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Loudness in the Library: Empowering Students to Think Critically About Identity and Bias

By **Anshu Wahi**, *Director of Diversity and Community*, **Allie Bruce**, *Children's Librarian*,
& **Jamie Steinfeld**, *Upper School Teacher*

How It Began

This past fall, during an 11/12s booktalking session with Bank Street's Children's Librarian, a girl asked, "Why is there a bird on that cover, when every other cover you've shown us so far has a picture of the main character?" The book was about a Mexican girl; the other books discussed up until that point had centered on white characters. And the librarian had a good deal of experience and interest in the topic, and the knowledge that marginalized groups tend to be less represented or not represented accurately on covers and in content. So, a big question, with a complicated answer.

That 15-minute booktalking session turned into a two-hour conversation about book covers and the publishing industry, which in turn developed into a yearlong project on Identity facilitated by a collaboration between the Librarian (Allie), one of the 11/12s Humanities teachers (Jamie) and the Director of Diversity and Community (Anshu). Throughout the year, the 11/12s class visited the library weekly to discuss portrayals of race, gender, sexuality, body image, class, ability and other aspects of identity in covers and content. They then began to explore how to take action against the injustices they found especially troubling, all the while being reflective about their own identities. The project truly shed light on what it means to be a student and educator in a progressive school.

What It Looked Like

Week 1: Students worked with the librarian to explore the topic of identity. They viewed a slideshow of book covers and the messages those covers convey to readers about identity. Students took notes on their observations about each book. Then the class ended the week with a hour-plus-long discussion and analysis of the covers of many novels.

Week 2: Anshu worked with the class to discuss vocabulary and terms related to race, identity and diversity. Allie then presented the students with an assortment of books that did represent marginalized groups on their covers, ones that went against

the norm.

Week 3: The class looked at how books are marketed differently for boy and girl readers. Homework included looking for examples of books with strong girls on the cover.

Week 4: The class continued their discussion on gender stereotypes, extended the conversation to include into “gendered” advertisements and toys. Students learned of a girl who recently campaigned for gender neutral Easy Bake Ovens. Homework included taking a pledge to take one action to address gender inequality.

Week 5: Students looked at examples of how issues surrounding body image emerged in the books they read. Allie read some excerpts from popular books and the class analyzed how the characters were described and defined by their physical appearance – particularly their weight.

Week 6: Students read a quote by a beloved author regarding body image in literature, and were then read excerpts from books by that same author that contradicted her comments. Students broke into small groups to discuss critically the implications of this.

Week 7: Allie presented a lesson on banned books and read the students a children’s book that was deemed controversial, as the main characters are samesex penguins and their baby. Students broke into small groups to discuss sexual orientation.

Week 8: Anshu led a conversation on the complexity of identity and various identifiers, as well as how and where those intersected. Students began to brainstorm topics relating to identity that they were interested in researching.

Week 9: The 11/12s class shared their project with the other 11/12s class. Each student shared a bit about what they had been learning and thinking about.

Week 10: Students went on a field trip to a large chain bookstore and took notes on ways various forms of identity were and were not represented in the children’s section of the bookstore.

Week 11: Two editors from a major publishing house visited the class and showed examples of books they have published. Students asked very thoughtful questions such as, “Have you ever been surprised by how a cover turned out?” and “Why do covers always have such perfect-looking girls?”

Week 12: The class had a discussion about the nuances of confronting bias.

Weeks 13 - 22: Students prepped for their final Identity Project through discussion, research, activities, current events and reflection. The Project consisted of an essay entitled *This I Believe*, relating to a topic of identity each student researched, and Identity Boxes, which represented their outer (public) and inner (private) identities. The essays were very thoughtful and moving, and got to the heart of many issues of identity and stereotypes for many of the students. The project culminated with presentations and a celebration.

Week 23: Students shared their reflections on this pilot project. Some asked that

more identifiers be explored; others requested less time talking about books. Many stated that their views about books, advertising and products were changed, and that they enjoyed challenging stereotypes.

Progressive Education in Context

The ideals of progressive education infuse all aspects of this project. What emerged as an unplanned, informal discussion in our school library evolved into a year-long investigation; the interests and comments of the students drove the curriculum. Because we take children and their views seriously, Allie, Jamie and Anshu met weekly to reflect upon student learning and plan follow-up lessons. This collaboration proved so fruitful that the curriculum will be taught next year, and it will be presented at two national conferences.

At the heart of this project was a focus on social activism and justice. Students were encouraged to look at real world issues, to stand up and try to influence change, and to expand their senses of responsibility and selves. Understanding and exploration went deep, to the benefit of everyone who was involved.