

Testimony to the New Jersey State Board of Education
**On School Libraries and Equity of Access and Equity of Experience or
On School Libraries and Diversity**

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As an elementary school librarian, one of my most important (and favorite) tasks is to develop my school library collection. Book selection takes into account professional journal reviews, research, teacher needs and recommendations, and of course, student input. I want to know what my students want to read. I want students to find what they love on the shelves, and I want them to find themselves there, as well. Yet . . . yet, I want them to find something else, too. There's the old saying, "you don't know what you don't know," and one of my responsibilities is to let them know.

When building a full and diverse school library collection, school library media specialists always remind ourselves that students need to see themselves in the characters. They need to feel connected. Yes, that's true, but I am discovering that what is equally important, dare I say more important, is that students need to see others. I have taught in a few districts across Morris County, some quite economically and culturally diverse, and others less so. I have come to find that students are not discovering new worlds on their own. It is one of my roles, as the school library media specialist, to introduce these new worlds and show our students what diversity looks like.

While visiting another library last spring, I found a bookmark promoting "Reading Without Walls" and I had to investigate further. During his tenure as the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, as named by the Library of Congress, Gene Yuen Lang used his platform to issue a challenge to readers. He put forth the charge that students should - read a book about a character who doesn't look or live like you, read a book about a topic you don't know much about, and read a book in a new format. I kept the bookmark and thought that might be something to consider for my students.

Last summer I was at the Eric Carle Museum. As I was browsing through the books on display in their library, I took note of some of the titles I had in my collection (it's always validating to find your choices in other places) *Worm Loves Worm*, *I Am Jazz*, and *Julian is a Mermaid*. I sensed the theme and took closer note of the other titles. The Museum was featuring a collection of children's books called "A Look into LGBTQ Representation in Picture Books." Save for one or two titles, the books in the collection

were all published in the last ten years. Authors and illustrators were responding to a developing conversation of gender diversity in our culture. How many of our students and families were having this conversation? How many were ready to have that conversation? Picture books can provide educators with the language to start conversations that are new or challenging. School library media specialists curate collections that can reach all readers and represent all students. Our collections are ready to provide resources to teachers and staff developing the new requirement for a LGBTQ curriculum.

School library media specialists work to build a print and digital collection that encompasses divergent viewpoints, cultures, and experiences and teach students to take responsibility for seeking multiple points of view and a global perspective. This broader perspective also allow school library media specialists to serve a unique role in addressing social and emotional learning in their students ([read](#) just how SLMS are prepared to do this).

When I returned to school last September, our building began a three-year initiative that included a focus on the Social Emotional Learning Competencies. I felt as though everything was converging at once. As with most “aha” moments, once you begin looking for something, you find it all around you. Recalling the “Reading Without Walls” bookmark, I decided this was going to be the focus of my library program for the year. I wanted my students to see themselves as individuals, but also as a part of a whole. I began the year with read alouds of *All the World* by Liz Garton Scanlon and *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold. My goal was to create a place where my students could ask anything, a safe space where they could wonder aloud and discover. Subtly, through bibliotherapy (using literature to support mental health and wellbeing), my students were discovering their place in the library, classroom, and ultimately the world. They knew they belonged and were part of a community that wanted them to succeed and feel included.

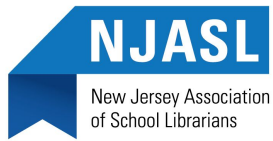
My student population is small, young (preschool - Grade 3), and lacking in diversity. I have always tried to be conscious of including a broad range of book themes, but this year I made a very intentional effort to bring in books that feature diverse characters. It’s not enough to just feature these books, though. I have to make my students aware of them. Last year, I introduced a cultural reading passport to students. I’ve done genre and nonfiction passports for years, but I believed my students were ready to read about new characters with different abilities, from different backgrounds, different traditions and faiths, and different expressions of self. My students eagerly accepted the invitation and we’ve been working together to bring these books to each other.

In so many ways, I have found validation in this path. I have met other school library media specialists who are working hard to change and broaden the conversation for themselves and for their students. I had an amazing and enlightening experience attending School Library Journal's Diversity Workshop at Rutgers University earlier in May. I learned so much about myself, my lens, and ways to authentically build my collection with a diverse focus (check out their [toolkit](#)). While I feel as all of this is coming together right now, Rudine Sims Bishop called for diversity in literature decades ago. In a [Reading Rockets interview](#), Rudine Sims Bishop reflected on her call to use literature to provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors - the doors being a way to use literature to enter another world. She states, "diversity needs to go both ways."

More recently, I've found other voices (listed below) echoing that call. One of those voices is Jacqueline Woodson, the current National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, with her platform [Reading = Hope x Change](#). Through the collaboration of the NJ Literacy Alliance and NJASL, Jacqueline Woodson's message will be brought to students across the state. On [October 16](#), Jacqueline will address middle school students in person and via livestream. In addition, Jacqueline Woodson's last appearance as the National Ambassador will be at NJASL's Fall Conference on Tuesday, December 10, 2019. She is appearing as our keynote speaker, presenting from 8:45 - 9:45 a.m. I invite you to join us for this unique and inspiring event.

School library media specialists make efforts to bring the world to all NJ students. Their pathway to these efforts are through reading and literature from the broadest possible diversity of cultures and perspectives through its collection of resources, and the equitable access to information. School libraries are safe havens as well as a judgement-free space for students; school library media specialists make the school library welcoming and comfortable. Unfortunately, not all students have the same equitable experiences with school libraries due to a lack of strong requirement for certified school library media specialists in NJ administrative code. Please consider the value of school libraries to students academic needs but also their social and emotional learning needs.

Respectfully submitted,
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INSPIRING EXCELLENCE
IN LIBRARIANSHIP
IN LEARNING

Other initiatives:

Newbery and Caldecott Medalist, Grace Lin, shared her interpretation of “Mirrors and Windows of Your Child’s Bookshelf” in her [2016 Tedx Talk](#); in April, the United Nations launched a 17-month Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Book Club with a curated reading list to match each of their [Sustainable Development Goals](#). I invite you all to find out more about these initiatives.