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Caring Libraries and Librarians

Carl A. Harvey II, 2011–12 AASL President

Caring in the library is such an important emotion.

In January, right after the holiday break, I made every class come through the school library for a review lesson on our procedures. First semester had ended with the classes coming for checkout being a little—and some more than just a little—out of control. I was intent that we were going to nip this problem in the bud and ensure that the spring semester went much more smoothly. Part of our discussion focused on the fact that our library belonged to the entire school community, so it was the responsibility of the entire school to take care of it.

For each class, I started out asking how they felt when they came to the school library. I asked students to talk about it with someone sitting near them. After they had a chance to talk, we shared out. As you can imagine, I got all kinds of responses.

Some students took the question quite literally—it was hot or warm in the school library. I had to chuckle at those since for most of the years I’ve been at North it has always been cool (some would say cold) in the school library, but in the last two years for some reason it has gone to the opposite extreme. I’m still wishing it would cool off a little bit.

Other students picked up really quickly that we had some issues with behavior. They commented that it made them feel sad or upset that people were not doing the right thing in the library. It was good to see that I wasn’t the only one who had noticed that things were not as they normally have been in the library. A few commented that it was scary to visit the library. As I asked them to share more, I found out they were just scared they might not find just exactly the book they wanted or needed.

The most common replies were that they thought our school library was a fun place to visit and they always felt good, excited, and happy. Some talked about being excited to go on an adventure to find something new to read. What I loved best about all these comments was that I could tell that our students enjoyed coming to the school library, they felt comfortable and safe coming to the library, and that they wanted to come to our library.

One of the goals for our school library is making sure that our students felt comfortable and wanted to be there. I’ve always wanted them to have the sense that it is a place where they can go to get help, to read, to learn, and to explore. I’ve always wanted students to feel like they could come and ask for help whenever they needed it. I’ve always stressed as part of our procedure lesson at the beginning of the year (and our review in January) that if they need help, they could just ask to let us know.

One of our busiest times is recess. We finally had to limit how many students could come from each class because we were getting too many all at once. I see it as a good problem. When they have a chance to head outside and
run around, and be loud and kind of crazy, instead many students are choosing to come to the library for a quiet and calm recess in a caring atmosphere.

We’ve created a climate where the students want to come, and they feel like we care about them when they come to the library. Caring is such an important emotion for students to experience. If they don’t feel like we care for them, they are never going to be able to learn from us.

Beyond the way students feel, we also want the students to take care of the resources we have available in our library. Being in elementary school, we talk about book care. We talk about how to properly use the technology. It all goes back to that concept of being part of one school community, and we have to care about the resources and people that make up that community.

**Being All We Can be for Our Students**

Caring in the library is such an important emotion.

Let’s look at this from another angle. Why does the school librarian need to care? How much do we care about the type of school library program we are creating for learners? Are we continuing to adapt and grow as we learn more, or are we stagnant and teaching the same lessons and activities as when we started? As professionals, it is our responsibility to constantly push the envelope to create the best school library programs possible for our students.

We have to be leading the charge in our buildings about what the potential for school libraries can be—whether we are close to reaching that potential or whether we feel we’re a long way away. We have to care enough to keep pushing, to keep moving forwards.

Over the last few years the economy has hit education funding hard, and as part of that, hit school libraries. For some, that hit has been harder than for others. It would be so easy to just give up. But, we can’t. We have to care enough about what our students deserve to continue to work towards moving our programs back where they were and making them even better.

I’ve used this line a lot over the years, but it bears repeating. A dear colleague of mine Barbara Pedersen says, “As good as we are; we can always get better!” I truly believe that these are words to live by. I learn about something new every day—whether it is a website recommended by another teacher in my building, a new book I ought to be reading that I found on Twitter, or just a fresh reminder from my nephew and nieces how wonderful the mind of a child is. Every day I learn something and that makes me better.

**Looking Back and Looking Ahead**

This is my last column as AASL president. It seems kind of hard to believe that we’re approaching the end of my twelve-month term. I can’t tell you how much I’ve learned about being a school librarian and about our field. From my presidential visits, to state conferences where I found librarians all across the country, to the countless volunteers who stepped up to the plate by being active board members, committee chairs, and committee members for AASL, each interaction has shown me the powerful and amazing things school librarians do! The work we were able to accomplish in the last twelve months is mind-boggling to me.

I’ve often said I’ve gotten more out of my involvement in AASL than AASL has ever gotten out of me, and I still believe that. Sure, I pay my dues and attend conferences. However, the ideas and resources I take away each and every time I interact with my friends and colleagues are just amazing and make me a better school librarian for my students and staff. I hope you will consider ways to get involved in AASL and the profession. Technology has opened up more and more opportunities for those unable to attend conferences and meetings. Please take advantage of these opportunities and get involved. I assure you that you won’t regret it.

I am excited for Susan Ballard to take the helm of our organization at the end of ALA Annual Conference. Susan has been an amazing school librarian and school library coordinator for years. Her work with the Learning4Life committee and her promotion of our AASL standards have been nothing short of amazing! She will continue to implement the AASL Strategic Plan and help AASL become even better!

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your 2011–2012 AASL president! It has been a great honor and a pleasure to represent school libraries and school librarians this year. It was an experience I will always treasure and look back on with very fond memories. Thank you!

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**Carl A. Harvey II** is the school librarian at North Elementary School in Noblesville, Indiana, and president of the American Association of School Librarians.
Care. It seems such a simple concept, but some school librarians whose long-standing focus has been caring for physical resources may struggle with the message that the school’s human resources need to be cared for, too.

Whether the topic is resilience or learning or dropout prevention, care is the magic bullet. Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith (1992) discovered through their seminal resiliency research that a caring relationship—oftentimes with a teacher—is the most important factor to strengthen students who face challenges—big and small. Robert J. Marzano emphasizes care as a learning strategy because the “quality of the relationship teachers have with students is the keystone of effective management and perhaps the entirety of teaching” (2007, 149). Students who drop out of school, which is arguably America’s greatest educational dilemma, often say that if teachers had cared more they would have stayed in school (Hondo, Gardiner, and Sapien 2008).

The lesser focus on resources and increased focus on learning remind me of Spencer Johnson’s parable Who Moved My Cheese?: An A-Mazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life (1998). Two miniature humans Hem and Haw, and two mice Sniff and Scurry face a dwindling cheese supply, but each pair handles the situation very differently. The observant and responsive Sniff and Scurry quickly set off to find where the cheese supply has moved—and they do find a wealth of cheese. Meanwhile, Hem and Haw are slower to look for a new cheese supply. A moral of this parable is that “noticing small changes early helps you adapt to the bigger changes that are to come” (Johnson 2002, 68). School librarians’ cheese has moved, too; a gradual move from a passive, traditional, and solitary teacher-driven role to an active, creative, and collaborative student-centered role that fosters learning. Care is the bridge that school librarians cross to find their new cheese.

Care. It seems such a simple concept, but its theoretical and conceptual underpinnings are complex. This Knowledge Quest issue on care contains a high-level look at some of these underpinnings, along with practical suggestions for implementing care. An exploration of care requires readers to examine their biases and prejudices, and transform accordingly their practices of care. Certainly, most school librarians say they care, but questions I have been asked—such as “How can a busy school librarian add care to an already too-full plate?” or “What does empathy have to do with school librarianship?”—make me wonder whether some school librarians comprehend their more dispositional and affective role, which is where our cheese is now.

I am honored by Nel Noddings’s and Sonia Nieto’s contributions to this issue. Noddings is prolific in support of her commitment to keeping alive John Dewey’s focus on the centrality of care to
This issue of Knowledge Quest presents a diverse array of thoughts and understandings about care that school librarians may not have considered until now. This issue should be read several times to reap every juicy morsel of insight from the contributor’s words. Learning. Noddings is known for her theory of the cared-for (students, in this case) and the carer (school librarian). Care is a reciprocal relationship beginning with observant school librarians who respond to students’ information, reading, learning, and relational needs.

To care in a deeply ethical manner as Noddings proposes requires reflection, self-understanding, and transformation leading to changed practices. Nieto furthers the message about the power of transformation to create communities that wrap their arms around students. Today’s student population is more culturally, ethnically, and socially diverse than ever before, but the teacher population remains unchanged—mostly white females who are monolingual. Developing reciprocal relationships of care with students whose lives may be so different from her own requires the carer to explore her prejudices and biases and to refrain from false empathy: “Oh those poor darlings, what awful lives they lead.” Nieto is well known for her writings about transforming students’ and teachers lives through respect and care.

Each contributor to this issue of Knowledge Quest offers readers a unique perspective about care. Gayle Bogel suggests that care reflects the Ignatian concept,cura personalis, which integrates mind, body, and spirit in the learning process. Alyce C. Hachey describes the biological evidence that care significantly impacts a students’ cognitive development. Olga M. Nesi translates the concept of care into everyday practical ways to care for students, teachers, and administrators. Other contributors write about roses in concrete, tribes, stories, students eating in the school library, empathic design, and, of course, reading.

Care. It seems such a simple concept, but the many ways that school librarian’s care is vast. This issue of Knowledge Quest presents a diverse array of thoughts and understandings about care that school librarians may not have considered until now. This issue should be read several times to reap every juicy morsel of insight from the contributor’s words. After the first reading of this Knowledge Quest issue I hope school librarians reflect on their practices. After the second reading I hope school librarians realize care is a choice and a decision. After the third reading I hope school librarians are well on their way to creating school libraries that are known as much for being communities of care as they are for the physical resources they house.

Care. It seems such a simple concept...

Jami L. Jones is an associate professor in the Department of Library Science at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. She is coauthor (with Gail Bush) of Tales Out of the School Library: Developing Professional Dispositions (Libraries Unlimited 2010), and books and articles on the role of the school librarian in preventing dropout, nurturing resilient students, and fostering creative school library programs.

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THE
Transformative
POWER OF CARE

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What is it that makes one school library the heart of its learning community and another merely peripheral to the workings of the building? Care. What distinguishes a truly vibrant school library program from one that is mediocre at best? Care. What is the magic ingredient that can turn a library from a room where books are housed to the destination of choice in the school? Care.

Without care a school library and its program cannot thrive. We know this intuitively. We also know that care can be demonstrated only by action. The more consistently we show care, the stronger our school library programs are. In point of fact, this may seem like a statement of the plainly obvious—but it is not always easy to know precisely what specific action will demonstrate care in a specific situation. Given a daily myriad of instances and circumstances, how do we consistently show that we care? What precisely is care, anyway? And how do we infuse our school libraries and all of our daily interactions with it?

In the interest of achieving some modicum of clarity, it may be helpful to start with a definition of the word “care.” Of the eleven definitions in The American Heritage Dictionary, the following stand out: 1. attentiveness to detail; painstaking application 2. heedfulness 3. to have a liking or attachment 4. to be concerned or interested” (1982, 240). While the word itself is defined easily enough, how its definitions translate into the daily workings of our school libraries is another matter entirely.

Suffice it to say that school libraries in which care is consistently demonstrated are places of both great joy and profoundly gratifying productivity—integral to their learning communities, inviting to all of the schools’ constituents, deeply welcoming, and well run. The rub, of course, is that great joy and great productivity are rarely, if ever, easy to achieve. As the old adage assures us, however, anything worth having is worth working for. As such, assuming our goal is to have strong and vibrant school library programs, a closer examination
of care as it applies specifically to our libraries is in order.

Clearly, care is multifaceted (as each of the four American Heritage Dictionary definitions imply). Heedfulness connotes reflection, taking care, and proceeding with mindfulness. Liking, attachment, and concern imply emotional engagement and empathy. Interest implies cognitive engagement. While all these connote action, attentiveness to detail and painstaking application suggest the level of action necessary for true care to be achieved. This is the definition that assumes constant diligence and tirelessness in all our endeavors (be they physical, cognitive, or emotional). Not at all surprisingly, the more we pay attention to detail, the more we demonstrate care. The more painstakingly we work, the more we demonstrate care. Taken together, the definitions provide strong beginning guidance for how to show care at all times. To fill out the framework, however, it is necessary to look at some specific actions.

For each of the different school constituencies, there exist categories of actions through which we demonstrate care. Broadly, these categories include: interactions, instruction/inquiry, reading guidance, collection development, and physical environment. As one would expect, we demonstrate care differently for each of the groups in our schools, and every category does not apply to every constituent. The commonality here is the transformative power of care. Regardless of the constituent or the category of action, care changes the landscape for the better. Examples follow.

### Interactions the Caring Way—With Children

Children thrive when they are cared for, and they are keenly aware of who cares about them and who doesn’t. Once they know we truly care about them, children are endlessly more forgiving of us and our foibles and moods than any adult will ever be. In our school libraries we demonstrate caring in our interactions with children when we:

- Are human and approachable
- Learn and use our students’ names
- Make eye contact and greet students warmly
- Make them feel welcome and encourage them to talk to us about their interests
- Allow them to be children without forfeiting opportunities to guide them gently in the direction of maturity
- Show endless patience and concern for them
- Listen and observe closely

We want to know them—are happy to know them. All of our interactions with children are governed by the fact that we genuinely love working with them. The clearer this is, the more joyous a place the school library will be.

### Interactions the Caring Way—With Our School Colleagues

Collaboration with colleagues is essential to our personal professional success. A very large part of our work involves providing teachers with the support they need to achieve their goals. We show our colleagues the best of care when we:

- Recognize the vast curricular ground they are expected to cover, and work with them to find ways to deliver their content in meaningful and professionally gratifying ways
- Employ diplomacy, professionalism, and gentleness when approaching colleagues with proposals
- Provide all the materials necessary for our colleagues to implement a new initiative, and make ourselves available to assist them with its smooth implementation
- Admit our missteps, work to correct them, and learn from them for the future

Our colleagues are more inclined to work with us when we have conveyed genuine concern for them.

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As one would expect, we demonstrate care differently for each of the groups in our schools, and every category does not apply to every constituent. The commonality here is the transformative power of care. Regardless of the constituent or the category of action, care changes the landscape for the better.
Interactions the Caring Way—With Our Administrators

All caring interaction with administrators is governed by the understanding that they are responsible for more than we could ever know. We demonstrate the greatest care when we:

- Assume a leadership role in our buildings, thereby showing concern in the best way possible: by action
- Join committees
- Volunteer to run workshops
- Attend (and then turnkey) professional development sessions
- Help devise school systems
- Act diplomatically
- Seek solutions actively
- Act professional at all times

Occasionally we may even engage in non-library-related tasks—either because we have been asked to or because we suspect our help is greatly needed.

Instruction/Inquiry the Caring Way—With Children

Deep and meaningful learning is tremendously difficult. The landscape of true inquiry is littered with false starts, uncertainty, blind alleys, and cognitive dissonance. We show the very best of care for our students when we openly acknowledge this fact and help them through the uncertainty. In our school libraries we show our caring when we:

- Admit that learning how to learn is difficult, different for each and every one of us, and that we struggle with it at times as well
- Diversify our instruction
- Encourage students’ personal contributions to their learning
- Demonstrate that we want our students to own their learning because we understand the power of ownership and the sense of accomplishment that comes with it
- Teach our students to be independent learners by allowing them to explore that which interests them personally
- Give students time to investigate and celebrate questions that don’t yet have answers (versus celebrating the “right” answers to questions that have long been addressed)

In short, we love to teach. We exhibit strong habits of mind by constant modeling. We share with students how we learn. We learn together.

Instruction/Inquiry the Caring Way—With Our Colleagues

More than likely, as part of inquiry instruction we will be required to deliver in-service workshops on inquiry. Rather than viewing this responsibility as a burden, we can view it as a solid opportunity to show the overlap between what we are required to teach and the goals of our colleagues. Inquiry is not the “extra library thing.” It is the vehicle through which content is meaningfully taught. Treading heedfully in this area will help win teachers over to the idea of inquiry. If we are asking for inquiry to be taught, we show care when we:

- Make ourselves available to teach it and provide all the necessary materials
- Model inquiry learning for our colleagues
- Support them in their learning
- Listen carefully to their concerns about instructional objectives and student achievement levels
- Learn about content from colleagues
- Take their advice about what they know has worked and what they know hasn’t
- Share the same with them

When we learn together and from one another, we demonstrate care for our colleagues and for our students—the ultimate beneficiaries of our efforts.
Reading Guidance the Caring Way—With Children

We are librarians. We understand the power of reading. We want children to read. Our deepest desire for them is that they should want to read without anyone having to ask them to do so. In our school libraries we provide reading guidance in a caring way when we:

· Demonstrate that we care more about children reading than we do about the books and the damage they might incur by being read

· Respect completely the personal reading choices of students who are fortunate enough to already know what they like (even if what they really like is something we despise), and when these students clearly signal to us that they are ready, we help them find their next favorite books

· Work tirelessly with those students who have not yet discovered their passions; in the process, we ask them about their interests and what kinds of stories they like; if they are so inclined, we help them to express and indulge a taste for nonfiction

· Teach all of our students how to talk about books intelligently—how to express precisely what they are looking for

· Refrain from imposing reading restrictions—genres, number of pages, “significance” of topic, etc.

· Circulate everything

· Model good reading habits by reading widely ourselves, and by enthusiastically and systematically sharing our reading with students

In short, we feel deeply fortunate that our work allows us to be surrounded by books all day, every day. Our students know this about us because our demeanor speaks it loudly. Our care is rewarded by noticeably increased interest in reading.

Reading Guidance the Caring Way—With Our Colleagues

We are viewed as the reading authorities in our buildings. This is not a responsibility we take lightly. With attentiveness to detail and painstaking application, it is well within our power to change the reading culture of our schools. We show the greatest of care when we:

· Open reading up to as many of our constituents as possible

· Recognize that it is to our students’ distinct advantage to have as many adults as possible aware of what reading materials are available for particular age groups; therefore, we show additional care in this category by running workshops designed to expose teachers to ways in which they can supplement their teaching with materials from the school library

· Encourage all of our colleagues to systematically model good reading habits for their students by discussing what the adults have read and by occasionally reading books recommended by students

· Discuss with our colleagues what we have read, and make and take recommendations—thereby further strengthening the reading culture in our buildings

Olga M. Nesi will present a webinar based on this feature, Tuesday, June 12 at 7 p.m. CST! Visit <www.ala.org/aasl/kqwebinars> to register.
HOW WE DEMONSTRATE CARE

WITH CHILDREN

The common professed intentions and widely held beliefs:
We genuinely like children, and we love working with them. Indeed, we agree that these are unnegotiable requirements of the job.

We Demonstrate Care by: | We Fail to Demonstrate Care by:
---|---
consistently displaying the understanding that they are children and we are adults | expecting them to be fully mature before it is humanly possible for them to be so
admitting that we too are human | acting like we have never in our lives returned a book late or lost one
tirelessly modeling the behaviors, demeanor, and attitudes we want them to emulate | expecting children to do as we say, not as we do
really listening to them and being deeply concerned for them and all their trials—be they genuinely immense or seemingly trivial | being dismissive of or indifferent to their concerns (be this verbally or in demeanor)
creating warm, welcoming, safe environments for them in our school libraries—despite encountered bureaucratic impediments to accomplishing this particular goal easily | not really wanting children in the school library lest they undo our hard work by being...well...children
being patient—even when this requires a herculean struggle with our inner Attila the Hun | being impatient, short-tempered, and brusque
truly respecting their personal reading choices and showing them we do by working to build our collections with their input | building collections of books we feel they should want to read

WITH OUR SCHOOL COLLEAGUES

The common professed intentions and widely held beliefs:
We are eager to collaborate with teachers, and view working with and helping others as imperative to our personal success in the job.

We Demonstrate Care by: | We Fail to Demonstrate Care by:
---|---
fully internalizing and actively demonstrating a deep understanding of the fact that our work is first and foremost about helping others meet their goals | acting as though it is others’ work to figure out how we fit into their goals
being diplomatic and gentle in our approach, thereby putting colleagues at ease | alienating colleagues by acting as though we have all the answers, if only everyone would just listen to us
being mindful of the fact that teachers work under immense pressure to cover vast curricular ground | minimizing the extent of their curricular burdens and, whether inadvertently or not, making more work for them
making well-thought-out proposals and then being willing to go the extra mile to see them come to fruition | “throwing things out there” and then expecting others to figure out how to implement them
admitting our own concerns, confusion, and drawbacks—a little humility and self-deprecation go a long way | acting as though we never misstep

WITH OUR ADMINISTRATORS

The common professed intentions and widely held beliefs: We are all hard workers and contribute mightily to our schools. Our work greatly enhances the perception outsiders have of our administrators’ capabilities and of our respective schools.

We Demonstrate Care by: | We Fail to Demonstrate Care by:
---|---
actively assuming a leadership role, including willingly planning and running professional development workshops and joining school committees | avoiding extra work whenever possible
finding ways to be supportive, including sometimes working on “non-library” tasks just because we’ve been asked to by our administrators or because we suspect they might need our help | being demanding, ultimately insubordinate, and worse yet, abusive
being diplomatic when we do not agree with something | being churlish and petulant
being committed to finding solutions to problems | complaining about problems without ever getting around to suggesting solutions for them
behaving professionally | overstepping professional boundaries
Collection Development the Caring Way—With Children

We know our students. We know what they like to read. We want them to read. Our collections provide books that they will enjoy reading. In our school libraries we demonstrate caring when we:

· Build our collections with direct input from our students
· Read reviews with students’ tastes firmly in mind and often share these reviews with them to get their feedback
· Tell them when something they asked for has arrived and set aside books we ordered just for them
· Excitedly deliver book holds to them and arrange for Sneak Peeks and previews of new books
· Put systems in place for students to systematically make book recommendations (both for collection development and for sharing with us and peers)

When we listen when young people tell us what they want to read and when we share our own excitement about books, we demonstrate caring and encourage lifelong reading.

Collection Development the Caring Way—With Our Colleagues

Just as we do with our students, we can show care for our colleagues in this area. Specifically, we show care when we:

· Build professional collections for their use and take their suggestions throughout the process of doing so
· Read and share reviews
· Read professional materials and deliver workshops on their salient points or bring the salient points to colleagues we think may benefit from them
· Encourage teachers to build strong classroom collections and assist them with the task—because we understand that the more books students have access to, the better. (Besides, what classroom collection could ever rival a strong central collection housed in an inviting school library staffed with a professional librarian?)

Physical Environment the Caring Way—With Children, Our Colleagues, and Our Administrators

The school library’s physical environment is a golden opportunity to demonstrate care in the most tangible of ways: visually. In our school libraries we show caring when we:

· Create warm, welcoming, and safe environments that encourage all our constituents to visit and stay awhile
· Build enticing displays of books and other materials we think might pique visitors’ curiosity and rotate these materials as regularly as is humanly possible
· Encourage our students to suggest themes for displays and use signage to give them credit
· Make sure the school library is navigable with clearly marked shelves and a sensible layout (to the extent that it is possible)
· Make sure all books are shelved where children can reach them
Care has deeply transformative power. When we are genuinely and consistently attentive, heedful, concerned, engaged, and interested, many of those around us respond in kind, and our gratification comes from the quality of our work and the extent to which we are able to achieve our goals.

- Show students that the space is theirs by eliminating barriers
- Encourage young people to "own" the space by engaging them in its upkeep
- View the occasions and special events in the library as opportunities to grab the ears and eyes of those in attendance, and ask for a few minutes to speak to those gathered about the school library and its program, and also to let the space speak for itself

Everything we establish in the school library’s physical space reinforces the idea that all of the space belongs to everyone.

In Closing
Accompanying this article are some charts for your consideration (see page 13). Included in these are an unnegotiable starting place for showing care with children, school colleagues, and administrators, followed by a small sample of behaviors that demonstrate the very best of care and behaviors that demonstrate the opposite. These charts present only the extreme ends of the care spectrum. Between these ends lies a broad continuum of behaviors (some of which have been provided above). Each of these behaviors is dependent on particular situations, individuals, and scenarios entirely too numerous and variable to itemize here. To achieve the positive behaviors, we are heedful, concerned, and interested. Keep the following well in mind: all caring action is about attentiveness to detail and painstaking application.

Care has deeply transformative power. When we are genuinely and consistently attentive, heedful, concerned, engaged, and interested, many of those around us respond in kind, and our gratification comes from the quality of our work and the extent to which we are able to achieve our goals. In all regards, we demonstrate care by working as though our goals are critical and urgent.

Striving to live our professional lives on the positive side of the care continuum guarantees that we will make a difference in the learning environments in our schools and, most importantly, in the lifelong learning and reading lives of our students.

Works Cited:

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In Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch said to his daughter, Scout, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” (Lee, 1988)

To understand and share the feelings of our students we must see the world through their lens.

Empathic design includes aspects of empathy and offers a means for a practical application of the concept by encouraging organizations to put themselves into the shoes or situation of their users so as to better understand users’ needs.

Program evaluation is a key activity undertaken to better understand the library user and generate data. We use the data to guide decisions and actions meant to improve the programs and services of school libraries. Often, students, faculty, staff, administrators, and parents are surveyed as part of the program evaluation process, and findings from surveys often prove useful in making data-driven decisions. A complementary way to collect data to improve school library programs and services is to closely observe the user in the context of actual engagement in information and literacy activities.
Empathic Design and Innovation

In 1997 Dorothy Leonard and Jeffrey F. Rayport coined the concept “empathic design” in their article “Spark Innovation through Empathic Design.” They defined empathic design as a set of steps or techniques that help solve the challenges that organizations, including school libraries, face when trying to meet the needs of their users. Empathic design offers a “relatively low-cost, low-risk way to identify potentially critical customer needs” (1997, 104). The typical five-step process of empathic design involves:

- Observation
- Capturing data
- Reflection and analysis
- Brainstorming for solutions
- Developing prototypes of possible solutions

How the needs of users are addressed may lead to completely new ways of doing the familiar. One example of empathic design can be drawn from the field of business. Each year, laptops are put on the market that offer more power and a streamlined and lighter design. Although the consumer is presented with something new and the newer versions offer advantages over the old, this product development model doesn’t necessarily demonstrate “out of the box thinking” or any deep cultural shift in product design and use. On the other hand, many iPad owners who take advantage of the countless available apps don’t just own a “new” slimmer and lighter mobile technology device. Rather, this product goes beyond the scope of portability and into the realm of innovation through what it can offer the user to meet expectations they may not yet have even recognized.

We are at a tipping point in time whereby the increasing population of students with varying abilities in the Pre–K–12 schools may serve as the driving force behind the actions of school librarians to develop more inclusive learning environments in the school library. Many school librarians sense that they are on the cusp of a significant cultural shift in the way they run their school library programs and offer services to meet the need of all students in their schools. The empathic design process offers a starting point in crafting a proactive and purposeful strategy to offer fully inclusive programs and services.

The use of empathic design practices to better understand and address unarticulated user needs is considered one of empathic design’s strongest features. School librarians are well aware that their library program users—the children, young adults, teachers, staff, administrators and parents—may not fully know what they need. However, understanding unspoken user needs becomes more and more important for all school librarians in the context of the shifting landscapes in our schools.

For example, students on the autism spectrum or students who are visually or hearing impaired may be hindered in their ability to express their information and research needs. A school librarian can observe the ongoing actions and activities of the students in the school library, including nonverbal behaviors and cues. How about partnering with your students who can unobtrusively observe their peers, then de brief with you about what they saw, and help brainstorm solutions? This ad hoc group of student advisers could also take part in the actual development of the solution and be part of the pilot testing.

The process of empathic design is flexible enough that it can be used as a low-cost, user-centered approach on either a large or small scale, yet it is a powerful—enough process to spark innovative improvements in school library programs and services to reach all learners.

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As a school librarian, one may or may not have access to the same students on a daily basis as would a teacher. This could be a good thing or a bad thing. Often, students are drawn to those who are not their “teacher,” and a bond is naturally formed. In other instances, students may not seek this bond. Either way, a school librarian can reach out to students and create positive relationships with those served. A school librarian can have such a strong impact on the students served, as the students are constantly looking for that person to engage in a lively discussion about what they have read, give them advice on reading selections, etc. This lively exchange of ideas and positive reinforcement for reading is more important than ever because our students are reading less now than in the past, especially as they age (National Endowment...
for the Arts 2004). From the perspective of a reading teacher (my perspective), the impact of a caring school librarian is paramount as one more person to whom students can turn for support in their reading practices and habits. Fortunately, the school librarian has access to all students, while a reading teacher might serve only struggling students.

Many things draw students away from the school library. Technology is ever-present, and many students are convinced that with the advent of the Web, the school library and its collection are not valuable to them. As children become teenagers, friends and socializing are increasingly important, extracurricular activities take more time, and students have so many educational obligations that reading self-selected materials becomes a thing of the past. As school librarians begin to notice the practices and preferences of their aging students, great things can happen. Consider these suggestions and precautions when planning a successful school library program.

**Acknowledge Students’ Choices**

Classic novels are not necessarily at the top of students’ reading lists; students are often more interested in reading magazines, newspapers, websites, lyrics, e-mails, letters, magazines, games, etc. In schools, these materials are not always considered reading materials, and what students read by choice is sometimes ignored (Haupt 2003, Moje et al. 2008). Reading what one enjoys promotes positive attitudes towards reading and motivation to read, regardless of the format. As students choose what interests them, they build fluency and comprehension skills, improving their overall reading ability (McKool 2007; Nippold, Duthie, and Larsen 2005). As school librarians recognize students’ reading choices and encourage/provide time for reading a variety of materials, students’ enthusiasm for reading grows because they feel someone acknowledges them for who they are, and they appreciate the effort being made by an adult who cares for them. To a reading teacher, this validation of students’ choices is important because encouraging students to read self-selected materials enhances their reading abilities, leading, in turn, to overall growth in academic achievement (Abeyrantha and Zainab 2004; McKool 2007; Nippold, Duthie, and Larsen 2005).
Get Classes In

Many students rarely purchase reading materials or voluntarily visit the school library. We wish they would; we know a rich reading environment creates avid readers (Chen 2008; Doiron 2003; Morgan, Farkas, and Hibell 2008; Sullivan 2004). Therefore, school librarians are a valuable resource for the students and teachers they serve. By promoting the services they provide, school librarians can draw teachers, classes, and individual students into the library. By getting teachers involved in the school library program, the librarian creates opportunities to advocate for allowing students to read materials they choose, as well as to help library users—including teachers—get the most benefit from available resources.

Getting teachers into the school library has many other benefits. Visiting the library makes them more aware of the books and other resources available there. So many times, teachers—especially those who do not teach English, language arts, or reading—believe that the school library has nothing to offer their curriculum or their students. Through coteaching, hosting teacher-resource walkthroughs, and presenting resources in faculty book talks, school librarians can encourage teachers in all subject areas to recognize the school librarian’s willingness to work with and for them.

Reaching out to teachers in all subject areas enhances reading practices throughout the school and allows students to see that reading is not just an activity for the school library and maybe one other class, but is a necessary part of all of their classes and the world.

When classes visit the school library, students can see the library is a safe place with caring individuals who are there to assist with school and personal literacy needs. Individual students will then be encouraged to come to the school library on their own time. Often, individual students benefit greatly when the school library is open and accessible before and after school. At those times, students feel the school library is truly available to meet their personal literacy needs. This access and appreciation once again lead to increased frequency of leisure reading, resulting in improved reading skills and overall academic ability (McKool 2007; Nippold, Duthie, and Larsen 2005).

Encourage Community Participation

As parents’ educational levels grow, students are more likely to be engaged in reading practices (Britto and Brooks–Gunn 2001, Compton–Lilly 2005). This reality leaves a group of students behind as they lack access to educational experiences. These students often lack access to facilities due to lack of transportation, money, or ability to use the available resources (Phillips, Hayden, and Norris 2006; Storch and Whitehurst 2001). It is never too late to begin providing access and tools to help students, parents, and the community become readers, whether through a family literacy program or suggestions sent from school.

Parents can encourage reading and support the reading habits of their children through discussions about their reading, visits to libraries, etc. By involving parents and the community, school librarians can help students gain more than one librarian’s efforts could ever provide. Parents who are themselves not avid readers may just need guidance on how they can help their children be better readers. School and public librarians can collaborate with teachers, especially teachers of reading, to provide parents and the community with books, reading lists, questions to ask children before, during, and after reading, etc.

In this combined effort, school librarians and teachers can also invite parents into the schools for classes intended to introduce parents to library and community resources that might be unfamiliar to parents who didn’t grow up in households where reading in English was an everyday activity. The community can be given access to the stacks, computers, Internet, etc., and, as a result, the community is participating in and around the schools. When these activities get adults into the schools, students notice their presence and involvement. Students see their parents and community members participating, reading, and valuing the school and library. Students then also begin to value and take pride in their school and library; this new appreciation results in a rise in use of the facility and its resources, creating a successful literacy-filled environment, all of which enhances the overall literacy rates of our students from the library to the classroom.

A Cautionary Note

Many times, a school’s library services, with the best of intentions, can inhibit the reading practices of its students, especially adolescents. Reacting to a constant push from a school librarian to read books, adolescent students, especially males, can be turned off from reading. Many adolescents are not reading books; they prefer websites, magazines, newspapers, etc. This interest in non-book resources is an issue because, even though the students are reading, school librarians and teachers do not
always view students’ preferred reading materials as educational or “school-like,” and the students feel reprimanded when they show interest in non-book resources (Haupt 2003, Moje et al. 2008). This feeling is especially evident when materials students self-select for leisure reading are rejected by teachers—and maybe even by the school librarian—as “not challenging enough.”

Additionally, school libraries, especially at the secondary level, often do not provide access to the variety of materials that are of interest to their patrons. Novels, the mainstay of many school library collections, are popular with many students. However, nonfiction books, among other genres, are also popular, but may be overlooked when purchasing decisions are made because of cost or concerns that the materials will become outdated too quickly (Moje et al. 2008).

Technology must also be considered when examining what school library services do to inhibit the time students spend reading. Technology is a part of today’s world. Students are intrigued and interested by what technology can offer, especially the Internet. Along with all of its pros, there are many cons related to Internet use. School librarians need to recognize this reality, but many times in their efforts to prevent exposure to the negative aspects of Internet access, educators ban students from the Internet, causing some students to be barred from what might be the only reading they willingly do. These comments are not presented as a reprimand, as these negative effects result from the best of intentions. However, the negative effects must be considered and minimized to ensure that reading and literacy are encouraged and are a vital part of a school with the school library program as its lifeline.

School librarians have much to offer those they serve. They are important to all members of a school and its community. By acknowledging students’ choices, getting classes into the school library, and encouraging community participation, lasting relationships with librarians and, more importantly, with literacy can be formed. A positive impact will be seen in the school as a result of these relationships. A literate environment can grow and be sustained, promoting the literacy practices of students in the school library, and in their classes and life.

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FEATURE

CARING FOR YOUR TRIBE
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ibrarianship places an ethical demand on practitioners to put patrons or library users’ interests before self-interest, and indeed, this is the hallmark of any service profession. But what obligation do we have to our peer librarians and educators? The Code of Ethics of the American Library Association offers this principle, “We treat coworkers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions” (2008). In other words, we afford them the same courtesy and consideration we might extend to anyone else swimming around in the great sea of humanity—the checkout clerk at the grocery store, the auto mechanic, or the person hired to clean our house. Beyond the ethical duty, enormous benefits result from caring for our coworkers—benefits that are not only highly practical, but rewarding at the oldest and deepest level of social organization: the tribe.

Coworker Support and Cohesion

Many positive individual and organizational benefits have been attributed to coworker support. In a meta-analysis of previous research on the topic, Dan S. Chiaburu and David A. Harrison found that in addition to increasing worker engagement and productivity, there was also cumulative evidence that coworker social support was related to lowering individual stress levels, reducing burnout, and reducing physical strain (2008). Another study, reported by Melissa Dittmann in the American Psychological Association’s Monitor on Psychology, found that employees who seek social support at work—especially during high-stress moments—may lower their blood pressure and improve their cardiovascular health (2003). Considerable evidence demonstrates a long list of positive effects promoted by supportive coworker relationships.

Support behaviors can be divided into two categories: social support and instrumental support. Social support behaviors include showing empathy, caring, and general friendliness. They bond coworkers together through conversations about non-work-related events, confiding and listening to one another’s problems, and providing emotional and spiritual support during difficult times. Instrumental support behaviors include sharing information about the organization, a work process, or a task at hand; offering advice or feedback on the quality of performance; teaching, coaching, or mentoring; as well as offering to assist directly with work, or offering to share tools or other resources.

Social support is thought to be an important influence on employees’ attitudes toward work, but not especially influential in terms of employee effectiveness. Instrumental support, on the other hand, tends to improve job performance and productivity. It can have beneficial effects on one’s perception of his or her individual job role; that is, the supporting individual can provide cues or direct advice to reduce the tension of ambiguity about the job or the organization, and help the individual better define and understand his or her role. Instrumental support can help with role overload by assisting an individual in sorting out priorities and discriminating between activities that are
genuinely important and activities that are merely routine. It is human
nature to expect that supportive behaviors will be reciprocated,
and support is usually offered on the assumption (conscious or
unconscious) that cooperation will be returned in the future. In fact, if
such cooperation is not reciprocated between interdependent peers, then
this lack of reciprocity may lead to competitive behaviors, such as
hoarding resources or information.

This is not to say that educators are stingy; in fact, these professions
attract the opposite—those whose passion is service to others. However,
the expectation of reciprocity does offer some explanation why
cooperation may not always be an attractive prospect. Reciprocity
requires some length of time in which the supporter can "collect,"
and the ability of the supported to return a favor in-kind. A person
anticipating retirement may not be interested in providing instrumental
support to others because the timeline required for reciprocity is
too short. Colleagues outside the school library may not feel they
have a legitimate expectation of reciprocity, and therefore don’t feel
compelled to provide instrumental support. How many times have
school librarians tried to get teachers to cooperate on a project,
or fill out surveys, or collaborate on lesson planning, only to be rebuffed? Asking for instrumental
support is very difficult without the ability to provide reciprocal and
in-kind instrumental support.

Social support, on the other hand, is considered to rise in importance
between and among coworkers as the social intensity of the work rises, for
example, when work involves direct and day-long contact with students.
Social support for coworkers—expressions of empathy, general
friendliness, and personal caring—can greatly improve attitudes toward
work, job satisfaction, and cohesion among members of the work
group. Strong coworker affiliation can directly affect the delivery of
service. Coworkers consciously or unconsciously teach one another
how finely policies should be interpreted, when exceptions can
be made, how much blame can be assigned or not assigned to other
groups or to the adequacy of their tools, and how a myriad of other
small and subjective judgments should be made. Whether or
not these judgments are correct, strongly cohesive coworkers will
adopt a consistent approach to them because the value of
affiliation is considered greater than the value of correctness.

The power of a congenial workplace where coworkers have friendly
relationships should not be underestimated. The longer people
work together, the more intimate information they may share, and
the more likely they are to shape one another’s opinions and behaviors.
In fact, there is evidence to believe that social ties (friendship networks)
in the workplace may be stronger than instrumental ties (helping
and advice networks), especially during periods of organizational
change (Krackhardt 1992).

The incidence of "best friends at work" has become a fairly
common phenomenon in the last few years. Based in part on Gallup
Surveys, Tom Rath maintains that people who have a best friend at
work are seven times more likely
to be highly engaged, experience
greater job satisfaction, and
are less likely to leave their jobs
(2006). Undoubtedly, having social
support at work can enhance the
job experience and help during
periods of overwork (implementing
new software, building renovation,
enrollment increases), or workload
creep (three people now doing the work of five), or during foundational change in the work environment (closing or merging schools), but the “best friends” dyad is loaded with toxic potential. If one friend expects the other to cover for errors or reduced efforts, or one friend is promoted or transferred, or socializing replaces getting the work done, then the entire work group begins to suffer. If the level of intimacy is too intense, or too much personal information has been shared, the boundary between work life and personal life may be crossed, and the relationship sullied in both arenas. The risk of best-friend “backfire” can be high, and when these relationships turn toxic, they can result in especially ugly situations. An event in or out of the workplace that is considered a personal betrayal can turn best friends into enemies, and the drama inevitably unfolds in the workplace and stresses the entire work group.

Personal Accountability

Neither social nor instrumental supports from coworkers are endless resources. When the potential for reciprocation, or the ability to reciprocate in-kind are missing, then a coworker may become a drain on the group’s resources. At some tipping point in the social ecosystem, the supported have to become accountable, and the social-support invoice comes due and payable, so to speak. This expectation of accountability can occur when a coworker has been supported for too long or requires more support than the group has to give, or when more than one coworker needs support at the same time.

Cohesive work groups are very skilled at identifying the point at which a supported coworker should become accountable, but often have difficulty communicating this to the coworker. When deciding to put the collective foot down, groups seem to intuitively consider factors such as the length of time and intensity of support provided, the health of the person involved, the person’s previous level of productivity, and the person’s potential for future contributions to the group. The phenomenon is familiar, but rarely goes beyond grousing about the indebted individual and assigning blame. When the group ostracizes the coworker entirely, that individual no longer has the connectedness required to reciprocate support, even if she or he were willing and able.

Perhaps the most difficult but genuine act of caring in this case is to open an honest group conversation to clarify the expectations for personal accountability. This conversation puts the expectations on the table for everyone, and provides an opportunity for the ostracized to reestablish connectedness.

Relatedness and Motivation

Relatedness is a person’s perception of belonging or affiliation with a group. For many, but not all, relatedness has high value as a reward and motivator. We are social animals and want to feel like we belong to a group. When a work group values relatedness, as in the earlier example of a group helping an ostracized coworker become accountable, this relatedness can be a powerful motivator. Group affiliations can include departmental coworkers, a professional association, a work team, a committee, or an entire school. Or, the relatedness can be among a small group of “work friends.”

The practice of banding together is deeply human, and the ability to quickly recognize another as “friend” (likely to reward) or “foe” (likely to threaten) is thought to be a survival mechanism that evolved prior to
the development of civilization. Our social antenna are highly sensitive, and we still consciously or unconsciously “size up” new contacts for their potential to threaten or reward us. The greater the perception that a new contact is different from our affiliation group, or the less familiar we are with the new contact’s cultural or racial group, the less likely we are to recognize the person’s potential to be rewarding to us.

Tendencies to gravitate toward those who resemble our current affiliates, and who are thus perceived to have greater potential to reward the group, have been known to affect hiring recommendations. Hiring choices based on who would be “a good fit” for the group may—or may not—have any work-related basis. The perception of threat may be no more than that—a perception, and is just as unreliable as the perception that another person would “fit in.”

School librarians speak and write frequently about the importance of the school library as a “safe and welcoming” environment for students, but librarians have the same potential to establish themselves as safe contacts for teachers and other school personnel, and to extend the school library proper to others for whom relatedness is a motivator and reward. For our own survival, we need to create the largest library tribes we can.

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TEACHING, CARING, AND TRANSFORMATION

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Educator bell hooks has written, "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (1994, 13). In making this statement, hooks acknowledged the fundamental truth that teaching, caring, and transformation are closely linked, that is, that true teaching must be accompanied by a deep level of care in order for learning to take place.

No matter how young or old, no matter the subject matter, and no matter where teaching and learning take place—a classroom, library, place of worship, or community setting—students instinctively know whether a teacher cares for them or not. A look, a gesture, a word: All of these can speak volumes about a teacher's perceptions concerning students, their identities, abilities, families, and the community in which they live. Without even realizing it, teachers bring their entire selves into the teaching and learning situation, and in the most damaging cases, this may include their stereotypes, negative judgments, and preconceptions. I have written extensively about this elsewhere (see, for example, Nieto 2009, 2010), and here I quote from my own experience as a child in school:

“I cannot remember her name, but the remark of one of my first teachers that it was rude to speak Spanish in the classroom still stings. It may have been nothing more than an offhand comment on her part, but those words had a powerful impact on me. In the short term, they had the effect of invalidating my use of Spanish in school. In the long term, they were to influence for many years how I would view the value of my native language. Equally rooted in my memory is the image of Mr. Slotkin, a creative and nurturing eighth-grade science teacher whose classroom was always an exciting place that made going to school worthwhile. I do not recollect any of the specific lessons he taught, and except for this one successful encounter with science, I was never particularly a science enthusiast. The relationships I had with these teachers is what made a difference, and I suspect the same is true for most people. That is why the personal transformation of teachers is a necessary process that needs to go hand in hand with structural changes in schools" (Nieto 2010, 155).

Although these things happened many years ago, it is true that they still take place every day, either, sadly, turning young people off to learning or making them enthusiastic students. In this brief piece, I reiterate some of the most important lessons I have learned from caring and courageous educators, as well as from my own experiences teaching—first, young people and, later, prospective and practicing teachers. Although here I focus on the personal commitments of educators, I want to make it clear that teaching cannot be separated from larger institutional practices and ideological realities in society, that is, from the sociopolitical context of education. As educators—we they classroom teachers, school librarians, administrators, policymakers, or others—strive to create caring communities, they must also struggle to create a just society.

**Learn about Ourselves**

The first lesson I’ve learned is that one must know oneself. Learning about oneself, one’s shortcomings and flaws, one’s biases and values, one’s vices and virtues, is a difficult but also empowering process. It means looking at oneself honestly and asking hard questions about one’s privilege and power, and about how one uses these in the teaching and learning context. It means asking about one’s biases, hidden or overt, and how they influence one’s relationships with students. And it means taking into account one’s true feelings about particular students, and asking whether one...
thinks that all students are capable and worthy. The answers to these questions will determine whether one cares or not for one’s students.

The result of this kind of deep introspection can be a personal transformation. A good example comes from teacher Mary Ginley. A number of years ago, my colleagues Meg Gebhard, Theresa Austin, Jerri Willett, and I interviewed a number of alumni who had been in our program to find out what impact it had on their teaching. One of them was Mary Ginley, a teacher who had recently been selected Massachusetts Teacher of the Year. At that point in her career, she had been teaching for about thirty years; she has since recently retired after forty-two years in the classroom. In her interview, Mary spoke about why it had been necessary for her to learn more about herself in order to become an effective teacher of students who were different from her. She said,

"I’m a White, middle-class woman who grew up in a White, middle-class neighborhood and went to a White middle-class college. I knew if I was really going to teach today’s kids, I had a lot to learn” (Gebhard et al. 2002, 233).

Mary decided that her learning had to begin with an awareness and reassessment of who she was, an examination of the unearned privileges she had as a white teacher of mostly children of color, and her unexamined preconceptions of the community in which she was teaching. She threw herself wholeheartedly into the work of doing so because she knew that her effectiveness as a teacher of children of backgrounds different from hers depended on doing so.

Learn about Our Students

The second lesson I’ve learned, closely related to the first, is that educators need to learn about their students. Otherwise, how can one ever care for them? The best educators I’ve met know that teaching is not simply about imparting knowledge; rather, it is about forming learning communities with students where, as Paulo Freire suggested, teachers become students and students become teachers (1970). It is a give-and-take, a sharing, not a depositing of knowledge. If this is the case, then educators need to learn as much as they can about their students: who they are, what they value and believe, what they hope for and desire. But learning about their students does not simply mean to read a book on cultural differences in learning, or to add to the curriculum a unit on the traditions of different families. While these are helpful activities, they may do little to inform teachers about the specific children in their classrooms. In addition to such activities, educators also need to learn about the sociocultural realities of their students, and about the sociopolitical conditions in which they live. This kind of learning leads to empathy and respect, critical ingredients of care.

One way to go about learning about students’ sociocultural realities and the sociopolitical realities in which they live is by becoming part of the community. For public libraries, this is often easier than for schools because public libraries are such an essential part of the community. Becoming part of the community does not necessarily mean living in
the neighborhood—although it can mean that as well—but rather it means participating in community events such as birthdays, quinceañeras, bar mitzvahs, student recitals, baseball and basketball games and other sports events, and other community gatherings. For school libraries, it might mean having an open house with speakers from the community, or featuring books that reflect the cultural, racial, and linguistic identities of the community. At the elementary level, educators can do home visits to learn about the family and parents’ hopes and dreams for their children. At the secondary level, educators can send letters home, produce newsletters, or communicate via e-mail or phone. Educators can also learn the native language of the students they teach, or, if numerous languages are used in the community, educators can learn a few words or phrases in each language. This effort helps give both students and their families the message that they are respected and honored. These are just some ideas for learning about students. Although there is no recipe for becoming culturally conscious educators, the ingredients that are absolutely essential are an open mind and a giving heart.

Develop Allies

Finally, the third lesson I want to mention is this: To survive and grow, educators need to develop allies. This means working to create a community of colleagues because all teaching, besides being tremendously difficult, can also be incredibly lonely. I have found that when teachers develop allies, they remain fresh, committed, hopeful, and caring. This is a lesson I learned as a young teacher myself, and one that many of the veteran teachers whom I’ve worked with over the years have reinforced. For example, Stephen Gordon, one of the teachers in an inquiry group I directed in the Boston Public Schools, stressed the significance of collaboration and relationship. I had asked the teachers in the group, almost all of whom were veteran teachers, to write a letter to a new teacher. In his eloquent letter about many things, including the power of collaborative relationships, Stephen wrote:

“To survive and grow, I had to find colleagues who share my anger, hopes, beliefs, and assumptions about students and teaching. When I discuss my teaching with these caring colleagues, I work to specify exactly what troubles me; I fight the fear that having problems means I am doing something wrong....Sharing difficult truths and emotions has been necessary for my personal and professional development” (Gordon 2003, 98).

These three lessons have been simple, yet profound, guideposts for me in my own teaching, as well as in my work with teachers, administrators, school librarians, and other educators. As an educator, I often returned to these lessons when teaching was too difficult, when the conditions in which I taught became overwhelming, or when some of the educators with whom I worked were filled with despair. In such a context, care is not easy. But overcoming these obstacles can lead to creating learning communities distinguished by care and respect.
FEATURE

A CRITICAL RACE PERSPECTIVE ON URBAN YOUTH AND SCHOOL LIBRARIES

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The late rapper Tupac Shakur wrote a poem called "The Rose that Grew from Concrete” that serves as a good metaphor for helping educators, including school librarians, to disrupt stereotypical metanarratives they might have about urban youth and replace them with new narratives of hope, compassion, and high expectations for all students. Tupac’s poem is a good primer for discussing what school libraries and school librarians can do to better support urban youth’s diverse backgrounds and literacy abilities. His poem can be seen as a commentary about the strength and resilience of urban youth who have not only survived, but often thrived, in a world that often looks at them with pity and contempt.

What lessons might we learn about educating urban youth based on the message embedded in Tupac’s poem? Moreover, how might we reflexively look back at our own practices and policies in the school library to see how they accommodate (or do not accommodate) the experiences, backgrounds, and literacies of urban youth? Finally, what insights might Critical Race Theory (CRT) afford us in an analysis of school library programs and school librarians’ practices as they relate to educating urban youth? These are questions that I will explore in this article to provide readers with the conceptual and practical tools for developing more culturally sensitive library spaces that support literacy development among urban youth.

A Note on the Term "Urban Youth”

Broadly speaking, the term “urban” is used to describe a diverse range of people who share a community with similar social, economic, and cultural conditions. Yet, more subtly, the term “urban” has become a placeholder used to describe a host of people, places, and things—most of which carry a negative stigma. Gloria Ladson-Billings explains that in mainstream discourses a new language and construction of race have emerged that are particularly offensive toward nonwhite people but are cleverly disguised beneath conceptual categories that become placeholders for normative references to certain racial groups:


For example, to refer to someone as an “urban youth” may subconsciously invoke images of nonwhite teens living in impoverished neighborhoods riddled with crime and failing schools. While these conditions may be realistic for some segment of the urban youth population, they are certainly not representative of the whole. Countless urban youth have been brought up in middle-class, two-parent, stable, loving, well-educated families. Despite the term “urban youth” being quite loaded, I use it here to strategically reclaim its positive aspects. To that end, it should be noted that Hip Hop culture, which is one of the most revenue-generating, global, cross-cultural influences of our time, originated in cities across America through the talent and ingenuity of the young people. The fact that many suburban white youth embrace and embody elements of Hip Hop culture in their daily talk, dress, and musical listening preferences is indicative of the ubiquitous and powerful influence of urban youth culture.
Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the School Library

CRT is not a theoretical framework that most school librarians would be familiar with or exposed to in their professional studies. Thus, it is perhaps prudent to provide a brief overview of CRT and show the possible benefits of using this theoretical lens to examine school library practices. CRT falls within the larger critical sociological tradition. Scholars who consider their work “critical” share a common goal of understanding, explaining, and disrupting the causes of structural domination and inequality in order to facilitate human emancipation and equity (Levinson et al. 2010). The intellectual origins of critical social theory are often attributed to the philosophers of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. In essence, critical theory challenged the biased nature of all knowledge, specifically knowledge that was transmitted via dominant institutions such as schools and the media (Morrell 2009).

While other subfields within critical social theory typically apply a class-based, Marxist-style critique of society, CRT places race and racism squarely at the center of its analysis. For CRT scholars, race and racism are endemic to U.S. society and embedded in the country’s social fabric. Yet, CRT scholars also recognize the fact that race does not function independently of other modes of domination, such as classism or sexism. In fact, CRT scholars are critical of any sociological analyses that focus solely on race without recognizing that racial oppression exists in multiple layers based on gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality (Dixson and Rousseau 2006).
Reimagining School Library Practices Using CRT

Disrupting Cultural Deficit Views

One of the first steps to reimagining school library practices with urban youth in mind is for school librarians to check their negative biases and assumptions about urban students. It is important to not allow outward conditions such as dress, speech patterns, and other cultural signifiers to shape how educators view and instruct students.

CRT scholars critique this kind of cultural deficit thinking. They describe it as a kind of liberalism that works against people from historically underrepresented backgrounds. This liberal view, according to CRT scholars, minimizes the structural forces that underlie various forms of oppression and sees society as primarily merit-based where individuals are rewarded through sheer hard work. One CRT scholar Garret Duncan found that his white student researchers enacted a similar sort of liberalism in their fieldwork with inner-city youth. Duncan, who is an African American researcher, noted how these student researchers articulated a “false empathy” toward the youth in the research site. He observed that:

“On the one hand, I saw the research problem mainly in terms of the role of a broader racist culture in undermining the human potential of the children in the research setting. The student researchers, on the other hand, understood their work as helping a group of unfortunate, underprivileged children take advantage of the offerings of a fundamentally just society” (Duncan 2002, 91).

The kind of false empathy that Duncan described is reminiscent of late Hip Hop artist Tupac Shakur’s poem where he describes how, at first, the rose in the concrete is marveled at, but ultimately it is pitted because of its tattered facade. To help avoid this kind of false empathy, it is critical for educators to begin to look past the damaged and dangerous caricatures of urban youth that flood the media and avoid seeing them as “other people’s children” (Delpit 1995).

Recognizing Structural Inequalities

Many educators are afraid to reach and teach some urban youth because of educators’ perception that urban youth are prone to violence or have violent tendencies.

However, many experts believe violence to be a learned behavior that arises out of unequal distribution of resources and lack of opportunities. Therefore, one way school librarians can teach from a standpoint of compassion is to guide youth in inquiry projects that help them answer questions about some of the larger social issues that directly affect their community. I have described this approach to teaching in the school library as critical inquiry and offered some practical examples of what this might look like in K–12 school library settings (see Kumasi-Johnson 2007, Kumasi 2008).
Understanding Whiteness

It is no secret that the school librarian workforce is comprised primarily of middle-class white females. By contrast, our nation’s schools are increasingly comprised of students from nonwhite, non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Thus, exploring the meaning of whiteness and the ways it might function (either implicitly or overtly) in school library practices and school librarians’ belief systems is paramount to a discussion such as this. Several scholars have been dissecting how whiteness plays out in real educational contexts (e.g., Carter 2007, Haviland 2008, Kirkland 2010).

CRT scholars maintain that whiteness holds material and symbolic property value in the United States. Audrey Thompson explains that when “conceived of as legal or cultural property, whiteness can be seen to provide material and symbolic privilege to whites, those passing as white, and sometimes honorary whites. Examples of material privilege would include better access to higher education or a choice of safe neighborhoods in which to live; symbolic white privilege includes conceptions of beauty or intelligence that not only are tied to whiteness but that implicitly exclude blackness or brownness” (2001).

We might look in several areas if we were to scrutinize how whiteness functions in school library practices and is embedded in school librarians’ belief systems. Materially speaking, a quick glance at the school library collection would help uncover which racial group’s knowledge is most represented in the books—both in terms of the racial backgrounds of the authors as well as the content of the books themselves. If there is a lack of cultural diversity in the collection (translated as books by and about nonwhite people), or if the books that are available contain stereotypes and biased representations of nonwhite people, then that can be seen as a significant area that needs improvement.

Symbolically speaking, the school librarian might inadvertently promote and make visible books and programs that mainly cater to the majority white youth population (e.g., Harry Potter and Twilight books, or Gothic themes). Meanwhile, books with nonwhite themes and characters might be highlighted only during cultural-heritage weeks or months. This practice might reinforce whiteness as the normative and superior cultural influence in the school library.

In terms of the atmosphere, school librarians should be sensitive to the fact that many youth of color feel like outsiders in library spaces and deem the school library as sole “property” of the librarian. For example, a diverse group of African American youth who participated in my dissertation research described their school librarian as “Not opened-minded” (Kumasi 2008). They went on to state “the library is like her house.” These feelings of disconnect and exclusion should be attended to by school librarians, if they want to
make all their students feel welcome. The young Black scholars in my book club research also commented that they would like to see in their school library more pictures and books that represent their cultural heritage. They also stated that they wanted their school librarian to be able to sponsor or facilitate programs that celebrated their cultural history and literary tradition. One such program that school librarians can sponsor at their schools is the African American Read-In. This event is held annually at schools, churches, and libraries across the nation, and takes on many formats including: author visits, spoken-word events, panel discussions, writing projects, and more (see NCTE 2012).

Conclusion

This article merely scratches the surface at using the tools of CRT to examine school library practices and school librarians’ belief systems that might marginalize urban youth. School library scholars who want to further examine their practices and beliefs for potential racial bias or privileging might read CRT scholarship more closely on their own (see Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Since CRT was developed by and for people of color, its analysis is already designed to account for marginalized viewpoints and experiences. Finally, if urban youth are like roses in the concrete and can grow in spite of severe neglect, then what might the world look like if these youth were given the right amount of nurturing in their homes, communities, and schools?

We in the school library can do our part by planting seeds of hope, compassion, and high expectations in the urban youth whom we might serve. This endeavor may mean doing the often messy—yet critical—work of holding our own practices up to scrutiny to see how they might cause cultural disconnects for certain students. The question we must ask ourselves is if we are willing to engage in this work. I hope the answer is a resounding “Yes!”

Kafi Kumasi’s research explores the intersections of urban education, school librarianship, multicultural education, and adolescent literacy. Her recent research has centered on examining cultural-competence preparation among library and information science students. An article reporting on this research, entitled “Are We There Yet? Results of a Gap Analysis to Measure LIS Students’ Prior Knowledge and Actual Learning of Cultural Competence Concepts,” was selected as a 2011 ALISE Best Conference Paper and appears in the Journal of Education for Library and Information Science 52, no. 4.

Visit <www.ala.org/aasl/knowledgequest> to view the online exclusive article, Youth Development and Care Define The Possibility Project, by Michael Hanchett Hanson.

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Care from a Cognitive Perspective

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Jami Jones, guest editor of this issue, voiced the concern that care has not been at the forefront of the school librarian profession. Yet, to be a caregiver is defined as providing what is necessary for the health, welfare, and maintenance of someone—which is certainly within the province of a school librarian’s job.

School librarians help train students to be effective acquirers, evaluators, and users of ideas and information—a necessary skill for survival in our information-rich society. From this stance, school librarians are definitely caregivers. But this does not perhaps get to the heart of the matter: Librarianship usually translates into a focus on concrete aspects of the profession, such as collection development, use of new media, and the design of programs to promote readership, rather than the affective nature of the vocation. Jami’s question to me as a cognitive psychologist: From a cognitive perspective, should there be a greater emphasis in school librarianship on care-based practices? The answer: Yes!

What is Care in an Educational Setting?

Caring is most often associated with overt behavior that reflects feelings with smiles and hugs and words of praise. And, while caring certainly includes positive affective demeanors, it is also an intellectual activity: “caring cannot be divorced from thought and is both an emotional and an intellectual act; caring is a deliberate moral and intellectual stance rather than simply a feeling” (McNamee, Mercurio, and Peloso 2007, 278).
Nel Noddings (1984) defines caring as ways of behaving; it is not something a person is (a personality trait or temperament) but a way of engaging in action that provides an opportunity to build care within a relationship. In her conceptualization, each caring encounter is an interaction between the person giving care (“carer”) and the person receiving care (“cared-for”). The carer responds to the cared-for with receptivity and engrossment in whom the cared-for is and/or what the cared-for needs. Such behavior goes beyond empathy to include a state of the carer “feeling with” the cared-for.

In a similar vein, Joan C. Tronto (2001) outlines four basic aspects of someone engaged in caring. Caring people behave in ways that are 1) attentive (they are fully present and devote their full attention to another); 2) responsible (they are aware and react to support the physical, intellectual, and emotional needs of the other); 3) competent (they possess and use the needed knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to support the other); and 4) responsive (they listen and observe carefully to understand the other’s perspective and communicate effectively with him or her).

**Does Care Really Matter in a School Environment?**

Secure attachments to educators (based on caring, sensitive, and responsive interactions) have been shown to aid children throughout childhood and adolescent school performance. Many researchers highlight the importance of caring and closeness in student-educator relationships: In elementary school, children’s reports of the quality of their relationships with teachers predict their academic effort and emotional engagement—when children experience teachers as warm and affectionate, they feel happier, are more enthusiastic, and do better in class (Skinner and Belmont 1993); in early adolescence, children’s feelings of care from teachers relate directly to students’ motivation, which influences persistence in academic efforts and their pursuit of prosocial and social responsibility goals (Wentzel 1997, Murdock 1999).

The research on the pedagogy of care focuses, not surprisingly, on students’ relationships with classroom teachers. However, the research results can be easily extrapolated to the school librarian. Lisa S. Goldstein (1999) contends that it is the affective qualities of the relationship between student and educator that allow development to take place in any school situation. Moreover, Abigail McNamee, Mia Mercurio, and Jeanne M. Peloso, drawing from various lines of research, argue persuasively that students benefit from a “culture of caring” in all educational settings (2007).

**How Does a Caring Relationship Change the Way Children Learn and Process Information?**

From a psychological need stance: There is strong evidence that interpersonal relationships are centrally important in the way people think. In particular, research validates the importance of caring connections at school as meeting two fundamental human needs. People of all ages have a need to secure the love and respect of others—to feel socially connected; this is labeled as the need for relatedness and the need for belonging (Connell and Wellborn 1991, Ormrod 2012). These fundamental needs impact a wide range of behaviors and guide cognitive processing by influencing emotions and thinking. Specifically, social bonds create a pattern in cognitive processing that gives priority to organizing information on the basis of the person with whom one has some sort of connection (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Both children’s sense of relatedness and sense of belonging have been connected to students’ cognitive engagement (i.e., the amount of mental effort directed toward an activity), which directly impacts student learning and achievement (Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong 2008). Because of this link, the cognitive processes involved in knowledge acquisition are firmly embedded in the social context in which learning takes place (Grabinger and Dunlap 1995).

When the social environment, particularly the behavior of adults at school, provides for

Secure attachments to educators (based on caring, sensitive, and responsive interactions) have been shown to aid children throughout childhood and adolescent school performance.
students’ basic psychological needs of belonging and relatedness, intrinsic motivation flourishes, and children are more apt to accomplish new academic tasks. Intrinsic motivation is a particular driver of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement in educational activities. It affects cognitive processing by focusing attention, stimulating mental rehearsal, and generating elaboration, all three of which contribute to memory development. Intrinsic motivation, then, often determines whether and to what extent something is learned (Ormrod 2012).

Roy F. Baumeiser and Mark R. Leary contend that general interaction is not enough to motivate people, only social bonds that endure in the context of caring meet these fundamental human needs: “...people seem to need frequent, affectively pleasant or positive interactions with the same individuals, and they need these interactions to occur in a framework of long-term, stable caring, and concern” (1995, 520). This assertion is supported by research that shows that when students believe their educators truly care for them and really support their efforts to learn, students displayed increased motivation to learn—responding with more vigor, flexibility, and constructive actions, especially in the face of challenges (Goodenow 1993, Furrer and Skinner 2003). In particular, caring relationships build up children’s feelings of positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, which have been shown to trigger energized behavior (such as effort, persistence, and participation), promote positive emotions (such as interest and enthusiasm), and dampen negative emotions (such as anxiety and boredom) (Furrer and Skinner 2003). Moreover, Abigail McNamee, Mia Mercurio, and Jeanne M. Peloso (2007) contend children do not merely need caring educational relationships so that they can be motivated to master academic work but that students also need it so that they can learn to develop the ability to be caring themselves.

From a Cognitive Development Stance

Additionally, research in cognitive development widely holds that cognitive development is embedded in the context of social relationships. This stance argues for the co-creation of knowledge—the idea that understanding happens between people. L. S. Vygotsky defines the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), that is, the mental space where learning occurs, as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, 86). In other words, the ZPD is the mental gap where the child cannot quite solve a problem or accomplish a task on her own but can do it with adult guidance—and it is the adult guidance that supports the child in bridging the mental gap and moving to higher levels of thinking. Thus, the ZPD is formed through interpersonal relationships. L. S. Vygotsky (1978) proposes the process of learning, then, as socially mediated—first between others and the learner (interpsychological) and then within the learner (intrapsychological).

Lisa S. Goldstein asserts that the interpersonal nature of the co-construction of knowledge (Vygotsky’s first stage) closely resembles a caring encounter: The adult and the student must connect through a process of conversation, negotiation, and shared experience to work together to build a new, mutual understanding and advance the child’s thinking (1999). Implicit in this co-creation of knowledge is the idea of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976): the adult’s role is to make sure that educational tasks fall within a student’s ZPD (that the child is engaged in a task at which he or she can succeed with adult help) and then to provide temporary and adjustable supports for the child while decreasing the support...
as the student becomes more and more able to perform independently. From this perspective, the process of adult scaffolding children in learning situations positions a caring relationship as the source of cognitive growth (Goldstein 1999).

From a Neuro-Cognitive Stance

Finally, although our understanding of the neuroscience related to caring is still nascent, social interactions have been linked to distinct neurological responses, and the evidence for the biological benefits of care is mounting. Research based on brain-imaging technology suggests that social thinking is a default, resting state for the brain (Iacoboni et al. 2004). That is, much of people’s non-conscious thinking concerns inferring causal relations and characteristics of people in the environment (Fiske and Taylor 2008). Hence, we can directly observe at a brain-based level that strong, automatic connections exist between reasoning, long-term memory, and social interactions.

Social thinking activates particular neural configurations; for example, research shows that social exclusion (the opposite of belonging and relatedness created by a caring relationship) activates in the brain the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and this activation is dampened by activation of the right ventral prefrontal cortex (rVFC), producing neural activation similar to patterns seen for physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, Williams 2003). Therefore, our brains are extremely sensitive to social cues; the needs for belonging and relatedness may even have a biological basis.

Moreover, caring relationships have been linked to the production of important neurotransmitters in the brain that: drive the human desire for pleasure, reduce stress, and increase self-expression. Neurological evidence suggests that positive and caring experiences selectively strengthen neural circuits involved in the production of the biochemicals dopamine (the major transmitter involved in the brain’s pleasure pathways connecting emotion and memory areas of the brain) and oxytocin (a hormone important for positive emotions and reduction of stress related to social situations). In particular, dopamine inputs are believed to be critical for circuit development in the frontal lobe (the area directly responsible for higher-order thinking) in children, and caring and pleasurable emotional relationships have been directly linked to contributing to the growth of a child’s mental capacity (Eisler and Levine 2002). Specifically, dopamine is linked to positive affect, which has been shown to systematically influence performance on a wide variety of cognitive processes, including but not limited to the consolidation of long-term memory, working memory, and creative problem solving. (For a review, see Ashby, Isen, and Turken 1999.) Overall, there is substantial neurological evidence that mild positive emotions, of the sort people can experience every day in a caring relationship, systematically affect cognitive processing.

What Care-Based Practices Can School Librarians Adopt to Help Students’ Minds Function Better?

We have no simple formula for achieving caring relationships. Nel Noddings states: “It requires different behaviors from situation to situation and person to person. It sometimes calls for toughness, sometimes tenderness. Some situations require only a few minutes of attentive care; others require continuous effort over long periods of time” (1992, xi–xii). The first step is to make the conscious choice to engage in care-based practice: “Caring, then, is simultaneously a choice, a responsibility and an obligation, involving both affect and volition” (Goldstein 1999, 656).

Once a school librarian makes the choice to engage in caring, the next step is to focus on actions that address students’ psychological need for belonging and relatedness and to provide scaffolding to students at their individual ZPD level. Based on the work of Nel Noddings (1992); Kathryn R. Wentzel (1997); Abigail McNamee, Mia Mercurio, and Jeanne M. Peloso (2007); and James J. Appleton, Sandra L. Christenson, and Michael J. Furlong (2008)—and supported by cited cognitive research—specific educational practices that are likely to promote caring librarian–student relationships are those described below.

Engage In and Model Caring Behavior to Students

Involvement (i.e., school librarians taking time for and expressing enjoyment in their interactions with students) is the key foundational behavior for building a caring relationship. Reaching out to check on progress, to provide students with constructive feedback, or to acknowledge good effort at every interaction assuages student needs for belonging and relatedness—as, too, do nonverbal gestures, such as smiles, pats on the back, and high-fives. The emotional tone of interactions should be upbeat, and convey warmth and approval. Students’ engagement
and willingness to face challenges are maximized when collaboration with an adult is pleasant, warm, and responsive (Berk and Winsler 1995).

Engage Students in Democratic Communication Styles

Students develop a greater sense of community when open communication and reciprocal sharing of ideas that respect individual life experiences and stories are encouraged (Wentzel 1999; McNamee, Mercurio, and Pelosi 2007). School librarians who provide acceptance and noncritical judgments increase chances for caring interactions. The caring librarian acts, as Joan C. Tronto says, “responsively”—listened carefully to understand the students’ perspectives and communicate effectively with them (2001). This behavior includes dialogues that lead to mutual understanding and perspective-taking, allowing the caring to develop (from Nel Noddings’s perspective) by “feeling with” each other. Caring also means establishing policies for equity by guarding against any action—such as humiliation, sarcasm, ridicule, anger, and impatience—that challenges equity for any individual or group.

Engage Students in Collaborative Learning Activities

As cognitive development is socially mediated, the focus should be on creating opportunities and learning activities that allow for collaboration—between school librarian and student, and between peers. Through the natural argumentation, exchange of feedback, and reflection that occurs in collaborative efforts, the thinking processes involved in a task become visible, thus providing opportunities for social scaffolding (Grabinger and Dunlap 1995). In addition, learning directed towards a common goal prompts caring behaviors in collaborators by encouraging students to think, plan, and implement how to work together in mutually beneficial ways (Wentzel 1999).

Orchestrate Opportunities for Student Decision Making and Autonomy

Drawing students into the learning process is often more beneficial than achieving a correct solution. Shared authority and decision making empowers learning by making the learning more personally meaningful and fostering belonging. Students are more likely to be active and to use knowledge and skills when they are acquired in a problem-solving mode compared to a fact-collecting mode (Grabinger and Dunlap 1995). This finding reflects the importance of creating learning situations related to realistic events—real-world problems or themes that allow for diverse and challenging tasks that promote skill development. The focus should be on creating opportunities for students to move freely about the school library, make choices about types of media and tools to use, and to initiate academic and social connections with others. In this approach, students become active investigators and seekers, and school librarians become facilitators and guides, rather than presenters of inert knowledge.

Engage in Consistent Rule-Setting and Structure

Students feel more psychologically safe and secure when they are provided clear expectations and consistent contingencies for behavior (Ormrod 2012). A consistent interaction style breeds a sense of comfortableness that is critical in a caring relationship. Moreover, students are more likely to adopt and internalize the expectations, goals, and behaviors that are valued by school librarians if these are consistently modeled for students (Wentzel 1999). Setting rules and structure includes assessing what attitudes and behaviors students come in with, and determining how these can be shaped via positive reinforcement to address the needs of the learning community as a whole.

Encourage Students to Do their Best and Meet Them at Their Own Levels

Students have greater success in learning tasks when educators pay attention to individual developmental levels (Wentzel 1997). In Joan C. Tronto’s words, during a caring interaction, school librarians need to be “responsible”—be aware and react to support the needs of the other. This behavior includes engaging in thorough observation and monitoring of individual emotional and intellectual needs. It also means developing expectations for student behavior and engaging in responsive support in light of individual differences. By interacting with an awareness of the individual, school librarians demonstrate care by being able to provide the conversation and
experiences needed to advance the students’ thinking; at the same time school librarians are able to scaffold learning goals so that they are reachable.

Promote Care as a Learning Topic

Bringing the idea of caring and the importance of social relationships explicitly into focus as learning topics also falls within the realm of building caring relationships.

School libraries abound with books that can provide a common language and experience for one-on-one and class discussions that focus on caring and the attributes of care, such as: compassion, kindness, cooperation, keeping commitments/promises, fair play, honesty, respect, and responsibility. Focusing on care as a learning topic can also provide school librarians with opportunities to model skills that are present when one cares for literature (McNamee, Mercurio, and Peloso 2007).

Read the full article for Works Cited, author bio, and more information.

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The School Library through an Ignatian Lens

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School libraries are filled with questions. Some are mundane, and some are spectacularly transcendent, as students grapple with a growing understanding of their place in the world. By definition, students of all ages ask questions as they are motivated to learn, to absorb, and to be shaped by their experiences. And also, by definition, school librarians ask questions to understand students and their own roles as professionals. All of these questions reflect connections to meaningful learning—and emerge from unique information needs that are best met by an environment that reflects care and support for multiple dimensions of learning, the holistic context that is mindful of the interactions of mind, body, and spirit.

Effective school libraries provide services that are based on meeting each individual’s need for information. Information needs arise from both immediate and global communities—from the school building to the “flat world” of online connections. The strategy for successfully engaging individuals as lifelong learners begins with acknowledging the connections between mind, body, and spirit—and pursuing the ideal of educating each child from a holistic perspective. Historically, the focus of educating the whole child is found in the Jesuit tradition and Ignatian pedagogy. With its emphasis on personal connections to learning and reflection, the Ignatian approach of cura personalis—care of the whole person and care for each student in his or her uniqueness (Rausch 2010, 56)—resonates through progressive educational reform, inquiry learning, and the philosophical goals of school library professionals.

Cura personalis and the integration of mind, body, and spirit in the learning process are particularly relevant to the underlying principles of the library profession—the commitment to nurturing democratic ideals of equity, intellectual freedom, and the cultivation of ethical choices. The goal and mission of all libraries is to empower individuals to actualize themselves as lifelong learners, democratic citizens, and strong community members. An educational perspective based on care of mind, body, and spirit encourages “subjective responsibility that is required for continuous construction of the ethical ideal” (Noddings 2003, 201).

For students to care about the larger world and community, they must first care for themselves and their immediate world. Functioning effectively in a democratic society requires a deep personalized understanding and commitment to shared goals. Libraries have traditionally provided leadership in upholding and defending constitutional and ethical rights for individuals and communities.

School libraries have affirmed this position of care for broader social goals. The current AASL standards—both the Standards for the 21st-Century Learner <www.ala.org/aasl/standards> and ALA/AASL Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians (2010) <www.ala.org/aasl/ncate>—support the position statements of the American Library Association, acknowledging the value of providing all citizens, both children and adults, with equitable access to ideas and materials.

As public spaces, whether digital or physical, school libraries allow students to directly participate in democratic responsibilities. Borrowing a library book is often the first taste of interaction in the public sphere. It is a building block for illustrating how personal responsibility, personal care, and personal ethics relate to others in the school community. Accessing publicly available databases, provided by states that recognize the value of equitable content, offers students the opportunity to experience the value and responsibility of shared resources. Bringing the abstract concept of ethical behavior to the daily care of borrowed materials and care in accessing digital resources is a powerful, personal channel to communicate the connections between individual and community social responsibilities.

What is the praxis and practice of a caring educator in an information environment? What does the philosophy of cura personalis look like in the day-to-day work of a school librarian? AASL’s Standards for the 21st-Century Learner identify four strands of learning that offer the potential
Cura personalis and the integration of mind, body, and spirit in the learning process are particularly relevant to the underlying principles of the library profession—the commitment to nurturing democratic ideals of equity, intellectual freedom, and the cultivation of ethical choices.

to frame the school library as a caring, holistic environment. The skills, dispositions, responsibilities, and self-assessment strategies are directly related to the traditional Ignatian pedagogy paradigm with its methodology of context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation. The Ignatian vision of care for mind, body, and spirit is an effective, realistic perspective for approaching the potential of the school library.

Caring for Mind
School libraries offer the resources and support to provide differentiation for individual needs, the heart of effective inquiry learning. "Inquiry does not stand alone, it engages, interests and challenges students to connect their world with the curriculum" (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, and Caspari 2007, 2). An essential component of inquiry learning is focusing on the individual student, engaging the learner in the process of connection to the essential question at hand. School librarians are educators who spend time finding out what their students are trying to do, what information they need, and why. School librarians believe, as constructivist teachers, that each person constructs his or her own representations and conceptual structures, and each student progresses through uncertainties to a personal understanding of topics and issues (Noddings 2005, 154). This consideration of context for learners—

their background, community, and potential—is the personal care for learners that is the hallmark of Jesuit education (Kolvenbach 2005).

Through developing information literacy, the school library is a laboratory for learning how to locate, evaluate, and use information in a wide range of situations (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, and Caspari 2007, 81). Respect for the individuals’ mental representations that result from guided inquiry and for the information needs that are uniquely different for each child is the motivation for providing affordances that meet the information needs of each student. The school librarian as an educator offers suggestions and challenges that help students make strong and useful constructs (Noddings 2005, 154).

Care integrates research and theory into practice, a framework for understanding the differences between seeking information about curriculum questions and personal questions. Care to discern the motivations in imposed queries, and those that spring from genuine intellectual or personal curiosity, is often needed to help students gain effective knowledge from their resources (Gross 2001). The reciprocal relationship between student and school librarian affirms the learning relationship.

Caring for Body
The physical space in a school library is often the key to engaging students of all ages. The provision of physical access points to fiction, to databases, and to study areas reflects careful consideration of the needs of each individual. From the height of bookcases, to comfy reading corners, to considerations of Universal Design, and the evolving concept of the learning commons—school librarians have many ways to enrich and extend learning. Considerations of copyright, intellectual freedom, and 21st-century skills have all been substantiated as being affected by the physical space in libraries.

Collection management is interwoven in design that supports physical access for all. Paperback or hardcover, print or digital, ESL versions, Kurzweil machines, audiobooks—all are selections that require care for intellectual and physical abilities. The cultural significance of the physical space of libraries as centers of learning and knowledge is an ingrained manifestation of care for the bodily connection of lifelong learners.

Caring for Spirit
How do school librarians manage to "connect the dots” and take advantage of the daily opportunities, moving beyond the educational fashion of the moment to ground practice in a philosophy of caring for each student in ways that promote ethical and moral development?

Progressive educational reform puts school libraries at the forefront of social concern for ethical principles of intellectual freedom and equity of access to information. Differentiation in services and resources reflects the diversity of populations served in
schools. Tending the spirit of each student advances collaboration and consideration of the greater good of the school community. Responsible citizens evolve from a caring attitude toward others.

The freedom to read and access resources at will, without censure for reading level or viewpoint, allows all students to reach their potentials, and nurtures their spiritual best. Reading as an essential freedom is clearly defined in the ALA Freedom to Read Statement (ALA 2004) and the AASL position statement on reading (AASL 1999). School librarians focus not just on learning to read, but on collaborating with other reading specialists to help each student explore diverse viewpoints, discover the intrinsic pleasures of reading, and make connections between home and family that support reading as a lifelong activity.

Moving Forward

School librarians have the potential to offer a unique perspective of care within the school community. They are able to promote the affective connections that deep learning requires—the connections to self and connections to the larger world that result from careful consideration of the whole individual, the unique mind, body, and spirit of each child that is framed in the philosophy of cura personalis. There is a direct connection from this holistic view to the overarching guiding principles of school libraries. The principles spring from a commitment to developing, understanding, and engaging lifelong learners and future citizens.

Historically, libraries have been holistic learning experiences, portals to knowledge, and a place of refuge for intellectual pursuits. In this tradition, students come to school libraries to search, browse, wonder, and explore. They need a physical space that encourages self-directed learning, access to information that supports their intellectual development, and active encouragement to develop and honor the choices of an effective democratic society. They need care.

Historically, libraries have been holistic learning experiences, portals to knowledge, and a place of refuge for intellectual pursuits. In this tradition, students come to school libraries to search, browse, wonder, and explore.
THE LANGUAGE OF CARE ETHICS

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From its inception in the early 1980s (Gilligan 1982, Noddings 1984), interest in care ethics has grown rapidly (Held 2006, Noddings 2002, Slote 2007). The language of care ethics has arisen largely from women’s experience, but that is not to say that it is inaccessible to men. It does suggest, however, some beneficial changes in male experience and education, just as women’s participation in mathematics—long almost exclusively a male domain—has encouraged changes in female experience. To understand and appreciate care ethics, one must become acquainted with the basic ideas and language. First, care ethics is a relational ethic.

The Caring Relation

As a relational ethic, care ethics begins its thinking—as life itself begins—in relation. We do not start with the individual, adult moral agent. Right from the start, we are concerned with the caring relation—from the briefest encounters to long-term associations, and we describe the roles of both carer and cared-for in establishing and maintaining that relation.

In an encounter, the carer is attentive; she or he listens, observes, and is receptive to the expressed needs of the cared-for. (For convenience, in what follows, I will refer to the carer as “she,” the cared-for as “he”). Typically, on detecting an expressed need, the carer “feels with” the cared-for and experiences motivational displacement; that is, her motive energy is directed (temporarily) away from her own projects and towards those of the cared-for. Then she must think what to do. She must respond. She responds positively to the need if she has the resources to do so and if doing so will not hurt others in the web of care. If a positive response might hurt others, she must still try to find a way to respond so that caring relation can be preserved even though the need has been denied. All parents and professionals in the helping professions understand the challenge implied here.

The contribution of the cared-for is simple but essential. He responds in a way that shows that the caring has been received, recognized. When an infant stops crying and smiles in response to his mother’s caress, when a student energetically pursues a topic after the educator’s encouragement, when a patient breathes a sigh of relief under the nurse’s gentle touch, when a library user works effectively with new technology under the librarian’s direction, the caring relation has been completed. Without this response, there is no caring relation no matter how hard the carer has worked at it.

It is important here to recognize a distinction between relational caring and what might be called virtue caring (Noddings 2010). In relational caring, we are mainly interested in the caring relation, not so much in the merit of the carer. When things go wrong, when the cared-for does not recognize the effort of the carer, there is no caring relation. The carer—parent, school librarian, teacher, social worker, nurse, diplomat—must try something else. In contrast, a virtue carer may simply point to her own virtuous acts and urge the cared-for to shape up. In virtue ethics, emphasis is placed on the character of the persons involved, especially that of the carer. In care ethics, we are less interested in the moral credit due to the carer and more deeply interested in the strength of the caring relation. This relational emphasis is becoming more and more important in national and global affairs (Held 2006, Noddings 2012).

Reciprocity and mutuality are important in relational ethics. Martin Buber wrote, “One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity” (1970, 58). Care ethics agrees. But the reciprocity to which we refer is not the contractual reciprocity so familiar in traditional ethics—the “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” variety. It is, simply put, the mutual recognition and appreciation of response. Not only does the cared-for’s response complete the caring relation (encounter, episode), the response often provides further information about his needs and interests, and how the carer might deepen or broaden the caring relation. The response provides building blocks for the construction of a continuing caring relation.

Reciprocity so construed does not limit the relational parties to the roles taken in any one encounter. In adult, on-going relationships, the usual expectation is that the parties will exchange positions regularly. I may be carer in one encounter and cared-for in the next. Stable, happy marriages are thus balanced. This is something care theorists have had to explain carefully. Drawing on women’s experience as we do and using words such as caring, response, and receptivity, some early critics expressed fear that women were being urged to enter another, somewhat glorified, era of servitude. I think most of this fear has been allayed. There is no intention to have anyone go through life as carer while others happily accept the role of cared-for. Carer and cared-for are not permanent labels but names for roles accepted in encounters.
The issue is complicated, however, in unequal relationships such as parent–young child, teacher–student, and nurse–patient. In all of these relations, only one person can really serve as carer. Reciprocity is then almost entirely defined by the cared–for’s response of recognition. When, for whatever reason (severe illness or handicap, for example), the cared–for is unable to respond in a way that completes the relation, the work of the carer becomes more and more difficult. Carers in this position need the support of a caring community to sustain them (see Noddings 1984).

Another distinction necessary to an understanding of care ethics is that between natural and ethical caring. Natural caring is the work that occurs regularly in congenial homes, schools, and workplaces. In these situations, people address and respond to one another in ways characteristic of caring, and they do so by inclination, because they want to care and be cared for, not out of duty. This is the cherished human condition. Carers may expend great physical and emotional effort in meeting the needs of their family members, neighbors, and friends, but no moral effort is required. In these situations, we do not agonize over what we are morally required to do. We respond out of love or inclination. Only when something goes wrong, when there is some disruption (and minor disruptions occur frequently), must we ask ourselves how—against our temporary anger or hurt—we ought to respond. Then we draw on ethical caring—an ethical ideal built of recollections of caring and being cared for. We ask what we would do if we were at our caring best or if this other were not so difficult. We respond “as if,” and by doing so we hope to restore the preferred condition of natural caring.

This way of looking at our moral lives stands in stark contrast to traditional ethical theories, which usually elevate principled moral thinking above love and inclination and above what I am calling natural caring. Eighteenth–century philosopher Immanuel Kant, for example, insisted that to be moral an act has to be logically formulated and freely chosen by reference to the appropriate principle. He noted that women often do the right thing out of love or inclination, but such acts have no moral standing from his perspective (Kant 1983). According to Kant, women are naturally inclined to be nice—kind and loving—but they may be incapable of the level of reasoning required for genuine moral action. Certainly, caring often requires highly sophisticated reasoning, but it depends more fundamentally on emotion for its motivation, on empathy or sympathy that presses us to respond as carers to others. How shall we describe this empathy or sympathy?

Receptive Attention and Empathy

Attention is of central importance in care ethics. In caring, a carer is first of all attentive. Before the time of care ethics, Simone Weil posited a question that might well be considered the basic question to be asked by the one caring (the carer): “What are you going through?” (Weil 1977, 51). The idea is to hear and understand the expressed needs of the cared–for.

The attention characteristic of caring is receptive. It is not the sort of attention usually identified with schoolwork or critical thinking. In critical thinking, we often attend closely to evaluate an argument and prepare our rebuttal. Receptive attention, in contrast, is open and vulnerable. To learn what the cared–for is going through, we put aside our own projects and listen. If the cared–for is troubled or in pain, the carer is likely to feel some degree of pain also. The carer feels something as a result of the encounter.

In care ethics today, the feeling that results from attention (or sometimes precedes it) is often called empathy (Slote 2007). It should be understood that this is a relatively new meaning of empathy. Initially (the word entered our vocabulary in the late 1800s), empathy was identified with an attempt to understand, and it was projective, not receptive. We were directed to project ourselves into a work of art or another mind to understand,
To learn what the cared-for is going through, we put aside our own projects and listen.

not to feel with. Accordingly, great emphasis was placed on empathic accuracy (Stueber 2006). We used sympathy when we wanted to refer to the “feeling with” that accompanies receptive attention. There may be no objection to using empathy in the dual way suggested by Slote as long as we remember that it now involves both understanding and feeling. Thus empathy may be thought of as “reading” of the other that engenders both feeling and understanding.

Many fascinating questions remain about the concept. What impels or triggers empathy? I suggested above that it is (at least sometimes) triggered by what we hear when we attend. This is clearly true. But sometimes empathy precedes conscious attention. When we observe an accident, for example, we may feel immediate empathy (or sympathy). We do not voluntarily open ourselves to listening and feeling; the channel of feeling is torn open by external events.

In everyday social and political life, most of us enter a receptive–attentive mode when a speaker has already been identified as “one of us.” If we agree in general with a speaker’s position on political, religious, or theoretical views, we open our receptive channels and listen, more or less receptive to what might be said. If, however, the speaker is not one of us, we often close our ears or open them only to gather information for our opposing argument. This is an area in which education should have powerful effects. In teaching young people to think critically, we should help them to differentiate between listening to understand and feel with the other, and listening only for our own purposes.

We must also consider whether empathy is somehow connected to character or personality. There may well be such a thing as an empathetic personality. That possibility should arouse our interest in empathic accuracy. Does this person really understand what the other wants or needs, or is she merely gullible? As educators, we are more properly interested in the connection between empathy and character. Can we educate to enhance the capacity for empathy? To do so requires that we help young people take a relational view and ask what the other is going through, not simply focus on how we ourselves might react if we were in the other’s position.

I have often used an example that illustrates the difference between traditional character education and a caring approach. Suppose a child of about ten years says something hurtful to her grandmother. In the traditional approach, her mother might say, “How would you feel if someone said something like that to you?” Such a question is sometimes useful in triggering guilt and remorse. But it might also elicit a defensive answer: “It wouldn’t bother me. She’s too touchy.” The mother’s question follows the biblical injunction to do unto others as we would have done unto us. In the caring approach, we would prefer to advise: Do unto others as they would have done unto them. The mother’s question should then be, “How do you think Grandma felt when you said that?” The idea is to encourage children to think about others
and to try to understand what they are feeling. We hope to build up a disposition to care, a habit of listening and feeling with others.

It is probably true, in general, that women are more empathic than men. This tells us nothing, of course, about the next person we encounter; he may be saintly or she may be as cold-hearted as nurse Ratched, the nasty nurse in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. But women’s experience favors development of the capacity for empathy and caring. Women bear children and for millennia have had primary responsibility to care for them. In the earliest days of humanity, women who could not “read” their infants and assess their needs lost them. Evolution would favor female empathy. Also, through many centuries of subordination, women had to read the males who controlled their lives, and this experience, too, probably increased the capacity for empathy in women.

Caregiving cannot be equated with caring as a moral way of life. Some tough-minded military men are capable of caring, and some caregivers—Nurse Ratched comes to mind again—can fail to care. However, engagement in caregiving activities, supervised by people who are genuine carers, does seem to promote the development of a caring attitude or disposition. Such experience usually helps to produce people who are prepared to care, and being prepared to care increases the likelihood that a person will engage in receptive attention and achieve empathic accuracy. If we want boys to develop the capacity to care, we must involve them in caregiving activities.

**Conclusion**

The language of care ethics suggests to casual readers or listeners that caring is a warm, fuzzy feeling that cannot do much to identify or solve moral problems. But the words care, attention, empathy, response, reciprocity, and receptivity all have special meaning in care ethics, and caring—far more than a fuzzy feeling—is a moral way of life.

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*Her latest book is Peace Education: How We Come to Love and Hate War (Cambridge University Press 2012).*

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Caring for Stories
Increasing Reader Engagement in School Libraries
Librarians, teachers, authors, video game designers, corporate executives, in fact all providers of information struggle with the dilemma of how to get consumers of information engaged with their message. School librarians know that engaged students learn more and retain the information longer; authors and game designers want their readers and players to become immersed in the worlds they have created so that their stories feel vivid and real; and corporations need customers to recognize their brands and use their products and services.
The Concept of Care

One of the most powerful ways to engage consumers is to develop their sense of care for information content. The scholarly literature on information seeking is delving into the role of affect, as society moves from a focus on intellectualism to a more holistic understanding that people’s affective states also influence their consumption of information (Wilson 1981, MacMullin and Taylor 1984, Kulthau 1991, Hughes 2009). Ever since Carol Gilligan (1977) introduced the phrase “ethic of care,” feminist educational philosopher Nel Noddings has written extensively on the power of care in teaching and education (Noddings 1984, 1996, 1999).

Care, as opposed to detached impartiality, focuses attention on relationships and the importance of “emotion and the body in moral deliberation” (Sander-Staut 2011), and has been defined as “the ongoing concern for the well-being and the constructive development of the one caring, the one or ones cared for, and [their] relationship” (Hawk 2011, 4). Noddings sees the benefits of a caring approach to teaching as the development of a relationship in which the teacher is “present to the [student] and places her motive power in his service” (1984, 176). The teacher is actively attentive and engaged in close listening because “the student is infinitely more important than the subject matter” (1984, 176).

As a result, “her commitment is to him [the student]...and he is—through that commitment—set free to pursue his legitimate projects” (1984, 177). Noddings further states that the power of caring lies in “stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the other’s. When we care, we consider the other’s point of view, his objective needs, and...our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves” (1984, 24). This focus leads to a state in which “we receive what-is—there as nearly as possible without evaluation or assessment” (1984, 34).

The Power of Story

This state of nonjudgmental acceptance of another’s point of view is precisely the stance of the reader enthranced by a story. Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock explore the power of story to transport readers into narrative worlds, claiming that the reader “may lose awareness of the self as a distinct entity. Instead of focusing on one’s own identity, the reader may become the story characters, or feel as if she is experiencing narrative events” (2002, 326). Victor Nell explains that “for the involved subject, the distinction between the subject and the object of the experience breaks down: there is a total immersion in the experience, which, for the reader, means being ‘transformed or transported by what he reads...swept emotionally into the experience described by the author’” (1988, 221, citing Hilgard 1979).

Story creators—from traditional oral storytellers to authors and digital-content designers—know that powerful stories are those that involve vivid description to help us “see” the story, emotional situations that help us “feel” and experience the story, and characters with whom we can identify and about whom we can care. Our brains are wired to accept and understand the story format more easily than raw data, as the story gives us the context within which to build meaning (Schank 1990).

A delightful folktale from the Jewish tradition speaks to this issue:

Two beautiful women, Truth and Parable, lived on a hillside overlooking a small village. They could not agree who was the most beautiful, so they decided to have a contest: Each would walk through the village and whoever garnered the most attention would be the winner. Truth went first, confident that everyone loved her, but as she went through the village, people went back inside their houses and closed their doors. When Truth reached the other side of the village, few people remained outside. “What can I do to get more attention?” she wondered. Without further ado, she completely disrobed and returned through the village, assured that now she would be the center of attention. To her astonishment, those still outside went indoors and would neither look at nor talk to her. Crestfallen, she returned to Parable’s side. Parable then walked through the village and back, and everyone came flocking out to meet her. When Parable returned, Truth demanded, “Why is it that you get more attention than I?” “While people do love Truth,” Parable replied, “no one likes the naked Truth! If you want people to accept you, clothe yourself in story.” With that, Parable gave Truth her multicolored robe of story, and when Truth returned to the village, everyone welcomed her.

When facts are cloaked in story, we understand and accept them more readily. In chapter nine of his recent book Story Proof, Kendall
When facts are cloaked in story, we understand and accept them more readily.

Haven (2007) synopsizes the research on story’s impact on listeners and readers. These studies support the claims that story improves comprehension, logical thinking, and cross-curricular learning; story creates motivation for learning, involvement in content, and a sense of community; it improves language mastery, general literacy, and writing success; and it improves memory and recall.

But how do story creators fabricate this sense of “caring” for characters and experiences?

Creating Care

Many techniques can be used to augment readers’ or listeners’ caring. Perhaps the most powerful is description, for it enables us to visualize the story world and the characters’ actions and motives. Descriptive adjectives and adverbs must be vivid and sensorial so that they evoke the mood of the setting and the emotions of the characters. Metaphors that are unique and unexpected capture attention, and force the mind to make new connections between previously unrelated concepts. Details help readers create mental models of the story events and increase their sense of the story’s realism. If those details are carefully chosen to reveal character idiosyncrasies, the characters become more human and complex (more like us) and, hence, more easy to relate to. Stock characters rarely capture readers’ imaginations as deeply as complex, multifaceted characters.

Culturally specific descriptions add authenticity and—like a delightful spice—add “flavor” that is exotic and memorable. These descriptions create an air of intimacy as readers get to know more about the events and characters in a story, and the more we know about people, the more likely it is for us to care about them; we are emotionally involved in their unfolding lives. Knowing fosters caring!

This appeal of knowing holds true as well for stories that are familiar to us. When we hear “Cinderella” for the hundredth time, the reminiscence of prior experience with the story can induce a feeling of nostalgia, creating emotional comfort that draws us into the story once again. Familiarity is the cornerstone of the series book, as readers return time and again to watch the same characters encounter different events within a predictable plot structure that readers know and anticipate.

While knowing fosters care, not knowing fosters curiosity, the intellectual equivalent of caring. This novelty keeps the mind fascinated and immersed. Again, series books can serve as an example because the plots and villains change with each episode, even though the plot formula does not. These new and unpredictable experiences keep readers’ intellects engaged and build suspense. An even better example is the mystery story, in which the intellectual challenge to solve the mystery helps keep readers immersed in the story.

Authors have long known that a good story involves conflict. Not only does conflict provide intellectual interest (how will the problem resolve?), it promotes caring for the characters as readers unite with the protagonists to battle a common foe. When protagonists are placed in jeopardy, we identify with them and want them to succeed. The greater the jeopardy, the greater the triumph, and often the more intense the rapport we develop with them. Jeopardy needn’t be physical threat; it can also be emotional conflict (romance novels), intellectual conundrums (mysteries), or, as in fantasy novels, the fate of the entire world may hang in the balance.

Often stories feature protagonists who face difficult life circumstances: children are orphaned, comfortable situations become discomfiting, and villains bring trauma into protagonists’ lives. Often these misfortunes are undeserved, leading the reader to sympathize with the character.

While knowing fosters care, not knowing fosters curiosity, the intellectual equivalent of caring. This novelty keeps the mind fascinated and immersed. This novelty keeps the mind fascinated and immersed.
Sympathy is a sense of feeling for someone else—or, as the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online states, “the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another or others,”—and it involves a beginning sense of identification with the other person. The best stories, however, move readers beyond sympathy to empathy, or feeling with another (Keen 2006). The OED Online defines empathy as, “The power of projecting one’s personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation.” At this level, readers have identified with characters to such an extent that they experience the characters’ emotions and trials as if they were happening to themselves; the reader/character distinction begins to dissolve into a more inclusive sense of “us” (Cohen 2001).

Young readers tend to identify more with good characters; they like them, more readily take their perspective, and feel more suspense for them during reading (Jose and Brewer 1984). Readers also care more for likable characters who are underdogs (sympathy), who are chasing a dream, or who are funny, nice, or admirable (Gerke 2010). Funny characters make us laugh, releasing endorphins and creating a pleasurable sensation in the body (Dunbar et. al. 2011). Characters who are nice appeal to our sense of compassion and make us feel comfortable and welcome; we want to spend time with them. Readers also tend to like characters who excel, as readers admire them and want to emulate them. However, likeable characters are not enough; they must also ring true as characters. One of the fastest ways to disengage a reader is to have a character say or do something that doesn’t seem to fit the character’s developing personality. The typical reader response is, “She wouldn’t do that!” and immediately the reader is no longer immersed; he is outside the story and commenting on it.

Authors can also promote caring for their characters by writing first-person narrative or using lots of dialogue. Both of these conventions make use of what has come to be called the “deictic shift” (Duchan, Bruder, and Hewitt 1995). Deixis refers to terms that rely on context for meaning. Words such as “now,” “here,” “I,” and “you” mean nothing unless the reader knows the context in which the term is being used. The word “I” has a particularly powerful role to play in immersion in narrative because it can have multiple referents. When a character in conversation says “I,” the reader understands the referent to be “you, the character.” However, in the reader’s ear, the word “I” has been spoken, and, therefore, “I” also refers to “me, the reader.” The character–I and the reader–I are then conflated, leading to easier identification with that character because the reader is able to shift the context of “I” to mean both character and self. First-person video games are notorious for their use of the
character-I/player-I deictic shift; players "become" the characters because they are forced to take that character's perspective in the game. First-person narratives work similarly. Dialogue is more subtle because the character-I is more evident in third-person narrative, but the shift is still possible whenever a character speaks and uses the word "I."

As teachers and as school and public librarians, then, we must find ways to showcase interesting story characters in vivid detail, with an emphasis on their idiosyncrasies and, if possible, the humor of their experiences. And we must do likewise as we share our stories (of our work, our libraries, and our lives). We must try to tell our truths through stories, trumpet our unity against a common foe (Illiteracy? Ignorance? Unimaginativeness?), and take advantage of the deictic shift so that our audiences can relate intensely to our "I" stories. Just as we want our readers to care for story characters and get immersed in story worlds, we want our users to care for us and get immersed in our libraries.

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Too often, lost and lonely students seem to find their way to the school library. As school librarians, we are blessed with the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of these young people.

In 2002 I was honored to be named recipient of the Amanda Award, which was established by the Florida Association for Media in Education (FAME) to recognize “high school and middle school media specialists for developing programs that enhance and support the self-esteem and well being of young adults by creating exemplary environments where students are made to feel that they fit in and that they are part of the school” (FAME n.d.). My program was called the “Lunch Bunch,” and it was not something planned, but rather just something that happened and then evolved.

After thirteen years in the classroom as an English teacher, I found myself in a school library and in a different world. Because I had taught honors students and moderated the yearbook, the students I had known and loved had been popular, active in the life of the school, and filled with self-confidence. In the school library, I came in contact with lost and lonely students who were seeking a place of refuge.

Day after day the same students came to the school library during lunch, each one seeking a quiet corner of the room, each one hoping to go unnoticed. The terrors of the cafeteria were more than they could face. I slowly came to realize that these students desperately needed a place to belong, a place that was “theirs,” and that place, I decided, was going to be the school library.

I began by getting to know each of these students and by introducing them to others. At first my attentions were unwanted, and I felt I was making some of the students uncomfortable, but I persisted. I asked them what they liked to read, and I ordered periodicals and books that appealed to their interests. Occasionally I asked one of the students...
to help me with a small chore: run an errand, cover the circulation desk for a few moments, put up a bulletin board display. The more I involved them, the more they wanted to be involved. One day, without any fanfare, I placed a chess game on the table. Friendships formed, chess tournaments were organized, and we became a close-knit group. This loosely connected group started calling themselves the "Lunch Bunch."

Four of the boys in the original group expressed an interest in the equipment in our production studio. They began experimenting with it and before long, CN News, the first televised news show at Cardinal Newman High School, was born. The boys brought bagged lunches, which they enjoyed in my office while they worked on the current production, a tradition that continues today.

Almost daily, anchors, reporters, and technical crew members meet in the school library to plan and produce the show, which airs during our weekly scheduled homeroom period. News stories cover many of the various happenings at the school, as well as club and sports highlights. Club moderators and coaches encourage their students to appear on the show to advertise their events, and we are proud that some members of our group have gone on to pursue careers in broadcast journalism.

Because our students are given much outside reading, it was difficult to encourage anyone to read for pleasure. I moved a bookshelf to the library’s front entrance, and created displays of recently acquired books and gave informal "book talks" to anyone who expressed any interest in one of the books on display. Before long, I developed a core group of readers who loved to talk about what they were reading and to share their recommendations with others. When FAME introduced the Florida Teens Read program, I encouraged our readers to become active participants. The idea behind the program is simple. Each year, a committee of school librarians appointed by FAME nominates fifteen books covering various themes, genres, and viewpoints, and which appeal to the teen reader. Students who have read at least three books from the list of nominees are encouraged to vote for their favorite. My selections from the list of nominees proved to be very popular with our patrons and, as a result, the number of readers increased. This year, each student who voted received a homemade chocolate chip cookie.

Research tells us that students do better academically when they are in nurturing environments, and over the past few years, our school has placed an added emphasis on creating a caring climate. Parents who send their children to our school in this poor economy often do so at great financial sacrifice. As working parents, many do not have the luxury of dropping off and picking up their children at times convenient to the school. In response, the school library staff worked with the administration to offer extended hours. We are now open from 7:00 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. every day and encourage students to use the time to complete homework assignments, read a periodical or book, or visit quietly with friends over a game of chess.

We recognize that a nurturing environment cannot exist where there is bullying. Incidents of bullying in schools, sometimes with tragic results, are being reported at an alarming rate. Through the leadership of our Guidance Department, our school implemented the nationwide Safe School Ambassadors program in January of 2010. Training and workshops, which are held in the school library, are provided by the Palm Beach County School District’s Prevention Center. I am proud to serve as a faculty advisor.

Students who become ambassadors must be recommended by a faculty member and must attend a day-long workshop where they are taught to recognize the signs of bullying and to respond in a safe and appropriate way to incidents they witness. Trained faculty members meet with the group once each month to discuss students’ concerns and to provide on-going instruction. Providing a caring, nurturing environment is the responsibility of every school, and we feel this program is a promising step in that direction.

Through the years the names and faces of my "Lunch Bunch" have changed, but these students will always hold a special place in my heart. It is so gratifying to see the lost and lonely who come to the school library blossom, make friends, and develop a sense of belonging. Creating a caring environment doesn’t require implementing a new program, impacting our already stretched budgets, or encroaching on our hectic schedules. In fact, it doesn’t have to cost anything at all. Sometimes all it takes is a welcoming smile and a friendly greeting.

Nelle Martin is the media director at Cardinal Newman High School in West Palm Beach, Florida, and the 2002 recipient of FAME’s Amanda Award.

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School librarians from Henrico County Public Schools in Virginia, the AASL 2011 National School Library Program of the Year (NSLPY) Award recipient, graciously shared some of their experiences caring for students in their libraries.
“Knowing students’ reading level and interests to help guide them to books that are good for them individually!”

Mary Ellen Jones,
Jackson Davis Elementary School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

“I work in a large suburban school with 650 students, grades K–5. One way I care about the students is making the concerted effort to know each student’s name. Being called by name, the students feel empowered to ask for what they need and participate in the library lessons. I have high expectations for all my students, regardless of age and ability, which is shown in my student-led lessons. I model what is expected (product) and allow the students the opportunity to discover the process through their own exploration.”

Kathleen Riopelle Roberts,
Rivers Edge Elementary School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

“We have a secret hallway sign to show love too. The students don’t need to speak or get out of line when walking in the hallway. The pinky represents the word “I,” the index finger and thumb make the “L” in “love,” and the pinky and the thumb extended represent the ‘Y’ for “you.”

“We also reward good behavior and returning books on time by giving them the ‘Scoob’ award. I have purchased many of the shelf elves (based on the book character in Shelf Elf by Jackie M. Hopkins) to give to classes. They get to pick an additional book for the entire nine weeks if they earn that award.”

Theresa Harris, Glen Allen Elementary School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

“At Twin Hickory, some of our students are home-bound or home-schooled. I make an extra effort to ensure that their reading needs are met. I am in contact via e-mail, phone, or through siblings who also attend our school. When these students need books they are selected by our library staff and sent home or picked up with work provided by the teacher. When we have book fairs, I make sure these students are invited to come in during a time that the fair is opened just for them.”

Joyce Ricks, Twin Hickory Elementary School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

Students working with Susan Howe at Tuckahoe Middle School (Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia)
“I am guessing many other schools do this, but if a student has a birthday on his or her library day, we put a little fountain display by their name tag and sing happy birthday to them. I always give them the option of having me sing ‘now or later because I am not the music teacher, so my singing my not be too great.’ Most students want the song NOW. We also send a birthday bookmark to all students on their birthday. The little fountain is available at Party City.

Also, just knowing every child’s name is a sign of caring. An idea I share with new librarians is to take a file folder and put a labeled picture of each child on the it. I have mostly four sections for each grade level, so I can get all pictures on six file folders. When teaching, you can have the folder in your lap and refer to it while learning students’ names. Parents are often impressed that many resource teachers know every child’s name.”

Theresa Harris, Glen Allen Elementary School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

“This year at Twin Hickory, the library has sponsored several fundraisers. We have a student who is a cancer survivor. In his honor, we motivated our children to raise $400.

I was honored in September when a student gave me a pin imprinted with the simple word “CARING.” I have worn it every day this year.”

Joyce Ricks, Twin Hickory Elementary School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

“When I was going through my treatments, I was worried about how my younger students would react to my new “bald” appearance. We had open discussions about my health and changes they would be seeing each week. I read two books to students to help explain cancer to them, “The Hair Book” by Graham Tether was quite hilarious, and the more serious, “Hair For Mama” by Kelly A. Tinkham, a story about a mother losing her hair because of cancer. The lessons ended in laughter, tears, and hugs. My students know that I care enough about them to tell them the simple truth. In return, they cared for me all year long with hugs, cards, flowers and pictures of me wearing my many bandanas. It was a year of caring for us all.”

Joyce Ricks, Twin Hickory Elementary School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

“Caring goes beyond knowing each student’s name. Caring means taking time to listen to what a student is really telling you and then making a point of remembering this information the next time that student is in the library. Gradually you will build readers and learners for life that way.”

Angie Branyon, Glen Allen High School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

Students learning at the library of Byrd Middle School (Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia).
“Caring for my students is the most important disposition I can have as a librarian and teacher. My students need to know, beyond any doubt, that I care about their WHOLE selves—not just the part that I teach. Whether it is through our Read and Ride program where we link reading and exercise, in our interactive collaborative lessons, or in one-on-one conversations I have with students, the most important connection I can have is to establish a trust that reflects mutual respect, absolute support, and genuine care for my students.”

Shannon Hyman,
Byrd Middle School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

“I show “care” for each of my students by stopping what I am doing, and looking them in the eyes and listening intently to whatever they have to share with me or ask me.”

Deanna Pollard,
Mehfoud Elementary, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

“I make it a daily practice to always speak and smile when I see students (or adults) in the hallways or when they enter the library. I have learned through the years that it may be the only smile or kind word that they get that day. I find something complimentary to say to the students who are not always the most popular, or may not have the material possessions that the other students do. Self-esteem is so critical at this age. My mantra is, ‘You are always welcome in the library.’ I believe that if it is said enough, the children will know they are indeed welcome.”

Marcialyn Ellis,
Short Pump Middle School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

“Caring in our library is using the students’ first names to address them. This is not an easy task as we have over one thousand students. If we do not know a name, we ask. We give attention to almost every student who enter our library. This is done by addressing students and asking what they need and how we can help (printing, computer, research, class work, recreational reading, etc.). Our goal is to be a place where students want to come every chance they get. We work hard to make our library a warm and inviting home for our students.”

Susan Howe,
Tuckahoe Middle School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

“Our school also uses the Drops in a Bucket philosophy from the book Have You Filled a Bucket Today? by Carol McCloud. When we see a student do something commendable (for someone else) we fill out a form shaped like a drop with a brief description of what the student did. These drops are read daily on the afternoon announcements and then displayed for the whole school to see on a bulletin board.”

Theresa Harris,
Glen Allen Elementary School, Henrico County Public Schools, Virginia

Visit <www.ala.org/aasl/aaslawards/nslpy/nslpy> for more about Henrico County Public Schools in Virginia and AASL’s NSLPY Awards.
The Calm AFTER the Storm

An Interview with Laura Bush about the Caring Power of the Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative

Julie Walker :: jwalker@ala.org
In 2005, a record breaking 26 named tropical storms including 13 hurricanes ravaged the Gulf Coast of the United States. In response to the devastation of hundreds of schools, the Laura Bush Foundation (<www.laurabushfoundation.org>) swiftly created The Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative to help school libraries become fully functional and to offer the needed print resources to the students of the schools that were destroyed or severely damaged.

As part of the first Foundation grant team to visit schools in April 2006, I was exposed to a firsthand view of the devastation as well as the resilience of the educators who, despite having suffered incredible personal losses, were caring for and educating their students. The experience so moved me that in the spring of 2009, during a four month sabbatical from my job, I spent seven weeks in the Gulf Coast visiting 50 Foundation grant recipients. My intent was to assess the impact of the grant on the school librarian, the students, the teachers, the principal and the community.

When I heard “Caring is Essential” was to be the theme for this issue of Knowledge Quest, I decided to approach Former First Lady Laura Bush about her Foundation’s initiative and how it has helped so many students and schools recover from disaster both physically and emotionally.

Although I had read all of the grant applications and participated in the first visits, the lens I carried was a curricular one. Steeped in the effect of school libraries on student achievement, I set out to find evidence of the school library’s role in the “recovery” of the educational system. Ultimately, I came away from that experience most struck by the unique stories of caring at each school – both during the storm and during the recovery. A small library "built by librarians across the country" sat on white plastic shelves purchased with a $300 Home Depot gift card in the corner of a beautiful new school library, an homage to the thousands of people who sent books, money and other donations to the schools. The circulation desk and shelves in one library I visited were purchased by a former student in another state, loaded in a truck and driven hundreds of miles to serve another generation of students. With labor in short supply, parents and teachers assembled...
The Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative

The Laura Bush Foundation for America’s Libraries <www.laurabushfoundation.org> was established in July 2001 to provide school libraries with new books to expand and improve their collections.

On March 8, 2006, First Lady Laura Bush, announced the creation of The Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative to help school libraries become fully functional and to offer the needed print resources to the students of the schools that were destroyed or severely damaged by the storms. On May 3, 2006, the first ten grant recipients were announced at Chalmette High School <http://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/05/20060503-8.html>. Since then, a total of 137 grants have been given to 116 schools.

Fund Established: FEBRUARY 2006

Funds Raised: $6,423,310

Granted Amount: $6.3 MILLION

Grants Awarded: 116 SCHOOLS

shelves and unboxed books to ensure their school libraries would reopen, and signal to students that some sense of normality had returned.

In all my encounters this theme of “care” came up again and again. The Foundation grants were a true extension of that. Along with the selfless acts of kindness I witnessed in the region, the rapid response efforts of The Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative played a huge role in the emotional recovery of students and school staff. The grants meant more to the recipients than just getting the education system operational. They provided a beautiful space where the school community could alternately draw back together or escape the realities outside of the door. One teacher described the school library to me as “the brightest spot in their lives.” When I asked a school librarian about the greatest benefit of the grant, she told me, “In the length of time it takes to read a chapter in a book, it takes you away from all of this.”

On March 1, 2012, I attended the ceremony that marked the final round of grants in this initiative. The event was held at Chalmette High School, the same place where the first ten grant recipients were announced on May 3, 2006. As I read through the notes that former grantees had provided for the event I was again struck by the recurring thoughts of care. Six years later that theme still resonated.

“As our parish rebuilt and refurbished our buildings, these books restored and nourished our students.”

“The Laura Bush Foundation grant turned the library into a welcoming, cheerful place of stability and warmth for our students whose lives had been totally disrupted by the hurricane.”

When I heard “Caring is Essential” was to be the theme for this issue of Knowledge Quest, I decided to approach my colleagues on the Advisory Committee who helped me form the interview questions, I explored the “caring” side of The Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative with Mrs. Bush.

Former First Lady Laura Bush at a school library in the Gulf Coast. PHOTO CREDIT TO PAUL MORSE
JULIE WALKER: An obvious purpose of your Gulf Coast Initiative was the physical restoration of school library collections. Were you surprised by the healing effect that both adults and children attributed to the new collections?

LAURA BUSH: I was surprised. After the hurricanes of September 2005, I had the last meeting of the funders—the people who had raised the money for the Laura Bush Foundation. It was a meeting to thank them for raising the money. But instead of just thanking them and saying that was enough, I said, “How about we continue to raise money across the Gulf Coast?” And they said, “Sure, why don’t we raise cash for cash and whatever we raise we’ll give away. And we won’t try to keep any for endowment.” I thought that was terrific.

At the time I really thought what I was trying to do was lighten the load on these school districts; just take care of one piece of rebuilding and that would be restoring their library collections. But as soon as I went to schools I realized there was a caring part of it. I realized that part of it would be healing.

I remember when George and I went to a school in Mississippi. These teachers who had lost their own homes and their schools saw George and they started to weep. They could finally cry because they were with him. And I realized how healing it would be for the librarians and for the school people to know that someone was going to replace their books. But also how healing it would be for children to come back to a school with a whole collection of new, fresh, books.

JW: I always called it a dirty little secret, but the librarians expressed to me that in many ways the flood was a good thing because their existing collections were so old and tired. I posed a question to a teacher when I was on my sabbatical [in the Gulf] about the impact of the grant, and she remarked, “The kids who liked to read would look past the dusty pages of the books in the old library, but the reluctant reader just looked past.” Students invariably commented about the newness of the books. One student even commented that the books are “clean.” Do children and teens, in some sense, measure their worth in terms of the quality of resources provided for them?

LB: I think we all do, really; adults as well. I remember reading an article by John Updike where he said that in his hometown in Pennsylvania when he was growing up, the school building was the prettiest building in town. He grew up in the age of those beautiful, classically designed school buildings. He thought having a beautiful school meant students were the most important people in town. I think all of us, when we see things are clean and we see a great collection of books; when we see the wonderful architecture and a school that’s pretty and decorated in a good way, and taken care of, the children, the teachers, and everyone see their worth. They see that they are that important; that what we provide to them is clean, fresh and pretty.

I often think of the landscape of school buildings as not being terrific, even though inside we’re teaching environmentalism and how we should take care of the land around us. But in fact, the school yard itself is not always taken care of. We’re really giving a double message there.

JW: One of the goals of the Foundation is to inspire young people to develop a lifelong love of reading. Do you find that access to appealing books and competence in reading will also lead children and teens to a greater understanding of and a more caring attitude toward others?

LB: I believe that reading and reading widely lets people know more about other people. I really think that when mothers read to their little children, and even if you’re reading about an animal that has certain characteristics of a human, that it’s a really wonderful way to teach children how to act in certain situations, or a way to understand that we all share the same feelings of happiness, sadness, loneliness, and other emotions. So I think there is a way to become more empathetic to people around the world if you know more about people around the world. I don’t know the research on it. I don’t know if that really is the case or not. But I certainly know from growing up as an only child that books were a solace to me, that reading was really important to me emotionally because of the time I had by myself. I didn’t have brothers and sisters at home.

At the time I really thought what I was trying to do was lighten the load on these school districts [...] But as soon as I went to schools I realized there was a caring part of it. I realized that part of it would be healing.
Special thanks to the members who serve on the Advisory Committee for The Laura Bush Foundation and The Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative. Thank you for your assistance with the interview questions, and for all your efforts on behalf of the Initiative, which has helped to bring solace to so many students and school staff.

Pamela Willeford
Chair, Laura Bush Foundation Advisory Committee
Austin, Texas

Jose Aponte
Director, San Diego County Library
San Diego, California

Barbara J. Correll
Retired School Library Administrator
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Eliza Cleary
Beverly Cleary Professor for Children and Youth, Information School, University of Washington
Seattle, Washington

Gary Hartzell
Professor Emeritus, University of Nebraska at Omaha
Omaha, Nebraska

Marilyn Z. Joyce
School Librarian, Brewer High School
Brewer, Maine

Dr. Larry Leverett
Executive Director, Panasonic Foundation
Secaucus, New Jersey

Barbara Martin, PhD
Professor Emeritus, College of Information, University of North Texas
Denton, Texas

Jim Maxwell
Superintendent (Ret.), Lane Education Service District
Eugene, Oregon

Tim Wadham
St. Louis, Missouri

Junko Yokota
Director, Center for Teaching through Children’s Books
Chicago, Illinois

JW: The committee members who visited the Gulf Coast prior to the first round of grants were struck by the makeshift libraries that school librarians, many of whom had lost their own homes, had put together with donations, often in portable buildings on temporary shelves. What common knowledge or values do you believe these librarians shared that prompted this sense of urgency “to get kids reading again?”

LB: Well, I think they knew. Librarians, like I am, love to read. They know how important reading is to really your whole social and emotional well being. They wouldn’t be librarians if they didn’t know how critical books are to life. The other thing we saw that was really remarkable was how responsible school people felt. They were the ones that had to get those schools open again. Not only the librarians, but also the teachers, and principals… many of whom were living with relatives some distance from the school district, or they were in FEMA trailers themselves. They had lost everything themselves, but they immediately went back to work after the storm and started to clean their school buildings and get the mud out of their school buildings. The librarians started to try to put together a collection again because they knew how important it was. These little towns in Louisiana and Mississippi couldn’t rebuild unless there were schools for people to send their children to when they came back. I was just amazed at how resilient the school people were, all the way across the Gulf Coast — the librarians, the teachers, and the principals, and how responsible they felt to come back immediately and rebuild those schools.

JW: Libraries are more than books; indeed we have demonstrated that they are foundational to rebuilding schools, communities and lives. As a librarian, what touched you most about the Foundation’s work in the Gulf?

LB: I was touched by all of it. There was a story that a school librarian told me about a little girl who evacuated with her parents and moved away for a year, and then she came back a year later with her library book and presented it to the librarian, and said, “What’s my fine?” It really makes me want to weep when I talk about it. She lost everything but she took really good care of her school library book and brought it back a year later. There were so many really moving stories that the whole library committee got to hear at those workshops and at every round of grants to the gulf coast libraries. These stories just show how resilient people are and how important people think schools are, and libraries are, to children. And how they want to take care of their children; they want the children who went to their schools to come back and find books on the shelves. All of us know how the structure of a schedule — going to school in the morning and spending the hours at school before you go home — is important to people’s well being. And once children could get back into school and go to school in the morning, and come home in the afternoon, everybody could breathe a sigh of relief.

JW: There was a teacher who pulled me aside on one of my visits. She had been gone for two years. She actually moved away. In the meantime, the librarian had restored the collection. The teacher said that when she walked back into the school everything that she needed to teach was there. Just like it was before.
LB: That is definitely the silver lining to the storm. All these new collections across the Gulf Coast were built because of you and the whole library committee that did the workshops. When we gave out the checks the library collections were built to support the curriculum, and then to support the specific student body. This was not just a "go order everything that had been in the card catalog." And of course none of these librarians, I suspect, had ever ordered a whole collection. They had just acquired a few new books with their very paltry funds that they had gotten every year to add a few books to their collection. So, I think that was the really good thing about being able to rebuild these library collections. They really are very vital collections now to their student body and curriculum.

JW: Americans seem by nature and experience to be a caring people. Calls for disaster relief – whether at home or aboard – result in generous donations. As we know from applications we read for the regular LBF grants, many young people, regardless of zip code, lack sufficient access to appealing books. Are there lessons from the Gulf Coast Initiative that we might apply to stimulate collective action on behalf of all of our children and teens that lack this access?

LB: Schools, of course, and school faculty, are so busy. They’re not fundraisers. They shouldn’t have to be fundraisers. Obviously the state and local districts pay for the public education of students, but if they actually tried to do some fundraising they would be surprised at how people would want to help. Maybe that is just something the administration of the school districts could work on, but I know there are ways. I know that librarians do not want a book drive where you get a whole lot of books that you have to go through and physically touch every single one of them, and make sure they’re all okay and not written in and are in good shape. I know they would much rather be able to order fresh new books that already come with the catalog information in them. But I think they might be surprised at how people in their communities would love to support their schools in many ways. Not just with new books, but even with mentoring or new playgrounds, if they just reached out to their communities. There might be a way for newspapers and television stations to help their local school districts do fundraising drives of various sorts. I think people would give. I think people would be happy to support their local schools. People just don’t get asked very often.

JW: That’s the end of my formal questions. Is there anything else you would like to say?

LB: One of the things I hope you’ll say from my viewpoint is how valuable the Advisory Board is to the Foundation. And how helpful you’ve been, especially to these schools across the gulf coast who attended the required workshops when they came to pick up their checks. I think it was really smart to ask librarians to bring their principals to the workshops. In many cases I think it was the first time a principal saw how important the school library is to his school. And how effective a help a school library can be if school librarians are included, and the whole school works together to buy the books that support the curriculum and the specific needs of their student body. It was very important. I just don’t think people think of it, even principals. They don’t think about how important a school library collection is, or how important a school librarian is.

Julie Walker is the executive director of AASL and a member of the Advisory Committee for the Laura Bush Foundation.

Her visits to the Gulf Coast schools are chronicled in a blog she maintained during her sabbatical, <www.sqpegroundwhole.blogspot.com>.

Laura Bush is the Former First Lady of the United States. Education was the primary focus of her tenure as First Lady from 2001-2009, as she supported numerous government and private sector efforts to promote reading and education. In June 2002, she founded The Laura Bush Foundation for America’s Libraries, which has assisted schools across the nation with building and extending their library collections. In 2006, her Foundation created The Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative to help school libraries devastated by storms to rebuild. Prior to becoming First Lady, Mrs. Bush taught second grade at Kennedy Elementary School in Houston, Texas for two years and worked as a school librarian at Dawson Elementary School in Austin, Texas. Visit <www.laurabushfoundation.org> to read more about Laura Bush and the foundation.

I think it was really smart to ask librarians to bring their principals to the workshops. In many cases I think it was the first time a principal saw how important the school library is to his school.
In today’s distracting, rushed, digital world, good old-fashioned companionable silence is a greatly undervalued and rare commodity. And I recommend it.

Mrs. Thornton, The Ghost House, AND THE REMARKABLE VALUE OF CARE

J.J. Johnson
cbcknowledgequest@cbcbooks.org

My librarian in elementary school is the reason I am an author today. *Mrs. Esther Thornton.* Ah, just writing her name makes me smile. Mrs. Thornton was in her late fifties, small-boned, white-haired. She wasn’t gushy, effusive, or touchy-feely—but she cared. She knew every student’s name; she was generous with her smile, and she curated her shelves thoughtfully. She made her school library a welcome place for us to learn, explore, question, research, and—of course—read. Picture books, encyclopedias, chapter books, historical fiction, mysteries...and a special section just for Dr. Seuss. Plus two swiveling racks of paperback novels for older kids. The books on those shelves! The worlds they opened!

Caring came as naturally as breathing to Mrs. Thornton; for others of us, it takes practice. Luckily, there are different expressions of care. You know the old saying: “different strokes for different folks.” With that in mind, I offer the following examples of care, selected from the robust repertoire of Mrs. Thornton.

**The Bean Bag Effect, or Why “Shushing” is Good for Students**

Mrs. Thornton was a master of creating a peaceful environment. Her expectations for students’ behavior were clear from our first library visit as kindergartners—quiet voices and settled, respectful bodies. The school library wasn’t huge, but it was blessed with natural light, to which Mrs. Thornton added comfy chairs (I remember bean bags, but I might be making that up, because bean bags are actually quite loud, aren’t they?), a kid-sized water pitcher and cups, and a shelving scheme that offered cozy nooks to snuggle up, settle down, and read. It’s a truism that human beings must feel safe and secure before learning can occur. School libraries can be safe havens for students: quiet places to decompress, without classroom pressures (grades, time limits, assignments) or social stresses (cliques, bullies, the negotiations of friendship). Reading and quiet offer respite for the weary souls of children. This is especially true for introverted kids, but even extroverts need some downtime now and then. So, go ahead, put your finger to your lips, and “shh”—smiling while you do.

**Less Talking, More Doing**

Mrs. Thornton didn’t say, “I care about you, Jenny Johnson. You are special to me” (although it would have been fine with me if she had!).
More than giving me her words, she let me share her quiet. This was companionable silence, which roughly means: “We don’t need to talk. I just like being with you.” And hope you’ll forgive my gross generalization, but I do think boys tend to be better at this than girls. Shared activity helps. I’ve learned to practice companionable silence while mountain biking or rock climbing with my son; sometimes he talks, sometimes he doesn’t, but I’m always too winded to ruin the moment with my usual verbiage.

Back in the Perry Browne School library, Mrs. Thornton let me sit and read while she sorted books. She invited me into her tiny office—remember what a kick it was, as a kid, to see a grown-up’s office?—while she used the laminator. Don’t get me wrong; I didn’t live in the library. These were ten- or fifteen-minute chunks, accumulated from kindergarten to sixth grade. Cumulative Companionable Silence. In today’s distracting, rushed, digital world, good old-fashioned companionable silence is a greatly undervalued and rare commodity. And I recommend it.

Being Real

More than anything, Mrs. Thornton made me feel like a real person, not Just A Kid. Mrs. Thornton did not patronize or make excuses for children. She expected good behavior. Books were to be returned on time. No funny business. But she cultivated critical thinking. Every time a student returned a library book, she would ask what we thought of it. (Less book report, more I’m truly interested in what you think.) I remember collecting my thoughts as I walked down the hall to the school library—nervous and excited to tell Mrs. Thornton my opinion of Ramona and Her Father. Had I liked it enough to read all the way through? Yes! Would I recommend it to a friend? Yes. Were there any tears that needed mending?

Mrs. Thornton, I’m really sorry, but someone made pencil marks on page 33. Listening, she would nod earnestly and ask follow-up questions—with never a whiff of condescension, but always a twinkle of delight.

Cultivating a Lifetime Love of the Written Word

And if you’re wondering, my answer is—yes, I believe that e-ink, story apps, “real” paper bound books, and audio books are all just fine—wonderful, in fact. They all develop an appreciation for good stories, good storytelling, and, thus, clear thinking and good writing. When I was in the second grade, Mrs. Thornton helped me discover that I loved to write stories as much as I loved reading them. She made me an offer she gave to every interested student: If I worked hard creating a book, and I sat down with her to make it the best it could be, she would laminate it, catalog it, and place it on the bookshelf.

Really, Mrs. Thornton? My own book? You’re not teasing me, are you?

My first book was about a haunted house. Black marker on yellow construction paper. Surely it would make the awards shortlists. Probably win the Caldecott.

Ugh, no. Mrs. Thornton respected me enough to tenderly quash my delusions of grandeur.

Carefully, gently, she edited The Ghost House with me, correcting my repeated misspelling of “ghost;” wondering aloud how best my illustrations could help tell the story; making sure my narrative had a beginning, middle, and end. When—and not until—the book was worthy, she cataloged it and helped me shelve it. Talk about pride of place.

I may be the only student who ever checked out The Ghost House by Jenny Johnson, but the pleasure of seeing my book on the library shelf told me everything I needed to know about becoming an author, and more importantly, it demonstrated the remarkable value of a school librarian’s care.

J.J. Johnson is the author of the YA novels This Girl is Different (Peachtree, 2011; winner of the Parent’s Choice Foundation Silver Honor) and the forthcoming The Theory of Everything (Peachtree, autumn 2012). J.J. grew up in Norwich, a small town in upstate New York, and graduated from Binghamton University. She has a Master of Education in Adolescent Risk and Prevention from Harvard University. J.J. believes in good libraries, good friends, good fun, and taking good risks. Find out more about J.J. and her books at <http://jjjohnsonauthor.com>.
Caring and compassionate school librarians have long known the value of using books to help students address challenging issues in their personal lives. These school librarians know the importance of providing students with titles that help them understand life’s everyday ups and downs, as well as more difficult concerns. School librarians have often used bibliotherapy as a process that leads youth toward emotional good health through the medium of literature (1992). Ancient Greeks used the terms biblion (book) and therapeia (healing) (Rudman, Gagne, and Bernstein 1993). Graphic novels can be effective bibliotherapy tools for middle and high school students, since many of the titles deal with challenging issues that students have experienced.

When school librarians use engaging 21st-century literacies like graphic novels to help students address challenging issues, this activity enables school librarians to “cultivate attributes that will serve them and society” (AASL 2008, 5). As Barbara Stripling states, “If the goal of education is to nurture and challenge all children to discover who they are and who they want to be, then school librarians must take a leadership role in creating an environment in which students can develop their attitudes and capacities” (2012, 20). School librarians, in partnership with guidance counselors and teachers, can foster this type of nurturing environment by using graphic novels to help young adults develop an understanding of themselves and others. In doing so, school librarians will address the following AASL Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (<www.ala.org/aasl/standards>):

“4.1.1 Read, view, and listen for pleasure and personal growth.

4.1.2 Read widely and fluently to make connections with self, the world, and previous reading.

4.1.4 Seek information for personal learning in a variety of formats and genres.

4.3.3. Seek opportunities for pursuing personal and aesthetic growth.” (2007, 7)
Although graphic novels for young adults are not a panacea for solving the challenging issues that teens face, reading about comparable experiences through the lives of fictional contemporaries can help to alleviate teenagers’ angst and let them know that they are not alone.

The following Teaching for Learning guideline from Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs <www.ala.org/aasl/guidelines> is also addressed by school librarians when they use graphic novels with students:

“The school library program provides instruction that addresses multiple literacies, including information literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, and technology literacy” (AASL 2009, 23).

Furthermore, in one of the actions under the Role of Reading, Empowering Learners also encourages school librarians to acquire and promote “current high-quality, high-interest collections of books and other reading resources in multiple formats” (AASL 2009, 21).

### Suggested Graphic Novels for Middle and High School

**BULLYING**

**COMING-OF-AGE STORIES**

**EATING DISORDERS**

**GANGS**

**HOMELESSNESS**

**HOMOSEXUALITY**

**MENTAL ISSUES**

**SICKNESS/DEATH**
Although graphic novels for young adults are not a panacea for solving the challenging issues that teens face, reading about comparable experiences through the lives of fictional contemporaries can help to alleviate teenagers’ angst and let them know that they are not alone. As the author Chris Crutcher states, “Reading books that in some way reflect the life of the reader can be tremendously helpful to that reader. It can validate the reader’s life” (Halls 2010, 34). Reading about challenging issues in an appealing format such as graphic novels can be an even more rewarding and validating literary experience for today’s teens.

Consider sharing some of the graphic novels listed in this article with your middle and high school students who are dealing with challenging life issues. The list of suggested titles, and recommended grade levels, is adapted from the book Connecting Comics to Curriculum: Strategies for Grades 6–12 (Gavigan and Tomasevich 2011).

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Works Cited:


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