

Leading a School Library as My Authentic Self

How My Identity Transformed the School Library Culture

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Sometimes it's hard to believe that anyone good would want you. There. I said it. It happens in personal relationships. It happens when you're looking for work. When the interested party stays interested, the self-doubt kicks in and you start to wonder, "When's the other shoe going to drop? Maybe this isn't as good as it seems. What's going to happen next? Is this going to be a mistake?" As a Black woman, there's the added questions of, "Am I just a diversity hire? Do they want me or the boxes I check?" It's alienating to worry about the core of who you are that has led you into the very room you're wondering if you belong. Yet I can't remember a time when I didn't wonder whether I was being chosen for my skills and experiences or because I am a double box check as a Black woman. I can't remember an accepted offer when I didn't vow, "I'm going to prove that I was the right choice."

That's a lot of extra pressure to the already challenging choice of transitioning to a new community and a new career. And that's what I was grappling with when, after earning my second Master's degree, I decided to leave my twenty-plus-year tenured English as a new language teaching career in the New York City Department of Education

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(NYCDOE) to become the director of middle school and upper school library services at a K-12 independent school in New York City.

It was the first year I would serve as a full-time school librarian and it was the first time that I would have a majority white student body. The NYCDOE faculties I had been a member of ranged from being majority Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to majority white, but the students I taught during my tenure were always majority BIPOC before we even had that term to use.

My Blackness didn't mean the Black students at my new school were going to welcome me with open arms. They are smart enough to know that there is no monolithic Black identity that makes my presence a reflection of their own lived experiences. They were already seasoned field guides of a majority white school space, which had taught them to be rightfully cautious of all new people. Students

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Luckily, in times like these the universe sends us the voices we need to hear. I am grateful for the friends and family who showed up to whisper or shout encouragement. Black school librarians sat me down and gave me a run through of their experiences, both positive and negative. One friend who had made it a point to come to every career day in my previous schools said to me, "I've never heard you tell a story about a teenager that didn't make you light up. You don't just like the students you've had, you like them all. I've seen this. You know this. You've got this."

Those words carried me into my new role with confidence. Starting with my students at the center of my work, as I had every new school year of my career, was the right way forward.

Creating a Welcoming, Inclusive Space: Reflective Collection Development

In my first week on campus, a student approached me. They had noticed the Human Rights Campaign sticker on my office window and took a chance on me. They explained with kindness but firmness that there were not enough “gay books” in the collection. They felt certain that my predecessor “hid the gay books.” It wasn’t my responsibility to sleuth out whether or not “gay books” were in fact hidden. What mattered was the brave person in front of me saying, “The books in this collection do not reflect me and my values. I feel unwelcome here.” That was all I needed to know.

I have felt unwelcome in spaces I was supposed to belong to enough times in my life to know that I had to show up the next day with a handful of books from their recommended list to earn the respect I was being offered. So I did. I went to my local bookstore with the list they gave me that afternoon. I bought some of the books from the list. I added in some that I found on my own including Archie Bongiovanni’s graphic novel, *A Quick and Easy Guide to They/Them Pronouns*. I went in early the next day to process the books myself by hand and had them on display before the lunch hour.

That student didn’t come to the school library that day. In my imagination, they were giving me the opportunity to not mess up, but I’m sure they were just busy or forgot. However, friends of that student saw the display and word got around. When the student returned to see the display on my circulation desk, they exclaimed, “Look at what you found!” They then proceeded to make plans for all the aunts and uncles in their life who needed to read the

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Bongiovanni graphic novel as they checked it out.

I was pleased to see that friend group take up daily residence in the school library during their free periods and I continued to receive expansive suggestions for the collection that reflected their interests, experiences, and aspirations.

Creating the School Library Culture: The Opposite of Shh-ing

I was used to being alone with thirty-plus students, which was not uncommon in NYCDOE classrooms. I wasn’t concerned about managing students in the school library. However, I wanted to manage the library through student buy-in rather than a watchful eye. After observing the natural rhythm of the school library, including volume level, capacity, friend groups, etc., I posted a timetable for collaborative work time and quiet study time. Students were mutinous when they saw the signs go up around the room and on both sets of double glass doors. Then they read the timetable more carefully and realized it was a reflection of what was happening naturally in the space rather than an imposition of what the space should be. Even in the timetable, they felt seen and respected.

Teenage buy-in is sacred. It comes from a place of respect and is not given freely. I decided to earn it. It

was essential that my students see me see them as whole people with a variety of passions. I wanted to show up for them the way I was asking them to show up for me in the school library. With this mission at hand, I attended countless basketball games, volleyball games, swim meets, jazz concerts, school plays, debate tournaments, parent association-organized community events, and other extracurricular activities after school and on weekends. In doing so, my students saw me make an effort to be a member of their community as did my colleagues who give so much of their time and energy to these extracurricular programs. Back in the school library, the students came



Timetable for collaborative work time.



in to tell me the highlights of a game or a show that I had missed with the understanding that I would definitely have been there if I could.

From that investment in time with my students and colleagues outside of the school library, we were able to create a culture with each other where showing up as your whole authentic self was the expectation. In addition to studying, you could often find students in the library practicing their original scenes for French class, restringing their bass guitar before jazz class, reviewing their most recent game footage before soccer practice, giggling through impromptu TikTok dance shoots, and meeting to plan the next edition of the school newspaper. Upper schoolers happily shared their robotics projects with wide-eyed middle schoolers, while lower schoolers checked in with friends of their older siblings.

Teachers also stopped by to provide individual and small group check-ins.

For the most part, my students honored the rhythm of the school library and respected the quiet work time we had established as much as they utilized the collaborative work and decompression time we all needed throughout the day.

The fall break season for colleges is Homecoming time for my new community. Recent and not-so-recent graduates come through the school building to pop in on their old teachers, visit with not-yet-graduated friends, and most importantly sing with us at the Thanksgiving assembly. The building was bursting with the energy I associated with tradition and community. It was a really special time. While I was unprepared for the number of visitors allowed on

campus, I embraced the opportunity to embody the school library culture we were creating.

During that week, I brought my laptop out of the office and stayed in front of the circulation desk and greeted returning friends. I introduced myself, shook their hands, and said, "Welcome home." One rambunctious reunion involved members of the current basketball team welcoming a former player and good friend. The visiting graduate tried to hush the current students when he saw me walking over so they wouldn't get in trouble. My students realized that it was his first time back, so he didn't know that I wasn't coming to shush but to welcome him and take a photo for our school library Instagram feed. The graduate said that this wasn't what he remembered about the school library. My current student said loudly, "That's because we have the GOAT [Greatest Of All Time] librarian." I looked at him surprised and moved by this epic compliment. He smiled back at me like it was nothing. Obviously, it was everything.

Maintaining the Library Community through COVID

I didn't have the opportunity to close out my first year in the school library. I wanted to host more Magic Monday Mornings so I could finally get my head around the game "Magic the Gathering." I wanted to host events leading up to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's annual Sakura Matsuri (www.bbg.org/visit/event/sakura-matsuri_2020), including a cosplay fashion show, anime screenings, and haiku writing workshops. I wanted to start a Fiber Arts Collective with some of my colleagues and students who already knit, crochet, weave, and felt. I had been planning the May graduation display for our school library and had already recruited class of 2020 co-conspirators to



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help me prepare. However, for the health and safety of our community, we closed the building on March 10, 2020. At that time we had no idea how long we would be away from one another nor how much would change in learning, creating community, connecting with others, being present, and sharing space. I had made progress in establishing the culture I wanted in our school library, but the best practices for remote librarianship were yet unwritten. I was afraid to lose the sense of community that is the cornerstone of our school library. As much as has been lost, the initial bonds were strong enough to manifest regularly attended Zoom school library office hours and book lunches, as well as a thriving student request-driven Sora digital collection (see “Resources for Right Now” at left).

While we were off campus learning remotely, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd were murdered. These three murders and the country’s response sparked Black graduates, current students, and former faculty of independent schools to start the Black@ movement on Instagram (read more about this movement at www.cnn.com/2020/06/29/us/instagram-black-students-at-pages-race-issues-trnd/index.html).

“Resources for Right Now”: Responsive Collection Development in a Time of Racial Injustice

In May and June 2020, news headlines across the United States pivoted between the increase in COVID cases and the daily Black Lives Matter protests in response to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. Despite being in quarantine and schooling remotely for the first time, it felt impossible and irresponsible to shelter even our youngest students from what was happening. It was our responsibility as school librarians, as agents of democracy, to support our families, colleagues, and community with a K-12 collection of books to spark meaningful conversations about the history of racial injustice in our country and to empower conversations about possible ways forward. We curated a collection on OverDrive’s Sora of 81 print and audiobooks, including picture books, graphic novels, fiction, and nonfiction. Our collection description read:

Resources for Right Now:

The library invites you to consider the following resources from the collection which may be useful to contextualizing current events and having conversations about race and racism. Additionally, being a member of our school community affords you access to reputable sources of information such as *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker*, *The Economist*, and *The Washington Post*. Please contact the librarians with any questions you have regarding access to those resources. As always, we look forward to your feedback and recommendations.

Working in symphony with the staff of our school’s center for peace, equity, and justice, and our team at OverDrive, we maintained our library’s mission to support the lifelong habits of reading for understanding and seeking credible information sources to have informed discourse.

Black@ gave voice to recent and historic injustices experienced by Black community members over the years at independent schools, my school among them. The stories were heartbreaking and familiar, having myself been schooled in white majority spaces where I experienced racism and discrimination. My experiences in elementary, middle, and high school taught me that my ability and accomplishments could not dispel the myth that I was there only as a token of affirmative action. Those experiences are the foundation for all the times I continued to be worried about being or being perceived as “the diversity hire.”

I am a bicultural Black woman. I’m simultaneously a pin-wearing, dues-paying member of the Daughters of the American Revolution (part of the legacy of enslavement predating this nation’s founding) and a fourth-generation immigrant from the Cape Verde Islands. It is a challenge to dissect what about my specific identity and my value set shaped the transformative experience for the school library I inherited. In other words, I wondered how my Blackness affected the culture my students and I created in the school library. As I was writing this piece, I asked the school’s director of diversity and inclusion, who generously shared this reflection:

More than the last iteration, the current school library is slightly more relaxed, prioritizes group work, and values the community that students forge. This library has clearly been shaped by Afrocentric values. It is a space where knowledge is actively being sought and created, in searching and deep conversations among students and in diverse activities aimed at unearthing and generating



The school library’s recognition for being “IN” in the pages of the yearbook after my first year.

knowledge. Whether students are designing a blueprint for a 3D object, reading emergent Black authors, or wrestling with a math problem or scientific concept, students are engaged because they feel safe. They feel seen and heard.

To think my worries were whether I would connect with my new students when the real work is how to show up every day for all my students in a way that disrupts institutional racism, homophobia, sexism, and patriarchy. How can I be the adult that I wish had been there to comfort and empower all the authors of the Black@ posts? How can I be the adult I wish I had myself as a Black child in white majority schools? More importantly, how do I collaborate with the other adults already invested in liberation work at my school? How do I support their work in my role as the school librarian?

This may sound like solitary work. Let’s be clear: my ability to do my job well and be my whole self is a

result of the friends and colleagues who hold space for me when I need support and who let me support them. I am never alone.

This article is dedicated to my Librarian Cooperative who shares best practices, keeps each other laughing, and holds each other up; to the community of antiracist educators I have the privilege to work with who hold themselves and others accountable to the social and emotional well-being of all of our students; to my mother and my aunts, all exceptional educators who continue to lead by example; to my father and stepmother who courageously paved their own path; to my husband for always giving me the space I need to be myself in the safety of our home; to my daughter in hopes that she knows she’s perfect exactly as she is.



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