School Librarians as Equity Warriors: Advocating for All Students

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Equality is not equitable—really? According to Kranich’s (2005) definitions endorsed by the American Library Association, equality refers to a “uniform distribution, where everyone is entitled to the same level of access.” Equity, however, not only means providing resources and learning opportunities equally to all students but also that redress must be made to “level the playing field,” so all students can participate fully. Kranich further states that equality being a fair and equal distribution of services is generally seen as favorable, but providing support to compensate or remedy inequities is often challenged as unfair, because it appears to favor some over others. Affirmative action is a classic example that has generated conflicts of opinions over the years.

Considering this clarification, do school librarians provide equity in their library programs? Although all students have equal opportunities to use the library, do school librarians help all students fully engage in the program and resources? Are school librarians equity leaders, advocating for all students, not just in the library? And what does that look like?

BACKGROUND

Consider these facts that illustrate the growing diversity among K–12 students:

- White, non-Hispanics are no longer the majority among school students, representing 47.5% and decreasing annually (Bitterman, Gray, & Goldring, 2013).
- “The poorest, mostly white districts have up to nearly 8 times more librarians per students than the wealthiest, high-minority districts” (Long, 2016).
- “The poorest schools have had the smallest increase in the number of book titles since 2007, and the increase in titles for inner-city schools is one-third the size of increases in other communities” (Long, 2016).
- Some researchers report that approximately 3 to 10 ten percent of the student population, or 5 to 6 percent of teens in grades 7–12, self-identify as LGBT” (Oltmann, 2016).
- The number of English language learners has grown by roughly 60% over the past decade, and the majority of them are second-generation immigrants born in the United States (Quintero & Hansen, 2017).

Patricia Gándara (as cited in Maxwell, 2014), an education professor and a codirector of the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at the University of California, Los Angeles, questions the use of the label minority today: “The whole notion of being ‘minority’ is that you are marginalized and have a second-class status, but what does that mean in this new context? When these students are at the margins with respect to achievement but at the center with respect to the population, how do we reconcile that?”

THE UNDERRPINNINGS OF LIBRARIANSHIP

School librarianship is deeply rooted in a belief that all learners have the freedom to read, hear, view, and speak about ideas, thoughts, and opinions of others and to craft and express their own ideas. In tandem is the belief that all learners have equitable access to up-to-date, appropriate resources, technologies, and digital connectivity. As stated in one of the American Association of School Librarians’ (AASL, 2016) position statements, “An effective school library program plays a crucial role in bridging digital and socioeconomic divides.”

WHAT LIBRARIANS AS EQUITY WARRIORS CAN DO

Although it may seem overwhelming, librarians can lead changes to ameliorate the effects of poverty, prejudice, and deliberate or unintended exclusions from learning opportunities in their schools. School librarians work with all students and all teachers and see the big picture. With the mission of improving equity, awareness and collaboration are the first steps. Know and watch the trends in student demographics, which are readily available on state school report card websites. Organize and collaborate with other specialists, such as special education teachers, guidance counselors, reading specialists, intervention coaches, school resource officers, drug and alcohol support staff, etc. Initiate an equity task force to include parents and school administrators to establish one or two attainable goals with specific actions for each school year.
Here are some potential activities to improve equity for students.

**Internet Connectivity and Technologies.** Loan hotspots to students, so they can access the Internet at home (see Fisher, 2016). Ask school board members for help in reaching out to local Internet service providers to negotiate reduced prices for impoverished families with students who cannot afford Internet connectivity (see Bentley, 2017). Investigate portable digital translators (see Nolan, 2018) to help English language learners and immigrant students communicate and feel more included and engaged with their peers and teachers. Collaborate with administrators and tech staff to establish policies to loan e-readers, tablets, and other devices for student use outside school and to diminish the inequalities caused by bring-your-own-device policies for kids who do not own personal devices. To fund some of these projects, write grants or seek community funding from organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the American Association of University Women, local Hispanic organizations, PTAs, and others.

**Library Use and Circulation Policies.** Re-examine circulation and library access policies to remove barriers, such as fine policies and limits on the number of books students may check out. Consider overnight loans of other types of media and technologies, such as DVDs, digital audiobooks, etc. Ensure confidentiality of student circulation records by reviewing policies with anyone who works the circulation desk.

**Collection Development Policies and Assessment.** Dust off the district’s collection-development policy to be sure it reflects the needs of the school’s changing student demographics. Are procedures for handling challenges in place and approved? Evaluate the library’s collection to assess its representation of resources that support the diverse developmental, cultural, social, and linguistic needs of the learners. Utilize the online toolkit *Defending Intellectual Freedom: LGBTQ+ Materials in School Libraries* (AASL, 2018) for guidance and resources. Consider engaging students with a diversity audit of the library’s books (see Lifshitz, 2016). Use this information and student demographics to justify budget requests.

**24/7 Web Presence and Curation.** Curate resources on web platforms or the library’s website to guide learners to appropriate resources 24/7. Address special needs by highlighting databases and websites that have text-to-speech features and language translation. Teach and use free online translation tools such as Google Translate and Babbel.

**Reading and Interest Levels and Languages.** Analyze the library’s collection for appropriate and sufficient range of reading levels. (Use Follett’s free TitleWise program, which analyzes the library’s MARC records.) Establish protocols for borrowing books from public, academic, or other school libraries for students who are reading well below or above their grade levels. Conduct a student interest survey to learn what students want to read. Have students write reviews and add them to the online catalog or create a blog of student recommendations.

**Teacher Professional Development.** During faculty meetings, with your principal’s permission, show teachers databases and websites and translation tools that offer resources in non-English languages. At another meeting, take 5 minutes to show teachers how to locate reading levels of books in the online catalog or other online web resources. Make teachers aware of equity resources and tools they can apply to their teaching practices.

**Special Programming.** Librarians can organize schoolwide activities such as culture fairs, exhibits, speakers, authors, and the like, looking within the community for potential presenters and opportunities. Organize a tutoring service in the library seeking older students, parents, or senior citizens willing to tutor struggling learners.

But, most importantly, create a library where everyone is welcomed to a safe, nonjudgmental, bully-free “third space” (Little, 2015). Additional activities aligned with the Shared Foundations of the AASL Standards can be found in Lechtenberg and Phillips’s article “Speaking Up for Equity Takes Courage” (2018).

**CONCLUSION**

As diversity and poverty rates increase among K–12 students, with more requiring English-language and other instructional supports, “leveling the playing field,” or improving equity, has become a growing challenge in educating the next generation. The have-nots are becoming the majority. As Bill Emmons (as cited in Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018), an economist with the Center for Household Financial Stability at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, recently stated, “We’ve just been through this very severe recession, and the scarring effects of that are still evident in young people.” While school librarians may believe that this issue is too daunting,
they can help ameliorate these conditions one child at a time, one school at a time. School librarians who work with all the students and all the teachers can provide the leadership to be equity warriors advocating for marginalized groups of students. This leadership highlights the unique value and contribution of school librarians who can reach out and think beyond the library walls to enact change.

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