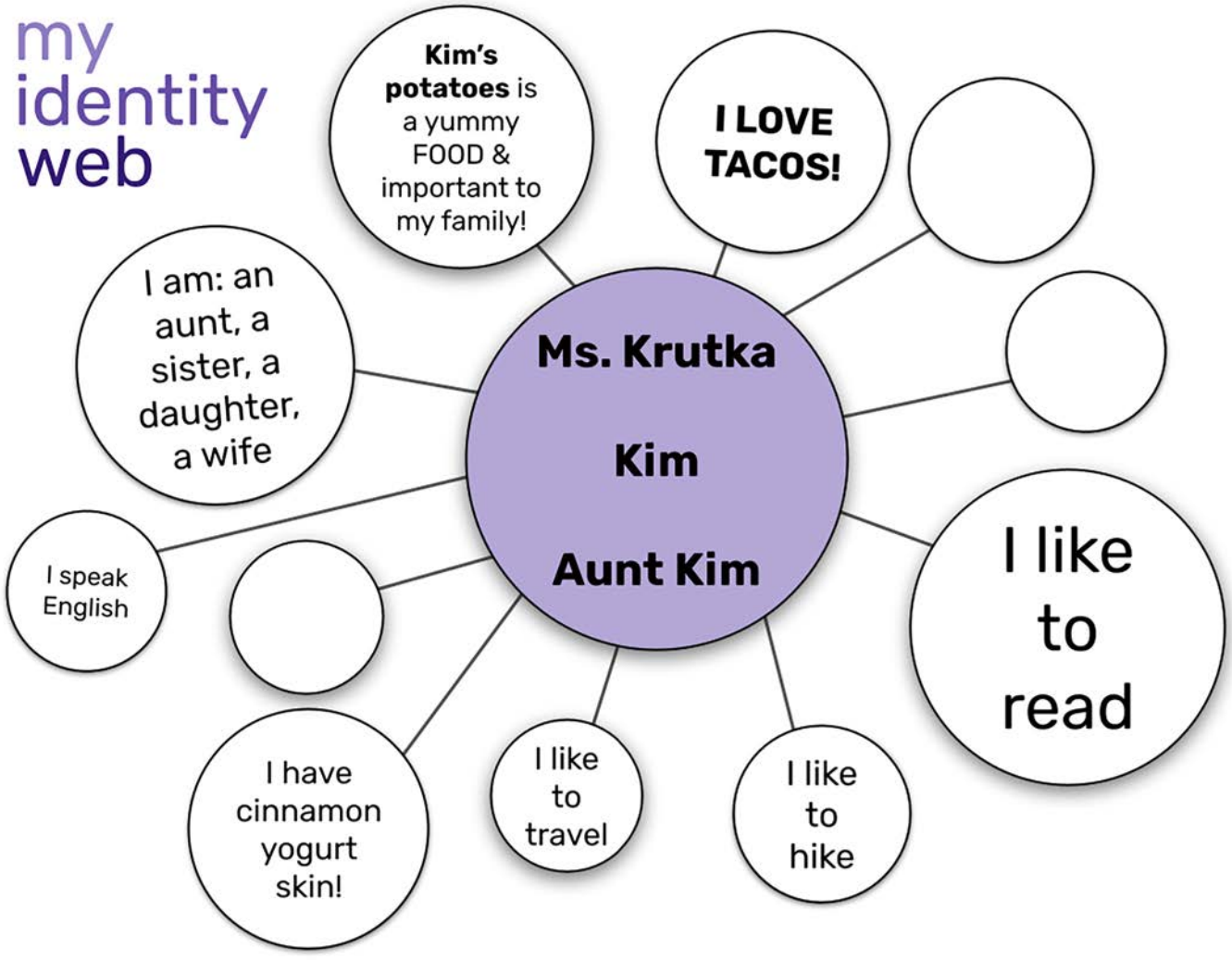
I put the knowledge and understanding I learned into action in a few distinct ways, including library monthly themes and updates to my collection, library signage, and professional development.

Each month I identify a library theme consisting of four components: an overall theme, "thinking about my thinking" questions, books, and related activities. The questions I develop are aimed to push me and students beyond diverse representation in books to also consider issues present in the theme and stories for that month. During our "Create Change" theme in November, some questions used to guide us were: How can I use my voice to create change? Can I speak up?

I purposefully choose themes that help students think about their own identity and culture and affirm and celebrate different identities and cultures. Examples of themes include: "Who Am I? Who Will I Be?," "Celebrate!," "Your Name Is a Song," and "Taking Action!" The "Your Name Is a Song" theme was inspired by the book with the same title written by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow and illustrated by Luisa Uribe. Reading this book and discussing its themes encouraged students to consider whose names and identities are normalized and their own thinking around these issues.

In each month's theme I contemplate ways to bring in who my students are as well as how they can think about themselves, other students, and the larger society. During the month with the "Who Am I? Who Will I Be?" theme, I included read-alouds that encouraged students to think about different aspects of their identity, such as their names (*The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi and *Alma and How She Got Her Name* by Juana Martinez-Neal), places where they have lived and language(s) they speak (*The Arabic Quilt* by Aya Khalil, illustrated by Anait Semirdzhyan), food as part of family and community traditions (*Fry Bread: A Native-American Family Story* by Kevin Noble Maillard, illustrated by Juana Martinez-Neal), and their own physical characteristics (*Honeysmoke* by Monique Fields, illustrated by Yesenia Moises).

Throughout this identity month, I worked on an identity web to model critical reflection. Initially I learned about the identity web from the Equity Institute put on by The Reading and Writing Project at the Teachers College. To create an identity web, a person starts with their name in the center and adds other identity markers to the web, such as languages spoken, religious affiliations, skin color, and hobbies. I added to my web each week, encouraging students and teachers



throughout the school to do the same by posting a digital template on our monthly theme website. Additional related resources or activities were available throughout the month, such as the "Sesame Street Beautiful Skin" song and a coloring sheet with "colors of the world" crayons for students to draw and color their own family. My thinking questions for this theme included: What are the things that make me who I am? How can I appreciate and celebrate those who are the same and those who are different from me? Do I have any ideas about who I want to be?

During our "Taking Action!" month, teachers and students looked at several people who have worked to make just change in the world. Some books and characters were historical, such as Georgia Gilmore in *Pies from Nowhere* by Dee Romito and illustrated by Laura Freeman. We also looked at current activists, such as Malala Yousafzai in *Malala's Magic Pencil*, illustrated by Kerascoët, or *Our House Is on Fire* by Jeanette Winter highlighting the work of Greta Thunberg. I asked students to consider how they can make a difference in our school, our neighborhood, and our world.

Kendi's charge to evaluate actions one by one helps me bring a critical eye to the decisions that go into each month's theme (2019). I am encouraged to think beyond the

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aspects of culture and identity that are often at the surface and find space to celebrate students for who they are. Each week's book choices during the month-long theme help my school community see diverse experiences and explore ways to connect with fellow students and our community. With these monthly themes, I guide my students to consider how, individually and as a community, they can push back against oppressive beliefs that infer the superiority of dominant cultures. I also ask them to consider how we can take action to confront inequities in our school, neighborhood, and the world.

Next, I had to rethink a core function of school librarians: collection development. I am in the process of conducting a diversity audit of the books in my school library to evaluate what is present in my collection and flag problematic titles that need to be considered for weeding. I rely heavily on the expert insights from Dr. Dehlan (2021) and Miller, Allen, and Kelly (2021). There are also many online resources that provide book lists such as We Need Diverse Books (<https://diversebooks.org>) and Social Justice Books (<https://socialjusticebooks.org>). Guided by the words of Paris (2011) and Sims Bishop (1990) I seek out books that sustain students' languages and cultures and provide windows into a breadth of experiences and characters.

I also am deliberate in book displays, book talks, and read-alouds. For instance, I have introduced two library awards each month, one for a picture book and one for a fiction book. When I examine the collection and what books I want to read, award, and share with my school community, I ask myself how it supports my goals for a more-equitable school library for my students. Will it offer them a mirror or window? Do they represent diverse ways of being in authentic ways? Do critical authors believe it is an authentic representation? Additionally in the conversations I have with students and faculty about books, I encourage appreciation and curiosity about things instead of using language that *others* an experience that might be different from that of the reader.

In the past, the signs in my school library have always been in English only. While my school has a majority of monolingual, English speakers, I have learned strategies for celebrating my multilingual students and their families (Ladson-Billings 1995; Paris 2012). I worked with the emergent bilingual teacher in my school to help create library signs that reflected the languages of all my students and families on our campus.

I accomplished this task by creating a spreadsheet of the seven languages and common library signs I needed. I used an online translator to translate

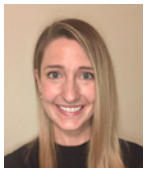
my fifteen library signs into each language. Our emergent bilingual teacher then e-mailed the parents of students who spoke those languages, asking if they would check my translations. Each of these parents promptly responded with suggested changes, and I had library phrases ready for seven languages! This change in the school library valued students as linguistically gifted who spoke multiple languages, as well as encouraged a broader appreciation for language diversity (Antiracist 2021). Students who speak these languages noticed immediately, with one expressing a desire to learn a third language! This is just a small step in creating a more language-inclusive library.

Finally, an important part of creating a more-equitable school library is my own continued development in anti-bias and antiracist work. As a leader, I have pushed for staff development on my campus and in my district. I created a staff webpage with anti-bias and antiracist resources, started campus and district book clubs, provided opportunities for campus-wide professional development such as Heinemann's Professional Development webinar featuring anti-bias, antiracist educational leader Liz Kleinrock, and established district and regional affinity groups for other librarians doing this work. Through these groups I have been able to reflect and develop ideas with other librarians directly related to elementary school libraries.

Hawthorne and Jewell remind me of the importance of this internal work (Banks 2020), and Dr. Terri N. Watson's five Cs offered me sign posts for change (2020). Transforming my library requires an ongoing commitment.

Conclusion

Creating a more-equitable school library space is not easy. I am fortunate to learn from the work that educators, scholars, and experts have been doing for years. Education often seems to involve new trends and initiatives, but the work to create more-equitable spaces must be the lens through which we see all other work. Which read-aloud will I choose? What books do I choose for my school library? What questions am I asking of myself and of my students? What message does the school library space I create for my students and staff send? The work is never done, but I have started my journey toward an equitable school library. I must stay committed because this work is essential to being the school librarian and creating the school library all my students deserve.



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