



FROM THE LIBRARY

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and
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Advocacy Is Loud and Uncomfortable

Originally, this article was meant to be a single, unified idea—libraries should be a place of advocacy. What we have produced, however, are two sides of the same “advocacy” coin, as told from a librarian’s and a teacher’s perspective. However, as we began breaking down the experience of advocacy from each of these perspectives, we realized the perspectives themselves inform not only the ways we individually define advocacy in a school library space, but also the ways advocacy actions are perceived or misperceived by other educators and students. Our differences about advocacy are not just professional; they are also personal and, consequently, informed by our identities. One of us identifies as a hetero Latina woman, mother of a transgender child. The other is a gay, white man. Therefore, in this column, we approach the discussion of school library advocacy as a back and forth between these two perspectives as we aim to find common ground. We invite you to join us in this exchange.

Advocacy

A Librarian’s Perspective

Twenty years ago when I stepped into my first position as a school librarian, my ideas of controversial school library topics—those difficult topics we wrestled with as a profession—made for a short list: co-teaching, administrative support, adequate funding, book challenges, reading incentive programs, fines, and fixed versus flexible scheduling. While some of the simplicity of this list can be attributed to my lack of experience at the time, the history of my career as a school librarian and school library educator convinced me that some (if not a significant amount) of the rea-

son for the makeup of this list lay with the way school librarianship employs the word “advocacy.” The American Library Association’s Frontline Advocacy for School Libraries Toolkit, a resource that aims to help school librarians “identify opportunities to advocate for the value of libraries and their own value on a daily basis,” describes advocacy and its importance in the following ways:

1. It’s about saying and doing the little things on a daily basis that give others positive feelings and an appreciation of your school’s library, and doing the big things when times are hard.
2. It’s about partnering with your school librarian and administrators to place your school library media center in the spotlight at every opportunity.
3. [It’s] using everyday opportunities to tell or remind people about your library media center’s resources and value to students, families, and staff. (ALA, 2020)

In 2018, *School Library Journal* partnered with Gale Databases to survey 350 educators and school librarians on ways they effectively advocate for school libraries and students (Gale, 2018). The resulting white paper opens with a quote from a Texas school superintendent: “You are a change agent. You’re a curriculum person. You’re an instruction person. You’re a professional development person. Sell your value. Show your value. That’s where you make a difference.” Over and over again, the field of school librarianship spends a considerable amount of time defining and operationalizing advocacy in terms of the school librarian, and what the school library is, both as a place and as a process. It is no wonder Every-

Library's Annual Report on School Library Activism highlighted its efforts to develop what it identified as a key element of strong school library advocacy: school librarian political literacy skills (EveryLibrary, 2020). And while the SLJ/Gale white paper goes on to emphasize that a librarian's strongest path toward advocacy for the school library program is to advocate

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for students, its concrete examples collected from the field continue to posit advocacy as library activities strictly tied to student academic achievement.

For many years, this bounding of school library advocacy made sense to me—a former music educator used to advocating for the importance of music programs and the ways these contributed to student

learning and engagement. Today, it is a definition I find insufficient and constrictive. This is the only controversy on my list, on my mind, on my heart: school librarians limiting their advocacy to a push for the school library, its resources, and its programming. Meanwhile, BIPOC students and teachers suffer almost daily reminders that the country they love does not love them back (ESPN, 2020). Four out of 10 Muslim families report their children have been bullied because of their faith (ISPU, 2017). LGBTQIA + students overwhelmingly feel unsafe at school, with 70% experiencing verbal harassment, 29% physical harassment, and 12% physical assault, while transgender children and youth face increasing legislative and political attacks under the current administration (GLSEN, 2017; NCTE, 2020). Children continue to be the poorest age group in the United States; 11.9 million, 1 in 6 children, live in poverty at a rate 1.5 times higher than the poverty rate of adults (CDF, 2020). Add a global pandemic; an abrupt pivot to remote learning deployed amidst inadequate funding, support, and access to technology; and a historic social justice movement calling out racist police brutality, and suddenly school librarians are faced with a stark reminder that our students and teachers are hurting. They have been hurting for a long time.

A Classroom Teacher's Perspective

I am a gay high school teacher. Ostensibly, students have been able to speak freely about themselves for decades, but until the Supreme Court's ruling on June 15, 2020—which declared that the 1964 Civil Rights Act protects LGBTQ employees from discrimination based on sex—that kind of confession could have cost me my job. With that in mind, consider also that I teach at a rural school in South Georgia. Though all my colleagues know I am gay, many students have wondered why other teachers keep buying me unicorn paraphernalia (don't judge, I'm a collector). Of course, many students have guessed why, but also know it is not something they or I talk about in class. I often skirt the issue as best I can. My being in the closet is not about shame as much as it is about the difficulty of moving from shame to pride. How will my pride affect my relationship with students?

I do know that as students piece together my sexuality, the relationships I have with students change. Rarely has that been negative. And even as I struggle to come out to my students, when I model correct behaviors—continually encouraging other students to join in discussions, calling students by their preferred name and identified gender, creating mixed groups when possible, advocating for students' rights to have a voice in my class—students fall in line as students tend to do. As a result, frequently disenfranchised students learn that there are freedoms of discussion in my class that they cannot have in others. Trans students tell me how teachers have intentionally misgendered them; others may talk about how they experience the racism of South Georgia and our high school; still others who are differently-abled have felt welcome to lead the class in taking notes on the board. Because these students have a voice in my class, other students and I learn not just to acknowledge their presence, but also what we can *learn* by their presence.

Having a voice that is heard—that is the stuff of privilege. But the voices not heard are those of real students in our classes. There is only so much voice to go around in a classroom, and if we are to encourage minority students to speak, others who are often heard may have to give up some of their time. Ideologies will clash. Students will react. Parents will complain. However, students' voices are more important

than my own comfort. I know I must work to make sure these presences are integral. It is in this kind of confession, acknowledging and learning from all this, that I can move from shame to pride. When I think about school library advocacy, I think about my own students' experiences in the library. My sense is that students are often left to their own devices. Advocacy itself is not much of a concern, at least not in the way I define it.

A Librarian's Perspective

In discussing advocacy with Corey, it occurs to me that it is time our profession shifted its definition of advocacy from an inward perspective to an outward focus. While advocacy for school library programming, resources, and funding is necessary and should continue, all efforts should be in service of the student as a whole person—an individual worthy of being treated with love, with dignity, with respect. In practice, this means the school librarian prioritizes the well-being of their students *above* the school library itself. It means we are ready and we are present when teachers and vulnerable students need to discuss how they are being impacted by current events; as school librarians, we are needed in these spaces.

Not only do we maintain our presence through resources, but also by helping teachers bolster student voices in healthy and productive ways. In a recent Twitter thread, professional development facilitator Val Brown reminded educators that despite a documented increase in student and teacher concerns about the 2016 election, “In the effort to be non-partisan, teachers missed the opportunity to be honest and protect the most vulnerable students. The profession failed” (Brown, 2020). She posited various scenarios that might happen as schools exist in virtual spaces: “When a student changes their name to *Black Lives Matter* and another student calls them a terrorist, what are you going to do?”

A Teacher's Perspective

From the standpoint of a classroom teacher, it seems to me that the reach of a school librarian can sometimes be limited—either because an individual librarian lacks opportunity or because of how the role of school librarian gets defined. Sometimes, rather than promoting the library as a bridge between the school

library program and the students, school librarians settle for passively placing books and tools around the library. The belief is that students will magically evolve from information consumers to active learners who can use library resources to guide their own inquiry. In an ideal world, all high school students would immediately access and interact with a variety of perspectives and know how to cull through resources according to their needs, but when students lack the models for these skills, their consumption conforms to their own biases and preferences.

Sometimes this passivity results in a lack of direction in student reading. Even worse, sometimes the passivity is tantamount to censorship, the consequences of which are that students have no means of finding themselves in the library collection. In the past, I have made suggestions for readings that school librarians either subtly avoided or outright discouraged. Once I sug-

gested Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a graphic memoir set in a funeral home (thus, the title) about a queer child trying to work through her relationship with her gay father. Bechdel is a MacArthur Genius Grant winner and lends her name to the famous “Bechdel test.” Though the librarian in our school prided themselves on their graphic novel and comic book section, I had to remind them about the book three different times over the course of one school year. While I could have written off the librarian's forgetfulness as persistent memory lapses, I was suspicious. Did they not take note of the recommendation enough to research it? If they had researched it, surely they would have remembered it.

In another instance, I recommended *The Handmaid's Tale* for reading groups in my classes. That school librarian responded by saying, “Are you sure you want that book? There's quite a graphic sex abuse scene. It's one of the most challenged books.” Over the course of my career, I've been left with the impression that the goal of the school library is to be neutral to the point of being dispassionate. This facade of neutrality covers a concerted effort to silence student voices. Rather than protecting student voices and

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advocating for their needs, school library advocacy is defined as protecting the library and an individual's position as librarian.

Final Thoughts

From the Librarian

An outward focus in school library advocacy means we can no longer use the excuse of job security (and yes, I am calling it an excuse) to avoid developing, promoting, and maintaining diverse collections in the face of community pushback. It means we can no longer shrug our shoulders with a "it is what it is" attitude when the district-mandated Internet filter allows pass-through of positive search results for heteronormative relationships while censoring or negatively labeling LGBTQIA + topics. It means we must identify and address personal biases and acknowledge once and for all there is no place for remaining neutral and "treating the existence and/or civil rights of one group as something that is 1) up for debate and 2) a danger to others" (Farkas, 2019).

From the Classroom Teacher

The school library program should collaborate with classroom teachers to create a school community that supports all its members and ensures everyone is heard. Such a community can be controversial and threatening to those whose voices are typically guaranteed to be heard, so the school librarian must be courageous as they try to balance the scale. This approach to school library advocacy is loud. It is uncomfortable. It is necessary.

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