

Regular Feature - Reflections

Libraries are for Everyone

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Dr Deborah Reed holds a BA from the University of Southampton, an MA in Anglo-Irish Literature from University College Dublin (UCD) and a PhD in Anglo-Irish Literature, also from UCD, specifically on James Joyce's 'Finnegan's Wake'. Deb has had an extensive career in librarianship, working in both the public library service in Ireland and subsequently in Further Education colleges in the UK. In the latter she has held roles as both a librarian and an equality and diversity officer. Here she reflects on issues of social justice for libraries and how her experience as a librarian in Further Education made her aware of how it is especially important to reach out to those who may not even consider that libraries are spaces for them.

KEYWORDS

social justice, diversity and equity, access

LIBRARIES ARE FOR EVERYONE

Libraries have always been closely linked to the principles of social justice. Regardless of the type of service or library setting, librarians have long recognised that libraries exist to serve everyone, and that their resources are essential to all members of the community.

The ethos of libraries is rooted in the idea that access should be universal. Librarians, in all their varied roles, understand that the provision of library services is a matter of fairness and equity. This belief drives a commitment to making libraries accessible and relevant to every individual, regardless of background or circumstance.

EXPERIENCES IN FURTHER EDUCATION

After an early period working with Dublin public libraries, I moved into Further Education in England, serving in two different colleges. Historically, Further Education has been regarded as the 'Cinderella' service within the wider education sector, often overlooked and underfunded. At the time, government funding per student was lower than in any other branch of educational provision. Much of Further Education focuses on providing vital catch-up opportunities for young people who may not have thrived in mainstream schooling. This meant our students were less academically able, but their motivation was frequently remarkable and this positivity helped to overcome many challenges.

INEQUALITY IN LIBRARY PROVISION

My first awareness of the gap in equality occurred when I noticed how poor the provision was for the students with learning disabilities. Staff would sometimes comment that mainstream services did not cater for these learners, and it became clear that library resources were primarily aimed at those studying university-level courses, Access to University, or A-levels. This raised the question: should the library not also serve foundation studies students and those pursuing vocational paths?

I decided to explore the possibility of greater library support for these groups. Foundation and springboard course staff were immediately responsive and enthusiastic. There was no dedicated library budget for these courses and the Head of Foundation Studies provided a grant for shelving to house materials rarely found in libraries. I sourced and, in many cases, created resources tailored to these students. Library sessions were introduced into their curriculum, and tutorial groups were brought into the library to access the new materials. Staff, realising there were actually other useful resources in the existing collection which they didn't know about, began to use the library for careers guidance as well.

SUPPORTING VOCATIONAL LEARNERS

Vocational learners, such as those studying mechanics and building trades, were also notable absentees from the library. They had course requirements to achieve certain levels in English and Maths so we initially focused on resources in these areas. This led to requests from staff for more technical materials, and soon, students from these courses were regularly visiting the library as part of their tutorials.

There was, however, less initial interest from hairdressing and beauty therapy courses. While the courses were excellent, the staff felt there was little the library could contribute and offered me no suggestions. I began subscribing to a selection of hairdressing magazines. 'Black Hair' proved particularly popular. Staff frequently visited the library to read it, leading to the magazine being placed on a '4 hour loan' due to its high demand. In a predominantly white, rural area, staff appreciated the resource, which helped them reflect on teaching approaches to diverse concepts of race and beauty, prompting questions and further discussions about inclusion. They didn't know what they didn't know!

INCLUSION THROUGH THE STUDENT UNION

The student union appointed officers with equality roles and they led the student body's participation in national initiatives. The library, with several display areas throughout the college, partnered with the student union to celebrate events such as Black History Month, Holocaust Remembrance, and Pride. The officers were very keen on the collaboration and would use the library displays as points to distribute their own literature. We would display relevant stock in the library which then turned into increased loans. We actually had a copy of Nelson Mandela's autobiography: 'Long Walk to Freedom', which had never gone on loan until it was featured in a Black History Month display.

KNOCK-ON EFFECTS

These basic outreach efforts have led to many positive, unexpected outcomes. For example, the library provided a safe space for a student seeking information about their legal position, helping them avoid a forced marriage. We were a little more ambivalent about a local Indian restaurant sending in some dishes to sample as their son had told them about our celebration of a Muslim festival, so we diverted this generosity into the student union. Recognition also came from Ofsted, the UK government office that oversees standards in education, when they noted improved achievement among Bangladeshi students due to their increased library use. I will confess here no specific targeted intervention was implemented but we took the compliment as it reflected the broader impact of inclusive library practices.

PROGRESS AND CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Since these early efforts, understanding and appreciation of diversity have grown considerably. Physical accessibility barriers have largely been addressed, and community partnerships are now standard practice for most libraries. Yet, societal inequality persists, and there is still much to do to create truly inclusive environments. Having a strategy is crucial: it is important to observe who is absent from the library and to actively seek their views on what would encourage them to utilise resources to which they are equally entitled.

Throughout my time at the colleges, I was heartened to see a genuine commitment to supporting these vital initiatives. Perhaps inevitably, I found myself increasingly collaborating with senior managers and governors to drive meaningful improvements in diversity across the curriculum. There was an era of significant societal change and there was a willingness from Government to update Equality legislation to reflect this by reconciling the 100 plus pieces of legislation into some cohesive frameworks. I was pleased to contribute to these, from the development of the Gender Recognition Certificate Act, known as the Gender Recognition Act, right through until Equal Civil Marriage, more properly known as the Marriage (same-sex couples) Act. Some of these very much need updating so I trust that there are serving librarians who continue to champion progress and advocate for positive change.

REFERENCES

Mandela, N. (1995). *Long walk to freedom*. Abacus.

