

Diversity audits and catalogue records

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Snapshot

This article explores the value and the challenges of undertaking a diversity audit of a school's collection.

Diversity audits are critical for ensuring that library collections represent a wide range of perspectives and voices. However, traditional school library catalogue data, like School Catalogue Information Service (SCIS), are not often used in these audits. While these catalogues have some limitations, they can still be valuable for initial collection assessments. As we strive for more diverse libraries, we must consider how these catalogues can be updated and better utilised for the future.

A diversity audit is an inventory designed to analyse and measure the range of experiences, diverse representations and points of view found within resources in a library collection. Audits provide concrete data to inform strategic collection development, ensuring appropriate representation of minority and equity-seeking groups. Therefore, diversity audits can be used as part of an active program to ensure that school library collections are equitable, diverse and representative of the school community and wider society (Jensen, 2018; Toltz, 2022).

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Various diversity audits have been developed for school libraries, each with their own evaluation criteria and processes. One of these is the Canadian School Libraries collection diversity toolkit, a practical tool for evaluating and developing 'collections through an equity lens' (Canadian School Libraries, 2022). During the 2023 SLAV (School Library Association of Victoria) Masterclass 'The Collection Diversity Toolkit, Canada', Rebecca Rubio, a contributor to the toolkit, spoke about the practicalities of undertaking a diversity audit. In one of her slides, she listed several sources of information: Goodreads, publisher websites, author websites, social media, Kirkus reviews, School Library Journal, local vetting services and others (SLAV, 2023). But the school libraries' catalogues were not listed or even mentioned in the presentation.

As the Catalogue Content Manager at SCIS, the provider of library catalogue records to schools, I was surprised that the toolkit did not consider the catalogues of school libraries as a source, and so I began investigating the usefulness of such records, specifically SCIS records, for diversity audits. My overall conclusion was that the usefulness of cataloguing data for diversity audits depends on the aim, purpose and scope of the audit being undertaken, the processes being used, the range of resources being audited and, most importantly, what criteria or markers are being used to assess the resources for diversity.

Protagonists and creators as criteria

The Collection Diversity Toolkit audit identified five markers for their audit of fiction titles: Indigeneity, Gender identity, Ability (visible and invisible), Sexual orientation and Race/Ethnicity (Canadian School Libraries, 2021). For each fiction resource they recommended asking two questions against these markers:

- Protagonist/main character identifies as ...
- Author/illustrator/creator identifies as ...

However, the usefulness of catalogue records to apply these markers is limited. There are several reasons why this is the case:

- A catalogue record may have data about the protagonist in the form of subject heading, for example: Wurundjeri (Aboriginal people) – Fiction (Indigeneity) or Children with disabilities – Fiction (Ability). However, headings like this indicate that these fiction books deal with those topics, but that does not necessarily imply that the protagonists identify as such.
- The identity of the protagonist will not necessarily be recorded as a subject heading at all if it is not a topical feature of the story – a story about a park ranger who happens to have dark skin will not be given a subject heading identifying their ethnicity because it is not central to the story.
- The SCIS subject headings are not necessarily granular enough for a thorough audit; for example, the SCIS subject heading Homosexuality encompasses both female and male homosexuality.
- Some audits see a value in considering whether the resource features characters of diverse backgrounds ‘living, playing, or working together’ (Adams, 2019), but this level of detail would not be found in a catalogue record.
- A bibliographic record will not contain background information about the author or creator of the work unless implied in a summary note. In some catalogue co-operatives, such as Libraries Australia, information about the author’s background may be found in the authority record for the creator, but this data is not generally available to end-users of the catalogue.
- Some audits, particularly those focussing on non-fiction and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources, ask whether, and how, the author(s) consulted with the peoples they were writing about (AIATSIS, 2022; Narragunnawali, ca. 2022). A catalogue record may have this information as a subsequent statement of responsibility if prominently recorded on the item itself.

For a thorough analysis of the identity and background of protagonists and creators, catalogue records may be a starting point. In most cases, reviewing the resource itself will be required, along with further research. Therefore, for the purposes of an audit as proposed by the Canadian School Libraries, catalogue records have limited use, as implied by Rubio in her presentation on the Collection diversity toolkit.

Subjective and granular criteria

Some diversity checklists include more subjective criteria for evaluating resources (Learning for Justice, 2016; Lee & Low books, 2016; Khokhar, ca. 2022). Audits that focus on decolonising library collections are also more likely to have granular, subjective criteria against which to assess a resource (Narragunnawali, ca. 2022; AIATSIS, 2022). Some of these subjective and granular criteria are:

- Are diverse characters only given incidental, insubstantial or silent roles?
- What is the cultural, social and historical context of the story, is it still relevant?
- Does the resource use appropriate language?
- Are the facts presented accurate?
- Does the resource include culturally sensitive or sacred information inappropriate to share?
- Does the resource perpetuate or rely on stereotypes, generalisation or misrepresentations?
- Does the resource promote inclusion and equity?

Catalogue records traditionally are very objective, that is, cataloguers are required to be non-judgemental about the content of a resource. Therefore, catalogue records would be of limited use for evaluative criteria such as these.

However, libraries are increasingly adding content warning notes to records, such as for resources containing culturally sensitive or sacred information or trigger warnings for resources with content that may cause harmful effects on readers. These notes will come in especially useful for audits like this that require subjective analysis.

Collection overview

When undertaking a thorough diversity audit, catalogue records cannot replace handling, reviewing and researching one resource at a time. Therefore, rarely will a school library have

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the capacity to undertake an audit of a whole collection. This is where catalogue data is very useful in making the task of auditing manageable. A library management system can be used to identify resources in a particular collection in preparation for auditing e.g. Teenage graphic novels or resources published before a certain date. The classification number can be used to select resources to be audited within a specific topical range e.g. resources starting with DDC 305.8 (Ethnic groups).

Audits that focus on evaluating resources on a particular theme or topic can make use of the subject heading or keyword search to identify resources that require auditing. For example, the

first step in a decolonising project could be to undertake a search of all records that contained the keyword starting with Aborigin* or Indigen*, to identify the resource that requires more granular evaluation. (Capraro, Lawless & Motti, 2022).

Storing the audit data

A diversity audit will provide a library with accurate insight about the collection by gathering data about each individual resource being evaluated. Depending on the markers or criteria used for the audit, there is useful information gathered which can be added to the catalogue record for the resource. Many library management systems (LMS) have the capacity to add keywords or tags and additional notes to existing records. If that is the case with your LMS, you could use the 'bulk change' feature in the system to make this efficient and ensure that any additional data added to the records is consistent. Keep a record of the format and terminology used for the tags and notes.

Undertaking this additional step in the audit process, updating catalogue records with data gathered in the audit, has two main benefits. First, it enhances the record for end-users, making it more informative and useful to assist with finding and selecting resources. And, secondly, it will save time when next undertaking an audit of this collection, as the data gathered in a previous audit is still available in the record itself.

Evolving catalogue data

Catalogues are valuable for undertaking initial overviews of a collection and selecting resources for closer analysis. However, the usefulness of catalogue records is limited when it comes to more granular evaluation of individual resources because they cannot replace the handling of one resource at a time.

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At SCIS we are constantly collecting ideas for how we can improve our catalogue records to make them more useful to schools and the end-users of SCIS Data, which is why we are considering automated methods of enhancing SCIS Data using information from other sources, such as adding author biographies, audience levels and content advise.

Cataloguers are required to be objective, using the data they have about the resource in hand, and not make value judgments. Is it time to move beyond traditional cataloguing practices? There are challenges with this approach that must be carefully considered, especially as most SCIS cataloguers are not educators. Nonetheless, catalogue data must continue to evolve to meet the needs of libraries and their end-users, supporting the need for diverse, inclusive and representative collections. Cataloguing practice at SCIS is continually being reviewed and improved, to ensure we stay relevant to school libraries and their communities.

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*Making information discoverable through effective metadata, is a theme that runs through **Renate Beilharz's** librarianship career as teacher-librarian in secondary schools, as cataloguing educator in TAFE, and as the current Catalogue Content Manager at SCIS. Renate loves cataloguing not just because it puts the world in order, but because it facilitates connections between people and quality resources that meet their information needs in a respectful and equitable manner. Renate is a member of ACORD (ALIA Community On Resource Description) where she hopes to actively contribute to critical cataloguing conversations, such as reparative cataloguing and the future of bibliographic data.*