

Examining the Role of the School Librarian in Developing Social Responsibility

by Constance A. Mellon

The library field has a long history of concern with the topic of social responsibility. For over twenty years, the ALA Round Table on Social Responsibility has discussed and debated the role libraries should play in relation to current social issues. National, regional, and local library groups consistently take an active stand on a wide variety of social issues directly and indirectly related to the functioning of a library in a free society. School librarians have an especially important role to play in the area of social responsibility. Not only is it our professional heritage, but as educators we constantly interact with and influence the citizens of tomorrow. Because this is so, we must define our role and its parameters carefully.

The issue of social responsibility in the context of the school library is extremely complex. Schools, unlike other settings in which libraries are found, separate the young from their parents. This allows school librarians, along with teachers, an unparalleled opportunity to influence the thinking of the next generation, and society is well aware of that fact. Schools are constantly scrutinized and consistently criticized; regardless of what decisions educators make, someone will be loudly and publicly unhappy. Furthermore, the question of *accepting* social responsibility, as an individual and as a profession, is very different from *developing* social responsibility in the young.

This essay explores the role of school librarians in developing social responsibility. It begins by examining the traditional stance of school librarians and how that stance relates to social responsibility; it then raises some questions about the conflict between philosophy and reality. The focus then moves to a discussion of values education and its newer corollary, prosocial behavior. The final part of the essay suggests that librarians, by incorporating prosocial concepts into school media programs, can become active partners in developing social responsibility.

To explore this topic effectively, we must begin with a definition for the term, "social responsibility." Social responsibility, as used in the literature of librarianship, is closely connected to a second term, "social issues." The original petition to establish an ALA Round Table on Social Responsibilities of Libraries defined social issues as "the major issues of our times — war and peace, race, inequality of opportunity and justice, civil rights, violence ..." and social responsibility as "the responsibilities of

libraries in relation to these issues."¹ From the field of psychology comes a definition that broadens the concept of social responsibility: "assist[ing] others who depend on us and need help."² These definitions provide a lens through which to examine the traditional stance of school librarianship.

A Tradition of Social Responsibility

Since the first set of school library standards was published in 1920, school librarians have followed agreed-upon guidelines into which social responsibility was deeply woven: maximum access for all users; materials that cover appropriate topics and present diverse viewpoints; user guidance and instruction. These guidelines, separately analyzed, provide a forum for most of the points that arise when librarians discuss social responsibility. However, as I began to examine these guidelines through the lens of social responsibility, I was forced to acknowledge the problems school librarians face as reality conflicts with philosophy.

Maximum access for all users is part of the American ideal of equal opportunity. It implies the need to provide physical access to the disabled and intellectual access to those for whom language, format, or conceptual approach may prove a barrier. It also includes networking to access materials beyond the limitations of an individual school collection. Most school librarians readily accept the ideal of maximum access; however, its daily application is far from simple. Consider, for example, the task a single librarian might face as she attempts to help the learning different identify information in a format they can understand, to guide those who read and comprehend well below grade level, to excite and stimulate the intellectually gifted, to translate or provide materials for children from homes whose language is not English, and to assist the physically disabled to retrieve and use the materials they need. Social responsibility implies that all groups deserve equal attention. School librarians recognize and acknowledge this fact. The difficulty lies in the reality of the situation; maximum access presents problems of time and money — both of which are in short supply in school libraries. The obvious question is this: how can priorities be set? Setting priorities when there is insufficient time and money may itself have implications that relate to social responsibility.

Developing a collection of materials that covers appropriate top-

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ics and presents diverse viewpoints is a major touchstone of the library field. In school libraries, however, social responsibility may conflict with the need for neutrality and balance. School librarians, unlike public librarians, are preparing collections for use by children — children who, because of the nature of schooling, will be allowed to select materials without the intervention of a parent. Does a balanced collection imply a full representation of materials on every topic touched by the curriculum? If children are reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*, should books that present the Nazi perspective be made available? What materials do sex and AIDS education require? How many of society's problems can, and should be, reflected in the school library collection? Sexual preference, substance abuse, the sexual and physical abuse of children, gangs, the violence that is becoming a part of American life in even the smallest towns: these issues touch the lives of many students. A typical class will include children who are abused or neglected, children whose parents abuse alcohol or drugs, and children who have experienced violence in the home, on the street, or even in the halls of the school. Should all these topics be represented in the library media collection? School librarians face similar questions every day as they struggle to provide a balance of materials that will best allow children to explore and learn.

The need for a balanced and neutral collection, and for materials to educate the young on social issues, is further complicated by the problems of censorship. We live in a complex society, a society in which there may not always be a clear view of "right" or "wrong." For every social issue there are dissenters, and dissenters — like all parents — feel strongly about the education of their young. Parents object to their children being presented with ideas that contradict what they learn at home. Thus, regardless of the strength of the selection policy and the support of the media advisory committee, censorship is a recurring problem for school librarians.

Providing maximum access to a balanced collection is one aspect of developing social responsibility through library media programs. Students may become more socially responsible because they have access to materials that help them identify, examine, and understand social issues from varying perspectives. The influence of maximum access and a balanced collection can be considered as indirect. User guidance and instruction, however, offer school librarians the chance to interact directly with students. *Information Power*, the national guidelines for school library media programs, emphasizes the impact that librarians can have on developing social responsibility in students:

Students are encouraged to realize their potential as informed citizens who think critically and solve problems [and] to observe rights and responsibilities relating to the generation and flow of information and ideas ...³

The direct interaction of user guidance and instruction can create opportunities for school librarians to teach and model some of the more enduring social values suggested by the term "prosocial behavior."

Values Education and Prosocial Behavior

In the 1970s, there was a surge of interest in values education that resulted in a wide variety of publications. One problem with this early literature relates to the definition of the terms "values" and "valuing":

Throughout the values education literature, *values* has been defined as everything from eternal ideas to behavioral actions, while *valuing* has been considered the act of making value judgements, an expression of feeling, or the acquisition of and adherence to a set of principles.⁴

The problems experienced in defining the terms *values* and *valuing* reflect the problems experienced when a complex society attempts to define "right" and "wrong." An examination of these problems supports the need for balanced collections and for a careful examination of the concept of values before incorporating what might be strong personal biases into instruction.

There are some enduring social values that most people would accept as appropriate to foster in a school setting. In their recently published book *Reclaiming Our Schools*,⁵ Wynne and Ryan suggest three such values: character, academics, and discipline. *Character* is described as "engaging in conduct immediately helpful to others";⁶ *academics* as student learning based on high standards, well-defined expectations, and appropriate support and supervision;⁷ and *discipline* as "not doing wrong things."⁸

It is important to point out that Wynne and Ryan do not take a stand on specific social issues such as sex education, AIDS education, and drug education. Their reason for this is enlightening:

We are infinitely more concerned with the general prevalence of sound moral instruction in a school or classroom than with systems of problem-oriented instruction in schools that are otherwise moral vacuums. We believe moral schools will comfortably devise ways of handling immediate, topical moral issues. Conversely, schools without sound moral norms may well misapply the most wholesome problem-oriented instruction.⁹

Wynne and Ryan stress three important social values for effective schooling, yet only two of these values — academics and discipline — have consistently received emphasis in the education literature. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to delve a little more deeply into the third value, character. As Wynne and Ryan point out, a conscious effort at educating for character can be "somewhat controversial."

Prosocial Behavior: Educating for Character

The literature on values education, often confusing and conflicting, has given way to a clearer concept: educating for prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior has been defined as "voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals."¹⁰ As Eisenberg and Mussen explain,

Although it may be assumed that all human beings have the *potential* for acquiring prosocial behavior, the behavior itself — the forms and frequency of prosocial actions — must be learned.¹¹

In his article, "Caring Kids: The Role of the School," Alfie Kohn equates educating for prosocial behavior with teaching children to care. He begins by quoting the philosopher, Martin Buber: "Education worthy of the name is essentially education of character." Kohn goes on to clarify this statement by claiming,

He did not mean that schools should develop a unit on values or moral reasoning and glue it onto the existing curriculum. He did not mean that problem children should be taught how to behave. He meant that the profession of teaching calls on us to try to produce not merely good learners but good people.¹²

Developing Prosocial Behavior in the School Library

The current emphasis in schools on cooperative learning provides an excellent environment for encouraging prosocial behavior. School librarians can design cooperative library activities that draw on a variety of cognitive styles: linguistic, spatial, interpersonal, analytic, global. Properly structured, these activities decrease competition and give children an opportunity to engage in such basic prosocial behaviors as sharing, collaborat-

Library media programs offer many opportunities for developing social responsibility, examining values, and encouraging prosocial behavior. However, many of the writers who deal with these topics believe that most educators act on the basis of the values that they hold. School librarians should begin by exploring, articulating, and understanding their own values; only then can they be coherently applied.

³American Association of School Librarians and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (Chicago:

¹³ Linda Leonard Lamme and Suzanne Lowell Krogh, with Kathy A. Yachmetz, *Literature-Based Moral Education: Children's Books and Activities to Enrich the K-5 Curriculum for Teaching Values, Responsibility, and Good Judgment in the Elementary School* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1992). 11.



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