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The Muscle of INCLUDE

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BY **JULIE STIVERS**

Every Shared Foundation author thinks their foundation is the most important one. Here's the thing—they are all right.

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I was lucky enough to focus on Include and how the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* can both guide and illuminate the inclusive collections, spaces, and programs we are building in our schools.

The Shared Foundations

The Shared Foundations have always been my favorite part of the AASL School Library Standards. To explain why, I can turn to comics. Yes, comics. (In my opinion, comics and manga are the answer to many library questions!) In Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics, he describes amplification through simplification as a way to explore the power of comic art. When a face is drawn in a simplified manner, the artist is able to amplify meaning and emotion in a way that a photorealistic drawing cannot.

I feel much the same way about the Shared Foundations. By simplifying the basis of our profession into six tenets—or foundations—the standards amplify what is most important to us as librarians in our work with learners: Create, Curate, Include, Inquire, Engage, Explore. No matter how new or complex or thorny an educational development or learner issue may be, the simple, powerful Foundations can guide us.

> If you're wondering whether or not your library has a culture, I can assure you, it has one. Every one of our libraries does, whether intentionally built or not.

Include

Include. The very word conjures a library culture that is welcoming, affirming, and yes, inclusive. If you're wondering whether or not your library has a culture, I can assure you, it has one. Every one of our libraries does, whether intentionally built or not. Building a library using Include as a guide can help us create inclusive spaces, collections, and programs—and library cultures.

When I think of issues facing librarians, issues attacking our learners and libraries, Include is still relevant, still helpful. When I wrote the *Include* guide back in 2020, I began with specifying that Include is at the heart of

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an effective school library practice. Not as a feel-good mantra, but as the muscle that can build an inclusive school library.

Here we are, over five years later, and we need that muscle more than ever. There are countless issues that have bloomed in recent years that were not prevalent when the Shared Foundations Series were being written—including Include. The gutting of funding for special education services. Rampant misinformation online, including from government sources. The rapid—and, to this librarian, unchecked—growth of artificial intelligence usage in schools. And, overarching all these dilemmas, are attacks on what we hold most precious: our learners and their rights to read, learn, and grow.

Attacks on intellectual freedom. Attacks on learners. Attacks on libraries.

Attacks on intellectual freedom, our learners, and libraries are horribly—and intentionally—intertwined. I do not need to explain what is happening, as we are all living in this toxic landscape for our libraries—from racism and cowardice at school board meetings to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity in our neighborhoods to legislation criminalizing librarians.

Where does Include fit in? Right where it always has. As the muscle. Its Key Commitment demands that we "demonstrate an understanding of and commitment to inclusiveness." If we want to understand and commit to inclusivity, it is being on the side of our learners who are being oppressed and attacked, whether that is literally or through the erasure of their stories. It is educating ourselves on legislative issues in our districts and states to unpack how to still support learners and their rights to stories that affirm who they are. Include is knowing our learners' right to an education in our schools—regardless of documentation status. If we truly commit to inclusiveness as the Include Shared Foundation plainly lays out—then we are committing to protecting our learners, all of our learners.

As equity-focused librarians—and we should all count ourselves in that group—we have to be strategic. I'm not suggesting that librarians lose their jobs. What I am suggesting is that we all have to figure out a way to support the learners in our spaces in a way that pushes back on the harm being done to them outside our school walls. Through personal interactions, displays, classroom texts, readers' advisory, lit circles, clubs, and read-alouds, we must actively uphold the Include Key Commitment and "demonstrate an understanding of and commitment to inclusiveness."

For some of us, that is protesting against ICE in our communities and doing read-alouds on books that center both immigration justice and joy. For some of us, that is creating displays that pair books on reproductive health with books on teens resisting oppressive governments. For some of us, it is making sure we have books that our learners need—even if we have to keep them out of our cataloguing system for safety reasons.

In *Fix Injustice, Not Kids*, Paul Gorski and Katy Swalwell discuss the need to be strategic as we take a stand in our schools. "Perhaps there is a time when morality requires some equity-committed leaders to take their stand, to be vulnerable to whatever repercussions may come. Of course, some of us are not in a position to do that, and that has to be OK too. Each of us must decide our best, most principled course of action. We need people to stay in the struggle even in places where the struggle feels at least temporarily fruitless. But we also don't want every equity leader to be chased out of schools and districts until there are no adults left who are willing to struggle for equity."

Remember, those who are not on the side of inclusivity want us to feel alone. You are not alone. Connect with like-minded equity co-conspirators in your school, district, union, or state librarian organization for support as you navigate supporting learners amidst any backlash in your school or district.

Shared Foundation Include—and all its domains, competencies, and alignments—is the muscle we need to keep our libraries strong for our learners. Now, more than ever.

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