

Supporting  
ARTICLE



# Be Brave by Being Here

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Listen. I would never call myself brave. That I'm writing an article in a journal issue centered on school librarian bravery creates a debilitating swirl of embarrassment and imposter syndrome in my head. I can lay bare in one word what I try to be both for and with students: *here*. I'm not a particularly brave person—I'm conflict-averse and literally scared of the dark—but whether creating my next book order, speaking at a school board meeting, or laughing with students in our library space, I try to be here. *I am here*.

The official definition for here includes "at this place or position." As school librarians, we are at both a unique place in time and position in our schools. Attacks are coming at our collections, programs, and spaces from right-wing groups that have been organized with specific talking points against our students' right to books and curriculum that reflect their lived experiences. We know this. So many incredible librarians, educators, and authors are doing gutsy work as the public face of the opposition to these coordinated attacks. Educators and youth librarians as a group are both facing an onslaught of intimidation. As school librarians, we fit in both of these groups (librarians and educators), and dealing with the current climate can feel

overwhelming. It *is* overwhelming. Luckily, our way forward is clear: simply being here for and with our students.

### **Being Here through the #LibFive**

The students at my alternative, academic-recovery school come to us from their base schools and at our school are able to rewrite their own school stories. Some of that rewriting naturally happens in the library. Many of our students have experiences at multiple schools, but it is not until they come to our school that many of them become frequent library users for the first time. That is both powerful and humbling! To help us all build inclusive libraries where all students—especially our most vulnerable students—are both centered and cherished, the #LibFive was born. I don't use the term "vulnerable" lightly. The attacks on our students' right to read is not random—it is focused on our BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ students and families. Our BIPOC and Queer students are vulnerable due to both the undeniable history and reality of oppression and the current toxic climate in which our students are growing up.

The #LibFive is student-led professional development for

librarians that I was privileged to create with three amazing eighth-graders: Cesar Falcon, Jose Gomez, and Jaida Morris (see figure 1). Even though these students are now finishing high school, the #LibFive framework is just as timely a method for building inclusive libraries now as it was when they were middle-schoolers. It's the overarching way we can be *here* for our students every day.

#### The #LibFive: Five Key Foundations for Building Inclusive Libraries:

1. See me! Listen to me.
2. Show me on the shelves and walls. Read those books yourself.
3. Graphic novels and manga are not extra.
4. Show the joy in our stories.
5. Make the school library a sorting free zone.

These ideas might seem obvious or too simple, but I would implore those thinking along those lines to think again. The ideas are powerful due to their simplicity and, when done well, can result in empowering and inclusive school libraries. I never want my students to think that my interest in them rests on whether or not they identify as a reader, and love that the #LibFive



Figure 1. Jaida Morris, Cesar Falcon, Julie Stivers, and Jose Gomez making their #LibFive presentation for the first time.

is bookmarked by tenets that are bigger than reading, bigger than literacy. They point to recognizing the joy and power that are inherent in welcoming our students' true, full selves.

The work we did on the #LibFive was based on key scholarship, action-based research, and student wisdom. Our first step in preparation for building this library professional development was accessing research related to our topic. We began with Dr. Kafi Kumasi's work, which found that many students of color felt like outsiders in their school libraries and that it often seemed like a place that was "owned" by the librarian (Kumasi 2012). My students reported having negative experiences in past libraries that matched those in Dr. Kumasi's study. As a foundation for thinking about libraries and youth, I shared findings from the powerful Mary Stone Hanley and George W. Noblit study (2009), which found that for youth of color, positive racial identity leads to academic success. From there, we moved to unpacking the current state of representation in youth literature by exploring the

#### Diversity in Children's Books infographics.

Jaida, Jose, and Cesar then embarked on their own action-based research. They conducted library walks in our Mount Vernon Library. They thought about the libraries at their previous schools and their experiences there. We brainstormed about what makes a library feel truly welcoming—a place where they *belong*. We spoke to other students at our school about their library experiences. We initially came

up with eleven ideas for what libraries and librarians can do to be inclusive. We spent months on this, eventually shaping our list into our five biggest

ways that libraries can build inclusive programs and spaces. During the whole process, I always tried to de-center myself as the librarian and bring it back to the library and the library program, collection, and space.

#### See me! Listen to me.

See me! It seems so basic, but clearly, it's not. My current students, to this day, share stories about not feeling seen in other libraries, not being seen. Truly seeing students requires a lot: pushing back against colorblindness (which only hurts our students), affirming Queerness, being disability-positive and mental health-sensitive. This does not mean that we should embody any kind of savior role. For those of us who are white librarians, this truth is even more critical. As Jason Reynolds clearly tells us: Our students "don't need [us] to save them." They need us "to see them" (Krok 2018).

As Jose said, "Find out what we're interested in. We have things to say and in the classroom, there may not be time. Please let us tell you things!" Please. Let. Us. Tell. You. Things. Look, I know. As school librarians, we are busy. With teacher shortages, many librarians are being called to

[The #LibFive tenets] point to recognizing the joy and power that are inherent in welcoming our students' true, full selves.

cover classes, teach electives, and fill duty-coverage across the school—and this is all in addition to running the beautiful and welcoming small

company that is our library. Here's the thing, though. We have to drop our other tasks to let our students talk to us. Nothing we can do is more important.

Seeing our students is also supporting them. Supporting their whole selves and creating brave spaces where students feel secure enough to be themselves. Our libraries need to be this space! Our libraries should be this space. Now, more than ever.

### Show me on the shelves and walls. Read those books yourself.

To have a collection where every student can easily find books that reflect them and their lived experiences requires intentionality. First, we know the dismal statistics of youth publishing. Yes, some elements may be improving, but publishers still have so far to go. This tenet requires us to be vigilant in getting the books—books that reflect our students, their lived experiences, and their interests—our students need and deserve.

Second, we're being intimidated through legal initiatives; racist, homophobic, and transphobic talking points; and news stories that adhere to a weak, both-sides dogma. Some states are passing—or seeking to pass—laws to criminalize educators who collect diverse, inclusive materials. As a profession, we're collectively worried about self-censorship in our libraries. First, let's be clear. When we are talking about self-censorship, we are not talking about responsible collection management decisions that we make on a near-daily basis. However, if I don't collect a title because I'm worried about pushback, even though multiple review sources identify the series as a good fit for my middle school students, that is self-censorship. And it's hurting our students.

Look, it's valid to think about outside pressures. I get it. I do. I've had horrible things said about me on Twitter. A local reporter likes to twist anything I say in defense of our students into a controversy. We can think about those outside pressures—but we *cannot* act on them.

The only pressures we *can* act on are: Honoring our students and their rights to true history, representation, and affirmation. That's it.

We don't have to be public about it. I recognize that I carry white, cis

privilege into spaces I inhabit, and if I can weaponize that privilege in defense of our students, I will. So, no, we don't all need to be public, but we do all need to be ruthless about it, quietly if necessary, to build a collection and space that affirms our students. After all, Jaida reminded, "I need to feel wanted, welcomed, and seen. That is NOT possible if I don't see myself in library displays and on the shelves."

Django Paris said, "Think of your syllabus as an act of resistance; something to be posted in the streets,

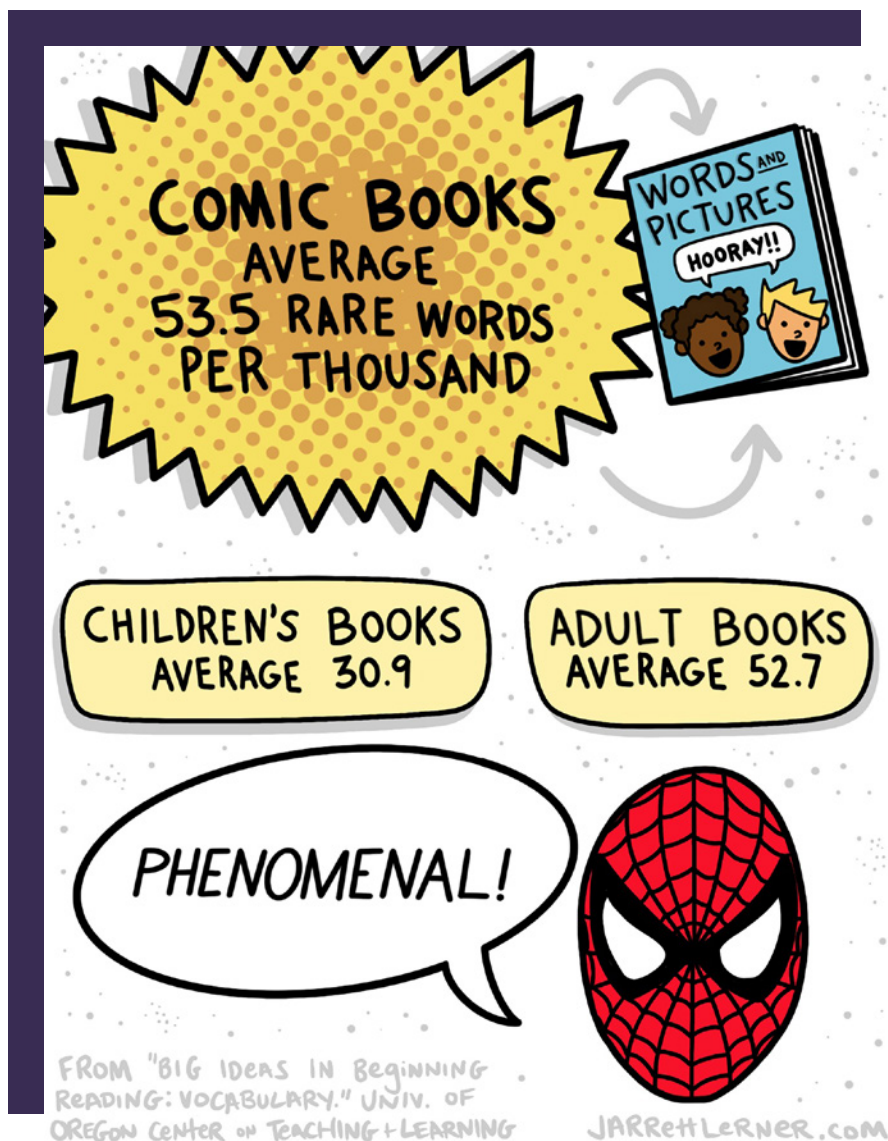







Figure 2. One of Jarrett Lerner's infographics librarians can use.

handed out at rallies” (Paris 2018). This is how we should think of our order lists! Our circulation/literacy lessons, our choices for class texts and literature circles, our displays. Are they resisting the vile things being said about our Queer students? Are they resisting the movement to block real narratives and erase both the history and current realities of our BIPOC students? Before I click to finalize any order, I think of this call, this quote. *Am I proud of my order? Is it a quiet but powerful rallying cry?*


### Graphic novels and manga are not extra.


This was Cesar’s favorite foundation, and his loyalty to Dav Pilkey’s *Dog Man* was boundless, which I joyfully encouraged. There is no place in an inclusive library for any kind of shaming about reading material. Being an advocate for students means being an advocate for graphic novels in not only your library but throughout your school and in the curriculum. Knowing that graphic novels strengthen multiple literacies, teach decoding and comprehension strategies, and contain complex vocabulary are key realities to have at the ready when facing pushback in our schools. Proudly display the graphics created by Jarret Lerner (free to educators at <<https://jarretlerner.com/art>>). Celebrate the format and your students. Figure 2 shows my favorite—and is one of my go-to hype pieces for using comics, graphic novels, and manga in the curriculum.


Every librarian in 2023 knows that manga is essential to feature in our libraries due to its popularity and the intense love and engagement it inspires in students. Beyond the increase in foot-traffic that manga will attract to your library, collecting manga is also an equity issue. When my students and I prepared a presentation for librarians on


**#libfive**     


**FIVE KEY FOUNDATIONS FOR BUILDING INCLUSIVE LIBRARIES**

 **1. See me. Listen to me.**

 **2. Show me on the shelves and walls. Read those books yourself.**

 **3. Graphic Novels + Manga are not extra.**

 **4. Show the JOY in our stories.**

 **5. Make the library a sorting-free zone.**

**To read more, visit [bit.ly/libfiveyalsablog](https://bit.ly/libfiveyalsablog) and follow our story on Twitter at #libfive and @BespokeLib.**

The #libfive was developed by Mount Vernon Middle School Students Cesar Falcon, Jose Gomez, Jaida Morris, and their librarian Julie Stivers.

the power of manga and anime, they highlighted the marginalized identities they inhabited. This is not to say that all marginalized communities love manga or anime—there is no monolith. However, based on my students’ lived experiences, testimony, and so many of our observations as librarians, there is a strong representation of BIPOC students, Queer students, and neurodivergent students amongst our manga and anime fans. That beautiful reason is why I consider collecting manga an equity issue. Graphic novels—including manga—are uniquely vulnerable to book challenges due to their visual brand

of storytelling. We can be here for our students by flooding our libraries with them!

### Show the joy in our stories.

This foundation came to be after Jaida wrote down “Black People Look Good” when doing action-based research and recording what she saw in our Mount Vernon Library. It was the first takeaway on Jaida’s written list and happily lives in my head forever. When Jaida talks about this idea, she stresses that in our library, she did *not* see only books with Black characters featuring historical struggles but saw covers with Black

characters having adventures, living in the future, and as part of romantic stories. Jaida reminds us that when we “show the joy, happiness, and normal lives of youth of color in books, you are showing the joy and happiness of *me*.”

The phenomenal Nic Stone wrote a powerful piece in the summer of 2020 entitled “Don’t Just Read about Racism—Read Stories about Black People Living.” (If you haven’t read it yet, please go do so. It’s free to read online after a quick Google search and is more important than anything I have to say.) What Nic is saying and what Jaida is saying are beautifully tied together. It doesn’t take bravery to relentlessly show this joy and affirm our students, only us all stepping into our shared humanity.

### **Make the school library a sorting free zone.**

When we think about making our libraries a sorting free zone, let’s consider a wide range of sorting that is a barrier to building a brave library. It’s not inclusive to sort our students by reading level. Or perceived behavior issues. Or (shudder) Lexile scores. There is no reason to sort by gender (or perceived gender). Remove saying “boys and girls” or “ladies and gentlemen” from your vocabulary—it’s easy! Collective nouns like “students,” “scholars,” “folks” (or “y’all,” “everyone,” “precious gems”) all work. It goes without saying that we honor our students’ and colleagues’ pronouns.

Students get sorted another way in our school libraries, which at their core should center equitable access to resources. However, there are events at school libraries where students literally have to buy themselves access—an event at their children’s schools that economically marginalized parents found to be their “most embarrassing” experience (Gorski 2022). I’m

talking, of course, about traditional school book fairs. I know that they are well-loved by many—but consider the traditional model. Is it inclusive to turn our libraries into mini-stores each fall and spring, becoming for-profit satellites for publishers? To create and sustain events that habitually embarrass our students’ families?

The typical school book “fair” does not align with its name. Students are unintentionally sorted into two groups—those who *can* afford to purchase items at the event and those who *cannot*. And yet. Book fairs can generate excitement for reading. They offer a pathway to more books in the home. Book fairs generate high interest among teachers. Can we create programs that generate reading excitement, increase the number of self-chosen books in the home, and champion reading for pleasure—all while preventing inequitable sorting by excluding learners? We can if we bravely reimagine the school book fair to be something different. At our #TrueBookFAIRs, students select new books to keep from a bespoke fair collection of all new books that I have intentionally and lovingly curated to reflect our students and their interests. There is no cost to students. One student summed it up perfectly—and unknowingly named the event—by saying: “Seriously. They were Book UNFairs. You are having an actual BookFAIR.”

### **Be Brave with Me.**

When we are here for our students, when we are building spaces that serve as incubators of both joy and belonging, it’s a kind of bravery. Even for an uncourageous person like me. In preparation for this article, I was looking back at our original list of eleven foundations that would boil down into the #LibFive, and I was struck by one I had forgotten: *Be*

*brave with me. Be a safe place for my ideas, struggles, dreams, and goals. I can think of no better way to be here.*



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*Foundation Series.*

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