

A SAFE HAVEN FOR TEENS

Numerous studies show that well-resourced school libraries positively impact student achievement, but inclusive, welcoming school libraries can also have a huge influence on student wellbeing. For school librarian KARYS MCEWEN, this effect on student wellbeing is just as important as the effect on academic achievement.

There will always be teenagers who seek solace among the stacks. Anecdotal evidence suggests this to be true in schools all over the world. There will always be students who need sensitive information they can't get elsewhere. There will always be kids who will stop feeling invisible when they find characters they can relate to in a novel. And there will always be teenagers who want to find refuge from the playground, the classroom or even from their own heads.

These young people need a space that provides safety and support. It's our job, as school librarians, to give them these things.

The best school libraries have fittings and signs that are quirky, charming, full of visual appeal and that are easy to navigate. There is a balance between light, open spaces and hidey-holes where kids can take a breather. A good design should also feel age-appropriate and engaging but never condescending. Good libraries don't have to be perfectly designed. I love an idiosyncratic library that suits all different needs and isn't in immaculate order. It might have a lived-in feeling, but that's just because it's loved and well used.

The budget and the architecture of the library are often outside our control. Luckily, however, while the design of the library impacts its role as a safe haven, the library experience is about much more than just the physical space.

ALLOWING FOR PRIVACY

Teenagers like privacy, and we should respect that desire whenever possible. In my library we have posters that direct students to the parts of the collection where they can find information about what they might consider embarrassing topics. Many of them may not wish to do an online search on mental health, puberty, family issues or relationships and sex, for fear of teachers or parents seeing their internet



Glen Eira College Book Club students on a book-buying excursion to make their own decisions about what the library should have on the shelves.



A book display in the library front window celebrating the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement, which advocates for putting more books with diverse characters into the hands of children.

history. The websites they find through Google may also not be entirely reliable. Instead, our discreet posters allow them to find vetted information about the most sensitive issues, and they can do so independently and privately.

SUPPORTING DIVERSITY

Students who are questioning their identity or sexuality often end up in the library. They may need help to figure things out or just want a neutral space in which to feel safe. Librarians can support LGBTQIA students in myriad ways, but mostly through creating diverse collections that are easily searchable via the catalogue, and by giving them a place where they will be accepted and listened to.

Similarly, students with social welfare issues or disabilities often have a great need for the library. The information we hold can be invaluable for these kids, whether it's access to materials for a school assignment, dyslexia-friendly novels for enjoyment, or alternative mediums such as audiobooks or zines. In my library, I've also seen many of these students thrive as library monitors, which helps them feel useful and develop their leadership skills. This is also a way to make friends.



Karys McEwan holding a Pop-Up Library at recess on the playground. It was an initiative to raise awareness of the school library to students that don't often come in, and let them know what the library can offer them.

BEING AN INTERMEDIARY

Librarians don't always have all the answers, but a visit to the library could very well be the first step to solving an issue. I once found students trying to find information on why feminism gets a bad rap, and the next thing I knew we were starting a feminist club that met in the library every week. Another student told me she was disappointed that all the sex education at school was heteronormative. We booked a meeting with the assistant principal to air our

WHAT MAKES A GREAT LIBRARY SERVICE?

concerns, and together we weeded out all the health books from the library with outdated and damaging information.

Of course, the library is not the only place where teenagers can seek help. Hopefully most schools today will have a wellbeing centre, and a school nurse, counsellor or teachers that students feel they can talk to and trust. Sometimes librarians may feel out of their depth in this area, but it's important not to get overwhelmed. What I have learned is to use common sense, be compassionate to the students but also be kind to yourself. Be prepared for the unexpected, know that you'll make mistakes, ask questions (especially about how you can do better next time) and collaborate with other school staff to share ideas.

As school libraries fight for funding, our focus should never move away from people. When planning for the future, we need to take students' wellbeing into account just as much as their academic successes.

Every school library is different. But the one thing they should all have in common is the sense of being a safe haven. The welfare of our students depends on it. 

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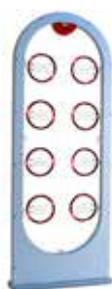
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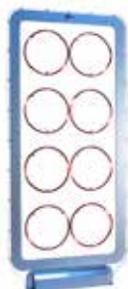
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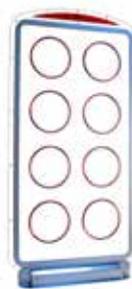
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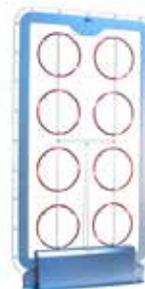
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