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# Editorial: Welcome to Country: School Libraries and Diversity in the 21st Century

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*We would like to begin by paying our respect to the local Indigenous people, the traditional custodians of the lands upon which we are meeting today. On behalf of the traditional custodians, we welcome you all.*

This opening sentiment, adapted from traditional Australian “Welcome to Country” addresses in which the peoples local to a particular event are acknowledged and honoured, underscores IASL’s mission to appreciate and grow school librarianship as well as this issue’s theme *School Libraries and Diversity in the 21st Century*. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the meaning of “Country” is more than just ownership or connection to land: Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features (Reconciliation Australia, 2007).

Diversity in the 21st century is understood through an evolving and expanding prism that includes dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, abilities, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age and religious preferences, among others. School libraries often serve as inclusive safe havens for many students. They are unique settings within a school that can offer access to a range of resources, practices, and programs to foster understanding and inspire advocacy.

Jamie Naidoo and Sarah Dahlen, noted researchers in the area of diversity and inclusion, noted that cultural competent professionals possess an “understanding and acceptance of cultures different from their own: (2013, xiv). They prefaced the preceding statement with:

Librarians and educators who truly want to embrace diversity within their community understand that their offerings should represent all of its cultural expressions including not only race and ethnicity but also ability, sexual orientation, immigration status, language proficiency, socioeconomic status, religious preference, gender, age, family composition, and domicile (2013, xiii).

Awareness of diversity's importance is clearly the place to begin promoting diversity. Information professionals and researchers worldwide embrace and codify these commitments in manifestos, statements of professional ethics, organizational missions, and strategic plans with terms like "equity," "respect," "understanding," and "empowerment." The UNESCO/IFLA *School Libraries Manifesto* (1999) captures a wide range of these imperatives in terms of school libraries:

School library services must be provided equally to all members of the school community, regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, professional or social status. Specific services and materials must be provided for those who are unable to use mainstream library services and materials (1999, np).

While the agreement on libraries' and librarians' responsibility to foster and ensure social justice and diversity through services and materials seems universal, less clear is how to best operationalize these commitments. The goal of this issue is to provide frameworks and best practices for professional education and practice as well as explorations of phenomena and problems that help school library professionals and researchers to identify entry points, gain understanding, reflect on practice, and be inspired to investigate diversity further.

### ***Diversity and Social Justice in this Issue***

For this issue, we encouraged the submission of original research papers that explored concepts of diversity and school libraries. Our contributors, from all over the globe, addressed this theme from a variety of perspectives in meaningful and informative ways. Some researchers examined the practices of teacher librarians from a situated perspective of their global region; some examined specific areas of diversity and uncovered potential areas of success and areas where there is work to be done and opportunities abound. Interesting questions are raised that can help us reflect on where we stand as a profession group in terms of our expertise and commitment to foster inclusion of all students and support diversity throughout school libraries. We bring together international and U.S. perspectives on diversity in 21<sup>st</sup> century information practice with students and preservice librarian education. Contributors to this issue addressed the representation of culture, language, and exceptionality in the services and resources of the school library.

### ***International Perspectives***

Throughout the world, libraries provide points of intersection and synergistic opportunities through literature, literacy activities, culturally relevant pedagogy, professional development; preservice education co-construction of understanding with and by our young people; social justice; and advocacy. In some places, the view of school libraries and librarians as central to primary and secondary learning is established; in some it is emerging. In "Global Perspectives: Exploring School-Based Brazilian Librarianship Through Institutional Ethnography," Lucy Santos Green and Melissa Johnston are guided by the notion that "As school-based librarians around the world struggle with strikingly similar challenges, it is important to examine the work of these individuals through a global lens" (p.16). They operationalize this idea by using

institutional ethnography to explore the placement of professional librarians within the organizational culture of a school. Patrick Lo from Japan's University of Tsukuba led a funded project with a team of colleagues from the University of Hong Kong to examine similar phenomena in East Asia by exploring school librarians' perceptions of their roles in two types of schools in Hong Kong. These researchers invite collaborations on their "Research Agenda for Enhancing Teacher Librarians' Roles and Practice in Hong Kong's 21st Century Learning Environments" to extend and enhance their study's methods and findings.

### **U.S. Perspectives**

In two papers, researchers examine theories to study diversity and social justice for the benefit and protection of our students. A group of researchers led by Delia Neuman apply her I-LEARN model to show how early elementary students not only benefit from learning a detailed method of inquiry, but also that when that model is promoted in the context of learning in the school library by a teacher/librarian team, outcomes for high need children are enhanced. An additional dimension of "Information and Digital Literacy in a High-Poverty Urban School: An I-LEARN Project," is considering how these positive outcomes can be maintained when the school library is closed—an all too common scenario in low socioeconomic communities. Deborah Froggatt's "The Informationally Underserved: Not Always Diverse, but Always a Social Justice Advocacy Model," builds on Neuman et al.'s point by positing,

*LIS professionals must continue to ask all of their stakeholders: Is social justice served when only certain students use school libraries? How do we ensure that, as teenage students complete their studies, they continue to have equitable access to LIS resources into adulthood? Where in our LIS practices do we see equitable information access compromised? How can we address these inequities?*

Indeed, these compelling questions form the framework of Froggatt's paper as well as the work by the other authors gracious enough to share their expertise with *School Library Worldwide's* readers.

### **Diversity in Preservice Education and Practice**

The final group of research papers shifts focus from learners to educators and soon-to-be educators. In "Culturally Relevant Booktalking: Using a Mixed Reality Simulation with Preservice School Librarians," Janice Bell Underwood and her team discuss promising attempts to increase preservice librarians' abilities to communicate diversity through resources and programming. "[E]xperience," Underwood et al. conclude "provided them with an opportunity for engaging in critical reflection regarding personal bias and systemic racism in schools and literature." On a similar vein, Candi Pierce Garry uses a progression of three methods to investigate potential occurrences of librarians' self-censorship in "Selection or Censorship? School Librarians and LGBTQ Resources," and concludes that collections may reveal more about librarians' preferences than we realize. In "What do Elementary School Librarians Know and Believe about Students with Color Vision Deficiencies?" Karla Collins explores what elementary school librarians know about color deficiency awareness on elementary school librarians and the effect of participation in awareness training to better meet the needs of

students with color vision deficiencies. Collins concludes, "Setting up the instruction and the space to be accessible to all as modelled in UDL opens up the accessibility of the information and provides a welcoming environment in the library." Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Julie Stivers report on findings from an exploratory study, "Examining Youth Services Librarians' Perceptions of Cultural Knowledge as an Integral Part of Their Professional Practice," that examines the extent to which youth services librarians the need for cultural knowledge and awareness in their professional work. They conclude that "the lack of cultural awareness and competence illustrated by the survey responses suggests that LIS schools and professional associations need to intensify their efforts to help youth librarians effectively meet the needs of youth of colour."

Finally, we present an installment of our "Researcher's Perspective" occasional column in which Michelle Hudiburg, Elizabeth Mascher, Alice Sagehorn, Jo Sue Stidham detail early results from federally-funded efforts to embed a revised model of the Purnell Model for Cultural Competence in use with preservice librarians.

Together, these researchers conclude that school librarian preparation suffers from a lack of coursework related to diversity and inclusion and that teaching and learning activities related to diversity and inclusion need to be integrated throughout the coursework, just as literacy skills are. As information professionals, we have much work to do!

## References

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## Author Note

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