

## Culturally Responsive School Librarianship

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by Melissa P. Johnston and Lucy Santos Green, April 2022

School librarians must develop a strong sense of cultural competence to meet the needs of the diverse students they serve. Cultural competence was defined in 2009 by Overall as "the ability of professionals to understand the needs of diverse populations" (p. 176). Hill and Kumasi expanded on this definition, describing a culturally competent school librarian as "an individual with the ability to understand and respect [students'] cultural differences and to address issues of disparity among diverse populations competently" (2011, p. 2). As school library educators we take this call to heart. We have made it a focus of our research, our scholarship, and our teaching.

The 2019 ALA/AASL CAEP School Librarian Preparation Standards (the standards universities use to develop school library training) emphasize preparing school librarian candidates who "promote cultural competence," "design culturally responsive learning experiences," and "articulate and model cultural competence and respect for inclusiveness, supporting individual and group perspectives." According to Loudback, "cultural awareness and competency development in higher education is essential in the development of students' global competence" and necessary if we are to prepare professionals who can address an increasingly diverse student population. This is why we have worked to implement a "culturally-aware" curriculum that creates opportunities for future school librarians to "engage with other societies and to develop tolerance and understanding of diverse cultural traditions and practices" to prepare future school librarians to develop programs and instruction that meet the needs of their diverse learners (Louderback 2017, p. 1077).

There are fantastic resources on culturally responsive teaching that address racial and socioeconomic diversity, as well as LGBTQIA+ student needs in the United States. But in this article, we would like to focus on how other countries apply culturally responsive programming in their school library programs. An international perspective benefits teachers as they expand their cultural skills competencies. By exploring school librarianship in other countries, librarians can develop a richer understanding of, and curiosity for, the world. Our research explores cultural understanding, experiences, and ways of knowing the world that help school librarians apply this new perspective when developing more inclusive and enriching programming design and development.

### **Our Story**

Throughout our years researching together, we have visited over thirty-five schools in Brazil, four in Russia, and twenty-two in Belize; conducted interviews with librarians, teachers, and administrators at each site; and explored student projects. We recorded observations and conversations about library policies, procedures, programs, and practices, and took videos, photographs, and detailed field notes.

One of the major themes that emerged from common practices of school library programs throughout the world was the inclusion of cultural programming. We found that the integration of folk art, folk costumes, storytelling, multicultural celebrations and partnerships, and theatrical presentations empowered students to maintain cultural integrity, while being supported for academic success. This led to the identification of three areas that school librarians can focus on in order to infuse culturally responsive programming: promoting reading for pleasure, supporting alignment with instruction, and establishing the library as a place for belonging.

Culturally responsive programming is a pedagogical approach that "empowers students to maintain cultural integrity, while succeeding academically" (Ladson-Billings 1995). Gay points out it acknowledges the strengths of students' diverse heritages, comprehensively using "cultural resources to teach knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes" (2010, p. 34). Inclusion of personal culture is important because classroom culture is influenced by the explicit or implicit presence of several groups: students, teachers, school, and community. These spheres of influence impact interaction efforts between teachers and students, as well as among the students themselves (Johnston 2013).

## Reading for Pleasure

We found a close relationship between reading for pleasure and inclusion of cultural activities in Brazilian school library programming. Several of the librarians we observed invited local storytellers from cultural centers to present folklore and historical tales to students and families. Afterwards, children were encouraged to not only check out similar stories from the library, but also to create their own for display and sharing. In Russia, libraries implement units on traditional Russian folk art to promote student interest in the library collection. One librarian collaborated with the art teacher and had students complete a traditional Russian craft to hook student interest in a special art section of the library. In Belize, we talked to librarians about book clubs they created in coordination with teachers using local folktales to "win back students to reading." By including local storytellers, artists, crafts, and stories, librarians helped students connect the library collection and the act of reading to the students' personal lives, background, and experience.

## Supporting Alignment with Instruction

Some of the most beautiful, colorful, and exciting examples of culturally responsive programming that we observed were uses of culture to support academic achievement. In Brazil, we visited a school library hosting a rich interdisciplinary unit that introduced children to state history and geography through the creation of ceramics and folk dances, giving them the chance to explore the historical contributions of different immigrant groups that populated their home state. Students had to research and help plan events that highlighted the particular groups they were assigned. Several students were able to invite family members and bring examples of artifacts from home.



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In Russia, librarians collaborated with Russian language teachers to implement units on folk stories spanning Eastern Europe, giving students the option of reframing stories through costume, dance, diorama, or original music composition (a song). Students presented their final projects in a beautiful schoolwide festival where community and family members were able to attend. In Belize, librarians told us about their collaboration with writing teachers, where students wrote folktales that reflected their culture and beliefs. Through the infusion of culturally responsive programming, school librarians were able to take on significant co-teaching roles as they helped students connect academic curriculum to their personal stories in powerful ways.

## The Library as a Place for Belonging

Australian researcher, Margaret K. Merga, interviewed school library students who frequently described the library as "a space where students may feel they belong... some described seeking sanctuary" (2021, p. 660). We also discovered this to be true, and we found that international school librarians in the countries we visited used several approaches to establish the library as a welcoming place for their students. In Brazil, we visited a school library where the librarian developed a reading corner. There she hung pieces of poetry representing different countries from the ceiling. She used this display to encourage students to come up with their own endings, and to reflect and relax.

Other librarians curated artifact displays from students' families and local organizations that highlighted the cultural background of the student population and the region. They hosted these displays in the library, further cementing the space as belonging to the students. In all three countries, we saw school librarians invite family members to speak and share their stories, and in Belize the librarians invited local artists to partner with students and paint gorgeous murals celebrating local culture. We were touched to see how students were celebrated all over the world.

## Conclusion

Culturally responsive school librarians have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to appropriately design learning experiences and programming that appropriately include "multicultural curriculum content, equal access, and high expectations" (Brown-Jeffy and Cooper 2011, p. 74). Our findings echo Brown-Jeffy and Cooper in determining that excellence and equity in school library programming depend on the design and application of curriculum that "is inclusive of students' cultural experiences" (2011, p. 73). As school librarians around the world adapt and evolve to meet the needs of the 21st century, a global perspective allows us to engage in partnerships that provide opportunities to learn from, share expertise with, and support one another, thus strengthening the practice of school librarianship throughout the world.

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