

ANALYZING THE DIVERSITY OF A HIGH SCHOOL LIBRARY COLLECTION

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Recognizing diversity is important not only in American society but also in school libraries. Our schools are culturally diverse places that have students and staff who represent varieties of race, culture, ability, sexual preference or identity, religion, gender, and class. School librarians serve all these individuals. The *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* discusses the need for a school library collection to reflect the school's community (AASL 2018). Furthermore, the American Library Association's "Diversity in Collection Development" interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights states that "library collections must represent the diversity of people within the society or community the library serves" (2002). If the current collection of young adult fiction portrays only the typical white, heterosexual main character (Perez, para 8), then the collection does not allow for understanding and learning of other races, cultures, and abilities, nor does it allow for students of minority groups to see themselves represented in books. The modern school library must strive to continually add diverse titles to its collection so that all students feel represented and can find and read books to which they can relate.

Diversity in Young Adult Fiction

The lack of published multicultural authors and stories is well documented. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, who releases annual reports documenting the number of books by and about people of color, only 28 percent of books published in the United States in 2018 were by or about people of color (2019). This includes Africans or African-Americans, American Indians or First Nations people, Asian Pacific people or Asian-Pacific Americans, and Latinx people.

Steven T. Bickmore, Yunying Xu, and Myra I. Sheridan studied the lack of diverse authors in the National Book Awards (NBA) finalists and winners over a twenty-year period (2017). They considered the racial and ethnic makeup of the authors and protagonists in the NBA nominees and eventual winners to learn more about how diverse authors are represented in book awards. They created a spreadsheet with the following categories: author, author gender, author race/ethnicity, protagonist, protagonist gender, protagonist race/ethnicity, protagonist socioeconomic status (SES), setting, genre, and grade levels. They then entered data from

the 100 NBA winners and finalists from 1996 to 2015. They found that 77 of the 100 finalists were white, including 15 of the 20 winners. Of the 23 remaining finalists of color, some were repeat nominees. Addi-

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tionally, only 10 titles were written by African Americans; six of the 16 African-American protagonists were written by white authors or "cultural

outsiders” (2017, 47). The researchers labeled the 23 books written by non-white authors as “culturally relevant texts” (2017, 49). Of these 23 books, the researchers found that exploration of identity was a common storyline.

This lack of published books containing diverse characters and written by diverse authors spurred authors Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo to create We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), an organization “dedicated to increasing diversity in children’s literature.” WNDB encourages books that “reflect and honor the lives of all young people” (WNDB n.d.). Providing diverse books for students also reflects the work of professor Rudine Sims Bishop, who found that students need to be able to see themselves in book characters (1990). Diverse texts allow students to see themselves in mirror books with characters who look and act like them; they also enable students to look through windows to gain a better understanding of others’ lives by reading about characters from different backgrounds. Not only

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do school libraries need books with characters who look like the diversity present in the student population, school libraries also need books with relatable characters who are like students elsewhere in the world.

For a book to qualify as a diverse book requires more than simply having a character with a foreign-sounding name who behaves in a stereotypical manner. Determining the diversity of a book requires careful consideration of characters, authorship, and intent. The school library collection should include books with characters who look, behave, and think like a variety of different people to inspire all types of students to take chances or grow in new ways. School librarians can ask themselves, “Who does my school library serve?” (Lechtenberg and Phillips 2018, 57) to remind themselves that the students served by school librarians benefit from diverse and inclusive material.

Collection Analysis for Diversity

School librarians can take steps to improve the diversity in their current book collection. In order to create a diverse collection, a school librarian must first understand what is missing from the current collection. This can be done by completing a collection analysis using the school library catalog. Sarah Jorgenson, a school librarian of a diverse student body in the Midwest, noticed that there were many students who were interested in reading but who were unable to find a main character with whom they could relate. As a result, Sarah worked with her professors Dr. Jenna Kammer, Dr. Rene Burrell, and Dr. Charlene Atkins at the University of Central Missouri to develop an action research study to address her concerns.

The research for this study took place at one high school in the Midwest. The library within this high school has two full-time certified school librarians and one full-time library clerk. The library’s collection contains approximately 8,000 copies of fiction and non-fiction

titles available for students to check out. Approximately 1,800 students in grades 10 to 12 attend the high school, and approximately 150 staff members work at the school.

Diversity of Current Library Collection

To analyze the collection for diversity, the top 100 titles that were checked out during the first three terms of the 2018–2019 school year were examined. This diversity collection analysis was based on the analysis created by Bickmore, Xu, and Sheridan (2017). Data pulled from the library’s management system software did not include names or library card numbers; the only data collected were the top 100 books checked out and the number of times those books were checked out. The top 100 titles were then broken down by main character and author. For analysis of the main characters from the books on the top 100 titles list, the character’s gender, race, and sexual orientation were determined via multiple Internet sources through a lateral technique (Caulfield 2017).

In this study, the top 100 titles were pulled from eleven browsing genres, which did not include non-fiction, reference, and professional collections. When analyzing the diversity of the authors, we discovered that out of the top 100 titles checked out, 29 were written by repeat authors, which left us with 83 individual authors to analyze. Of these 83, 31 identified as male and 52 as female with no other genders specified. Approximately 25 percent of the authors were from racial minority groups, which included authors who identified as Black or African-American, Asian, Latinx, Lithuanian, Middle Eastern, and Haitian. When analyzing main characters of the same titles, we found that 25 percent of the books had multiple main characters. Sixty-six books had male main characters, and 57 books had female

main characters. When looking at minority group representation of main characters, 42 percent of the characters were Black or African American, Asian, Latinx, multi-race, Korean, and Middle Eastern. When analyzing sexual preference of main characters, 90 percent of the characters were straight, and 10 percent were identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer.

Jorgenson compared these results with the diversity of her student population and discovered targeted areas of collection development. She also shared the results with her administration, along with a request for funding to purchase additional diverse titles. During the 2019–2020 school year she and her co-librarian have been focused on purchasing books that more closely represent the diversity within the student population. They have also been promoting diverse books that were already in the collection but did not show up in the top 100 titles. Finally, they have been encouraging teachers to integrate diverse titles into their classroom lessons.

Implications for School Librarians

In order to analyze the diversity of a school library collection, school librarians can follow the following steps:

1. Use your library management software to run a report of the top 100 circulating titles.
2. Determine the date range of the report. It is recommended to run a report that spans a whole school year (e.g., first day of school in August 2019 through last day of school 2020).
3. Create a spreadsheet in Google Docs or Microsoft Excel and then break down the top 100 titles by main character and author.



4. Determine the main characters' gender, race, and sexual orientation via multiple Internet sources. Internet sources used to identify diversity in the books include the library's software management system, Goodreads, *Kirkus Reviews*, *School Library Journal*, and many other book review journals and blogs.
5. Determine the diversity of authors on the top 100 titles list. Consult author and publisher websites and social media, as well as op-eds written and interviews given by the authors, to determine the gender, race, and sexual orientation of the authors.
6. Compare the results of the diversity collection analyses with the diversity of the student population of the school. In our study, 22 percent of students responded as identifying as lesbian, bisexual, gay, or queer, yet only 10 percent of the top 100 titles featured main characters who identify as LGBTQ. Examples such as this highlight where to further develop the collection in the future.

School librarians should be mindful of the following tips and cautions while analyzing the diversity of a school library collection:

1. There will be repeat authors (e.g., more than one book by Jason Reynolds was in the top 100). We recommend analyzing each author only once.
2. It can be challenging to determine the exact race and gender of authors. Only include information that the author has stated about themselves; do not assign a race or gender based on a picture of the author. Leave that informa-

tion blank before determining this information without an information source.

3. Many books have multiple main characters. With this in mind, expect to analyze well over 100 main characters for race and gender.
4. Fully describing authors and characters allows people of all ethnicities and sexual orientations to see themselves in the text, and it can help to decrease the likelihood of "default white reading," which happens when the reader, regardless of race, tends to picture white characters while reading (Grice, Rebellino, and Stamper 2017).
5. The top 100 titles checked out were books that students specifically sought to check out or were recommended by friends, school librarians, teachers, or reviews. Students were interested in reading diverse books, thus contributing to the diversity in the

top 100 titles, and it is possible that the books not circulating as frequently are not as diverse as the books students are repeatedly checking out. This can have implications for practice in that diverse books not in the top 100 titles should be promoted to increase access for all students.

The findings of a diversity collection analysis provide a guide for school librarians to improve the diversity of the collection. School librarians can use the analysis to identify books that are missing from their collection. As funding becomes available, new books can be purchased with characters or authors that represent the current diverse population in the school. School librarians can also use the results to promote current books within the library collection that are diverse but not part of the top 100 list so that students are more aware of the diverse titles that are already in the library. School librarians should work with teachers to integrate diverse titles into their lessons to create more opportunities for students to read diverse books. School librarians should share results of the study with the administration to increase conversations about diversity and request additional funding.

The design of this action research study is not limited to the particular high school at which it took place. This study can be duplicated anywhere; school librarians need to know what is—or is not—on their school library's shelves. In today's diverse society, providing opportunities for diverse opinions and worlds through books is just one of the things school librarians can do to help their students. All school librarians can get started by analyzing their student population and analyzing the corresponding diversity of the school library collection.

Another way to build a diverse collection is through personal research. By following hashtags like #weneeddiversebooks, browsing collection lists, and reading reviews, high school librarians can find hundreds of recommendations for diverse titles to fill their library shelves.

Another way to build a diverse collection is through personal research. By following hashtags like *weneeddiversebooks*, browsing collection lists, and reading reviews, high school librarians can find hundreds of recommendations for diverse titles to fill their library shelves. There are resources available online for critiquing one's collection; for example, *School Library Journal* offers a diversity toolkit on their website, and in the September/October 2009 *Knowledge Quest* article "Questioning Your Collection" Toby Rajput gives advice for analyzing and updating a library collection (2009). One way to know what to look for is to start with the *School Library Journal*'s 2018 Diverse Books Collection Survey, which gives the top demands for books in various libraries.

Conclusion

Diversity covers many areas: race, culture, ability, sexual preference or identity, religion, gender, and class. In order to serve all students, school librarians must be ready to advocate and promote diversity within their own environment. Placing diverse books in the hands of students helps develop empathy and understanding, allowing students to get to know those around them. By being knowledgeable and accessible, and by providing diverse resources for students, school librarians help students to grow and understand each other and themselves.



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Dr. Rene Burress is an assistant professor of Library Science and Information Services at the University of Central Missouri. She was awarded ALA's 2019 Jesse H. Shera Awards for Dissertation Support for proposed dissertation research employing exemplary research design and methods. She is a member of ALA, AASL, the Missouri Library Association, and the Missouri Association of School Librarians.

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