Book review: Practical tips for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Libraries

Reviewed by: **Colette Townend**

Lambeth Libraries

Montague-Hellen, Beth (2024) *Practical Tips for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Libraries : Practical Tips for Library and Information Professionals*. London: Facet Publishing. ISBN 978-1-78330-601-5 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78330-602-2 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78330-603-9 (PDF), ISBN 978-1-78330-604-6 (EPUB).

CONTACT   Colette Townend ✉ CTownend2@lambeth.gov.uk 🏠 Lambeth Libraries

This is a useful handbook unpicking the descriptors and acronyms behind EDI, a recently evolved term used to encapsulate work and formal policies around equality, diversity and inclusion (as well as other occasionally included terms like equity, justice, belonging and dignity and similarly used acronyms DEI and D&I). Author Beth Montague-Hellen is a STEM library director and EDI specialist, here sharing her experiences in these fields as well as her personal lived experience as a library user with protected characteristics to provide guidance. She recognises concerns from audiences that EDI can be too often just "bandied about" without material impact, making clear her belief that "no one book, or author, or speaker can tell you how to 'do EDI'" (p. 1). She explains that to investigate the topic and work towards reducing inequality within a professional or social setting requires thoughtful consideration, expertise and positionalities to be built into an organisation's business-as-usual operations. This can achieve more depth to this work beyond a one-time policy paper rubber stamped with "EDI". The book's subtitle spelling out the acronym as "Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Libraries" bridges between any organisational need to build an EDI policy and any other less formal inclusion projects in library settings. Montague-Hellen does also cover the high profile backlashes and criticisms to EDI work, both scepticism from marginalised groups and rolling back from conservative and right wing decision makers (p.7-8). Published in September 2024, the book predates the very recent anti-EDI rollbacks from the newly re-elected Trump administration. The future impact of this formal defunding of EDI programmes is yet to be seen and how legislators and managers respond to this topic is certainly going to be a significant concern for American libraries going forward, with wider implications for librarianship internationally.

As the latest in Facet's 'Practical tips for library and information professionals' series this book joins other titles on developing staff and successful library management. Within this context the book is positioned to be a useful addition to help libraries establish and develop core principles and service design. It is appropriate for all services across the library sector, suggesting equality and inclusion to be considered holistically rather than a tick box exercise or one time consideration. There are suggestions for policy and law compliance with a UK focus – using core legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 as anchors to understanding where protections in law both need to be adhered to and can create inspiration for local library policy implementation. It can be difficult for a library sector handbook to effectively straddle academic and public library sectors as the issues can very much vary. Montague-Hellen does handle this successfully, by focusing in on some identity and social group needs which will likely impact any library environment. Specific project case studies are given as suggestions for implementation throughout, for example Sheffield Libraries' Pride outreach stall (p. 66) and University of York's parent and child study space (p. 79-80) could both be beneficial projects if replicated in our public library service. Throughout the book there were only a few examples given that may not have a universal relevance. Another particularly good chapter was on organising and promoting events which could be used by an event organiser or to develop training for events staff.

Cataloguing gets a relatively succinct overview in a chapter about decolonisation in collections (p. 89-91). Montague-Hellen takes a relatively top-down look at the topic, asking the reader "Have you ever looked at your cataloguing system? Really looked at it, not taken it at face value, but dived deep?" (p. 89), an instruction to library management to take a critical end user consideration to a service's catalogue. The chapter argues that inequitable metadata and discovery is the result of a lack of catalogue record updates, personal bias and historic discriminating mismanagement. She does cite the original researchers who have written extensively on this (mostly north American such as Melissa Adler or Emily Drabinski) so a reader would have the opportunity to explore further by looking up these works. Montague-Hellen is not a cataloguer or metadata practitioner, and perhaps a book like this written by someone with this background would have a more in-depth section as there were fewer case studies than other areas. But it does evidence that metadata and discovery concerns around equality and inclusion are recognised at managerial level. I certainly think there is scope for some more UK specific case study examples here, such as UK specific subject headings, instances of international subject headings which do not fit the needs of marginalised groups in the UK or gender privacy in RDA authority control. All of which I imagine cataloguers would like to see on library leadership's radar. The chapter did include a case study on the Bliss classification system, historically assumed more neutral than the Dewey Decimal Classification. However, a specific analysis of its use at Queens College, Cambridge University (p. 90-91) found instances of item classification the scheme upheld biases from staff and their worldview over the years of its implementation. This was a particularly interesting critical viewpoint, that a scheme not designed to prioritise one group over another could still do so through its

application. It is a great example to give to staff to reflect on how to carefully implement a scheme which would require them to check their own biases.

Considering the content, this book would be valuable for library management tasked with writing an EDI policy, facing specific local issues or any library staff with an interest any aspect of equality and inclusion looking to formalise projects and viewpoints into suitable presentations for management consideration. It could also be included in library and information course reading lists and library collections as an initial reference book for these issues. As a practical guide it summarises the issues and refers to further reading suggestions for the theory and research behind the subjects so students could refer to the cited literature in any of the relevant sections.