And Then There Was Me

Feature

by Tara M. Foor, October 2020

In a school library setting there is so much we do to make the space appealing to students. We create an inviting environment, display materials, and host events and programs in an effort to show how students could utilize library resources to improve their learning. We research best practices, brainstorm teaching strategies, and share information on new tools that could help students pursue their learning goals and become better independent thinkers. But for me, it becomes very difficult to do all of those things without the input or feedback from my students and staff, especially during a period of high stress, such as a pandemic.

Staff Social-Emotional Care

One thing I love about libraries is the sense of community that happens within the library's walls, whether it be through a program, a lesson, or book club. Regardless of the reason they enter through our doors, everyone is welcomed. I love that I work in a school that has developed a school culture based on community. Teachers work both within and outside of their departments to collaborate on activities and learn from each other professionally. So naturally, when schools closed due to the 2020 pandemic, teachers rallied together to create expectations for e-learning to best help students. Each department had multiple teachers come together to collaborate on lessons and adapt what was happening in the classroom to e-learning. Even though this was something teachers could work on as a team, it was still a stressful situation.

In a previous SLC article "If Not Us, Then Who," administrator Matt Bush, discusses how the school library can be a safe space for our students by fostering connections and engaging in real conversations that could assist them during times of trauma. While this article is particularly motivating in regards to serving serve students, as school librarians we must also take into consideration the other patrons that we serve. When we talk about social and emotional learning, as educators we automatically put the needs of our students first—how are they learning and coping in this environment? As school librarians, we should broaden that concern to include the adults we also serve. How are teachers, support staff, paraprofessionals, and

Social-Emotional Care Simple Staff Checks

- **Ask** how things are going…but be specific. Asking a broad question of "how are you" could result in an unengaging "fine," so ask how a particular project or aspect of your colleague's life is going in order to create a conversation.
- **Follow up**. Check in with teachers with whom you have shared resources. How were they implemented and what were the results? For remote learning, ask the teacher if you can join their online learning environment to see how the lesson or activity goes. If the teacher asks for feedback, feel free to share a few words, but otherwise, sit back and enjoy watching the learning happen!
- **Start small**. As school librarians, we want to help everybody, but sometimes it is better to start small. If your administration permits it, send an email to your entire staff offering to help with whatever they may need. Then, contact department chairs or lead teachers to see if you can offer assistance to their content area. Or, just remind each of the teachers that you work with on a regular basis that you are there to support them.

administrators working and coping?

School Librarian Social-Emotional Care

And then there was me…and I felt left out. I was the only librarian on staff. I was in a department of one. Let's not forget the one who is most important to take care of—ourselves!

There are always a few dates in an educator's career that seem to stick in our mental calendars. For me, March 13, 2020, is a day I do not think I will forget any time soon, simply because of all of the "what-ifs" that happened. I was in the midst of confirming my full schedule of lessons for the next week, while conversations about COVID-19 were circulating. Students were not the only ones speculating, since teachers were also scrambling to create back-up plans for the potential cancellation of school and implementation of e-learning. As a school librarian, I pride myself on being flexible. With over one hundred teachers and more than twenty-two hundred students, I have tried to be prepared for whatever inquiries, needs, or lesson ideas could come up. It is a great mental exercise to be prepared for whatever walks through the door, but what happens when the doors are mandated to be closed?

School Librarian Social-Emotional Care

- **Check your checklist.** What needs to be done right away and what could be postponed to a later date? Can something be delegated to paraprofessionals, students, or volunteers? Is the item on your list something you truly want to invest in or are you comparing yourself to others?
- **Speak it out**. Connect with someone you can talk with during periods of loneliness and frustration. Are you reflecting often? Talk about your goals and the process for working towards them, but more importantly talk about how you want to feel as you strive to make your goals a reality.
- **Breathe!** It is okay to slow down. Taking breaks or moments away from a stressful project can be essential. Enlisting the help of meditation apps such as Calm or Headspace provide activities that help you slow down during high anxiety moments

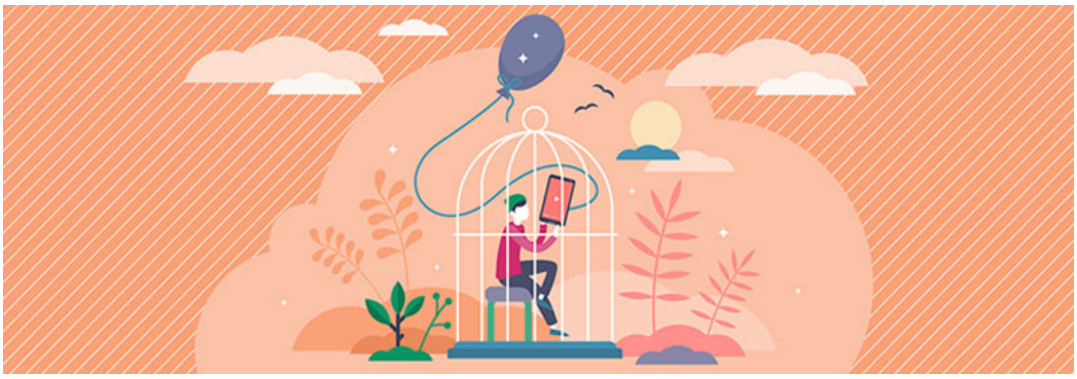
I recently revisited the book *I Miss You When I Blink*, a collection of essays by Mary Laura Philpott that I had enjoyed reading because I found it relatable. Through various observations on her own life, Philpott addresses how sometimes going through life's checklist will ultimately make us miss all of the little moments in which we find more joy and meaning, and it helped me get to a point of realization. How many of us have a mental checklist of everything we have to do? How often do we overload that checklist to the point where we are overwhelmed? For me, I felt pressure to have an elaborate makerspace, a robust collection of books, and a consistent rate of attendance during any virtual event I hosted. All of this stressed me out to the point where I dreaded brainstorming for makerspace craft ideas or even shopping for books. Keeping our checklist in check helps us measure our expectations. We are capable of physically, mentally, and emotionally to achieve those expectations.

Ask Questions through Reflection

During an effort to come up with remote learning alternatives for our library, I took time to think about "soul work"—a concept of how individuals become invested in serving others (Moreillon 2020), and how I could manage my workload during this socially and emotionally challenging time while also brainstorming ways on how the library could still be effective.

As Judi Moreillon mentions, we need to understand and manage our emotions. What is the emotion we are feeling and what is causing us to feel this way? Before COVID19, I would feel stressed or burned out because I was doing so much, often because I thought that I was not doing enough. During the months staying at home, I struggled with how I could best serve my colleagues who would share frustrations with e-learning, but I also felt disconnected from the typical camaraderie that was part of my school's culture. To cope with the absence of interacting with coworkers, I started mailing postcards and letters that included printouts of funny memes to surprise their mailboxes. The extended period of being at home during COVID-19 allowed me to reflect on everything that I had been involved with and allowed me to slow down and take note of where I was devoting my time. Whether it be journaling, talking through it with a loved one, or even writing motivational sticky notes on your bathroom mirror, ask yourself what emotions you are feeling and why you may be feeling them. As we transitioned back to working in office, I was able to realize that (among other things) I could delegate some tasks to my library's support staff (or students or volunteers) after I trained them, thereby taking the work off of my plate, while still feeling like the library connected them.

Seek Answers by Focusing on What Matters



It is okay for your school library to be different from those of your peers! In one of her essays on graduating, Philpott says "as my friends seemed to plug along in pursuit of their post-graduation dreams, I stared terrified into the abyss, wondering if I'd be able to see my dream once my eyes adjusted to the darkness. Looking back, I realize pretty much everyone felt as lost as I did. But I didn't know that then, and I wanted a plan of my own." Embrace your uniqueness and pursue the vision that best serves your students, staff, and school community. For years I wanted to pursue all of the different aspects of a school library makerspace, but would only become frustrated with promoting the additional (and unfamiliar) technology. No matter how hard I tried to encourage use of LittleBits, 3D printing, and coding activities, my students would rather unwind with origami and coloring. And that is okay!

As school librarians (and educators in general), we tend to create massive to-do lists. No matter how long your list is, taking the time to devote your whole attention to something is going to allow that project to come to fruition. I am grateful for the time at home because it allowed me to pursue creating a library-based podcast that our book club students had brainstormed, but we had never found time to bring to completion. To help manage our time for this project during e-learning, we devoted one-hour blocks to each step of interviewing for a podcast episode, then editing and final revisions. Setting aside this time allowed both my students and I to focus wholeheartedly on the task and allow it to become an end result that we were pleased with.

Feeling Lonely? Connect!

There have been many moments where I've felt socially isolated during the pandemic, reminding me how our profession can sometimes make us feel separated from the rest of our staff. It helps to connect with others who feel the same way. While it can be intimidating to network, start small. Connect with others by subscribing to listservs or following others on social media. Join your state library associations as well as the American Association of School Librarians. What I have particularly enjoyed is connecting with other school librarians who live locally and gathering in a social setting, whether it is an informal Zoom meeting or a coffee date, and just chatting about anything. Even if the conversation strays away from library life, it still is an important connection because those individuals understand the workload and expectations of our job.

Apply Your Knowledge to Library Life and Reality

I have become a fan of taking breaks from anything related to library life. While this might sound counterintuitive to professional growth, let me explain. I love being a school librarian, but there are moments where I need to step away in order to clear my head. I have suffered through too many moments of working myself to the point of frustration and anxiety, where tears have started flowing down my face. As school librarians, we have a lot going on and often are the only ones to do it, which means that sometimes we set the bar too high for ourselves. Checking our expectations, as well as understanding our limits, can help us avoid losing our passion for the profession. Like many others during COVID-19, I started a garden. I also pursued my love for baking by tackling a new cookbook. Both of these hobbies allow me to take an extended period of time to focus on something that I can look after with an end result I feel directly involved in. And they relate to our need as educators and librarians to nurture and organize. Find hobbies or interests that allow you to unplug from the demands of this job. Then, when you return to your tasks at hand, you will approach them with a reinvigorated mindset.

Creating a sense of community is a natural thing in a school library, especially since we make it a priority to include students, staff, and community members in our programs, lessons, and mission. Regardless of who you welcome into your school library community, remember you are also a member of that community and don't forget to make yourself a priority as you continue to grow together.

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