

Professional Growth: VAASL Reflections

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Keynote 1:

Anne Blankman, the first keynote speaker, discussed the power of books in impacting children and students in her role as a mother, librarian, and author. After discussing several challenging situations, she focused on the importance of resilience and utilizing books to cope with challenges. She emphasized the importance of librarians in providing each reader with the right book and reaching them where they are. I was inspired by her personal resilience and the positive impact that books had on her and her own daughter. She said, "Books saved us." As a future school librarian, it was awesome to see the important role that books play in personal development. I hope that I too will be able to curate collections that meet the needs of my students in all kinds of different situations. Reading the right book at the right time can have a huge impact on a person's growth and development during the good and the bad. It is important that we as librarians provide access to students that both respect and represent their experiences. Anne Blankman inspired me to see the power of resilience in books. This was a great way to start the VAASL conference and feel the positive impact of the librarian and the librarian community.

Keynote 2:

Dr. Stephen Watkins talked about writing realistic fiction for children and young adults and the struggle between telling the truth and making it palatable. While his speech was more on the dark side compared to Blankman's, I do find value in ensuring that we as librarians are presenting fair access to reputable and factual information for our students. It is also important to remember that fiction is just that. Historical fiction provides a window into the past, but depending on the goal of the author, there may be need for hope and inspiration among a dark part of the past. I appreciated that Watkin's speech complemented the historical fiction of Blakeman's book, and I look forward to reading both authors in the future.

Session 1:

I attended “Embracing Brown and Black Books” by Tanisha Tyler and Tiffany Cannon. I selected this presentation because I feel that it is important to ensure that books in the library represent all students and experiences, and I was interested in how these librarians advocate for and accomplish this task. They emphasized embracing race, culture, advocacy, and books, indicating that it is our role as librarians to ensure that we are selecting books that are diverse and appropriate for our students. I really appreciated one comment about embracing culture, that we should acknowledge that not everyone thinks, speaks, and does things like you. Recognizing that my way is not THE way is an important step towards self-awareness and inclusivity. Shortly after this, they discussed the current surge in banning books, which is targeting books about LGBTQ and black and brown people disproportionately. As I enter the school library, book challenges will certainly be an issue I will face. I appreciated their push for advocating for our students and our collections to ensure inclusivity rather than exclusivity. Access is important, and being able to stand up for that is necessary as a librarian.

They also mentioned that it is important to present “authentic” experiences in books, telling stories that make the readers feel included and proud, rather than an outcast of their race because of stereotypical presentations. That really struck me, and as a white person, it is especially important that I make sure that I am not selecting stereotypical books. We must remember that people have all kinds of different experiences, and the books we select provide windows for some and mirrors for others. As I enter the librarian world and select books, the suggestions and resources that Tyler and Cannon offered will certainly help guide me. A librarian needs to create an inclusive and welcoming environment, and ensuring a solid selection of books that represent all kinds of people and experiences is key.

Session 2:

My second session was called “Virginia Readers' Choice Primary and Elementary Book Talks (2022/2023 book lists)” by Jane Fields and Tamara Teaff. I selected this presentation because I find that I am not as aware of books targeting elementary aged students, and as I head into my internship this summer in an elementary school, I want to learn more. The presenters gave quick summaries about books, first for older students, then for younger ones. These books sounded amazing! It was interesting to see the wide variety of books that have been chosen for this list. Some books focus on educating, others on representing different aspects of life, others on entertaining while presenting a positive message. This is a great opportunity for me to have some books to recommend to students in the future, and I look forward to visiting the VSLA website for other lists to help me as a librarian.

I also appreciated seeing books that represented brown and black people, like my first session discussed. It is empowering to know that organizations are actively seeking to diversify the books they select in terms of themes, characters, and overall ideas. Librarians are embracing the mirrors and windows more and more, and I'm excited to do this myself one day soon.

Session 3:

My third session was called “Collaboration Inspiration” by Jenni Cooper and Debby Kelly. I selected this session since this is something that we are actively working on in our class. In addition, my current high school definitely struggles with collaboration. Many teachers have no interest in working with others in the building to enhance their lessons and experiences for their students. The presenters discussed several incredible collaborative lessons that they completed with other teachers in the building. It is exciting to see the different activities and their enthusiasm for their efforts. They also ask for feedback from their teachers, which is a great

self-assessment tool. When I am a librarian, especially if I am at the secondary level as these teachers are, collaborating with teachers is essential to providing resources and information to students. I do wonder how they work to establish the environment where their teachers actively approach them, and how one would go about that in an environment like my current school. They mentioned having one incredibly successful lesson with an English teacher, leading to other teachers asking for their help as well. As a librarian, I hope that I can utilize some of these techniques to develop strong, collaborative lessons, and in turn, develop strong relationships with teachers and students in the building. Establishing positive collaborations will help me share my librarian knowledge and enhance the learning experience for everyone.