



Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

Integrating DEI in Public Library Book Clubs

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ABSTRACT

The killing of George Floyd in 2020 propelled the Black Lives Matter movement into the global spotlight, calling attention to the racial inequities still persisting in America. In response, public libraries have hosted anti-racist book clubs as a way to address and discuss pressing issues of social and systemic inequity. These book clubs are often explicitly marketed as “anti-racist” and have been beneficial to the promotion of DEI within their communities. However, regular book clubs hosted by public libraries can and should still integrate DEI within their processes and discussions, even if they do not have an overt anti-racist theme. In this column, I will share the DEI strategies I have successfully embedded in the monthly book club I host at the public library where I work, including how I make title selections and how I have navigated the subsequent discussions. I hope this column is useful for library staff members who are interested in proactively embedding DEI in their libraries’ book club programming.

KEYWORDS

book clubs, public libraries, library programming, diversity, equity, inclusion

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Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are “fundamental values” of the American Library Association (ALA, 2023a) and libraries should aim to provide “collections and programs which accurately and authentically reflect the cultural perspectives of diverse communities” (ALA, 2023b). Since the killing of George Floyd in 2020, there has been increased attention on the Black Lives Matter movement which aims to “eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities” (BLM, 2023). Public libraries like Toledo Lucas County Public Library have held anti-racist book clubs to address “systemic inequity” and to promote “meaningful and compassionate conversation[s] about anti-racism” (LaPierre, 2020). However, to truly embody the ALA value of DEI, I believe that book clubs hosted by public libraries can and should still integrate DEI within their processes and discussions, even if they do not have an overt anti-racist theme.

Since September 2022, I have been hosting a monthly adult book club at Strathcona County Library (SCL), a public library in the province of Alberta, Canada. I will share how I have embedded DEI strategies into this book club, beginning from the title selection stage to guiding the meeting discussions so that they are thoughtful, respectful, and inclusive. For the purpose of this column, I define a “diverse book” as one either written by an author who belongs to historically underrepresented minority groups (i.e., 2SLGBTQ+, BIPOC) in North America or contains integral characters who belong to these groups.

Case Study: Adult Book Clubs at Strathcona County Library

SCL is a mid-size public library serving a population of 100,362 within Strathcona County (Strathcona County, 2023, p. 9). 80.3% of the population identifies as “White (European descent),” with the remaining 19.7% identifying as a visible minority (Strathcona County, 2023, p. 9). Working within the Adult Services Department at SCL, I am responsible for hosting the Monday afternoon book club, which is one of five book clubs hosted by the library. This book club meets monthly for one hour from September to June. During the 2022/2023 programming cycle, half of the participants were regulars who have been part of this book club for multiple years, and the other half were new participants who only joined during the 2022/2023 cycle. An average of ten participants attend the meeting monthly, and there are currently no participants who are visible minorities. As the host, I am a visible BIPOC minority. During the 2022/2023 programming cycle, we met and discussed a total of nine fiction titles.

Planning and Title Selection Process

When I surveyed my book club’s participants, most, if not all the participants cited that their main motivation for attending a book club was to read books that they would not otherwise have chosen for themselves. This is supported by a Book Browse report (2019), which states that 91% of surveyed book club participants feel that “exposure to books I otherwise wouldn’t read”

(p. 17) is an important attribute in their book club experience. Knowing this makes introducing diverse titles to my book club participants easier, as I know they are already self-selected to have curious and open-minded reading preferences.

At SCL, there are 135 book club kits available for borrowing by the public and by staff members for their book club programming. To embed DEI into library-run book clubs consistently, DEI needs to be already incorporated into the collection development policy in order to ensure that there are sufficient titles by historically underrepresented authors available for selection and circulation. My colleague, Colleen Melanson, a Library Services Specialist, is the selector for Strathcona County Library's book club kit collections. She orders around ten new kits every year, and her goal is to "collect a popular and diverse collection of fiction and nonfiction titles that stimulate book discussion" (Strathcona County Library, 2021). She strives to offer a mix of "Canadian, Indigenous, international, current and classic titles" as well as titles from BIPOC authors. While reviewing requests from patrons, she also avoids duplicating authors and topics that are already in the collection (C. Melanson, personal communication, 2023). Because of this, SCL's book club kits collection is sufficiently diverse for my purposes, and allows me to make my title selections using the following three criteria:

Availability of alternative formats

To ensure active participation in the book club meetings, any barriers to access should be removed wherever possible. When a new participant joins the book club, I will take note of their preferred reading format. I will make sure that 100% of all titles selected have sufficient copies in their preferred format, especially if they are alternative formats like large print, audiobooks, or e-books. Should there be insufficient copies in the book club kit or in the library's collection, I will supplement them using Interlibrary Loan.

High ratio of books with diverse elements

At least 50% of the titles I selected are by minority or underrepresented authors and/or contain minority or underrepresented characters that are integral to the story (refer to Appendix, Table 1). In the 2022/2023 programming cycle, 53% of the titles have such diverse elements (refer to Appendix, Figure 1).

Balance of tone and genres

Every month, I alternate between books with heavy subjects/tones and light subjects/tones as having "heavy" books back-to-back may be intimidating or overwhelming for participants. I also include a variety of genres to create a varied reading experience (refer to Appendix, Table 1).

Strategies for Book Club Discussions

Encourage further reading

During the book club meetings, participants have frequently commented that a book is “educational” and “informative” about an underrepresented group or culture. This is an understandable response, as there are historically fewer authentic representations of BIPOC or LGBTQ+ groups in English language fiction due to a persistent lack of diversity in traditional publishing houses (Tager & Shariyf, 2022). However, it is important to remind participants that fictional narratives are inherently imaginative, and a fictional narrative is not reasonably able to provide a complete or definitive viewpoint on complex issues that an underrepresented group or culture faces.

To better support their understanding, when my book club is discussing a title with diverse elements, I will select and bring to the meeting 4 or 5 non-fiction titles from the library’s collections that are related to the subjects covered in the book. I primarily select well-researched titles authored by journalists and experts within the underrepresented group and published within the last 5 years. For example, when we discussed *The Henna Artist*, the female protagonist had an arranged marriage. To enhance participants’ understanding of the subject, I brought the non-fiction books *The Newlyweds* by Mansi Choksi and *The End of Karma* by Somini Sengupta to our meeting. Both books explore how younger generations in India have responded to traditional norms like arranged marriages. During the meeting, I encouraged participants to check out the books if they would like to learn more about the subject(s). Many of the participants have been interested in these suggestions and have picked up these supplementary reading materials. By providing these supplementary non-fiction materials alongside discussions of a diverse fiction book, I am able to deepen and support participants’ understanding of real-world subjects that they may be less familiar with.

Responding to negative biases and stereotypes

Even though book club participants are more likely to be open to reading outside their comfort zones, it is also likely to be the first time they are encountering diverse content that contradicts their values and beliefs. Participants may also overgeneralize a negative representation of an underrepresented group in a book to all individuals within the group. These are the strategies I have utilized to respond to negative bias or stereotypical statements that come up during the discussion of a diverse title:

Ask “Where did you learn about this?” This question encourages participants to consider the sources of their own beliefs. If their sources are anecdotal or not well-substantiated, I will remind them not to judge an entire group based on the behavior of individuals. I also welcome participants to share with everyone if they know about activists within an underrepresented group who are raising awareness of issues within their own community or culture.

Ask the rest of the participants “Do you agree?” This question encourages other participants to consider possible counter-stereotypes. By doing so, the negative stereotype is “diminished in impact” because other positive associations are introduced (Choudhury, 2021, p. 77). However, it is still important “to maintain an awareness that all groups have both positive and negative qualities” as it is unrealistic to paint a group as “only positive” (p. 77).

Ask the rest of the participants “Is this something that only occurs within this group or does it happen within your culture/community?” This question encourages other participants to connect a fictional event or behavior to their own life experiences, which helps to dispel the misconception that a certain issue is inherently limited to members of underrepresented groups. According to Crisp and Turner (2011), “emphasizing shared identities that cut across existing intergroup dichotomies...weakens the salience of the “us” versus “them” category distinction” (p. 247).

Ending the conversation. If participants make vitriolic statements unprompted, I am prepared to respectfully but firmly let them know that such viewpoints are not welcomed in a library program. Support from administration is crucial for this strategy, as this allows library staff to set appropriate program boundaries with patrons. Unpacking implicit biases with patrons can also be a challenging process, as these biases are often a product of past experiences and long-term personal beliefs. Continuing to engage with the participant may derail the discussion unnecessarily and is likely to be beyond the professional scope of most library staff members.

Conclusion

Embedding diverse books into library book clubs poses its own challenges, but consistently doing so not only builds bridges between dominant groups and underrepresented groups, but it can also be very beneficial to participants. According to Crisp & Turner’s (2011) study, when motivated individuals are exposed to “minority viewpoints,” it can encourage “divergent thought [and] a more complex and systematic way of thinking” (p. 247). Other benefits include the cultivation of “cognitive flexibility” (p. 251) and a “more positive attitude towards outgroups” (p. 258)—all of which are beneficial to the overall social wellness of a community.

As a member of a visible minority group, embedding DEI in book clubs is also a way of recognizing my own personal power to make changes. Choudhury (2021) defines personal power as “inner strength and conviction...from psychological and spiritual qualities” (p. 145). Large-scale systemic change is a slow and sometimes disheartening process but being able to use my personal power to improve social inequity and make our living circumstances “more positive” (Choudhury, 2021, p. 145) is itself worth the effort. I hope to continue utilizing and honing these DEI strategies in future book club programming cycles, and I hope other peers working in the library field will have opportunities to do so too.

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Appendix

Table 1

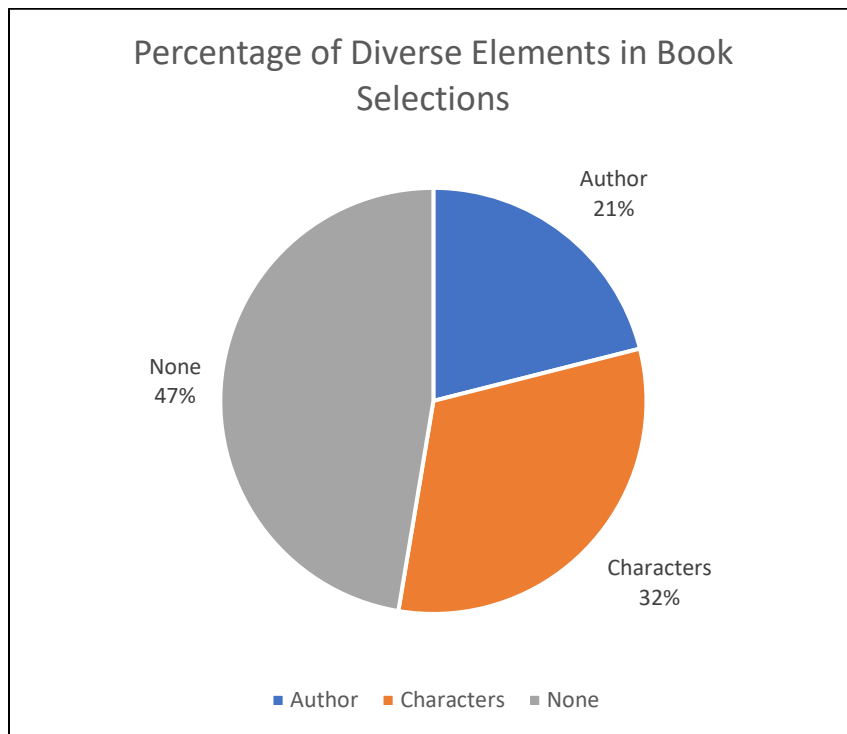
Characteristics of Book Club Title Selections for 2022/2023 Programming Cycle

Month -Year	Title, Author	Tone	Genre	Diverse Elements	
				Author	Character
Oct-22	Sourdough, Robin Sloane	Light	Speculative		
Nov-22	Half-Blood Blues, Esi Edugyan	Heavy	Historical	✓ Black Canadian	✓ Black Americans
Dec-22	The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo, Taylor Jenkins Reid	Medium	Historical		✓ LGBTQ+
Jan-23	The Henna Artist, Alka Joshi	Medium	Historical	✓ Indian American	✓ Indians
Feb-23	A Gentleman in Moscow, Amor Towles	Light	Historical		
Mar-23	Ru, Kim Thúy	Heavy	Autobiogra- phical / Historical	✓ Vietnamese Canadian	✓ Vietnamese
Apr-23	The Guest List, Lucy Foley	Medium	Mystery		

May-23	My Sister, the Serial Killer, Oyinkan Braithwaite	Light	Thriller	✓ Nigerian	✓ Nigerian
Jun-23	Cloud Cuckoo Land, Anthony Doerr	Medium	Historical / Speculative		✓ LGBTQ+

Figure 1

Diverse Elements in 2022/2023 Book Club Title Selection



Note. Out of a total of nine books selected in 2022/2023 book club cycle.