

# Diversity audits in library learning commons: Equity in action

“Libraries need to speak the truth so hard it hurts.”

– Chief Stacey Laforme, Ontario Library Association Super Conference, Toronto, January 2020

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**WE ARE IN A TIME** of social revolution. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in addition to the Pride, Black Lives Matter, and Me Too movements, have demanded that we collectively examine our understandings of equity and discrimination. The demands by these movements are necessary, and responses to these demands are long overdue.

Schools, like other institutions, are complicit in systemic discrimination and are part of a system that needs examination. Equally, school library learning commons (LLCs) are structures within this system. They can be fierce allies who commit to equity and inclusion in their practice, collections, and programming. So, as teacher-librarians, it is time for us to ask ourselves some hard questions: Which aspects of our practice have we failed to examine lately? Which voices, histories, stories and perspectives have we amplified in our collections, and which ones have been silenced or excluded?

One way to actively answer these questions is to launch an LLC diversity audit. LLCs have a duty to ensure that all patrons have access to high-interest, high-quality books that are representative of their lives and the lives of those who make up their communities. A diversity audit is a thorough review or inventory of items in the LLC, with the goal of determining exactly how diverse the collection is.

A diversity audit can be summarized as four key steps: taking a random sampling of the collection, tracking it against diversity markers, generating data, and then using the data to inform future acquisitions and directions. However, it is much more complex than these simple steps. It is a rich journey of professional development that addresses our implied biases. It also tackles a critical question: to what extent is the LLC collection representative of the school, the community, and even the world?

Secondary teacher-librarians in Richmond are currently immersed in a diversity audit. Our journey began in September as we unpacked concepts of identity, positionality, privilege, racism, systemic discrimination, diversity, equity, and intersectionality.

Considering our desire to expose underrepresented voices, we set out to establish categories of self-identification, also called “diversity markers.” In setting those, we grappled with big ideas: How do we define race? What is decolonization? What is gender? What are our understandings of sexual orientation and gender identity? How do we define “ability” and “disability,” “visible” or “invisible”? How do we decide which groups are underrepresented or marginalized?

We settled on markers of race, gender, ability, and sexual orientation and gender identity. We also included Muslim voices, as a response to increasing Islamophobia in Canada. Finally, we included “Own Voices” as

a marker, in a deliberate attempt to honour authors authentically writing about their own experiences, as opposed to having others appropriate their voices. We then pulled a random sampling of our young adult fiction and started tracking it against these selected markers.

Our next step will be to analyze our data and then use it to inform our practice and update our collections. Whose voices, histories, worldviews, and perspectives have we neglected? The diversity audit will be followed by advocacy, applying pressure on publishing companies to invest more in diverse literature. We will continue to amplify the voices that have not had equitable space on our shelves, in our buildings, or in our classroom conversations.

Rabia Khokhar, a teacher-librarian from Toronto, noted, “Equity is not something we do every once in a while, but rather the lens through which we intentionally plan and carry out our vision for the school library.”

Equity is something we can champion all the time: refusing silence, committing to learning and unlearning, and understanding that this important work begins with an examination of the self. An LLC diversity audit is important work—it is equity in action. ●

## MORE INFORMATION

The BC Teacher-Librarians’ Association hosted a webinar on LLC diversity audits in January 2021; it is available at [bctla.ca](http://bctla.ca).