

# Balance or indoctrination: Developing and defending balanced school library collections

By Anita Brooks Kirkland

## Snapshot

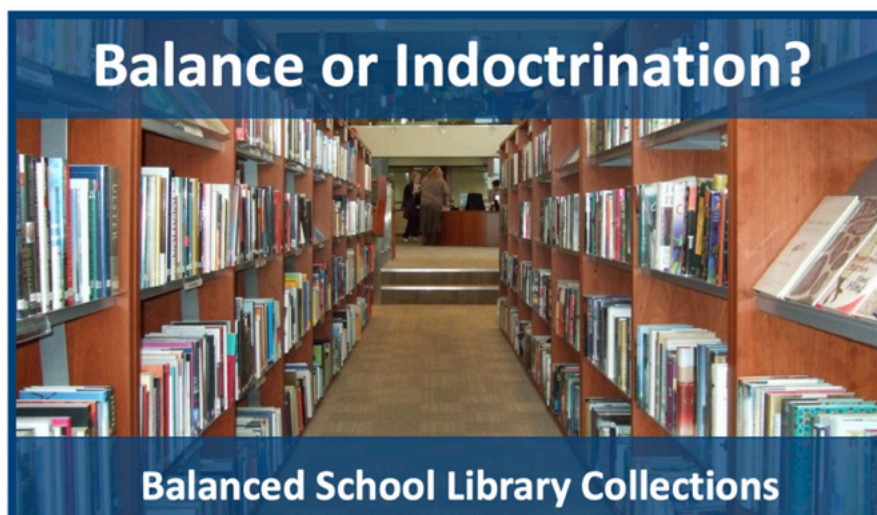
Anita Brooks Kirkland, our Canadian contributor, clearly outlines sound approaches for creating balanced school library collections. She makes a strong case for the role of internal and external policy, the importance of selection criteria and our integral role in learning and teaching as we seek to serve, and represent, our diverse communities.

Over the past couple of years I have been kept very busy responding to the crisis in book challenges sweeping across Canada. My focus is always on explaining professional ethics and standards related to collection development, and defending students' freedom of expression rights.

One challenge that I have received more than once during this time is to the most basic of selection criteria, that collectively resources in the school library should represent diverse points of view about controversial topics.

'Well', the challenger says, believing that books featuring LGBTQ+ characters are controversial, 'If you have books with gay characters then you have to have just as many books with alternative points of view!' Of course, typical collections include hundreds of books representing more 'traditional' families, so the challenge truly defies logic.

But how do we explain that this so-called controversy is contrived? I know that we all get that squiggly, uncomfortable sensation when confronted with this kind of misguided logic, but if you're like me, the quick answer doesn't always make it from the deep recesses of my mind to cross my lips simply and logically.



Representing diverse points of view is an important aspect of selection, but there are a few important things to keep in mind to clarify our thinking, and help to explain professional practices.

## The mandate of the school library collection

It is very important to understand that different kinds of libraries have different mandates, and collections vary accordingly. Public libraries serve the broad interests of the whole community, and therefore have more varied collections. University libraries maintain huge collections because their mandate is in part to support researchers, who need to understand the progression of knowledge over time in their area of expertise.

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The school library supports an inquiry approach to learning, providing current, quality, professionally-selected resources to inform deeper inquiry into topics in the curriculum and also inquiry driven by personal interest. Within that context, resources may represent different perspectives. But it is very important to understand that that does not mean that all points of view should be represented. As selectors, we are looking for quality resources that are well-researched, with information that can be verified. Our collections may have resources that suggest different approaches to dealing with issues, but that does not mean that school library collections should include resources that deny the basic facts.

The school library collection also supports literacy development and reading engagement. Again, the collection must provide a wide range of choices within this context to serve the reading interests and abilities of all students.

## Selection guidelines and criteria

Good guidelines include selection and de-selection criteria related to the curriculum and learning. This is the basic mandate of the collection. They also include criteria related to protecting freedom of expression, as guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Good selection guidelines help us to ensure that the collection represents the diversity of Canadian society, including ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

The Canadian School Libraries Collection Diversity Toolkit includes a [poster](#) ready for you to download and print with a model of selection criteria that includes both of these main areas. It relates selection criteria to [Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada](#).

Rich and diverse library collections are developed within the context of the rights and freedoms guaranteed to all Canadians in the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#). The Charter protects the rights of everyone, including children.

**Our School Library Learning Commons:  
Diverse Collections and Equity-Informed Selection**

**The collection follows our school district's selection guidelines.**

**Strong selection criteria ensure that the collection:**

- Enriches the curriculum and engages readers
- Serves students' varied interests, abilities, and learning styles
- Stimulates personal growth and growth in critical thinking
- Provides a rich information environment to support inquiry
- Represents a variety of perspectives, including about controversial issues
- Promotes cross-curricular, holistic, and inquiry-based approaches to learning

**Additionally, the library collection represents:**

- The diversity of Canada's religious, ethnic, and cultural groups and their contributions to our heritage
- Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing
- Experiences and perspectives of individuals from diverse backgrounds, lifestyles, sexual orientation and gender identity expression, and people of varying abilities
- Gender, cultural, and racial inclusiveness

These representations are protected and enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in provincial human rights codes. **Resources cannot be rejected because they represent diverse peoples and communities.** Trained library professionals make selections based on reason and principle rather than on personal opinion and bias. They also defend students' right to resources that promote open inquiry, critical thinking, diversity in thought and expression, and respect for others.

**CANADIAN  
SCHOOL LIBRARIES**

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## Understanding the concept of a balanced collection

A balanced collection – what does that mean? Does it mean that for every resource that is considered by some to be 'in favour' of a 'controversial' topic be balanced by a resource that denies science or that does not support Charter rights? Should resources on animal adaptation (in every elementary science curriculum) be 'balanced' by creationist theories? Should resources on the Holocaust be 'balanced' by resources denying the Holocaust? Certainly not! The theory of evolution is accepted as sound science, and is supported by the curriculum. The existence of the Holocaust is not in dispute, except from extremists whose viewpoints may be based on hate. Should resources about gender identity or sexual orientation be 'balanced' by resources representing these identities as personal choices? Certainly not, as that would contravene our mandate to protect Charter rights.

A balanced collection is one that is created according to the mandate for school library collections and that serves the needs of the entire learning community. Well-written guidelines defend universal principles of protecting intellectual freedom, and put collection diversity within the context of the rights and freedoms of all Canadians, as expressed in the Charter.

Topics such as evolution spur many debates, many of which might indeed be controversial. But resources selected to represent these controversies are still selected for their quality, which includes the authority of the author and the quality of the research that has informed their writing.

**As selectors, we are looking for quality resources that are well-researched, with information that can be verified.**

I remember two teachers at one of the schools in my district requesting that the library include books at the primary level that represented a creationist view of the world, where people co-existed with dinosaurs. They wanted these books included in the non-fiction, science collection. These teachers were filtering their selection of resources through their own belief systems, rather than through sound selection criteria. The science curriculum clearly supports the theory of evolution. The 'science' of these resources was bogus. The purpose of the books was religious

rather than scientific. They did, in no way, support the curriculum or the mandate of the library. In my role as the consultant for K-12 libraries in the district, the school sought my assistance in handling this situation. I supported the school in denying the request.

## Supporting inquiry into diverse points of view

As a teacher and a teacher-librarian I consistently advised my students that they could have any point of view that they wanted, provided they were able to back it up with real evidence from reliable sources. And so we have the basic foundations for teaching information literacy and skills for inquiry and research.

A good example would be exploring issues around climate change. Denying that climate change exists is not a supportable point of view, given current scientific knowledge. Exploring the implications of climate change, on the other hand, means exploring depths of differing perspectives and associated controversies. Resource collections should support student inquiry by providing insight into these differing perspectives.

One way that school library collections present differing viewpoints for controversial topics is through online subscription research databases such as Canadian Points of View or Opposing Viewpoints. Both of these resources are from quality publishers. For each topic they give an overview, present both sides of the controversy, and link to professionally-selected resources from good sources to support each viewpoint.

**A balanced collection is one that is created according to the mandate for school library collections and that serves the needs of the entire learning community.**

In the end, part of the mandate of the collection is to offer opportunities for young researchers to explore varying perspectives from a wide range of resources. That collection includes resources representing varying points of view, some of which might indeed be controversial.

But those resources are selected according to sound criteria, not influenced by personal bias on the part of the selector, or by external pressure to 'balance' the collection with 'alternative' points of view. It's about information literacy and developing students' critical literacy skills after all, not indoctrination.

Note: This article first appeared in the May 2024 edition of the [Canadian School Libraries Journal](#) and is reproduced here with permission.

*As a writer, presenter and consultant, **Anita Brooks Kirkland** specializes in the areas of information and digital literacy and the role of the school library learning commons. She draws on her extensive experience as a teacher educator, both as an instructor in teacher-librarianship for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, and in her previous role as the Consultant for K-12 Libraries at the Waterloo Region District School Board. Anita was a contributing writer to Together for Learning, Ontario's guideline document for the school library learning commons. Anita is very active in professional organizations, currently serving as chair of Canadian School Libraries. She was the 2014 president of the Ontario Library Association and has also served as president of the Ontario School Library Association (2005) and co-chaired The Association of Library Consultants and Coordinators of Ontario (2011-13). Anita shares an extensive collection of program resources, articles, and presentations on her website and blog, [www.bythebrooks.ca](http://www.bythebrooks.ca)*