

Let's Talk about Diversity

A Content Analysis of School Library Collection Development Policies

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All youth need access to diverse books. Diverse books have personal and communal benefits. Personally, they provide youth with opportunities to see reflections of their own worlds.¹ These reflections, known as mirrors,² are affirming and can lead to a greater sense of belonging and self-worth.

Diverse books also serve as a foundation for helping youth develop a love for reading, which can lead to increased comprehension and language development. When youth encounter diverse narratives with relatable cultures and experiences, it leads to greater engagement.³ Engagement is a precursor to deep thinking, and deep thinking is needed for readers to gain an understanding⁴ of complex themes often transmitted through literature.

Diverse books also have communal benefits because they can foster cultural competence and mutual respect between individuals with dissimilar experiences and backgrounds. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop argues that youth gain a better sense of the world around them through diverse books because books can serve as windows and sliding glass doors into myriad lived experiences. Diverse books also unearth social and political constructs⁵ that can foster critical consciousness. Critical consciousness allows youth to understand and then “critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities.”⁶ By interrogating systems of inequity, youth become empowered to “take action” against social injustices. Ultimately, these experiences will prepare students for their adult roles within a democratic society.

Despite expansive conversations about the benefits that diverse books have on youth, BIPOC (Black,

Indigenous, and People of Color) communities remain underrepresented in terms of authorship, authenticity, and visibility. According to Sarah Park Dahlen, books featuring diverse characters remain low in comparison to books featuring white characters.⁷ Diverse books also have high rates of outsider authorship. Outsider authorship describes a work created by authors whose identities differ from the characters they write about. Outsider authorship can contribute to low publishing opportunities for writers from marginalized communities and can fail to capture the authenticity of diverse experiences in books. Outsider authorship can also lead to misrepresentations of BIPOC characters. The misrepresentation of BIPOC characters in children’s books and the lack of authenticity can perpetuate misinformation about specific groups and communities.⁸ Visibility is also problematic for diverse communities because diverse narratives are bearing the brunt of censorship challenges. According to Shannon Oltmann, censorship challenges have strategically targeted the voices of diverse communities.⁹ Thus, censorship threatens to decrease access to existing books that make the experiences of BIPOC communities visible within library collections.

These issues are germane to school libraries because school libraries provide students with opportunities to encounter a wide collection of children’s books. It is through books that students



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learn about the world, including the diversity that exists within it. According to the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights (ALA), librarians are responsible for providing students with access to a wide range of books representing multiple sides of a topic, viewpoints, people, and experiences.¹⁰ Additionally, school libraries have seen an increase in book removals due to book challenges.¹¹

Given the role that school libraries have in exposing youth to children's books and the uptick of school library censorship challenges aimed at banning books representing BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, it is important to examine the extent that collection development policies governing the collections of school libraries address diversity. Such information can illuminate the practices of librarians as it relates to how messages about diverse content are communicated to wider audiences.

Lastly, school collection development policies are significant to this study because the schools and districts meeting the criteria for inclusion are, which recently passed Illinois House Bill 2789.¹² This bill encourages librarians to write policies that align with specific sections of ALA's Library Bill of Rights or that expressly prohibit book banning. By examining collection development policies, the authors can discuss practices meeting this mandate.

As such, this study examined the collection development policies of school districts across nine counties in Illinois to determine the extent, if at all, that manifest messages of diversity exist in policies. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How many school libraries within the sample region have publicly accessible collection development policies?
2. To what extent, if at all, do collection development policies address diversity?

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in gatekeeping theory. Gatekeeping was originally coined by Kurt Lewin in 1947 and has been widely applied to the fields of communication, journalism, and sociology.¹³ In the field of communication, gatekeeping has been used to explain the process that moves information from one channel to another. Gatekeeping posits that information passes through decision points known as gates. At each gate, decision-makers (gatekeepers) determine if the information gets disseminated to a larger audience.

In library and information science (LIS), gatekeeping has been used to describe the role of librarians as gatekeepers.¹⁴ It has also been used to describe the role of libraries¹⁵ and library policies as gates.¹⁶ Librarians are considered gatekeepers because they make final decisions about the types of information included in library collections. The information included within a library collection is made freely available to library users. When information is not included, it is important to highlight why it is excluded. By doing so, librarians can assess and identify potential patterns of exclusion

that may privilege certain types of information. By identifying patterns of exclusion, librarians can work toward greater equity by ensuring that library practices align with library core values.

Collection development policies are considered gates because they are decision points. Collection development policies outline the selection, deselection, and reconsideration criteria for library resources. By using gatekeeping as the lens to examine the data in this study, the researchers can further conversations about how diversity is framed within policies. In other words, we can discuss whether collection development policies act as gates that help librarians make critical decisions about including or excluding diverse content. Given that librarians have an obligation to provide access to resources that reflect the needs, interests, viewpoints, ideas, and experiences of a pluralistic society, we believe that collection development policies should only act to ensure equity of diverse content and not to propagate personal/individual ideologies or values.

Literature Review

Collection development policies are essential to guide a library's collection management practices. They serve as a decision point to help librarians identify which books or information sources should be added to the library's collection. Collection development policies establish the criteria or conditions for excluding books or information sources from a library collection. Lastly, collection development policies inform the public about important collection management decisions and can provide an equitable process for responding to book challenges. According to ALA, "libraries have a responsibility to meet the information needs of everyone in their communities. To do so, they must promote and protect users' intellectual freedom and ensure that the delivery of library services to the community is fair, equitable, and non-discriminatory. This can be achieved only if the library has developed and adopted formal, written library policies and procedures. Written policies are essential because they provide a legal framework for the operations of the library and provide a bulwark against claims that the library or its staff is acting in violation of its mission or the law."¹⁷

Collection development policies, often considered the cornerstone of collection development, should be well-developed to ensure implementation.¹⁸ Library policies must also conform to the ALA's Library Bill of Rights, which interprets how First Amendment rights apply within library settings. Having a clear and concise collection development policy is essential to ensure ethical library practices and continuity of services across the field of librarianship.¹⁹

Furthermore, LIS literature highlights a need for librarians to be intentional when creating inclusive library spaces because equity in libraries is a social justice issue librarians must address.²⁰ Inclusive collection development policies should highlight a library's commitment to diversity by explaining both why and how diversity is achieved and maintained within respective library collections.²¹

Sample

Convenience sampling based on geographic location and proximity to research was used to identify sampled school districts. The principal investigator (PI) is native to Illinois and works in McClean County. Therefore, McClean County and bordering counties met the criteria for inclusion in this study. McClean County is in north central Illinois and is bordered by eight counties. Within these counties, the researchers identified 77 school districts representing approximately 244 public schools: 145 elementary schools, 48 junior high schools, and 51 high schools.

Methods

This study utilized a mixed-methods research design. Both researchers conducted content analyses on sampled school collection development policies to assess the extent to which sampled policies had “manifest” messages of diversity. The principal investigator (PI) performed a similar study on the collection development policies of academic libraries. In that study, the PI examined how collection development policies manifested messages of diversity and the extent that policies aligned with the Library Bill of Rights for Diverse Collections.²² This study employs a similar methodology.

To conduct the analyses, the researchers used a checklist as a guide. The checklist enabled the researchers to identify and document words and phrases that could denote or account for diversity in each sampled policy. The researchers documented the (presence) of diverse words or phrases and the number of times these words or phrases appeared in the policy (frequency). Qualitative data was also captured by keeping anecdotal records on how diversity manifested in policies as well as any mention of the ALA's Library Bill of Rights.

The PI created the checklist by coding the Library Bill of Rights' Interpretations for Diverse Collections (LBR). By coding the Interpretations, the PI was able to extract a list of words and phrases used to denote and/or describe diversity. These words and phrases became the basis of the checklist; however, an additional category for the term “other” was also listed to accommodate words or phrases outside of the LBR that could also describe or denote diversity.

During the content analysis process, both researchers read each sampled policy thoroughly. Then, using the checklist as a guide, the researchers reread each policy, recording words or phrases (referred to as units) that denoted or accounted for diversity. A check mark indicated the presence of a unit. For units that were present in policies, the number of times the unit occurred within the policy was also documented. For policies manifesting the unit “diversity” itself, an example of how the unit manifested within the policy was documented, along with anecdotal records about where diversity examples were found.

Both researchers conducted independent analyses on sampled policies. Independent analyses were then compared to determine

inter-rater reliability (IRR). IRR was measured using simple percent agreement. The researchers analyzed sixteen collection development policies. These policies represented fifty-three schools across sixteen of seventy-seven districts. Fifteen of the policies were district-wide policies. One policy was identified as an individual school policy. The percentage of inter-rater agreements across all policies equaled 96% based on a total of 294 agreements out of 304 possible agreements. Where disagreements did occur, the researchers discussed these disagreements and came to a consensus. Consensus was reached to identify a policy type according to a classification scheme developed during an early study (see appendix A). Consensus was not used to improve interrater reliability.

Data Analysis

Data for this study was analyzed in three parts. For part 1, the PI sought to determine the percentage of schools with collection development policies that were either accessible through the district's website or the website of an individual public school. For this analysis, the PI created a master spreadsheet of all counties that met the criteria for inclusion in this study, along with the districts and number of schools within each district. The PI coded each of the counties and school districts using both colors and numbers. Each county was randomly assigned a color, and each school district within a specific county was identified using both the county's color and its respective district number.

For example, one county was coded as blue. This county has nine school districts (according to the Regional Office of Education): District 1, District 2, District 11, District 6, District 21, District 60, District 69, District 122, and District 140. Therefore, the PI labeled each district as follows: Blue 1; Blue 2; Blue 11; Blue 6; Blue 21; Blue 60; Blue 69; Blue 122; and Blue 140. This type of labeling allowed the researchers to manage the data and match each collection development policy to specific districts or schools within a given district.

The PI recorded the total number of public schools within each district, according to school type (elementary, junior high, or high school). The PI also recorded the number of schools with a collection development policy and the number of schools without a collection development policy. This data was disaggregated and then placed into a table (see appendix B). Additional data was also recorded to identify the number of school districts that had policies and whether collection development policies were district-wide policies that applied to all schools within a district or local school-based policies. When collection development policies were associated with a particular school but were not a district-wide policy, the PI added the first three letters of the school's name behind the district number to distinguish the policy.

For part 2 of the data analysis, the researchers analyzed content analysis data by looking at the specific units that manifested in policies and how those units manifested. This data was tabulated in several different ways. First, the researchers tabulated presence and frequency. To tabulate by presence, the researcher

Table 1. Classification of Policy Types

Policy	TP	TF	PIFP	Policy Type
Orange 14 LS	10	16	60%	High Presence—Low Frequency
Purple 3 ULH	5	6	20%	Low Presence—Low Frequency
Yellow 52 WIL	4	4	0	Low Presence—No Change
Orange 5	3	4	33%	Low Presence—Low Frequency
Gray 2	2	2	0	Low Presence—No Change
Orange 87	2	2	0	Low Presence—No Change
Red 438	2	2	0	Low Presence—No Change
Red 232	2	2	0	Low Presence—No Change
Red 230	2	2	0	Low Presence—No Change
Red 6	2	2	0	Low Presence—No Change
Yellow 703	1	2	100%	Low Presence—Same
Yellow 309	2	2	0	Low Presence—No Change
Yellow 303	2	2	0	Low Presence—No Change
Yellow 75	2	2	0	Low Presence—No Change
Red 5	1	1	0	Low—Presence No Change
Gray 92	0	0	0	No Presence

counted the number of different units that appeared in policies. The sum of these numbers equated to the total presence (TP) of units. To tabulate frequency, the researchers counted the number of times each of the different units appeared in the policy. The sum of these numbers became the total frequency (TF) of all units manifested in policies.

The researchers then ordered policies according to the total presence of units to determine which policies had the highest presence of units versus those with the lowest presence of units. Policies were then ranked according to the total units manifested, which factors in the TF of all the units present. The researchers then calculated the percentage of increase in frequency over units present in policies (PIFP). To accomplish this, the researchers divided the difference between presence and frequency by the total number of units present. The percentage of increase over frequency allowed the researchers to classify each policy based on five distinct types of policies (see appendix A). This data helped the researchers answer the second research question from a quantitative perspective.

Table 1 organizes the collection development policies by total frequency of diversity units present in policies and shows the percent of increase in frequency over presence for each policy. The table also classifies each policy as a specific type.

For part 3 of the data analysis, researchers examined anecdotal records from each policy to determine how the unit “diversity” manifested in each policy. The researchers studied each example of how the term “diversity” was used to identify themes or trends that emerged from the data. First, each researcher made notes and comments about each example in isolation. Both researchers are knowledgeable about equity, diversity, and inclusion and were able to make initial assessments of their observations based on professional and personal experiences. After making independent observations, the researchers compared notes and

discussed commonalities between initial impressions. From these conversations, the researchers were able to identify and agree upon themes present within the data. This data enabled the researchers to answer the second research question from a qualitative perspective.

Table 2 shows the collection development policies that manifested the term diversity or a variation of the term, along with an example of how the term manifested in the policy. Out of sixteen policies, four had manifest language of diversity. Twelve policies did not mention diversity or any language from the checklist (see sample in appendix C).

Results

Lack of Transparency

Out of nine counties with 77 school districts representing 244 schools, 16 collection development policies were publicly available via a school or school district’s website. This sample ($N = 16$) represents approximately 53 (or 21%) of the schools across nine counties. However, the researchers cannot rule out the fact that more schools within this sample area may have collection development policies. From this study, the researchers only conclude that, at the time of this study, collection development policies were not publicly available on either the district or individual schools’ websites for the remaining 61 districts, which represent approximately 191 schools.

Two Additional Policy Types

The researchers were able to identify two additional types of policies during this study: a “no presence” policy and a “low presence, low frequency” policy. We define “no presence” policies as policies that do not manifest any diversity units and should be identified as a type of policy. A “no presence” policy was evidenced by policy Gray 92. The Gray County has seven school districts, representing sixteen schools. District 92 within the county is a single school district governing one elementary school. Within this policy, none of the checklist units were present. Nor were there other terms in the policy related to diversity, equity, inclusion, or access.

We define “low presence—low frequency” as policies that manifest a lower presence of diversity units, and the overall increase in frequency over the unit present is less than 100%. This policy type was noted in Orange 5. Policy Orange 5 represents a district-wide collection development policy for approximately sixteen schools. Within this policy, the following diversity units did manifest: diverse book awards, diversity, disability, and different voices. The unit for “diverse book awards” was given a frequency count of two because the policy names specific diverse book awards. Therefore, this policy has a total presence of three and an overall frequency of four. The increase in frequency is less than 100% of the terms present, which means that while the policy does manifest diverse language, only a small percentage of that language is repeated throughout the policy. In these types of

Table 2. Policy Samples with Diversity

Policy	# of Times Diversity Manifests in Policy	Example of How Diversity Manifests in Policy
Purple, District 3	1	"For further information on library selection policies in general, please see the following ALA documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluating Library Collections <i>Diversity in Collection Development</i>"
Red, District 5	1	". . . is dedicated to building collections that provide the greatest impact on literacy, learning, teaching, and research and offer <i>diversity</i> of content."
Orange, District 14	4	" <i>Diversity</i> : Emphasis is placed on collecting resources which accurately and respectively represent <i>diversity</i> in culture, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, citizenship status, country of origin and more. It is crucial resources reflect the <i>diversity</i> of experiences within a given identity and represent intersectional identities." <p>". . . by providing access to quality information and literature from <i>diverse</i> resources."</p>
Orange, District 5	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "For further information on library selection policies in general, please see the following ALA documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluating Library Collections <i>Diversity in Collection Development</i> "Library Bill of Rights." American Library Association. Web. 11 Apr. 2012. Jacobson, Frances. "Uni High Library—Collection Development." University

policies, diversity language is not embedded or given significant space within the policy. Lack of embeddedness can signify that diversity is either siloed within certain sections within policies or not meaningful because there is no real emphasis on the language.²³

Themes

Based on the data from this study, the following themes were noted:

1. *Lack of specificity*: The term "diversity" in this sample ($N = 16$) of collection development policies was not always defined. Within this study, one policy (Orange 14) defined "what diversity means" as it pertains to collection development. Diversity is a broad term that can be used in multiple ways and can have different meanings. In the context of equity, diversity, inclusion, and access (EDIA), the term "diversity" should always point to people (their ideas, experiences, abilities, identities, backgrounds, etc.). Diversity should always be specified within policies to distinguish when the term represents diversity in book format, diversity of topics, or diversity of genre.
2. *General district-wide policies*: Schools in this sample often use district-wide policies to outline collection procedures. Approximately nine (57%) of the policies sampled were the exact same and posted to websites across multiple districts. These policies manifested a lower presence of diversity units and no frequency increase over the units present. Therefore, these policies lacked specificity in terms of defining diversity, and the importance of diversity was not imbued throughout the policy. While district policies can ensure continuity of library service across all the schools within the district, these nine policies didn't address diversity in a meaningful way. Nor did they outline specific procedures for acquiring diverse content or ensuring inclusivity within collections.

Data from this study does not provide insight into why school districts may opt to use district-wide policies. District administrators may want to ensure continuity in messaging regarding library services and use. These types of policies may also be

convenient for districts given that they can be copied from one district to the next. However, the researchers noticed a trend regarding district-wide policies in this study. These policies had not been updated within the last five years, and some had references to outdated versions of the LBR. District administrators should consider the implication of copying existing policies without verifying the policy information and without ensuring that the copied policy represents the unique needs of their students.

3. *Reference to ALA*: Of the four policies that manifested the term "diversity," two of the four policies referenced or provided direct links to ALA's Library Bill of Rights for Diversity in Collection Development. While the numbers here are low, the researchers believe that this data is indicative of a positive direction for future policy development. Illinois recently passed Illinois House Bill 2789, which encourages librarians to write policies that either align with specific sections of the Library Bill of Rights or that expressly prohibit book banning. One policy provided a direct link to ALA's website. Another policy referenced ALA in the policy's bibliography section.

Implication for Policy Development

ALA identifies diversity as a core value. Therefore, collection development policies should reflect this value. By articulating meaningful messages of diversity in collection development policies, librarians can reinforce the importance of diversity and apprise users of a library's intentional commitment to equity.

These policies can also send strong messages to censors that diversity within library collections undergirds the mission of the school, the district, the school library, and the broader field of librarianship. Empirical studies analyzing how school libraries address diversity through policy are scant. Therefore, this study illuminates the policy practices of sampled libraries and can intensify discussions about actionable ways to make library collections more inclusive. As such, the authors make the following recommendations for writing school collection development policies:

1. *School library or district-wide collection development policies should create collection development policies that clearly articulate a commitment to diversity and the curation of books that reflect both social and cultural pluralism.* Since policies serve as guides for selecting library books and other resources, librarians should ensure that messages of diversity in policies are clear. Diversity is a broad and complex term that describes many different experiences. To capture the vastness of these experiences, librarians should create policies that are specific and that identify groups that are included within their collection. Therefore, policies should use terminology to name the specific groups that are represented in their collections. Such policy specificity can serve as a compass to help librarians select books that represent the populations most impacted by diversity inequities.
2. *School library or district-wide collection development policies should make sure that collection development policies are easily located on their respective websites.* Transparency is important for both defending selection decisions and for ensuring professional accountability. In this study, the researchers posit that absent publicly available policies, it is impossible to determine whether policies act as gates. Most policies examined in this study did not act as gates for diverse content because only some policies addressed diversity in a way that would guide the selection practices of diverse content. Given that collection development policies provide guidelines for building library collections that are fair, equitable, and under library standards, policies should detail procedures for selecting diverse materials. Systems of inequities thrive when information is not scrutinized. By making policy information available to the larger community, librarians can reinforce messages of diversity and practices that align with core values of librarianship as articulated by ALA. Transparency also creates accountability.
3. *School library or district-wide collection development policies should directly reference the current iteration of the ALA Library Bill of Rights or Interpretations.* School library or district-wide collection development policies should also provide links and additional references to the ALA Bill of Rights to underscore the message of intellectual freedom and the importance of inclusivity. This information should be updated frequently to ensure that “links” direct patrons to current iterations of the LBR.
4. *School library or district-wide collection development policies should increase the frequency or number of times diverse language appears in policies.* Language used to draft diversity statements should be reiterated throughout the entire collection development policy to emphasize the value of diversity in all aspects of selection decisions. &

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Appendix A

Five Policy Types	
High Presence—Low Frequency	Policies fell within either of the groups that manifested a high presence of checklist and IBOR units. However, the overall increase in frequency over the number of units present increased by less than (<) 100% of the total unit presence.
Low Presence—High Frequency	Policies fell within either of the groups that manifested a low presence of checklist and IBOR units. However, the overall increase in frequency over the number of units present increased by more than (>) 100% of the total unit presence.
High Presence—High Frequency	Policies fell within one of the two groups that manifested a high presence of checklist and IBOR units. This category also describes policies where the overall increase in frequency over the amount of units present increased (>) by 100%.
Low Presence—No Change	Policies fell within either of the groups that manifested a lower presence of checklist and IBOR units. However, there was no (0) increase in frequency over the amount of units present.
Low Presence—Same	Policies had a low presence of checklist and IBOR units. However, the overall increase in frequency over the amount of unit presence was equal to (=) or 100% of the total unit presence.

Appendix B. Districts with Policies vs. Districts Where Policies Were Not Located

County	# of School Districts	# of DWPL	# of DWPNL	Total # of Schools	# of SWP	% of SWP
Orange	9	3	6	50	33	53%
Green	2	0	2	8	0	0
Red	12	5	7	24	8	33%
Yellow	18	5	13	52	8	15%
Blue	9	0	9	23	0	0
Gray	7	2	5	16	3	18%
Purple	14	1	13	53	1	1%
Pink	2	0	2	7	0	0
Brown	4	0	4	11	0	0
Totals	77	16	61	244	53	21%

Appendix C. Sample (Unedited) District Without Diverse Language

Policy 13: Yellow, 703

Media Policy

The ultimate responsibility for the selection of media resides with the Board of Education. The Board and the Administration delegate the actual selection of materials to the professional staff whose training qualified them to perform this function. A parent/guardian has the right to evaluate the media materials his/her child is using. However, no parent/guardian has the right to determine materials that will be used by other children. If materials are being used in a classroom that a parent/guardian formally objects to, accommodations may be made.

It is our purpose to provide a rich environment that will foster in each child, a lifelong desire to learn. Materials selected for use should include, but not limited to, the following:

- Materials that are an integral part of the instructional program.
- Materials that are appropriate for the learning level and understanding of students.
- Materials that reflect the interests and needs of the students and faculty.
- Materials representing a wide range of literary and artistic values.
- Materials presenting as many opinions as possible on issues of contemporary concern so that students have opportunities to analyze varying points of view and to learn to think critically.
- Video materials with a rating other than "G" will require a permission slip signed by parent/guardian prior to showing in grades K–6.
- Video materials from sources other than the IMC video collection will be recorded by title and rating with the Principal prior to showing.