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INCORPORATING MINDFULNESS IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY THREE WAYS

Mindfulness has been a hot topic recently as many educators were forced to work from home over the past year and a half. With the onset of COVID-19, the entire world was asked to social distance and isolate at home, creating tension in our lives by removing access to our social circles. Our normal shifted and often brought isolation and removed in-person access to our friends and families. As a result of the quarantine and the isolation, attention to mental health grew exponentially. A number of movements have brought attention to mental health awareness, focusing on removing the stigma associated with mental illness. Organizations such as Project Semicolon (<www.facebook.com/projectsemicolon>), The Trevor Project (<www.thetrevorproject.org>), and To Write Love on Her Arms (<<https://twloha.com>>) have been prominent support for people from all walks of life suffering from mental illness. Mental health is also a prominent issue in schools and how we can best support students through education using mindfulness.

Supporting students using mindfulness is a great way to model self-care behaviors, while being a listening ear and a shoulder to lean on. Many times, our students struggle in ways we will never understand. Being mindful of our students' lives can mean that we make personal connections with them and are beacons for inclusion. Training in diversity, belonging, inclusion, and equity helps provide school librarians with insight into microaggressions we may be unaware of.

As school librarians, we have a duty to ensure our students find a safe haven in the school library. Whether that is through our collection or the space itself, it is important to understand the mindful behavior that goes into collection development and space design.

Collection

Mindfulness in a school library is more than just creating a safe place for students (though Lynn shares why being mindful in the design of your space is important later). It is also important to build and curate a collection that provides students with resources that support mental health. The challenge is finding resources that are age-appropriate for your students, how to market those resources, and how to encourage students to be an advocate for their own mental health. Adding materials to your collection that share ideas and techniques around mindfulness and stress relief is a great place to start, but as R. David Lankes stated, "Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services (of which a collection is only one), great libraries build communities" (2012). You need a quality collection, but it is useless if you don't find a way to connect it to your community. Find the resources to educate students about mindfulness and self-care but be sure you find ways to connect those resources to your community.

One idea for a collection is to create a "self-discovery" section or display. Fill a space in your school library with resources on stress relief, strategies to stay on track, ways to communicate with others, and how to navigate difficult situations. Think

differently about this section than the other sections in your school library; it is special and students may be interested in learning more about the resources you collected but hesitant to check these items out. One option suggested by a public library in Washington state is to have the materials in the section circulated through an honor system. A student does not take the item to the circulation desk for checkout; they borrow it with the understanding that it will be returned. This alone takes the pressure off the student from checking out a resource that may be a self-help guide or a book about learning about oneself that they are embarrassed to have on their account.

As a high school librarian, I (Traci) have created this type of section with the honor checkout system, and remarkably the books do get returned. A few students will check them out at the circulation desk; some just disappear but they find their way back. This system creates a sense of ownership in the collection by the students, and they often spread the word about this special collection and your students who need it will find it. I also collaborate with our school counseling team and our mental health team so they can send students in or even come with them to get materials. A "self-discovery" section allows students to

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have access to quality resources that can help them through challenging times.

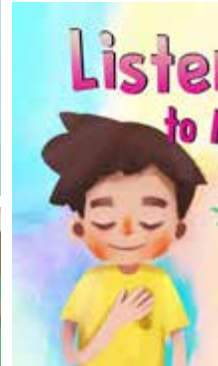
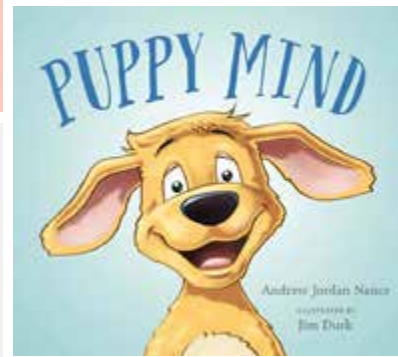
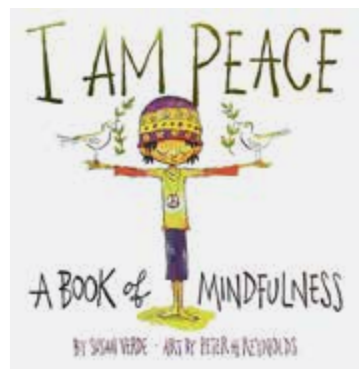
Your collection also should be built not only for your community but by your community. Start a student library group that gives input on collection development, work with your school counselors and administrators to learn about the greatest mental health needs of your students, and connect with other librarians to learn what they are adding to their collections. Keep an ear to the ground when listening to teachers and colleagues. What are your students struggling with and how can you help? Curating a diverse collection with resources for all students that are easily accessible helps keep your library relevant and, more importantly, helps your students through some of their most challenging days.

Space

School libraries have always been a haven for self-discovery and safe spaces, a calm in the proverbial storm. Mindfulness is about raising awareness, being conscious of the present moment, and engaging in calm retrospection. These factors don't just apply to the resources curated in our collections; they also should be reflected in the physical space itself. The past year has surfaced a need to be especially aware of cognitive overload and mental well-being. Creating a space specifically designated for the exploration or practice of mindfulness can help students.

School librarians should consider the mental impact of their library spaces on their communities. There is a deep connection to learning space design, neuroscience, and well-being. "Each feature of the architectural environment influences certain brain processes such as those involved in stress, emotion, and memory"

START A STUDENT LIBRARY GROUP THAT GIVES INPUT ON COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT, WORK WITH YOUR SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND ADMINISTRATORS TO LEARN ABOUT THE GREATEST MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF YOUR STUDENTS, AND CONNECT WITH OTHER LIBRARIANS TO LEARN WHAT THEY ARE ADDING TO THEIR COLLECTIONS.





ADOPTING A COMMON COLOR SCHEME IN CALMING TONES AND ORGANIZING MATERIALS ARE QUICK WAYS TO HELP REINFORCE MINDFULNESS IN YOUR SPACE.

(Edelstein and Macagno 2012 as referenced in Hare and Dillon 2020, 56). As school librarians, we need to consider the messages (especially unintended) that our spaces may be sending and be mindful that our spaces are not unintentionally providing additional stress or mental fatigue.

Although we should be acutely aware of the sensory experiences within our spaces, one of the most overlooked sources of stress and mental fatigue within educational environments, especially libraries, is that of visual noise. Visual noise refers to the overabundance of visual stimuli that can overwhelm the brain, deplete mental energy, and raise anxiety. Because we want our spaces to be welcoming and inclusive, school librarians often decorate them with bright colors and a multitude of displays, including but not limited

to stuffed animals (often found in elementary settings), posters or other wall art, signage, and furniture. These items often join the books on the shelves and the tools of the trade, such as makerspace items or book carts. In addition, school libraries often become the collection spots for donated or discarded items from various classrooms or educational spaces. When taken as a collective, this can be overwhelming to not only the librarian but also the patrons.

Thinking through this visual lens, school librarians can be mindful of reducing visual noise, thereby creating a more intentional experience. Adopting a common color scheme in calming tones and organizing materials are quick ways to help reinforce mindfulness in your space. An additional solution would be to apply the concept of "addition by subtraction"

tion.” This approach can be applied by reducing the items in the physical space to create mental space. “By removing, or at least minimizing visual noise, the visual system is freed up to concentrate on what’s relevant or important, making it easier for students to focus on the task at hand” (Holmes 2017 as quoted in Hare and Dillon 2020, 56). This would include the removal of furniture, wall decor, and other decorative items to create negative space. This not only supports physical navigation of the space but also promotes the ability for mental navigation.

This addition by subtraction methodology could also be applied to the collection. Oftentimes, school librarians strive to build robust collections with a plethora of choices for readers. However, this can lead to cluttered shelves that leave little room for visual navigation or mental space to process options. By intentionally reducing the number of books on a shelf through the practice of weeding, school librarians can reduce mental distractions that impede the ability to focus and create a calm environment for exploration.

By raising one’s own awareness of the messages being sent while others experience their library space, librarians can be intentional about the impact of the mental and emotional influences of their space and model mindfulness in practice.

Mindful Practice

In addition to being mindful of collection development and spatial design, a school library can provide students a place to experience personal mindful practices. As an elementary school librarian, I (Ashley) often used mindfulness with my students. Offering mindful practices in the school library is one way to model for students how to manage emotions and feelings, even for older students. While not overtly

related to emotions and feelings, creating space for students to become aware of their body positioning and physical well-being and providing them a place to practice mindfulness can increase their ability to manage emotional stress and identify feelings.

One particular practice I brought into the school library was posture practice. Students and educators sit down quite often during the day. Our bodies weren’t designed to hold this position for long periods of time. Throughout the day, we begin to slouch, often looking down at a device or paperwork. Being mindful of posture can improve attention and

blood flow and increase awareness. For younger students, I have them envision a water hose. When the water is turned on and the hose is straight, the water flows freely. If I were to bend or kink the hose, the water flow would decrease. The same effect can be seen in your spine. Sitting postures that allow your spine to lengthen and elongate can improve blood flow and increase neurostimulation. Providing flexible seating arrangements and comfortable seating areas are good options to include for posture practice. I often allowed students to sit or lay on the floor in specific light traffic areas. My one rule was not to be under tables or chairs for safety.

PROVIDING A CREATIVE OUTLET FOR STUDENTS CAN RELIEVE SOME OF THAT STIMULATION, AND IT ALSO PRESENTS AN OUTLET TO MANAGE EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS.



A second opportunity to provide students with a mindful practice is to offer creative outlets. As Lynn mentioned in the “Space” section, students can easily become over-stimulated with the visual aspects of learning. Providing a creative outlet for students can relieve some of that stimulation, and it also presents an outlet to manage emotions and feelings. Coloring pages, word searches, and craft activities are cheap, and sometimes free, activities you can include in your library space. In my library, I kept one shelf dedicated to such exercises.

The topic of what to do with weeded books often appears across our Arkansas listserv and on social media groups. These weeded books can be used in creative mindful practices in school libraries. Allow students to use discarded books for craft projects, blackout poetry, or other artistic endeavors. With mindful creativity, there is no expectation of a grade being assigned. These activities encourage students to explore creative outlets that they can use to support their emotional well-being.

Another way to support students in developing mindful practices is to cultivate spaces for them to practice mindfulness. Creating a quiet space for reflection, studying, or spending time alone when overwhelmed is a perfect way to support students. While many spaces do not offer a specific area for this type of self-reflection, there are ways you can support students who are looking for a quiet space. A former student who suffered from anxiety often came to the school library to complete her work. While I did not have a quiet space for her, I could offer her my desk while I reshelfed books or worked on other things. I had established that relationship with educators in my building, and

they knew I would be more than happy to support this student (and others). Students were not the only ones who took advantage of a quiet library space. Oftentimes, educators would ask to use the space to grade papers, watch professional development videos, or meet with their team.

Adding a curated list of YouTube yoga and meditation videos is another way to support mindful practices. Be sure to vet the videos and watch them first. Creating playlists for students and educators to use demonstrates that you want to support their mental health and well-being.



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Conclusion

Mindfulness extends well beyond meditation. As school librarians, we are called to support our students in any way we can. As students navigate the tough terrain of growing up and learning more about themselves as individuals, we have a duty to be a safe harbor for all students. Creating a mindful collection of materials that supports students through tough times and with difficult topics, assessing the use of mindful design in library spaces, and providing space for mindfulness are all wonderful ways to support the health and healing of our students.



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