



School librarians are on the front lines of ensuring the safety of our learners when we choose books that represent people in our communities and the broader world.

Discernment and Censorship—The Collection Development Conundrum

Jennisen Lucas, 2021–2022 AASL President | jennisenlucas@park6.org

In the book *Our Enduring Values Revisited: Librarianship in an Ever-Changing World*, Michael Gorman writes that the job of librarians and archivists is to “preserve and disseminate the human record” (2015, 12). His words embolden me as a school librarian and humble me as a human being. What a great call to duty! Many of you will have heard me say this before because this quote is a huge part of my “why”: school librarians have a sacred duty to connect all people to the human record.

The more I think about that part of my why, the more I realize that this charge means that we must pay close attention to whose stories we are sharing and whose are left out. As we curate our collections, are we including stories about as many different ways of life as we can? Are we ensuring that everyone in our community is represented? Are we sharing stories about people who live outside of our immediate communities? One of my students recently pointed out that not including all stories causes us to “lose the nuance of society.”

When I first began my career as a school librarian, I worked in an elementary school in which 49 percent of the students were white, 49 percent were Black, and 2 percent were “other” (Hispanic, Russian, Middle Eastern, Native American, and Asian). There was a huge gap between the white students and everyone else in reading scores and engagement.

As we curate our collections, are we including stories about as many different ways of life as we can?

For my Master’s paper I looked at the collection I inherited. The school relied on a reading program for grading “free reading,” and I discovered that only 10 percent of our collection had corresponding tests in the program. I then looked at that 10 percent of the collection and discovered that only 10 percent of those books had Black main characters or authors. In effect this meant that, based on the way our learners were graded, only 1 percent of the books in the school library represented half of our student population. Our students couldn’t see themselves in the books they read, so they didn’t read (Lucas 2003).

I was able to use this data to acquire a \$10,000 grant to update our collection to be more representative. The reading interest went up almost immediately, although it still took a little while for scores to rise.

Now, almost twenty years later, as a nation, we are looking at the collections of school libraries. How do we discern what materials to purchase for our school libraries? How do we ensure that all learners have a chance to see themselves in a story? How do we ensure that our learners grow the empathy they need to understand others? These are complicated questions.

We need to represent children of all colors, nationalities, and creeds; children whose families are traditional, nuclear families with both male and female parents; children from divorced families; children who are adopted into their families; children who are raised by grandparents; children whose parents are same-gender couples; children whose lives are idyllic; children who have suffered trauma; and the list could go on and on and on. There are as many variations on this theme as there are students in our schools.

This is not new. What is new is the availability of these many stories. Twenty years ago it was much harder to find stories for children with LGBTQ characters, for instance. It was even harder to find books about Black children that did not invoke the Civil Rights Movement or slavery—Black Joy was still missing. Thankfully, we are moving forward, even if slowly.

Another thing that hasn't changed is funding shortages. With no budget for library books, I needed the grant to update my collection twenty years ago. In my current district, we do have a budget for library materials, but we all know that there will never be enough funding to buy everything we need or want for our shelves. The decisions become even more difficult when we consider the hidden needs of our learners. I know several people as adults who could have benefitted from books about sexual abuse when they were children, if there were any available. Children don't always have the words to explain the "secret" or "shameful" thing that happened only to them, and adults don't want to expose them to these things, so they don't know how to ask for help.

And, today, in an age when our society seems bent on keeping an old-fashioned, rose-colored view of the world for our children, guarding against self-censorship is exceedingly difficult. School librarians are on the front lines of ensuring the safety of our learners when we choose books that represent people in our communities and the broader world. There may be many topics about which we are hesitant to address

because we don't want to expose children "too soon" or we are concerned about the subject matter ourselves. There are topics about which we have strong opinions that feel "right" to us, and there are the topics we feel like we must still include to provide the opposing side. We must be open minded in our approaches without foregoing legitimacy of arguments. It is no wonder we are so tired.

I know this article does little to address the questions surrounding the choices we make in our collection. I don't pretend to know the answers, but I am sure that as you read this issue, you will gain perspective from our amazing colleagues that will help you find answers to your questions. I am looking forward to this issue for this reason!

I do want to ensure that you know that we all struggle with these questions. You are not alone. Working together, learning from each other, and asking these important questions are highlights of our professionalism, and school librarians are professionals.

Works Cited:

- Gorman, Michael. 2015. *Our Enduring Values Revisited: Librarianship in an Ever-Changing World*. Chicago: ALA.
- Lucas, Jennisen. 2003. "AR: Accelerated Reader and Accurate Reflection? A Collection Assessment of the Accelerated Reader Collection at an Elementary School in North Central North Carolina." Master's paper, University of North Carolina. <<https://ils.unc.edu/MSpapers/2886.pdf>> (accessed Dec. 10, 2021).

Jennisen Lucas (*she/her/hers*) is the 2021–2022 AASL President. She is the district librarian for Park County School District #6 in Cody, Wyoming. She earned her MLS from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2003, and earned National Board Certification for 2006–2026. She has been chair of the Wyoming School Library Interest Group and has been a member of or chaired multiple AASL committees.