Core Values: The Foundation for Authentic School Librarianship

Feature

by Judi Moreillon, May 2021

Over the past thirty years, some aspects of the school librarian profession have changed dramatically. The plethora of resources available to today's students and educators is far superior to those available at the beginning of my career in librarianship. And yet, when I set up a CD-ROM workstation in our school library in 1992, the library program offered the most advanced technology-integrated learning opportunities in the building. The same was true at a different school in 1997 when our library had a modem for a standalone connected computer, the only one in our school. At that elementary school, we utilized our access, in part, for an award-winning student-designed, created, and maintained website that showcased classroom-library collaboration and students' learning products.

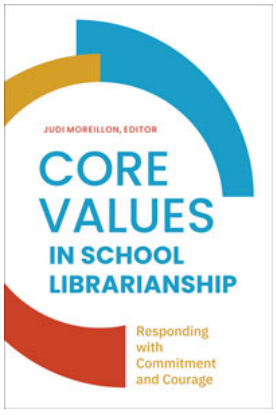
Resources matter and yet, there are some aspects of librarianship that have not changed since long before the Internet came to school. The constants in our profession are the core values we hold dear. Equity, diversity, inclusion, and intellectual freedom are the foundation on which our work is built. Our values give us a place to stand in the rapid-fire changes of living in a technologically advanced society and an ever-fluid education landscape. Our values also give us the strength we need to take action to help make the world a more just and safe place for the youth, colleagues, and families we serve.

School Librarian Core Values and Identity

Core values serve as guideposts for practice. That is why "we are forever explaining why we're going out of our way to protect someone else's work, why it's important to consciously select diverse books, why the library is a safe place for everyone, and why we work so hard to protect our patrons' privacy" (Gilbert and Allen 2020, p. 36). When we adhere to our values, they give our work integrity.

When we live our core values, we also develop an authentic identity. We take actions based on our beliefs. We are true to our calling and to ourselves. And, when we combine our core values with authenticity, we have the opportunity to serve as effective and respected leaders in our learning communities.

Core Values in School Librarianship: Responding with Commitment and Courage



The co-authors of *Core Values in School Librarianship: Responding with Commitment and Courage* (Libraries Unlimited, 2021) are school librarian leaders who have a deep commitment to the core values of our profession. They have also shown courage in holding true to our shared values. The book offers testimonials to the enduring and unique contributions that school librarians can make to the culture of learning in our schools.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I includes four chapters, one for each of the core values. Part II is comprised of four chapters that focus on specific strategies for enacting the core values in practice. The final chapter, Part III, suggests the critical importance of collaboration with others to achieve a values-centered learning community. Readers can get a small taste of the book's content from the following chapter summaries. (Note: All unattributed quotes in this article are from the book.)

Part I: Core Values Chapters

Co-authors Erika Long and Suzanne Sherman contributed the "equity" chapter. In their work, these practicing school librarians from Tennessee demonstrate that equity is a matter of social justice. All library stakeholders must have the access they need to succeed. "The question we continue to work

toward answering is whose role is it to push those stumbling blocks aside—or better yet, remove them altogether—so that attaining equitable access for all is achievable." In their chapter, Erika and Suzanne answer this question with one word: "you."

Three practicing school librarians co-authored the "diversity" chapter. Julie Stivers and Stephanie Powell, from North Carolina, and Nancy Jo Lambert, from Texas, share their experiences on the critical importance of diverse library resources. Julie notes, "all students deserve great stories—and if you're not including BIPOC authors and characters—then you're not truly giving your students all the possible great stories. Diversity in resources, however, is not enough. We must commit to pairing a diverse, inclusive collection with diversity within our own internal work, mindset, and pedagogical frameworks."

In the "inclusion" chapter, co-authors Vermont school librarians Meg Boisseau Allison and Peter Patrick Langella offer examples of how "inclusion means welcoming and affirming the voices of all library stakeholders in a way that shares power." Meg and Peter take action based on the belief that school librarians and libraries should not be neutral. In libraries that are spaces of radical inclusion, librarians join with students and colleagues to advocate for voices that have been silenced and for people who have been historically marginalized, dehumanized, or oppressed.

California school librarian Suzanne Sannwald collaborated with her colleague Dan McDowell, director of Learning and Innovation, to explore "intellectual freedom" from access to print and digital resources to students' opportunities to exercise agency. Intellectual freedom is a mindset that includes seeking and receiving information, securing privacy and confidentiality, and fostering democracy. Suzanne and Dan suggest a role for school librarians in collaborating with other educators to design pedagogy based in trust that honors students' right to lead their own learning.

Part II: Values in Action Chapters

Effective school librarians know that these four core values—equity, diversity, inclusion, and intellectual freedom—cannot thrive unless they are practiced both within and beyond the walls of the library. School librarian values must be modeled, developed, and enacted through the relationships we build within our schools, districts, and professional associations. At the building level, school librarians' relationships with colleagues and principals are essential to disseminating values-based practices throughout the learning community. Leadership, advocacy, and collaboration are required in order for educators to reach their capacity to help students achieve success.

District-level school librarian supervisor Jennifer Sturge contributed the "relationships" chapter along with her district-level colleagues assistive technology specialist Stacy Allen and supervisor of equity and school improvement Sandy Walker. Their district-wide impact extends from the taproot of their collegial relationships with one another and with other Calvert County (Maryland) School District educators. Their work attests to the power of relationships to touch hearts and minds and turn a spark of curiosity into a flame of learning that makes a difference for students, colleagues, and families.

In their chapter, Pennsylvania principal Kelly Gustafson and school librarian M. E. Shenefiel shared how allyship between principals and librarians supports schoolwide and districtwide success. Principals demonstrate their value for librarians and library programs through budgetary decisions, scheduling, and the promotion of collaborative instruction. Librarians enact their support for principals by helping them achieve building-level goals. When principal-librarian alliances are strong, school librarians serve as co-leaders and library programs are positioned to exert a positive influence on the entire school community.

New Hampshire school librarian educators Pam Harland and Anita Cellucci, who is also a practicing school librarian in Massachusetts, noted in the "leadership" chapter that "to lead and succeed, each individual member of the school must be an integrated component of the school's community and culture." The co-authors make a strong case for how school librarians who take risks and show vulnerability grow their confidence and their ability to lead. These leader librarians co-create a welcoming, supportive, and effective learning environment in which all stakeholders succeed.

Kristin Fraga Sierra and TuesD Chambers, school librarians in Washington State, launched their "advocacy" chapter with a note about how school closures impacted their library public relations efforts. They acknowledge that students, classroom teachers, and community advocates are the best and most effective voices and faces of the school library program. They also show the need for an effective curator who will gather these voices for others to see and hear—a certified school librarian leader who is also a library and librarian advocate.

Part III: Collaboration

"Collaboration is *the* key to co-creating a values-centered culture of deeper learning." Writing from Arizona, I authored the final chapter in the book. Effective school librarians are educators who collaborate with other educators in order to continuously improve our own practice and elevate the culture of deeper learning for all members of our school communities. Through classroom-library collaboration, we co-create our school culture and infuse it with our core values: equity, diversity, inclusion, and intellectual freedom for the benefit of students, colleagues, administrators, and families.

The figure represents the central role of our core values in shaping our school librarian identity and practice. On this foundation we create opportunities for enacting our values through relationships with other educators and administrators, leadership, and advocacy. As instructional partners and collaborators, we co-create a schoolwide

culture of deeper learning.

Putting It All Together

In addition to the wisdom and experiences of the co-authors, each chapter in *Core Values in School Librarianship: Responding with Commitment and Courage* includes two vignettes. These bright spots shine a light on our core values in action and are included to help readers "see themselves" in values-centered library practices. These examples can also inspire readers to step out of their comfort zones to take risks in order to improve teaching and learning in their schools. To invite even more voices into this conversation, each chapter also includes quotes from the field published in practitioner and scholarly works as well as via social media venues.

Finally, each chapter ends with reflection questions to invite readers to connect the chapter content with their unique teaching and learning environment. Many of the questions ask how school librarians can serve as leaders who take action to actualize core values or demonstrate courage in their practice.

At its heart, this book is about how our core values shape our identity as school librarians and how our identity influences our relationships with library stakeholders. "The decision to never veer from your cause, to hold yourself accountable to HOW you do things; that's the hardest part" (Sinek 2009, 68).

The co-authors of *Core Values in School Librarianship: Responding with Commitment and Courage* hope that our book will help you affirm or reaffirm your commitment to library values. We hope you will join us in enacting our shared values with courage and in collaboration with library stakeholders. As school librarian leaders, we can make a difference for the communities we serve when we hold ourselves accountable for standing up today and tomorrow for the hard things.

Works Cited

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