

Compassionate Collaborations

School Libraries Developing Empathy and Social Action through Making

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In this chapter, the discussion focuses on compassionate collaborations. Comfort and care in times of need, through grief or crisis, is paramount to our students' health and well-being. Youth develop self-confidence and self-esteem when they engage in maker activities. It is empathy that makes us want to create change or provide assistance. The activities discussed in this chapter are targeted to develop or enhance empathy and social action among youth. Tips for developing successful collaborations, the benefits of community partnerships, and real-world examples are explored.

Grief, Bereavement, and Crisis

As librarians, we are in a unique position to assist youth with research, reader's advisory, and a host of personal concerns. In school libraries, librarians focus on teaching varied skills. Coping and self-expression are two such skills, though not as often discussed as information literacy skills. When a student arrives at our doorway, we don't always get to pick and choose which student needs we wish to address. Life happens, and we are on the frontline. It is because of our unique position and the emotional connections to our students that they come to rely on and choose to seek us out for a feeling of comfort and safety. Diane Chen, a school librarian in Nashville, Tennessee, plays a role in her school's Crisis Aftercare Response Event (CARE) team. Chen explains, "sometimes the library is just a space where a student can come and be with another caring adult, whether it's the counselor, psychologist, faculty member, librarian, or

administrator. The students know that we will connect them with whom-ever they need” (as cited in Maughan 2018). Following the shooting death of a student at her school, Chen opened up her library’s makerspace for students to create tributes and write out sympathy cards. In her words, “the library became a grief station and a place to question why this was happening in our society” (Chen 2018).

Diana Haneski, school librarian at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, has shared her thoughts about using her library makerspace after a school wide crisis. “For a little while, you forget,” said Haneski of the Parkland Florida, shooting of February 14, 2018. It was beneficial for students to use their school makerspace to “get into a flow, doing something else,” she said. Just like at Chen’s school, counselors also spent time in the library’s space, facilitating access to students and staff in need of support. “Now you have six kids around a table with a counselor working on a puzzle, and they’re talking,” Haneski reported. Chen noted that her “students grouped around tables talking about the violence they had experienced in their lives and the lives of friends and family lost” (Chen 2018). Engaging in difficult conversations can be improved when one is occupied by puzzles, tinkering, or other makerspace projects. Both Chen and Haneski’s students addressed their grief in a hands-on, physical manner. At Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, students used the library to write letters to government representatives and create friendship bracelets. “It’s very good for your mind. It’s been part of the healing process,” stated Haneski (Yorio 2018). Library makerspaces provide a beneficial outlet in the grief process as “it may be difficult for some students to sit and talk about their grief, worries, and fears. They may feel more comfortable releasing energy as they talk” (Heath, Leavy, Hansen, Ryan, Lawrence, and Sonntag 2008, 261).

Grief and bereavement become second nature to a school librarian. While most librarians are familiar with individual loss, for example, the student whose dog died or the passing of a grandparent, we are unfortunately exposed to community grief as well. The death of a community member, student, or staff member is a traumatic experience for all. Several years ago, a recent graduate of Islip (NY) High School died in a vehicular accident on his way to the community college. It was the beginning of the school year, and shock and grief were immediate for students and staff members alike. We put our heads together and decided creating memorial buttons with the likeness of the student would be cathartic. Our school library makerspace was the perfect gathering spot as students and staff made the buttons. A camaraderie formed as we supported one

another as it is easier to cope with grief when busy with other tasks. One of the participants stated, “The making of the pins was an escape to the grief I was feeling” (Seymour 2016). Our students decided they wanted to wear the buttons during homecoming, though even to this day one can spot these buttons within the walls of Islip High School. We had successfully handled the responsibility of communal grief through traditional counseling and maker activities.

Following the tragic death of a loved one, I developed increased sensitivity to the hurt our students were experiencing at their personal losses. One student told me about the passing of her grandmother, another of her father. Loss of a parent or other family member affects not only learning but also all aspects of one’s life. When December rolled around, I felt we needed to be proactive in addressing the feelings and emotions our students were experiencing during this time. So, to address this situation, we organized a holiday grief program at our high school open to students and staff called *Crafting Your Grief through the Holidays*. The endeavor involved communication with mental health staff within the building, discreet and overt marketing of the program, and the program itself. With the support of counselors and my own experience with bereavement support groups, the program was attended by students and a staff member who had lost her brother. Holiday time is challenging as it is traditionally a period of time when families gather. And it brings up memories when all were together. Assorted maker activities were offered, but the most popular activity was creating memory ornaments from fillable plastic balls. As participants showed pictures of loved ones, they experienced a sense of honor and privilege to be part of this reverent activity. This and many other activities can be found at <http://hslibguides.islipufsd.org/grief>.

A community event led to a chance discussion between me and the outreach librarian at our local public library regarding this program. Together, we are in the process of collaborating on bringing the *Crafting Your Grief through the Holidays* program to the rest of the community in December. The public library’s outreach librarian is always on the lookout for programs that will benefit residents, which led to this compassionate community partnership. What starts in a school library can often cross over to the public library and vice versa. It is our commitment to create safe, nurturing environments for our students. Our school libraries are safe spaces where children come and gather and where difficult discussions are improved by engaged patrons. So, why not consider a partnership with a clinical art therapist in your area?

Art Therapy in the Library

Coloring is a calming and therapeutic activity that provides children with an outlet for self-expression. The act of coloring also leads to increased self-esteem and confidence. Libraries—and notably library supply companies—are increasing their marketing and supply of coloring books and bookmarks to patrons. Simple preprinted bookmarks and colored pencils are affordable and easy to implement. Other comforting activities in our school library include the addition of Hasbro's Joy for All social robotic cat that augments a calmative effect when employed. Students place the cat nearby, or on their lap, stroking and petting this realistic cat as they sit and read. Schools with iPads can download gentle guided meditation apps. Another maker activity we implement at test time is making stress balls out of rehydrated "magic" beads and balloons. This activity along with a community partnership with our local dog therapy group provides students with a soothing experience at a stressful time.

While all of these activities comfort our youth, art therapy is a form of psychotherapy involving expressive therapy that uses the creative process of art making to improve a person's physical, mental, and emotional well-being under the supervision of a licensed professional therapist. This is not coloring sheets with markers! We partnered with Long Island University's (LIU) Clinical Art Therapy Program. In New York, a master's in clinical art therapy, licensure, board certification, and clinical hours are required for licensure and certification. Art therapy is used at all ages and backgrounds; everyone can benefit through the use of art and expression. LIU graduate students and their supervising professor came in for two nonconsecutive days approximately a week apart. The therapists left a poster four feet by six feet long for students to fill in and respond to questions along the lines of "Who is therapy for? How would therapy benefit you?" Students responded and decorated the poster during the week. During time with the clinical trainees, our students made decorated masks inside and out. The outward side showed students' outward facing persona and the inside their inner feelings and concerns. The therapists also worked with our staff members to facilitate the creation of social emotional lesson plans. Our library makerspace hosted the activities, and though the therapists came with all the supplies they needed, our students were comfortable using our makerspace and added additional touches from our supplies to complete their projects. Don't be concerned if you don't have a makerspace or even lack basic arts and crafts supplies as the therapist will bring everything they need. While this partnership is beneficial for any school, schools that lack funding will not be impeded.

Art therapists engage in community partnerships with hospitals, jails, nursing homes, and rehab facilities, so why not a school library partnership? Reach out to the American Art Therapy Association (<https://arttherapy.org/>) for lists of educational programs in your area. These students in training need clinical hours, and chances are your library has space, a table, and participants who can benefit from the exposure to this type of therapy. Children can create order in the midst of their psychological chaos, a key point among the numerous benefits for students (Keane 2017). Art therapy provides a way for coping with adversity, “manage behaviors, process feelings, reduce stress and anxiety, and increase self-esteem” (“Creativity and Recovery” 2018). Programming that is free and beneficial for students is a win-win situation.

“In art therapy, students can reflect deeply about themselves in relation to their social climate, explore inherent contradictions in those relationships and become empowered to problem solve” (Keane 2017). This collaboration offers students a safe outlet to release and express feelings and develop skills to solve problems.

Makers with a Cause

MakerCare, a program at Islip High School, is designed to empower youth to create change through making. The maker activities help foster empathy and compassion, as well as explore issues related to social justice, through active school and community partnerships. Items such as dog and cat toys are made using assorted materials and then donated to a receiving facility, namely the town animal shelter or community rescue groups. Other community partnerships include healthcare facilities. We’ve sewn surgical caps for hospitals and post mastectomy pillows for cancer support groups and crocheted warm shawls for nursing home residents. Libraries with 3-D printers and sufficient funding can embark on creating prosthetic arms for children through Project e-Nable. Or work with local wildlife rehabilitators and veterinarians to address prosthetic and ambulatory animal needs. Low cost and easy-to-implement projects include Sending Smiles, postcards to sick children in hospitals, and thank you cards for armed services members and veterans. Additional decorative projects include making placemats for Meals on Wheels recipients. Kind messages of caring and concern brighten the day of our military, the infirm, and the elderly. Youth can engage in assistance in any area. The variety of projects exposes students to a range of social issues—healthcare, homelessness, and food insecurity are but a few. In the Islip High

School library makerspace, we model and expose our youth to empathic behaviors. Three tips for starting your own program—start simple, be inclusive, communicate well.

Start simple and local. Many projects can be implemented at minimal cost by upcycling or asking for material donations. Plarn sleep mats for the homeless are made solely from upcycled plastic bags. The only cost is for crochet hooks, which often can be donated from a crafter's oversupply. Sending Smiles postcards are free upon request. All you need are basic coloring and decorative supplies. Braided dog toys, an animal shelter favorite, are made from donated T-shirts. These are just a few simple, low-cost ideas that can make an impact in your community.

Be inclusive. All students benefit from participation in service projects, as does the community. "By providing kids with opportunities to find out more about their communities and to become involved and make a difference in their communities, there is a chance that a new civic generation will emerge" (Durrance, Pettigrew, Jourdan, and Scheuerer 2001, 57). Include and encourage special education and English Language Learners (ELLs) to participate. While many of these students are recipients of services, by empowering them to participate in community service, they learn valuable information. For example, "What services are available within their community? Where is the agency located?" ELLs new to the community, or country, may not be familiar with the services available; thus, programming is mutually beneficial. Youth learn important skills, such as organization, problem-solving, and time management, and the receiving agency is provided with tangible, useful items.

Communicate well. Over the years, communication has become both easier and harder. On the one hand, with numerous digital advantages, reaching someone has become quite easier. On the other hand, with the lack of face to face interactions, getting your message across is challenging.

Partnerships Tips

Some collaborations are in-house partnerships, as in the case of Diane Chen's school CARE team. Members of the education team from various departments work together to assist students. Other partnerships go beyond the school walls and in to the community, such as the MakerCare program at Islip High School. Regardless of the type of collaboration, the key to successful collaborations is communication and patience, as well as respect for time. Once time passes, it is gone and with busy schedules and busy lives, no one wants to feel their time was wasted. Always listen to your partner and hear what they are saying. Articulate your issues and

concerns before initiating an activity and respond in kind when your partner shares concerns. Respectful communication and listening skills are vital to successful encounters. In addition, know when the partnership is a good fit. Don't be afraid to walk away from an opportunity. It may not be the right time to initiate for any number of reasons. Agree to keep in touch and consider an alternative time or activity. A bad encounter can have lasting effects. With a little planning, a positive attitude, and careful communication, successful collaborations are just a conversation away from making a difference. Ideas and inspiration for numerous projects, partnerships, and funding can be found in *Makers with a Cause: Creative Service Projects for Library Youth* (Seymour 2018).

Conclusion

These compassionate collaborations provide the care and comfort our students deserve. They also provide a model for our students not only to be recipients but also to create comfort and care for others in their community and around the world. By providing—and sometimes receiving—community assistance, participants develop a range of benefits. Benefits of compassionate collaborations include real world learning experiences for youth participants, namely, in exploring social justice and developing empathetic skills. These are authentic skills and just as necessary as problem-solving, time management, and organization skills. By providing—and sometimes receiving—community assistance, participants develop a range of benefits, including authentic skills as listed previously, community assistance, self-esteem, and confidence for youth participants and for community agency assistance. Through these unique collaborations, students are afforded the opportunity to discover who they are, how they see themselves, and how they see the world around them. Youth can then take action to make changes, either to themselves or in their communities. It is through compassion that we seek understanding and change. And it is through empathy that action takes place. As librarians, we can empower youth to help improve their lives and solve fundamental problems in their communities.

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Radical Collaborations for Learning

School Librarians as Change Agents

Violet H. Harada and Sharon Coatney, Editors



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