SCHOOL LIBRARIES & SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

& EXPLORING FOR CHANGE

CURATING

ENGAGING

COLLABORATING

INQUIRING

INCLUDING

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Librarians are fierce defenders of freedom. Throughout time, public librarians have always tried to fulfill community needs in times of discord and controversy. We’ve all heard the stories of the librarians who stood up to the FBI and protected patron records. Recently, Carla Hayden kept the doors of the library open during the unrest in Baltimore and continued to serve the community in a time of need. These are just a few examples of what public librarians are doing to promote social justice.

School librarians are also leading the way in promoting social justice within the many roles they fulfill. Smaller deeds, stories, teachable moments, and actions happen in a school library. These small deeds and actions positively affect students, faculty, and the school community while creating an atmosphere of belonging, positive identity, and diversity. School librarians constantly advocate for their students, their libraries, their funding, their positions. It should come as no surprise that school librarians and school libraries are playing a larger role in being champions for social justice.

In her TED Talk, 2017 teacher of the year Sydney Chaffee stated, “Social justice should be a part of the mission of every school and every teacher in America. If we want ‘liberty and justice for all’ to be more than a slogan” –Sydney Chaffee (2017).

According to Rebecca Miller, in order to be fair, we need to be kind. “At the core of kindness is compassion, empathy, and the ability to put others’ needs first. That can mean learning how to listen, as Elisa Gall did with her third graders around #OwnVoices books, and addressing internal or baked-in biases, as Jane Eastwood did at the Saint Paul Public Library. It also can mean applying Universal Design principles toward inclusivity or securing fairness in your approach to MakerSpaces. In each case, the answer lies in doing something about inequality when it is identified” (2017).

In this article, we will focus on how creating a culture of equity and social justice connects to not only the AASL Standards but also the Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards. By leveraging these two sets of powerful standards, school librarians can defend equity and be powerful partners in the school community in the realm of social justice.

AASL Standards...Meet Social Justice Standards, an Introduction

The AASL Standards clearly address diversity and inclusivity. The Shared Foundations spell out the ways in which students, school librarians, and school libraries strive to address diversity and equity. One of the Common Beliefs is that the school library is a unique and essential part of a learning community (AASL 2018). As part of this belief, school librarians provide equitable, personalized learning for every learner’s well-rounded education. The Common Beliefs also state that students should be well-prepared for college, career, and life; intellectual freedom is every learner’s right; and technologies must be appropriately integrated and equitably available (AASL 2018). Throughout the Common Beliefs, the word equitable appears multiple times. The role of equity in social justice cannot be denied.

Additionally, when exploring the Domains of Think, Create, Share, and Grow, school librarians are empowering learners to:

- Think critically and gain knowledge
- Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, and apply knowledge to new situations while also creating new knowledge
- Share what is learned ethically while being a productive member of a democratic society
- Pursue personal growth (AASL 2018)

These Domains encourage students to grow and learn in a responsible manner while applying knowledge to new situations and making informed decisions. They also allow a relationship between the standards and social justice.
Several years ago, Teaching Tolerance developed the Social Justice Standards (<tolerance.org/frameworks>). These standards were created using Louise Derman-Sparks’s goals of anti-bias education in early childhood (Sparks 2009). The Social Justice Standards are comprised of anchor standards that are categorized into four different areas: Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action. The descriptors for these anchor standards function in the same way as the Key Commitments in the AASL Standards. Each descriptor ties the five corresponding standards together.

**Anchor Standards and Domains**

**Identity**

1. Students will develop positive social identities based on their membership in multiple groups in society.
2. Students will develop language and historical and cultural knowledge that affirm and accurately describe their membership in multiple identity groups.
3. Students will recognize that people’s multiple identities interact and create unique and complex individuals.
4. Students will express pride, confidence and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people.
5. Students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces.

**Diversity**

6. Students will express comfort with people who are both similar to and different from them and engage respectfully with all people.
7. Students will develop language and knowledge to accurately and respectfully describe how people (including themselves) are both similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups.
8. Students will respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and will exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way.
9. Students will respond to diversity by building empathy, respect, understanding and connection.
10. Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified.

**Justice**

11. Students will recognize stereotypes and relate to people as individuals rather than representatives of groups.
12. Students will recognize unfairness on the individual level (e.g., biased speech) and injustice at the institutional or systemic level (e.g., discrimination).
13. Students will analyze the harmful impact of bias and injustice on the world, historically and today.
14. Students will recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics.
15. Students will identify figures, groups, events and a variety of strategies and philosophies relevant to the history of social justice around the world.

**Action**

16. Students will express empathy when people are excluded or mistreated because of their identities and concern when they themselves experience bias.
17. Students will recognize their own responsibility to stand up to exclusion, prejudice and injustice.
18. Students will speak up with courage and respect when they or someone else has been hurt or wronged by bias.
19. Students will make principled decisions about when and how to take a stand against bias and injustice in their everyday lives and will do so despite negative peer or group pressure.
20. Students will plan and carry out collective action against bias and injustice in the world and will evaluate what strategies are most effective.

The goal of the framework is “that children will learn more effectively and grow up with a healthy understanding of who they are and how to skillfully live and learn alongside people who may or may not share their identity groups” (Teaching Tolerance 2017). Figure 1, taken directly from the Teaching Tolerance Framework, shows an overview of each of the areas of the Social Justice anchor standards.

*Figure 1: Social Justice anchor standards with domains.*

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Each domain in the Social Justice Standards is comprised of five anchor standards (see figure 1). Within those anchor standards, Teaching Tolerance has created grade bands spanning K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12. Each standard in the grade band addresses the same principle, but in a language that is appropriate to the grade level. Figure 2 shows a crosswalk of a standard in the Action domain as it changes from kindergarten through grade 12.

Making Connections between Standards

Together, the AASL Standards and the Social Justice Standards create a powerful framework for the work in leading the charge to integrate teaching social justice in the school library. The AASL Standards consist of six Shared Foundations: Inquire, Include, Collaborate, Curate, Explore, and Engage. Digging deeper into the Key Commitments for each of the Shared Foundations, the relationship between school libraries, the AASL Standards, and the Social Justice Standards becomes visible immediately.

Let’s take the Shared Foundation of Include. Include states that learners, school librarians, and school libraries will demonstrate an understanding of and commitment to inclusiveness and respect for diversity in the learning community (AASL 2018). There are a couple of keywords to pay attention to in that very powerful sentence: inclusiveness, respect, and diversity. When looking at the learner standards, learners “contribute to a balanced perspective when contributing to a learning community by describing their understanding of cultural relevancy and placement within the global community” (AASL 2018). Learners also are “adjusting their awareness of a global learning community by interacting with learners who reflect a range of perspectives, evaluating a variety of perspectives,” and “contributing to discussions in which multiple viewpoints on a topic are expressed” (AASL 2018). This can all be framed through a social justice lens.

Take, for example, students at a high school who read Their Eyes Were Watching God. The school librarian and the English teacher want to highlight the social and educational issues of the novel, which many students declare boring. They can achieve this by connecting the novel to the #MeToo movement. Rather than focusing solely on race, the collaborating team of the school librarian and the English teacher focus on gender. Students study the Anita Hill testimony, they read current event articles on the growing #MeToo movement, and they debate different sides in class. Ultimately, students are able to apply the principles of inclusiveness, respect, and diversity to the main character Janie and the gender roles and relations in the novel to social justice and equity in today’s society. At the conclusion of this unit, students met both AASL Standards for Include and the Social Justice Standards included in the Action, Diversity, and Justice domains.

The Collaborate Shared Foundation states that students, school librarians, and school libraries will “work effectively with others to broaden perspectives and work toward common goals” (AASL 2018). The key words are broaden perspectives. By integrating the AASL Standards with the Social Justice Standards, students can broaden and deepen their understandings, engage in a learning group, establish connections with others, and involve diverse perspectives in their own inquiry process. However, the statement that truly ties the Collaborate learner standards to the Social Justice Standards is: “Learners will actively participate with others in a learning situation by recognizing learning as a social responsibility” (AASL 2018). By recognizing their responsibility to learn together and by working in diverse groups, students will recognize their diversity and welcome each other’s unique identities in order to collaborate. The AASL Standards blend beautifully and relate directly to the Social Justice domain of Diversity. The
Social Justice Standards state that students will “respond to diversity by building empathy, respect, understanding and connection.”

For example, a high school librarian collaborated with her entire team of English teachers on multiple units focused on social justice and human compassion. Students explored concepts such as:

- What is justice?
- What is social justice?
- How does human behavior influence justice?
- What are the roles of the individual and society in advancing/promoting justice?

Students also explored the concept of compassion and morality. For this unit, a list of books with a social justice theme was curated for students. Each student engaged in finding the book that was right for them and then collaborated with a small group of students to engage in book discussions and activities. Students collaborated with each other with very little teacher-led direction. Instead, the teachers and school librarians supported the students with personalized meetings and by ensuring that there were norms for collaboration. Students collaborated with each other to create a final project that shared the social justice themes in their chosen books.

The Shared Foundation Explore encourages students to discover and innovate in a growth mindset developed through experience and reflection. Students are encouraged to read widely and deeply, reflect, and engage in inquiry for personal growth. In addition, the Explore Shared Foundation asks learners, librarians, and libraries to be problem solvers; this relates directly to the Social Justice domains of Justice and Action. As shown in the examples above, students explore issues and ideas through a variety of lenses.

For the purposes of this article, we have focused on the Shared Foundations of Include and Collaborate, and we touched on Explore. However, figure 3 shows keywords from each of the six Shared Foundations to show how they relate to the Social Justice Standards.

**Curriculum Connections**

As a specialist for school libraries, I (Jennifer) worked to roll out the new AASL Standards with the school librarians in my district and saw an opportunity to revise, refresh, and renew our school library curriculum. The opportunity to integrate the Social Justice Standards and the AASL Standards into our practice fit naturally into learning about the new AASL Standards and in curriculum revision.

In the county, school librarians worked together to rewrite and revise the curriculum to reflect the 2018 AASL Standards and the Social Justice Standards. The school library curriculum starts by encouraging inclusivity, diversity, and the celebration of identity in a launch unit for every grade. Every school library is a community, and in the first unit students will be introduced to building a library community. In this unit, students are exposed to books that celebrate identity and diversity and explore their school community. In kindergarten, the book *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold is used to introduce the idea of inclusion, collaboration, identity, and diversity. The units in subsequent grades include read-aloud books *Shades of People* by Shelly Rotner and *What I Like about Me* by Allia Zobel Nolan. In the upper elementary grades, lessons on identity, collaboration, and diversity include utilizing Teaching Tolerance lessons on developing empathy and developing identity.

As part of the inquiry process, students in each grade engage with author studies. One author study is the study of families and includes Donald Crews, Ann Jonas, and Nina Crews. Each is a renowned author in his or her own right and a member of the same family unit. Throughout the curriculum, inquiry is taught through the lens of social justice, diversity, and equity, which are interwoven into the fabric of our library communities. Because each of the Shared Foundations neatly ties into each other, building a curriculum that ensures students will Include, Inquire, Collaborate, Create, Engage, and Explore meant creating multiple units at each grade level to meet the needs of the learners.

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**Figure 3.** Connections between the Shared Foundations in the AASL Standards and the Social Justice Standards.
In the elementary schools, the curriculum for information literacy, media literacy, and digital citizenship integrates the Shared Foundations with the Social Justice Standards. Students as young as kindergarten learn how engaging with the media can affect how they see their identity. As students engage with the digital citizenship aspect of the curriculum, they explore and engage with the content and meet the AASL Shared Foundations of Inquire, Curate, and Engage. They do all this while also learning how they can take action when someone has been hurt or wronged by bias, building empathy and expressing pride and confidence without denying the value of others, all part of the Social Justice framework.

The impact the school librarian can have on creating a culture where every student feels respected, valued, and finds equality is beyond measure. By strategically planning and implementing the AASL Standards in school libraries in collaboration with teachers while also embedding the Social Justice Standards, school librarians can ensure that every student is impacted in a positive manner. To once again quote 2017 National Teacher of the Year Sydney Chaffee, “When our students walk into our classrooms, they bring their identities with them. Everything they experience in our rooms is bound up in historical context, and so if we insist that education happens in a vacuum, we do our students a disservice. We teach them that education doesn’t really matter, because it’s not relevant to what’s happening all around them” (2018).

Be the positive experience. Celebrate students’ identity. Celebrate diversity. Celebrate that school libraries make a difference. Be the change.

Additional Readings and Resources
Derman-Sparks, Louise, et al. 2015. Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs. Teachers College Press.

Works Cited:

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