So much more than a safe space: Student well-being in the school library

By Anita Brooks Kirkland

Snapshot

Our regular Canadian Landscapes section author, Anita Brooks Kirkland, explores the work by Canada school libraries to support and enrich student well-being. Kirkland clearly describes how school libraries are actively engaging with the issues, reflecting on their role and ensuring school libraries are meaningfully seeking change and improvement.

Understanding the library as a safe space is part of our professional psyche. We all have stories of how our libraries have provided a place of refuge and acceptance for our most vulnerable students. We have been courageous in developing collections that help students develop their own self-identity and sense of self-worth. We intentionally collect resources and support initiatives related to mental health, addiction, and challenging social issues. We fiercely protect our students' right to privacy as they explore dangerous ideas in the safe space of the library.

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Being a safe space, where students are welcomed and valued, is a vital part of the library. But is that really enough? The stressors of the pandemic combined with unprecedented social change have made it very clear: we are not all fine, and nor are our students. Everyone needs support in keeping well. What can we do in the school library to enable all students to flourish and thrive socially, mentally, emotionally, cognitively, culturally, and physically? It is very clear that we need to expand our understanding of how to support the well-being of all students in an intentional and wholistic way.

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Supporting student well-being has become a priority for Canadian teacher-librarians. As we explore the issues, I hope you may take inspiration from the many associated projects from Canada's school libraries.

New ways of thinking about student well-being

In its 2015 Program for International Assessment (PISA) report on student well-being, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provides this definition.

'Students' well-being refers to the psychological, cognitive, social and physical functioning and capabilities that students need to live a happy and fulfilling life.' (OECD, 2015)

PISA's definition focuses on positive outcomes for all students, a significant shift from traditional approaches that focus on threats to children's mental and physical health.

> 'It is now important to develop international data that extend beyond the study of adolescents' disorders, deficits and disabilities, and that put more emphasis on the positive attributes that define the success of students. By examining students' strengths, assets and abilities, it will be possible to identify the core elements that enable them to flourish and thrive.' (OECD, 2015).
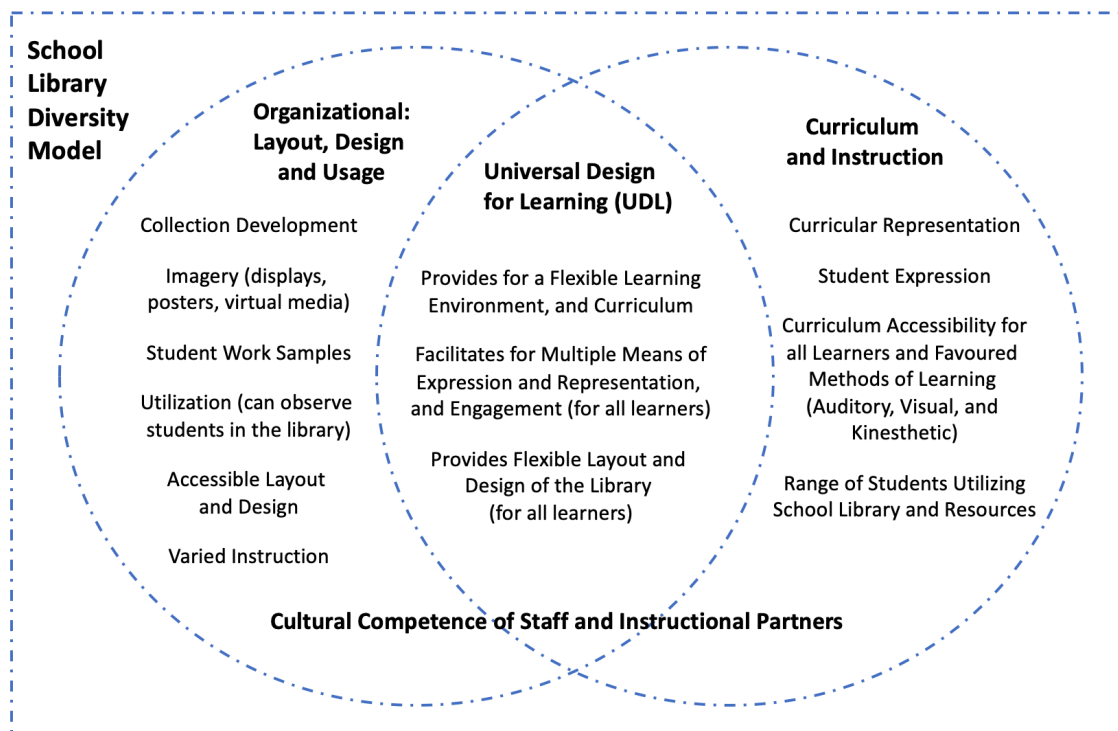
Education policy in many jurisdictions now considers student well-being as an important component of overall student success.

Supporting all students and their diverse needs

How can school libraries effect this shift in philosophy? Let us start by recognizing the diversity of our students and of their needs. That diversity may be cultural, it may be related to learning needs, and it may be related to a wide range of personal circumstances. Once we understand that the health of all is intertwined with the diversity of our human experiences, we can understand that attending to this diversity with intention will go a long way in achieving a healthy and empowering learning environment.

Robinson's school library diversity model (2019) proposes that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a logical framework for school libraries to meet the diverse needs of all learners. The cultural competence of staff and instructional partners is a transcending factor for all areas of supporting diversity. This model puts everything together. Addressing diversity with intention creates healthy and supportive school libraries for all students. Today's school libraries need to be more than a safe space for struggling students. They need to be places that empower all students and build their capacity to flourish and thrive.

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School Library Diversity Model

Organizational: Layout, Design and Usage

Collection Development

Imagery (displays, posters, virtual media)

Student Work Samples

Utilization (can observe students in the library)

Accessible Layout and Design

Varied Instruction

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Provides for a Flexible Learning Environment, and Curriculum

Facilitates for Multiple Means of Expression and Representation, and Engagement (for all learners)

Provides Flexible Layout and Design of the Library (for all learners)

Curriculum and Instruction

Curricular Representation

Student Expression

Curriculum Accessibility for all Learners and Favoured Methods of Learning (Auditory, Visual, and Kinesthetic)

Range of Students Utilizing School Library and Resources

Cultural Competence of Staff and Instructional Partners

Robinson, David E. (2019). A school library diversity model and assessment guide. Knowledge Quest 48(2).

Building capacity and developing strategies for well-being

Student well-being is an overarching theme when reviewing new practices and innovations in Canadian school libraries, and perhaps there may be some inspiration here for your school library.

Expanded understanding of safe spaces

The library may be a place of refuge for the most vulnerable, but are there ways to help all students deal with stress? Many school libraries are now creating zones for quiet and mindfulness, and may even provide calming toys such as stress balls. You may find an exercise bike and yoga mats in the library. I've even visited a secondary library that provides light therapy lamps to help students deal with a particularly Canadian depressive symptom caused by lack of light over the long winter, Season Affective Disorder (SAD). On the other hand, the library can provide a natural space to strengthen the social ties so important to adolescents.

This inspiring article demonstrates how the teacher-librarian in an Ontario secondary school library learning commons took a leading role in taking practical steps to implement the school district's strategic plan for supporting student mental health. *The Mindful Library: A Path to Student Well-Being, Mental Health Literacy, and Mindfulness in the Library Learning Commons* (Nunn, 2017)

Teacher-librarian leaders from the Toronto District School Board and community partners share effective strategies for fostering wellness in and through the library learning commons. Their account includes suggestions for whole school wellness initiatives, facility design, programming,

curricular connections, resources, inclusiveness, and involving students in design. *Fostering Wellness in the LLC: Stories from Around the Board* (Wray et al, 2019)

Developing physical and virtual environments that foster well-being

If nothing else, this extended pandemic crisis has taught us about the importance of the virtual environment. Good design can foster the kinds of collaboration and creativity that students experience in the library's physical space. Take for example the wonderful website created by teacher-librarians in the Peel District School Board in Ontario in response to the first lockdown in the spring of 2020. **Bringing the LLC Home** fostered a culture of participation, sharing and collaboration. Students could be a part of the library community, even though they were learning remotely from home. You can **learn more about the project** from its creators (Mulcaster & Zita, 2020).

> **...perhaps the debate should not be about the relative merits of face-to-face vs online learning, but rather about how intentional we are in applying good teaching practice in all contexts.**

The move to remote learning has been extremely disruptive, and spurred endless debate. But perhaps the debate should not be about the relative merits of face-to-face vs online learning, but rather about how intentional we are in applying good teaching practice in all contexts. Teacher-librarian Jennifer Casa-Todd puts it succinctly.

'I really think we are asking the wrong questions. We should not be debating synchronous vs asynchronous, we should be asking ourselves how can we help our kids feel connected and supported; in their learning and with their well-being.' (Casa-Todd, 2020)

Sage advice for the design of all of our virtual spaces.

Understanding resource diversity as an equity issue and the foundation for student well-being

Jenny Dupuis is the co-author of the best-selling book, I Am Not a Number, which is based on the experiences of her grandmother, who was removed from her First Nations community to attend a residential school. Jenny challenges us to consider **what happens when you create a culture of respect, trust, and innovation in school library spaces**? That culture was clearly lacking when she attended school herself.

> 'Growing up, I can recall going to the school library, and being encouraged to explore the sections, but found myself detached, disheartened, and disconnected after reading a series of books about Indigenous peoples found in an inappropriately titled area, 'Peoples of the Past'. The books lacked respect, depth, and truth. The stereotypical images and words hurt. They were not reflective of the histories, cultures, and lived realities. It was not a culturally safe experience.' (Dupuis, 2019)

Addressing lack of diversity in library collections has become an urgent priority in Canadian schools, and there is tremendous interest in conducting diversity audits of collections, such as the one undertaken by teacher-librarian Toni Duval. She tells the story in her article, *Diversity Audit of a Middle School Library* (2020).

Canadian publishers are addressing the diversity issue, and we are seeing a great influx of wonderful new books that are representative of the range of Canadian lives and experiences. Adding these new resources to our collections only addresses half of the issue. We must also weed out the outdated and biased books that Jenny Dupuis found so hurtful. **Weeding is an equity issue**, as teacher-librarian Rabia Khokhar explains (2020).

Developing our own cultural competencies

The theme of our fifth biennial TMC research symposium and think tank held in 2017 was the culturally relevant and responsive school library learning commons. A **wide range of papers** explored various aspects of cultural competence. Canadian School Libraries put it all together with our resource, **Culturally Relevant and Responsive School Library Learning Commons**. The planning tools in this resource may prove particularly useful for developing a strategy specific to your context.

Library programming and pedagogy

An elementary teacher-librarian reflects on the rationale, learning experiences and resources developed in an Ontario school library to engage students in critical thinking and reflection regarding cultural relevance. *Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy in a Racially Homogenous School* (Khokhar, 2020)

TIME TO MAKE ROOM
Culturally Relevant and Responsive School Library Learning Commons

It is time to make room for everyone's voices in our learning commons.

It is time to recognize whose voice is present and whose voice is missing.

It is time to address the gaps in our collections in a way that respects and honours the contributions of all.

It is time to create collections where students and staff see themselves reflected and gain a window into the lived experiences of others.

It is time to address the inherent cultural bias in the way we catalogue resources .

It is time to reflect on barriers to learning. Who has access and who is left out in our learning environments?

It is time that we know and share our true history in order to understand our present and give us direction for the future.

It is time to reflect honestly about our own beliefs and experiences around privilege and bias.

It is time to have difficult conversations.

It is time to have these conversations in our classrooms, our staff rooms, our board meetings – anywhere and everywhere – virtually or face to face, in order to push learning forward.

THE TIME TO MAKE ROOM IS NOW.

www.canadianschoollibraries.ca

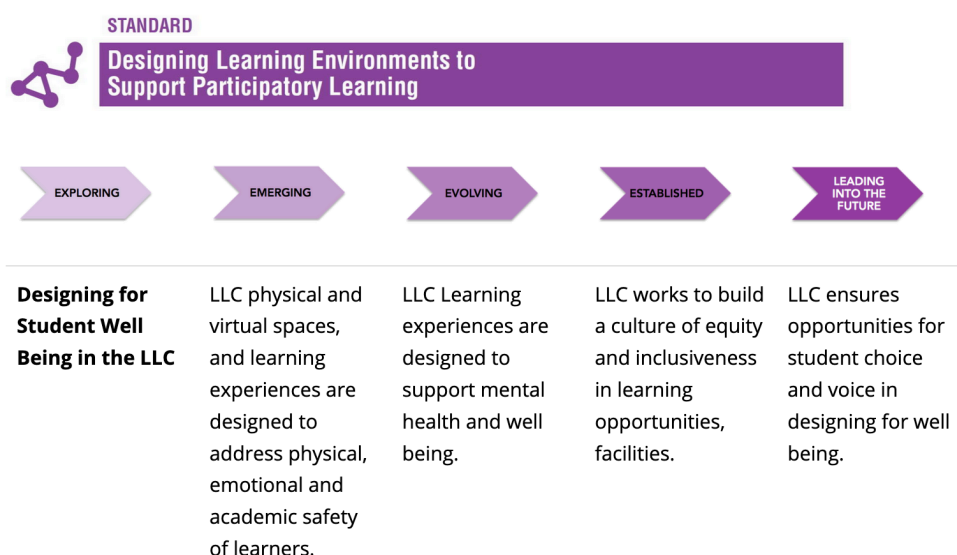www.canadianschoollibraries.ca/relevant-responsive

Student choice and voice

Developing a diverse and culturally responsive collection is extraordinarily important, but how do we truly know whether our choices will appeal to students? Give them a role in the selection process, of course! This secondary teacher-librarian did just that, and her **process and criteria** may prove very useful. (St. Aubyn, 2020)

Canada's *MediaSmarts* conducts important research and provides a wonderful collection of student and teacher resources for developing information and media literacy. Their new resource, *Speak up! Your Guide to Changing the World, Online and Off* presents an essential guide with strategies for helping students find and use their voice in social activism in safe and effective ways. (MediaSmarts, 2020)

Leading the way from the school library learning commons in Canada

Recognizing broadening understandings of supporting student well-being, Canadian School Libraries has added a new theme to *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada* (CSL, 2020). The standard Designing Learning Environments to Support Participatory Learning already included themes for a range of factors – designing for collaboration and accessibility, for responsive collections, for creativity, innovation and a participatory culture – but well-being was glaringly absent. The inclusion of this new theme arguably brings all of the others together, as they are all essential factors for enabling students to flourish and thrive.

STANDARD

Designing Learning Environments to Support Participatory Learning

EXPLORING	EMERGING	EVOLVING	ESTABLISHED	LEADING INTO THE FUTURE
Designing for Student Well Being in the LLC	LLC physical and virtual spaces, and learning experiences are designed to address physical, emotional and academic safety of learners.	LLC Learning experiences are designed to support mental health and well being.	LLC works to build a culture of equity and inclusiveness in learning opportunities, facilities.	LLC ensures opportunities for student choice and voice in designing for well being.

The *Leading Learning* growth continuum (chevrons) provides guideposts for progressive stages of implementation and growth. Each stage builds on the accomplishments of the previous stage and provides steps to achieving future goals. The Leading Learning website provides links to real-life exemplars of how Canadian schools are implementing the standard, some of which have been featured in this article. **Designing Learning Environments to Support Participatory Learning.**

Taking a proactive stance for student well-being

The school library has a long tradition of being a caring place and a place of refuge. As our understanding of student well-being evolves from addressing deficits to helping all students flourish and thrive, we need to take a proactive stance and be intentional in the strategies that we use. It is my hope that your Canadian colleagues may provide some useful inspiration.

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