

Overcoming Cultural Gaps and Digital Divides

EVERY SCHOOL LIBRARY NEEDS AN AMY Hamrick. She works at Westerville Central High School in Westerville, Ohio. The educator who nominated this teacher-librarian as a “Down the Hall” candidate pointed out that she not only is an adept media specialist but also puts social-justice issues at the forefront of her work.

That’s important because the nearby city of Columbus has a large and growing population of both Somalis and Latinos. More and more, this trend has been reflected in Central High School’s student body of about 1,600. Hamrick’s library has become a gathering spot for diverse students and staff. In her spare time, Hamrick even bakes vegan cookies for her library helpers.

How do you make the library inviting to so many different types of people? Learning to say hello in Somali was the first step in identifying myself as someone who has an interest in connecting with our Somali population. ... I’ve learned that having a heart for ESL students is not the same as having sound pedagogy related to teaching students whose second language is English. And I took courses at an area university to move toward certification in teaching ESL.

We interview your favorite school administrators in each issue of Teaching Tolerance magazine.



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What else have you done to accommodate the different types of students at Central?

I think I learned from the school of hard knocks to put real time in an academic setting to learn about cultural practices. When I became a librarian nearly a decade ago, I think I started off from a very different place, one that had me trying to help students adapt to mainstream academic culture but that made no demands on me to really learn about other cultures. ... My first day of teaching research and technology in my role as teacher-librarian, I needed to call a group of Somali students downstairs from a balcony level in the library. Not wanting to embarrass them by loudly calling out to them, I instead simply gestured by extending my index finger and curling it inward,

palm up. The students were very offended, and I found out later that this gesture was considered to be

diminutive, a way of calling to farm animals. I felt awful and knew I needed to become much more culturally literate in order to serve the students well.

What did you do?

Finally, I took an “occupational Somali” four-day workshop where I learned much more than saying hello—I learned about culture and communication practices. My earlier point about even learning to say hello in Somali is that that tiny action began to bridge a gap. It told students that I cared about them in a way that telling them directly couldn’t have.

Do you think that effort helps make the library a more welcoming place?

I open the library before school, and many students gather there as a way to start their day. I have an open-access study hall policy and, when I am not teaching a class, I can spend time helping students with projects or technology. I’ve

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made sure to develop a collection of high-interest books that feature diverse main characters, and I display them alongside other books. This says, I hope, that we value diversity. So I rarely make displays of, say, LGBT books, but instead include them in displays or bibliographies for units of study along with other books, just as I think they should be. We have an area set up in the library for the ESL paraprofessional to tutor and help students with homework. The area affords students privacy and can be used by Muslim students for prayer, if they want. We’re open at lunchtime, too, and many students prefer to work and read in the library instead of dealing with the noise and social structure of the lunchroom.

Why did you become a librarian?

The best part about being a teacher-librarian is the fast-paced variety of each day. I collaboratively plan lessons with English, history, math, science and arts teachers, providing educational-technology instruction to students and staff. And I love the thrill of finding the right book for the right reader at the right time.

What roles have literature and stories played in your life?

Before I even fed my children at the hospital, I read them a book. Yes, really! I think that probably gives you an idea of the significance I place on literacy and the love of learning. This is in large part thanks to my own mother. Through reading, I’ve discovered ways of seeing and understanding that I could never have imagined.

What is the single largest challenge at your school library? How are you addressing it?

Without a doubt, it is the digital divide. As more and more information migrates

online and onto digital devices, students in poverty—already at a disadvantage—find themselves facing even more obstacles because they don’t have after-hours access to technology. Our open-access policy allows students to use library resources before and after school, at lunchtime and during study halls. And my role as a teacher facilitates bridging that gap, student by student.

What are your favorite books on social justice issues?

I really love *What Is the What* by Dave Eggers. The narrative format and writing style make the subject approachable for students. Students like Eggers’ *Zeitoun*, his true story about social injustice in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, circulates really well—especially because our teachers here recommend it. High school students are very interested in what their teachers recommend. And the more we talk to students about books—books we loved, books we didn’t, books we want to read next, books we think they’d love—the more they will read.

What’s the biggest compliment someone can pay you?

Usually, when I tell someone that I’m a librarian, they reply, “Oh ... You look like a librarian!” To protect my sense of self-esteem, I’ll take that as a compliment! But I was born with glasses and sensible shoes and a strong sense of curiosity. Really, I most appreciate when someone tells me I’m the hardest worker they know.

DOWN THE HALL

Know an excellent administrator, librarian or counselor we should interview?

Email us at editor@tolerance.org and put “Down the Hall” in the subject line.

Lessons Learned

We post new classroom lessons online each week. Activities are grade-specific, address a range of issues and align to standards. Here are four of the most-visited in recent months. Find them at tolerance.org/activities.

1. A CONTRACT ON BULLYING

(*Middle and High School*)

The mini-unit involves four steps: 1) Identifying the types of bullying, 2) Defining the types of bullying, 3) Putting students’ knowledge to the test and 4) Signing a contract.

2. BULLYING: TIPS FOR STUDENTS

(*All Grades*)

This checklist provides suggestions for what kids can do when bullying occurs. It is written for students being bullied, witnesses and the bullies themselves.

3. FIGHTING PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

(*Grade 3 and up*)

In these lessons, students will work toward understanding what it means to have a learning disability.

4. USING PHOTOGRAPHS TO TEACH SOCIAL JUSTICE: EXPLORING IDENTITY

(*Middle and High School*)

How do people identify themselves and how do others identify them? The activities will help students recognize that a person’s sense of identity has many components. Students will analyze two photographs, each dealing with a different element of identity.

5. WHAT’S FAIR?

(*Early Grades*)

This lesson explores the concept of fairness through questions such as: What is fair? Should all people be treated the same? What can you do if you see someone treated unfairly? Students are encouraged to reflect upon fairness in their own lives and communities.

IN YOUR CLASSROOM
DID YOU KNOW?

48% of 7th–12th graders experienced sexual harassment in the 2010–2011 school year.

—AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY WOMEN