

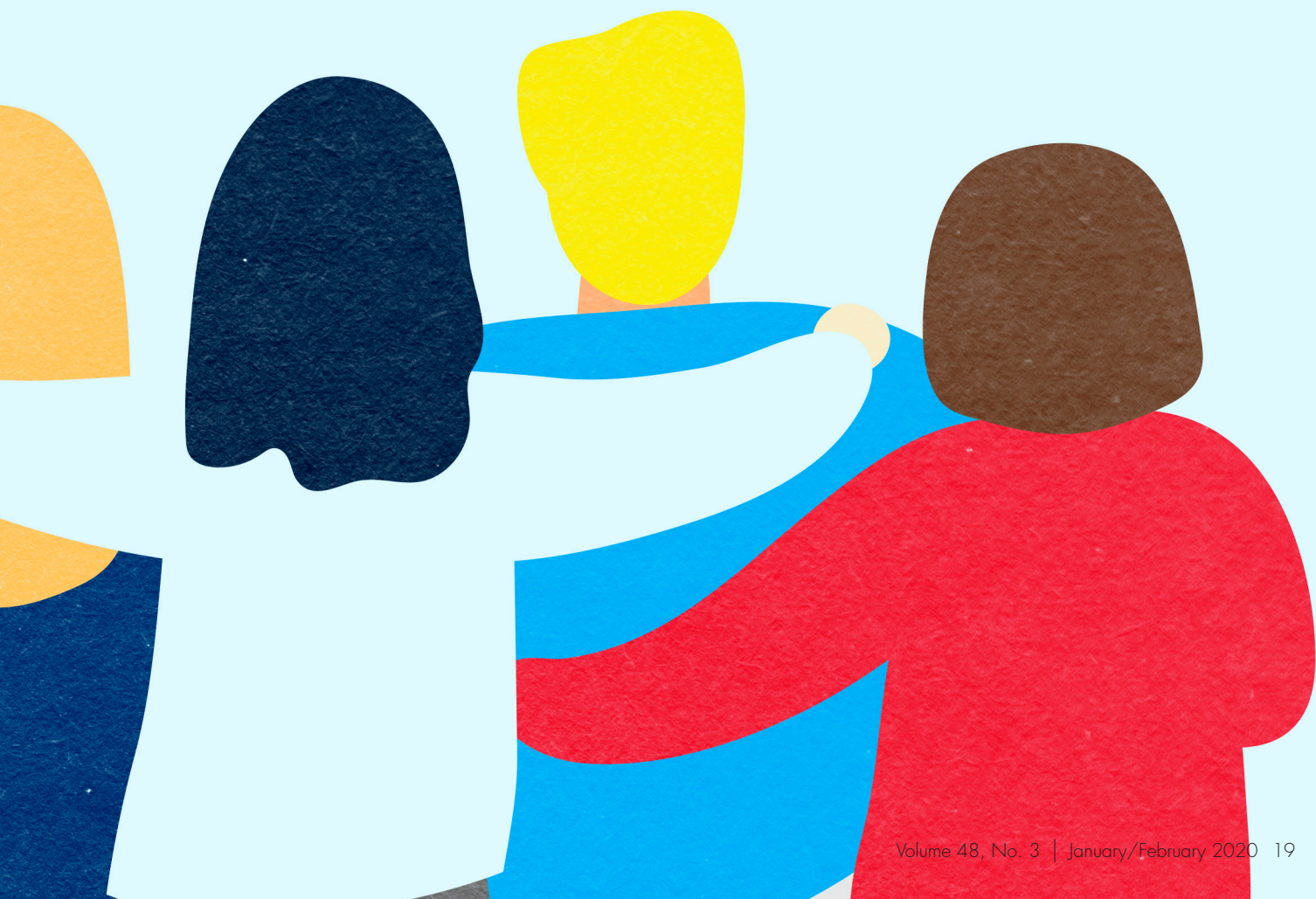
REGARD MORE, NOT REGARD LESS



Welcoming All to the Sanctuary of the School Library

Barbara Gabaldón

gabaldon_ba@aps.edu



My mom was my high school librarian. My oldest sister, who had to transfer to my mom's high school as a junior when we moved, was so mortified, so sure that it would be the social kiss of death if anyone knew that her mom was the librarian, that she told people that the librarian was a nice lady who lived down the street from us and gave her a ride to and from school every day. And happened to have the same unusual last name.

By the time I went to high school, I had made a few friends in the area and wasn't so worried about the social stigma of having a parent on staff, even the school librarian. I actually hung out in the library sometimes, often to work on assignments (some of the best being those collaboratively planned by our visionary librarian and social studies teachers) and often to socialize. I wasn't in one clique, so I knew and met people from many walks of high school life—drama kids, soccer players and runners (my sports), brainiacs, artists—and chatted with all of them in the library. I even managed to get kicked out a few times for laughing too loud. I suppose that school library was a sanctuary for us, though not the stereotypical type or with the stereotypical regulars. It was a vibrant place where interesting people liked to be and belonged in a community—a third space.

We know the stereotype of the students who find sanctuary in the school library, and the words used to describe them range from fond to mean: curious, intellectual, quiet, sensitive, bookish, nerd, loner, outcast, loser. The stigmatized school library is seen as a sanctuary only in the sense that it's a last refuge for students who have no place else to go. There's nothing about this library that tells students that they belong, just that they don't belong anywhere else. My junior high library was this

type of place, and I only went in there occasionally and reluctantly.

I hadn't changed that much from junior high to high school, but the libraries were two very different places. How did my high school librarian create a third space, a vibrant sanctuary? I believe she forged relationships with individual students from all groups and grew and diversified the library users from there; she also used engaging content in her teaching. While I never anticipated following in my mom's footsteps, I am now a high school librarian in one of the largest high schools in New Mexico. I took a very different route to get here—from elementary dual language teacher to librarian in a two-way bilingual immersion elementary school to my current role—but I am striving to form a vibrant sanctuary using the same basic tenets.

Many passionate articles and blog posts have appeared about the public library as sanctuary, particularly in response to growing anti-immigrant statements and actions—see, for instance, the blog post by Laura Saunders on the Simmons *Unbound* website titled “Libraries as Sanctuary Spaces” <<https://slis.simmons.edu/blogs/unbound/2017/01/30/libraries-sanctuary-spaces/>>. Yet few have discussed the school library as sanctuary. Is it that school librarians generally fall into the “libraries are neutral” side of the argument? Is it that, at least in the case of public schools, we assume that by law we already serve all students in our communities? Or is it that we believe that because school libraries are already seen as sanctuaries, at least for some, we don't need to promote this concept?

Many of the descriptions of public libraries as sanctuaries provide myriad examples of ways in which they serve the underserved: language circles, English language learning

and citizenship classes, and access to technology for the homeless, to name a few. In the school library, if we are providing sanctuary only to those who feel comfortable seeking it in the library, we are not valuing the school library as a sanctuary for all. We need to prioritize knowing our communities and being proactive rather than neutral.

As Judi Moreillon notes:

In the types of outreach and the target audiences for our outreach activities...librarians who adhere to our value of “access” seek to be fair rather than equal. A neutral library would simply exist and serve the patrons who come. The library/librarian that assesses the community and determines how to best help people achieve their goals will, of necessity, do more for some than for others. (2018)

Culture—Are We Really Neutral?

Promoting authors of color is not neutral. It does promote the creation of sanctuary. In our 96 percent minority school, I make sure students see names and faces like theirs throughout the library on display every day. Our students are predominantly Hispanic, both immigrants and New Mexicans, so this means Rudolfo Anaya, Matt de la Peña, Erika Sánchez, Isabel Quintero, Zoraida Córdova, and Meg Medina. The experiences of authors from the East Coast/Chicago and from different Latinx backgrounds are similar but not exactly the same for my students; however, being surrounded by Hispanic names and reading about characters who have a lot in common helps my students enter the club of reading and writing and know that they belong in our school library.

Other ethnic groups are represented in our school and larger community,

so our students are also exposed to Jason Reynolds, Sherman Alexie, Rin Chupeco, and many more. I seek out, prominently display, and purposefully promote diverse authors. I also have students critically look at publishing and representation in awards over time, such as the Newbery or our state awards, and discuss why we have awards such as the Coretta Scott King or Pura Belpré. As Cory Eckert observes:

Where there is imbalance, giving equal weight to the privileged and the underserved does not create balance. If we are doing our jobs, we are providing the space and resources that our communities...need in order to thrive. Even if your...administration believes in the myth of library neutrality, you're not powerless. What books have you faced out? What books do you read in storytime? What is the color of the people in your advertising clipart? Your library may wish to remain neutral, but librarianship isn't neutral. All your decisions shape your library. (2016)

I promote *The Hate U Give* to Native and white students, *American Born Chinese* to Hispanic students, and *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* to straight students. All our students need windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors in the books they read and in the books we display and promote. I would promote diverse authors even if I worked in a predominantly white school, because we do our students a disservice by insulating them. Far from being an extra or optional aspect of school librarianship, Include is one of the Shared Foundations of our AASL Standards. As the late Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop eloquently explained in her development of the concept of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors back in 1990:

Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others...They need books that will help them understand... their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans. In this country, where racism is still one of the major unresolved social problems, books may be one of the few places where children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves. If they only see reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world—a dangerous ethnocentrism. (1990)

Language—How Fully Are We Serving All Students?

An individual school librarian might oppose the use of ELL students' home languages or work in a school or district in which English-only is the norm. Yet it is our job to provide reading materials to all our students. When school librarians face obstacles to being literacy leaders for all, we need to examine biases and educate ourselves on the effectiveness of home language use in order to serve all students. Sometimes our collection will follow the lead of the school program; a two-way bilingual immersion school with most students starting to read in their home or target language of Spanish should have more than half of the picture books in Spanish as well as a good balance of Spanish-to-English non-fiction and chapter books for students to continue their development in both languages. In other situations, the library might



lead the school in supporting home languages, as in when multiple languages are represented in a community, or when a recent influx of immigrant or refugee students precedes the school's development of programs addressing their needs.

When I started in the library position in a two-way bilingual immersion elementary school, the dual language program was based on native English speakers and native Spanish speakers learning language, content, and cross-cultural competency together. However, you could tell at a glance that the library collection did not support the program or the population. In a school in which most of the students were learning to read and write first in Spanish, then transferring those skills to English while continuing to develop in Spanish, our small collection of books in Spanish—picture books, fiction, and non-fiction—were segregated in a short section of primary-sized shelving. Not only were there too few books in Spanish to support the students and families, but the size and segregated shelving

for the Spanish collection implied that Spanish was not as valued and that they could not get out of the little kids' area until they learned English, notions not aligned with our program or community values.

Growing the Spanish collection was essential, but still not sufficient. Book arrangement can help or hinder a student's sense of belonging, too. Even before my additions to the Spanish collection outgrew their space, I started rearranging the book collections. I created a much larger section, with lots of room to grow, for Spanish picture books, next to and in the same type of shelving as the English picture books. Spanish fiction was moved to taller shelves next to the English fiction, again with room to grow. And I chose to interfile Spanish and English non-fiction, because in our effective dual-language program, by the time students were starting to read more non-fiction and use it for research, they were strong enough in both languages that they could choose to use resources in either or both languages. As the collection

and arrangement started to reflect and promote the goals of the program and community, the school library became a vibrant, well-used sanctuary.

I might not have approached collection arrangement the same way in a multiple-language school, but I knew my community and the goals of the dual-language program well, and this allowed me to thoughtfully approach collection development and arrangement to promote the school library as a sanctuary in that particular community.

Language in signage promotes sanctuary as well. Even though the percentage of students participating in our high school's bilingual program is much smaller than the percentage at my former elementary school, I carried habits of celebrating language and culture to something as seemingly inconsequential as signage. I continue to work to balance the language in signage and alternate the language on signage that I use and make, so that it isn't always English on top or on the left, followed by

In our community, the fact that most students have cell phones can give the impression that the digital divide has been overcome, but many students do not have access to the technology they need for assignments at home...



Spanish on the bottom or on the right. My reasoning is, how would you feel if your mother tongue was always second—if it was even used? Consistently using both or multiple languages and alternating language position helps make students, parents, and other community members feel more welcomed and encouraged to participate.

Access—Who Needs Sanctuary?

Our school is fortunate to have an administrator who recognizes the importance of access to the school library. I work a staggered schedule with the library assistant, so that one of us opens the library before school, the library is open during lunch, and one of us keeps the library open after school. I know that many schools may not have the luxury of a library assistant (or full-time librarian), but I have heard of other ways that librarians keep the doors open outside of duty hours: principals providing comp time or a stipend, sharing of assistants, etc. It is worth advocating for access as an important aspect of sanctuary.

In our community, the fact that most students have cell phones can give the impression that the digital divide has been overcome, but many students do not have access to the technology they need for assignments at home: Internet access, a computer that is not shared among siblings and maybe the family business, or a printer. Also, many of our students work from the time school is out until late at night to help support their families, and need time during lunch to use the library's technology.

Some teachers with whom I collaborate do not bring their students to the library to choose books for independent reading, while some teachers have restrictive requirements for their reading assignments (no graphic novels, page minimums,

etc.). These students need time outside of the school day to browse or get help locating the reading materials they truly want to read.

Finally, some students simply need a space to either be alone or to socialize, and despite the traditional view of the school library as a silent place, the latter is equally valid and can co-exist with the former. While touring colleges with my daughter recently, I noticed that many college libraries had different zones, sometimes even different floors, designated for silent study, group work, and food-and-drink-allowed zones. While I don't have multiple floors, I was inspired to start to create similar zones in our library. After reading Maisy Card's insightful article on over-policed black and Latinx youth's needs for safe places to gather (<<https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=School-Libraries-Are-Vital-to-Black-and-Latinx-Students>>), I am currently gathering input from students on allowing food in the library.



Barbara Gabaldón

is a teacher-librarian at Atrisco Heritage High School in Albuquerque, New Mexico. An ALA

Spectrum Scholar (2004), she received her MA in Information Resources and Library Science from the University of Arizona. A founding board member of Dual Language Education of New Mexico and former co-organizer of La Cosecha Dual Language Conference, she has focused her career and her professional development presentations on educating culturally and linguistically diverse students. She recently joined the selection committee for the Land of Enchantment Book Award.

Many school library mission statements include phrases such as "serve all patrons regardless of background" or "serve the whole community, no matter the language, beliefs, etc." While well-meaning, such language falls short of the often excellent work that many school libraries are doing to serve all patrons. To create school libraries that are sanctuaries for all, we can't disregard who our patrons are; we need to regard very closely. We can't say that it doesn't matter where our patrons come from, because it does matter and we need to know our communities well in order to build sanctuary libraries.

Works Cited:

- AASL. 2018. *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. Chicago: ALA.
- Bishop, Rudine. 1990. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6 (3). <<https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>> (accessed August 10, 2019).
- Card, Maisy. 2019. "School Libraries Are Vital to Black and Latinx Students." *School Library Journal* (Aug. 12). <<https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=School-Libraries-Are-Vital-to-Black-and-Latinx-Students>> (accessed August 23, 2019).
- Eckert, Cory. 2016. "Libraries Are Not Neutral." *School Library Journal* (Aug. 12).
- Moreillon, Judi. 2018. "Libraries and Neutrality." *School Librarian Leadership* (June 4). <www.school librarian leadership.com/category/social-justice-2/> (accessed August 23, 2019).
- Saunders, Laura. 2017. "Libraries as Sanctuary Spaces." *Unbound* (Jan. 30). <<https://slis.simmons.edu/blogs/unbound/2017/01/30/libraries-sanctuary-spaces/>> (accessed August 10, 2019).