

Tackling the Challenges of Implementing Diverse Libraries at Your School

By Jill Eisenberg | Categories: Children's Literature, Thought Leadership

Among the many roles Jill Eisenberg plays as Director of Curriculum and Literacy Strategy at Lee & Low Books, a critical one is working with schools across the country to diversify their libraries. She brings a deep understanding of literature and curricula to her work, and we are thrilled she agreed to share her expertise with us.

Last week, we explored how to go about developing and implementing diverse libraries at your school.

Schools and districts are doing some amazing work, but let's face it: roadblocks are inevitable.

"Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it."

—Michael Jordan



What are the challenges in building or refreshing your diverse library? How do we overcome those challenges?

1. **Budget.** Knowing the gaps in your library is your secret weapon. Your budget (or lack of budget) may mean you have to build or refresh your library in pieces, but starting with an assessment of your current collection will let you know what you need most. You can also look for grants, make wish lists, crowdfund, and focus on small parts of your library.
2. **Backlash.** Kareem Abdul-Jabbar said, "One man can be a crucial ingredient on a team, but one man cannot make a team." Some colleagues and parents might challenge the books or assert, "We don't need *those* books." All of our children's stakeholders must be part of the conversation and part of your strategy to bring culturally responsive and relevant resources into the classroom.
 - Make the case that window opportunities are just as important as mirror opportunities. I strongly recommend reading this parent's, these educators', and this librarian's case to fight the backlash and educate our colleagues.
 - Consider creating a wish list or recommendation list where parents and students can nominate titles for you to consider adding to the collection. This list can be shared with parents for gifting or donating to the classroom.
 - If parents or colleagues are fearful or feel threatened by particular subjects or titles, consider working with your administrators to find trainings or hosting a parents' night to learn more.
 - In the long term, consider working with the PTA/PTO to create a diversity and inclusion advisory panel.

3. **Finding diverse books.** You are right; it *is* hard to find diverse books. On top of that, search engines, online retailers, and visual-pinning platforms are overwhelming and can show you lists of books that aren't from the experts. Here are some resources to help you build an inclusive library.
4. **Knowing when you're done.** If you feel like this work is never done, you are right. It isn't and won't be done. Adding culturally responsive and relevant titles to your collection is an ongoing process—there is keeping up with cultural changes and progress, responding to collective moments and current events, discovering ever new offerings, the adoption of new learning standards, and keeping up with shifting demographics in your classroom and community. Your new mantra should be, “My library is a journey, not a destination.” How to keep up, stay sane, and stay within your budget:
 - Look at your district's and school's enrollment for demographic insights for your classroom library's needs. What once was a window book for your students may now be a mirror book (and vice versa). What languages, religions, learning differences, and nationalities are you seeing that maybe weren't as predominant ten years ago?
 - Aim for a periodic review with the classroom library questionnaire every couple of years.
 - Remember that village of experts we talked about last week? Follow them on social media. I've found e-newsletters in particular to be a manageable way to help cut through the noise and curate the most timely, relevant, and best resources. Don't track new award winners, trends, or ways of thinking about community conventions, genres, or standards all by yourself!

Why does this matter?

Schools and districts across the country are doing this hard work of creating and improving their culturally responsive and relevant books and libraries year after year because they know three things. Diverse classroom libraries:

1. **Improve inclusivity and build community.** You are showing our children that their experiences and values matter in your classroom and that there are many people and cultures to learn from. Let's inspire and empower our students and their families to create a better world—starting with books.
2. **Improve reading engagement.** Check out Reading Rockets for teacher practices that impact reading motivation.
3. **Improve reading outcomes.** Remember, nationwide 63% of all fourth-graders and 64% of all eighth-graders are reading below grade level. We. Must. Do. Better. Emerging evidence shows “black and Latino students enrolled in courses featuring culturally relevant themes and texts increased GPA in all courses, attendance, and credit accumulation.”

Jill Eisenberg is the Director of Curriculum and Literacy Strategy at LEE & LOW BOOKS, the largest independent children's book publisher specializing in diversity and multiculturalism. Before joining LEE & LOW, Eisenberg was a Fulbright Fellow in Taiwan, where she taught English as a foreign language to children in grades 2–6. She went on to become an ELA teacher for third grade in the Bay Area in California and has been passionate about best practices for supporting English Language Learners and parent engagement ever since. At LEE & LOW BOOKS, she oversees strategic partnerships and provides product and literacy expertise to schools, districts, and literacy organizations.