

Position Statement on Labeling Practices

BACKGROUND:

School library collections are places where learners can explore interests safely and without restrictions; they are not merely extensions of classroom book collections or classroom teaching methods. A minor's right to access resources freely and without restriction has long been and continues to be the position of the American Library Association and the American Association of School Librarians (AASL). The *AASL National School Library Standards* emphasize the importance of a school library collection that "is physically and intellectually accessible" and where access is "best met at the time of need" (2018). These standards describe the school librarian's ability to work "with learners to ensure that they are able to independently evaluate resources and make responsible and ethical decisions regarding the use of these resources" (AASL 2018, 117). Furthermore, the International Federation of Library Association's (IFLA) *School Library Guidelines* (2015) affirm the ethical responsibilities of school librarians to promote intellectual freedom, access, and privacy. IFLA guidelines maintain that school librarians "must endeavour to put the rights of the library users before their own comfort and convenience and avoid being biased by their personal attitudes and beliefs in providing library service" (2015, 30).

These commitments have implications for school librarians' labeling practices related to classification and shelving practices, labeling content and reading levels, and protecting learners' privacy.

POSITION:

Classification and Shelving Practices

School librarians' classification and shelving practices should support learners' ability to meet their information needs while avoiding reductive classification choices that narrowly define readers and/or books.

Librarians use classification systems and spine labels to organize and identify library resources by call number to help patrons locate general subject areas or specific fiction, non-fiction, reference, audiovisual, or other items. Best practice in school libraries includes books and other resources being shelved using a standard classification system that also enables learners to find resources in other libraries, such as a public library, from which they may borrow materials. School librarians should teach learners how to navigate their library classification systems, as well as how their classification system may differ from other libraries, such as public or academic libraries.

Classification by genre can be a valid shelving practice when done with attention to systematic classification, established subject headings, or other commonly used genre labels. School librarians considering reorganizing or reclassifying their library collections by genre should consult current research on genre-based classification in school libraries as well as collaborate with other librarians, educators, learners, and families to balance the many benefits and constraints of such systems. For example, B. Trott and V. Novak (2006) weigh the potential for creating more browsable collections against the possibility of reductive labels or classification choices that narrow the audience of a book. Furthermore, school

librarians should consider cultural biases and power relations when creating genre-based labels related to a book's content, as discussed in the next section.

Labeling Content

School librarians should avoid using prejudicial and identity-based labeling practices.

The ALA's "Labeling Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights" (2015) makes a distinction between viewpoint-neutral directional labels that increase learners' access to information and support their First Amendment right to read and prejudicial labels, which are based on value judgments used to warn patrons or limit access to certain materials. A label that describes materials as "controversial" or warns readers of "mature themes" is an example of a label that contains a value judgment, since what is defined as controversial varies widely from person to person. Moreover, the National Council of Teachers of English (2018) argues that reducing books and materials to isolated, potentially controversial features serves to reduce learners' access to books both for leisure reading and for inclusion in classrooms. Labels that make determinations about a book's content are an infringement of a learner's First Amendment rights to free speech and their ability to make determinations about what content is appropriate for them. Instead, school librarians should support each learner's right to make determinations about content.

School library professionals should also exercise caution when creating labels that may serve to further stigmatize a historically marginalized identity group (e.g., books by or about LGBTQIA+ authors or Black, indigenous, and people of color). Labeling practices that separate marginalized groups from the collection may seek to narrow the audience for a book or make accessing these resources more difficult. For example, labels signifying LGBTQIA+ characters and content could make materials difficult to locate for patrons who are not specifically looking for LGBTQIA+ titles but may be browsing for romance or science fiction (both genres that contain LGBTQIA+ books). Likewise, when using content labels such as "urban fiction," school librarians should carefully consider their definition of "urban" and ensure that it does not suggest monolithic identities based on race, gender, or socioeconomic status or experiences that focus on stereotypes of urban crime or violence.

Reading Level Labels

School librarians should resist labeling or arranging books by any readability scale and should instead advocate for the development of policies that do not require library staff to restrict access to books based on reading or age levels.

Some school librarians face pressure from administrators and classroom educators to label and arrange library collections according to reading levels. However, commercial leveling systems are an imperfect predictor of a book's reading level since they generally rely on a single quantitative measure that ignores other aspects of text complexity included in the Common Core State Standards like the text's qualitative complexity (e.g., the levels meaning or the structure of a text) and considerations specific to the reader (e.g., motivation or background knowledge) or the instructional task or purpose. Moreover, learner browsing behaviors can be profoundly altered with the addition of external reading level labels. When reading level labels are tied to rewards or grades, learner browsing becomes mainly a search for books that must be read and tests completed for individual or classroom point goals and/or grades.

School libraries that serve broad age and grade levels (e.g., a single library that serves grades K–12) may also feel pressure from administrators or parents to restrict younger learners' access to certain parts of the collection. These contexts present clear challenges for school librarians charged with serving a diverse group of learners within a school library, and whenever possible, the school librarian should work with administrators, educators, and parents to create library policies that reduce unnecessary or arbitrary distinctions between ages or grades. Providing information to educators, learners, and families about how the school library is organized and encouraging families to be engaged with their own child's reading selections is preferable to requiring written permission or restricting access to certain library sections

based on a learner’s age or grade, since the needs, interests, and readiness levels of two children of the same age may be vastly different.

It is also important for school policies to recognize the distinctions between a school library’s need to be accessible to all learners and a classroom library’s more narrowly targeted collection, which may focus on the needs of a specific age group or instructional goal. Because the school library’s goal is to meet the needs of its entire community’s information-seeking, curricular, and leisure reading goals, its collection and labeling practices will necessarily be more inclusive and less restrictive than some classroom libraries.

Protecting Learner Privacy

School librarians have a responsibility to protect learner privacy and confidentiality when considering any practice that places a label on the outside of a book or on library shelving.

Labeling and shelving a book with an assigned reading level or an indicator of content on its spine allows other learners to observe the reading level and reading interests of their peers and should be avoided. When it comes to reading levels, only a learner, the child’s parents or guardian, the teacher, and the school librarian (as appropriate) should have knowledge of a learner’s reading capabilities. I. C. Fountas and G. S. Pinnell, creators of a widely used text leveling system, argue that “levels have no place in classroom libraries, in school libraries, in public libraries, or on report cards” because their goal was to create a system of leveling books to aid teachers in instruction, not to place labels on learners (Parrott 2017). Any classification system that relies on external labels for readability levels labels the reader and violates First Amendment rights to privacy.

Additionally, some content labels may infringe on learner privacy as well and can impede a learner’s ability to read and access materials of interest (see “The Freedom to Read Statement”). This is particularly important when considering LGBTQIA+ materials. Labels indicating LGBTQIA+ characters and issues could be stigmatizing and hinder access to materials for some learners’ who may fear being outed to their peers or adults (Rainbow Roundtable 2016). All learners and users of a school library should be free to choose books without leveled or labeled restrictions.

APPENDIX

Questions to Guide Practice

When creating policies and practices related to the labeling of books by genre, content, or reading level, ask yourself these questions to determine whether you have addressed concerns of privacy, learner First Amendment rights, and potential behavior modification in browsing and reading motivations. Consider:

1. Whom might these labels help to find or access resources? Whom might they deter from finding or accessing materials?
2. Are the labels restrictive (limiting access for some learners) or directional (making resources more accessible)?
3. Are the labels related to determinations about controversial content? Who would think this content is controversial?
4. Are the labels marking one identity group as different from “normal” identities? Do the labels center stereotypical understandings of marginalized groups?
5. Are the labels providing information about the reading level or potentially controversial content of the book? Are those labels violating learners’ First Amendment right to privacy (meaning they are prominent and visible to anyone who can see the book)?
6. Do the labels make judgments about content, level, or “appropriateness” that should more appropriately be made by learners and their families?

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ADDITIONAL READING:

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DISCLAIMER:

The position taken by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) represents the organization and cannot be applied to individual members or groups affiliated with the association without their direct confirmation.

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