School libraries need to be more than havens for students who sometimes don’t feel safe or valued; they must be places where student identities are celebrated and their experiences are carefully considered.

We often talk about school libraries as third spaces and safe havens, but what does that look like today? Is there one way of making a space safe, or are there many? How are school libraries similar to other libraries, and how are they different? More importantly, can we go beyond safe havens and toward celebrations of student identity, kindness, and inclusion? The authors in this issue share philosophies, specific plans, and an overall call to action for school librarians to create safe spaces for their learners. They show us how, and more importantly they show us why.

When I first read the articles in this issue, I noticed a common theme: the need to truly see and value all facets of students’ identities. School libraries need to be more than havens for students who sometimes don’t feel safe or valued; they must be places where student identities are celebrated and their experiences are carefully considered.

The more I read the articles in this issue, the more I was inspired to keep searching for more ways to make our school libraries safe, inclusive spaces. It isn’t always easy to make school libraries safe for all—we sometimes need to deeply consider our own implicit biases—but the rewards are priceless. School libraries can be safe havens for students by focusing on inclusion.

Include is the Shared Foundation from AASL’s National School Library Standards on which this issue rests. While it’s hard to pick a favorite, Include might be mine—how can you not be inspired by the idea of learners who “[demonstrate] an understanding of and commitment to inclusiveness and respect for diversity in the learning community” (AASL 2018)?

The articles in this issue show school libraries where students are surrounded by inclusiveness and respect for diversity. It’s clear students respond to this inclusion and respect. When they are seen, respected, and appreciated by their school librarians, they are engaged and excited learners.

For me, Lisa Gay-Milliken and Jeff DiScala’s article on going beyond book displays to truly support LGBTQ students strikes a very personal chord. I remember—intensely—feeling like I (years away from being ready to come out) never really belonged at school. I hope each reader will find their own entry point as they read about school librarians across the country doing the work to make sure students feel seen and welcomed in ways I and other school librarians weren’t (or, sometimes, the ways we were).

Barbara Gabaldon demonstrates how valuing student diversity, both culturally and linguistically, can create school libraries that go beyond traditional ideas about school libraries and create vital spaces for all learners.

In an online exclusive, Jennifer Sturge, Marianne Fitzgerald, Donna Mignardi, and Sandy Walker show us...
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how the AASL Standards align with Teaching Tolerance’s Social Justice Standards, further emphasizing how the work of seeing and advocating for our students sits at the center of the school librarian’s role.

From New Jersey, Keungsuk Sexton shows us how a strong school library can be seamlessly embedded in the school and larger school community so students find support everywhere they go. The third space of the library, in her hands, becomes something that surrounds students with support, love, and the desire to spread the safe space of their school to the world around them.

On the other side of the country, Kay Waitman’s school library in Anchorage is full of love of language, with students reading in many languages and feeling justifiable pride in their home languages as well as English. Their bilingual skills are sources of strength and pride, and the school library is stronger for its embrace of families, languages, and cultures.

Three librarians from Seattle give us a window into a multiplicity of ways to support students and use diversity within the surrounding school community to bolster both library programming and student and family engagement. Nancy Fisher-Allison and Paula Wittmann show us how to support specific groups of students and create a space that is welcoming and inviting for any student who is drawn to the library. In an online exclusive Mary Bannister gives concrete suggestions for how to educate ourselves and support our LGBTQ students.

Elizabeth Pelayo writes about her work to become a trauma-informed school library. She outlines the philosophies that inspired her school’s work and provides practical suggestions for how to create library safety and inclusion in a trauma-responsive way.

When you read Melanie Toran’s article, you may feel like you’re right there with her, seeing her rapport with students and watching the way they respond to her support. Her understanding of and support for LGBTQ students will change lives for the better, and she shows us how the AASL Standards align perfectly with this work.

It has been an honor to guest-edit this issue and to work with so many fantastic colleagues and authors whose writing shows us the many ways a safe haven can be a quiet refuge or a busy hub, a place to calm down or a place to celebrate, a third space or a feeling of support, or all of these things at different times and for different students. I hope you enjoy the articles in this issue as much as I did, and find some practical advice that inspires you to Think, Create, Share, and Grow.

Rachel Altobelli lives with her wife in Albuquerque, NM, where she is the director of library services and instructional materials at the Albuquerque Public Schools. Her work has appeared in Knowledge Quest, American Libraries, the KQ website, and the School Library Journal website. Rachel currently serves as a member of this year’s AASL Presidential Initiative Task Force, which is focusing on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. She has served on several other AASL committees and is active in her state association. She was privileged to be the AASL member guide for the group of ALA Emerging Leaders who created Defending Intellectual Freedom: LGBTQ+ Materials in School Libraries. She is passionate about advocating for the representation of all students in school library collections.

Work Cited: