

# Check It Out!

## WANT HELP BOOSTING CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS AT YOUR SCHOOL? ASK YOUR LIBRARIAN!

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**TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LIBRARIANS** are smashing the stereotype of the quiet, cardigan-clad lady who does nothing but check out books and shush noisy patrons. In fact, a growing number of school librarians and library science experts are raising their voices to promote the vital role school librarians play in education. Nowhere is this truer than in the realm of social justice education, where school librarians—often referred to by

the more accurate term “media specialists”—wield so many vital tools for challenging bias and supporting equity.

“Literacy is a civil right,” says Kafi Kumasi, assistant professor at Wayne State University’s School of Library and Information Science. “If we think of school libraries as natural repositories and agents of literacy, then by extension libraries are also a civil right, and having a school librarian is a civil right. Our role is as instructional partners with teachers.”

### Gaps on the Shelves

Research on the diversity of authors and characters in children’s publishing consistently yields troubling data and highlights the need for skilled library professionals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) tracks statistics on people of color in published children’s books. Of the 3,200 books received by the CCBC in 2013, only 93 were about African Americans and just 68 had African-American

authors. Thirty-four were about American Indians (18 authors), 69 concerned those of Asian Pacific descent (90 authors) and 57 were about Latinos (48 authors). Authors and characters representing nondominant sexual orientations, religions, languages, income and ability levels also consistently fare poorly in the publishing market. These numbers have remained stagnant for decades.

While many would agree this trend should change on principle, the demand for more diverse libraries should really be driven by the emotional and developmental cost to students, says Jamie Naidoo, an associate professor at the University of Alabama School of Library & Information Studies. Naidoo authored the 2014 white paper “The Importance of Diversity in Library Programs and Material Collections for Children.” His conclusion? Never seeing themselves in books is devastating for children.

“It’s just sending the message that they’re not important,” he says. “That’s

something that happens in childhood that obviously goes on throughout the child’s life.”

Teacher-librarian Crystal Brunelle of Northern Hills Elementary School in Onalaska, Wisconsin, agrees with Naidoo. Brunelle knew that Hmong students make up the largest minority group at Northern Hills, so she made sure she had Hmong books on the shelf. However, when a third-grade Hmong student was surprised to learn he could check out books pertaining to his culture, she realized some of her students weren’t aware of what the library had to offer. Dismayed, Brunelle went into promotional mode, displaying the available Hmong books prominently and looking for more, talking up the materials to students, trying to speak in Hmong and inviting a Hmong author to speak at the school. The strategy worked.

“They’ve learned... there are all these books to choose from,” Brunelle says. “It’s exciting. And some of the students who are not Hmong are also enjoying checking out those materials and asking questions of their friends or just appreciating the fun stories that are there.”

Eventually, Brunelle applied the same strategy to other culturally responsive literature, and now her school library has a robust collection of books in Korean, Urdu, Spanish,



Ojibwe, Chinese and other languages. Most important: Students are aware of them and use them.

### Stepping Out of the Stacks

Seeking out and promoting materials that represent diverse identities and experiences is just one way librarians can foster more inclusive school environments. Some librarians also take

### »»» SCHOOL LIBRARIANS UNDERSTAND THE POWER OF WORDS.

So for years the American Library Association (ALA) and its various divisions, including the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), used the term “media specialist” to better capture the crucial role school librarians play in education. The usefulness of this more accurate term has its limits, though: Not everyone knows what a media specialist does. Recently, ALA and AASL have used the term “school librarian” in organization publications.

on instructional roles, working closely with teachers to incorporate culturally responsive materials into the curriculum. Others create library-based programming designed to engage students, enhance their research skills and promote intellectual curiosity.

Kumasi notes that librarians often have the research skills and access to data that can help schools get to know

self-examination should be the first order of business.

“A lot of my work is sort of the cerebral work of librarians understanding who they are and how they’re positioned in the community,” Kumasi says of her role as a librarian-educator. “If you don’t understand diversity from a cognitive and interpersonal view and don’t understand your own worldviews

learning specialists or multicultural media publishers. If physically visiting a school isn’t possible, host a virtual author appearance via online tools, such as WebEx or Google+ Hangouts.

➡ **OFFER AN OPEN HOUSE.** Other educators may not be aware of the research skills, programming ideas or database access librarians possess. Hosting an open house provides the opportunity

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their surrounding community. Looking at population shifts in census data, for example, can help identify ways a school’s demographics may be changing and whether or not the school’s programming meets these changing needs. “Philosophically, you have to have a disposition of questioning who’s left out of the picture,” she says.

But regardless of how a librarian uses creativity and skill to expand her role, Kumasi emphasizes that

and biases and stereotypes, you can’t really be that culturally competent librarian that you might strive to be.”

### Library Marketing 101

Brunelle and other social-justice-minded librarians know that, to be more effective in their roles, they must “market” the media center and make it clear how their expertise can benefit other educators—and their students. “It’s incumbent on us to change perceptions,” says Sandra Hughes-Hassell, professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Information and Library Science. “We have to share something different; we have to be something different if we want them to buy into that new image of school librarians.”

To do this, librarians who have successfully expanded their reach recommend a variety of techniques to spread the word about resources and forge collaborative relationships.

➡ **NETWORK.** School librarians can broaden their impact by connecting with state American Library Association chapters, joining district equity committees and engaging professional learning communities (either online or in person) focused on diversity issues and library science.

➡ **INVITE EXPERTS TO SPEAK.** Approach authors, child development experts, social emotional

to showcase all that the library—and the librarian—has to offer.

➡ **CREATE A WEB PAGE.** If teachers aren’t reaching out, synthesize a clearinghouse of links, lists and resources. The accessible format may increase the likelihood they’ll pursue quality multicultural titles.

➡ **ATTEND TO CULTURAL DIFFERENCES.** Students may respond differently to learning opportunities based on their lived experiences. Young people from communities that value oral history, for example, may benefit from opportunities to attend or participate in spoken word events. “Open mic” nights, media arts programs and literary magazines are other ways to differentiate teaching library-based reading and communication skills with students’ backgrounds and preferences in mind.

➡ **LEARN TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES.** Hughes-Hassell recommends that school librarians take part in professional development teachers attend—even if they’re not required to do so. “Begin to understand the language of teachers,” she says. “Begin to understand the position of teachers and what it is that teachers are trying to deal with.” ♦

## Windows and Mirrors

When Emily Style wrote her oft-cited paper “Curriculum as Window & Mirror” about the personal nature of multicultural learning, she could have been describing a library. The books and other media contained in a library collection can serve as both mirrors reflecting students’ own lives and as windows into identities and experiences unfamiliar to students.

“Oftentimes when we talk about ‘diversity’ we automatically assume we’re talking about people of color or people with disabilities, and it kind of gets marginalized,” Kumasi says. “Mainstream or predominantly white communities need to have an understanding of diversity ... for a number of reasons; not only to reinforce equality, but just for their own cultural consciousness and to understand the world is bigger than their small bubble.”



### Toolkit

Help students make the most of your school and community libraries. VISIT » [tolerance.org/check-it-out](https://tolerance.org/check-it-out)