

FEATURE

A stylized illustration of a hand, rendered in shades of orange and peach, set against a dark blue background. The hand is positioned palm-up, with fingers slightly spread. The background features wavy, layered bands of orange and red at the bottom.

Trauma-Informed School Libraries

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A SPACE FOR ALL



THE SCHOOL LIBRARY IS THE HEART OF THE SCHOOL, and much of what happens in the school includes the library in some way, shape, or form!

Some people see the school library as merely a place for books and materials, but for many students, it is a refuge and a place where they can relax and feel safe. School libraries are more than receptacles of books, technology, and audiovisual needs; they are sanctuaries for many students dealing with issues outside of school. Whether it is addressing students' academic needs or their social-emotional problems, school librarians and staff provide an engaging and comfortable place for young people. The school library is the heart of the school, and much of what happens in the school includes the library in some way, shape, or form!

As school librarians we believe that gathering information is one of the most powerful tools available. The more we know about our students and patrons, the better we will be able to support their needs. That's why it's important school librarians be trauma sensitive and trauma informed; school librarians need to understand how trauma affects the brain so that we can help our students suffering from these issues. We have everything to gain by adding knowledge about trauma-sensitive issues and their effects on adolescents to our toolboxes.

Defining Trauma-Informed Libraries

Understanding the fundamental and core beliefs of what it means to be trauma informed is essential. As in most new learning we have to gather information so we can see how this learning relates to us and our school library spaces. The timeless thought that we cannot know where we are going if we do

not know where we have been, is key to this philosophy.

To be defined as a trauma-informed and -sensitive environment a school or library must commit to supporting every student. According to the Treatment and Services Adaptation Center, "In a trauma-informed school, the adults in the school community are prepared to recognize and respond to those who have been impacted by traumatic stress" (n.d.). Recognizing students who may be at risk can prove challenging at times, but through open communication and positive, trusting relationships identifying students with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) becomes easier. Some common ACEs that students may experience include:

- Physical or sexual abuse
- Abandonment
- Neglect
- Death or loss of a loved one
- Bullying
- Chaotic living environments
- Witnessing domestic violence

As school library professionals we must hold true to creating an inclusive environment for all in our collections, policies, and patron expectations.

Consider how adults handle trauma and use that information as a mirror for understanding our students' reactions. When we go through traumatic experiences in our lives, we are not ourselves at work, with our families, or with our friend groups. If our colleagues know what we are dealing with emotionally or physically, they are more likely to be understanding of off behavior, like late work or insolence.

Imagine then that you were sensitive to students in such a way. You had the background information and were aware of the triggers that might mean the difference between a productive day at school or a complete meltdown. When a student's emotions are hanging on by a thread, the smallest thing can cut it or keep that student hanging on. As school librarians we are committed to try our best to help students through these moments.

To assess whether your school library is sensitive to students' trauma, review the ten principles of a compassionate school from the state of Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction:

1. Focus on culture and climate in the school and community.
2. Train and support all staff regarding trauma and learning.
3. Encourage and sustain open and regular communication for all.
4. Develop a strengths-based approach in working with students and peers.
5. Ensure discipline policies are both compassionate and effective (restorative practices).
6. Weave compassionate strategies into school improvement planning.
7. Provide tiered support for all students based on what they need.
8. Create flexible accommodations for diverse learners.
9. Provide access, voice, and ownership for staff, students, and community.
10. Use data to identify vulnerable students, and determine outcomes and strategies for continuous quality improvement. (n.d.)

By following these principles to be compassionate and sensitive to all our students, school librarians can help develop their school library into a safe space for staff and students.

Professional Development

The first step in any new way of thinking is understanding. When my school began the process of becoming trauma informed, a base of knowledge had to be laid down that would define this new way of trauma-informed thinking. Using all school professional development time was a great way to reach all staff and ensure that everyone was hearing the same message about trauma-informed and -sensitive behaviors in education.

Screening the movie *Paper Tigers* directed by James Redford was my school's initial step. This documentary film follows six high school students at Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, Washington. The school's principal has seen great success with his students using trauma-sensitive strategies and outlines what he did and continues to do to see positive changes in his students.

After the movie screening the school's staff needed processing time and conversation. We carved out dialog time during professional learning community work days, staff meetings, building leadership team meetings, and school improvement team meetings. To process the movie, the school's instructional support coaches created focused driving questions that were discussed by all staff. Examples of these questions include:

- What key messages did you take away from the film? What stood out?
- How did learning about ACEs and the changes made at Lincoln impact how you think about

students in our school/your classes?

As a library group, my assistants, instructional tech specialists, and I reflected on these questions. Because our school library is the heart of the school, we decided that the school library needed to be on the forefront of these changes. A brainstorming session of ideas soon followed, with my library staff producing a list of ways that we could be a more trauma-sensitive library. All the ideas we came up with reflect trauma-sensitive practices by being inclusive, supportive, and sensitive to students' outside situations. Removing barriers for students with traumas so they can focus on the work they need to do at school was our goal. A few of the ideas we came up with were:

- Student IDs for check-out becoming preferred, but not mandatory
- Late and damaged fines reviewed
- Chromebook loaners given to students without charged devices
- Chargers checked out to students to use in the library
- A free replacement ID each year

All of these ideas were approved by our building administration and implemented in the second year of our trauma-informed learning.

Year Two Implementation

In year two of our learning, the school leadership team set up a plan to shift into a trauma-sensitive mindset. Teachers were surveyed to find out what learning they wanted and needed to further their understanding and buy in to this inclusive way of thinking. During department meetings lead teachers would encourage conversations

and sharing among staff on topics related to social-emotional learning and ACE-informed procedures. These procedures could be as small as a “hello” at the door entering the classroom, or as complex as taking a day during the week to do social-emotional learning lessons with the entire class. According to the National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments, “Supporting social and emotional development is a core component to trauma sensitive schools” (2018, 49). (The center offers a packet of specific handouts and tools that can be used to support this mindset at https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Building%20TSS%20Handout%20Packet_ALL.pdf.)

For our school library, year two was a learning process. The school library staff found that some of our new ideas worked out great, and some needed to be tweaked. Most of our ideas worked just the way we thought they would. However, Chromebook loaner devices proved to be the most difficult to implement, and continues to be an issue still. Students with ACEs have a hard time remembering to bring their devices charged to school, or they are unable to charge their device if they are not living in a permanent home. Some students have difficulty even bringing back the loaned Chromebook. Students with trauma are not thinking about bringing back what they borrowed; their minds are on other things. We continue to find that loaned Chromebooks are not returned, so we then have to hunt them down. We just don’t have the time or staff to do that every day. As a group we are still trying to brainstorm ways to make this a more successful process for students and library staff.

Year Three Modifications

Moving into year three our goal as a school was to have the majority of staff members using some kind of social-emotional learning strategy, lesson, or protocol in their classrooms. To support this goal the school improvement team created professional development sessions where teachers could choose a strategy they felt like they needed to learn more about during institute days. The sessions were led by members of the school improvement team. Some examples of sessions included:

- De-escalation Strategies
- Self-Care Strategies
- Dropping Your Personal Mirror
- Keeping Discipline
- Offer Support Strategies
- Trauma and the Brain

The library staff debriefed as a whole group about what we learned in these sessions, how we felt about our learning, and what additional topics we still wanted to explore. During these sessions, we all were able to make concrete connections to the school library, and it really helped us in our understanding of ways to help students in the library. Some of our big takeaways from these sessions were:

- Keeping our cool as best we can when students begin to escalate or get frustrated with us or library policies.
- Taking care of ourselves during the day, making time to relax at our lunch breaks, and taking care of our basic needs at work when we need to.
- Using calm talk and reassurance to help students de-escalate when they become heightened in the library.

Action Steps to Implementation

All the valuable learning, mindset adoption, and subtle changes in library policy became our action plan. With all this learning in place as a library staff we were able to connect to students, be more understanding of students’ needs, and work toward a library environment that is welcoming and safe for every student. When students and staff feel connected to the library and see it as a safe and inviting space, then they will want to be there; and when students and staff want to be there, circulation, connections, and use of resources increase. Our school library staff goals are to form positive supportive relationships, and to share new ideas and resources with waiting students. Through trauma-sensitive library practices we are shaping libraries of the future to meet the needs of our students and staff better than ever before.

Thoughts about education as a one-size-fits-all program have begun to fall by the wayside. The ideology of trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive thinking is a natural fit into the new educational metamorphosis, which has shifted to more personalized learning. When matching students with a book or a resource for research we always ask questions first. That sense of satisfaction we feel when we have exactly what the student is looking for, the relief in students’ eyes that yes, we can help, and the feeling that we made a difference with a student that day is everything. We ask questions to help understand what students need. School libraries are a safe place for all students where they can temporarily forget about the trauma in their lives, and focus on finding books and resources that can support them.

Positive Outcomes

The positive feedback and outcomes with this trauma-sensitive mindset have been far reaching and abundant. As a school we have seen great success in our abilities to connect with students and form positive relationships. We have seen an increase in students asking for help when they need it and being open with staff when they need support and getting it. We have also had an increase in students feeling like they have a trusted teacher in the building that they could go to for support. As a library we have stayed true to our mission of being an inclusive and safe space for all students. The library is the heart of a school with a beat on what our students need to be successful. Stopping to consider outside factors in students' lives has been an eye-opening experience and has brought changes to our school policies that have affected the library's day-to-day operations. These changes, such as incorporating social-emotional learning lessons and being more flexible with students on rules such as IDs and Chrome-books being charged, have been our most successful. The school library has become more aware and more thoughtful, and it is a place where students can feel safe and connected to their school. Many of us chose the school library profession because of how teaching and libraries made us feel as adolescents.

Over the past years the school library staff have revised our policies, developed a better understanding of our students' needs, and become aware about best practices in helping students with ACEs. All these factors have contributed to a positive school library environment. We have fewer students reaching a frustration level; we have eliminated obstacles preventing students from checking out materials that they need; and we have fostered positive feelings and relationships with students.

Next Steps/Continuations

As we look forward, the school and library will continue incorporating trauma-sensitive and -informed practices. The plans that we make for each new school year will include ways that we can support all our students in positive ways. Our commitment to collecting resources for all students, not just ones that support our own beliefs, holds strong. Moving forward we will continue to keep a pulse on what our students are asking for and what will best support them psychologically and academically. Our library policies and procedures will be fluid according to our students and their needs.

Every human being needs a place to feel safe, a place to belong and feel understood. The library in every school can be that safe and understanding place. For some students, our area of the building can serve as a quiet eye in what seems to be the hurricane of life, a spot in the busy school day to catch a breath and slow down. The fiction titles that we offer that give students an escape or a reflective moment are invaluable. The nonfiction titles and resources that give students information they need to learn and grow in vast areas of knowledge are priceless.

Understanding where your students are at emotionally and cognitively together is really at the heart of being a trauma-informed and -sensitive library. With all the knowledge that understanding ACEs has provided, we have truly made great strides at becoming a school library that is a safe space for all.



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writes book reviews for *School Library Journal* and writes for AASL's Knowledge Quest website. She is a member of the AASL AAUP Book Selection Committee. She also serves as a member of the YALSA Outstanding Books for the College Bound Committee. She is a member of the reading panel committee for the AISLE Abraham Lincoln Book Award.

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