

The Mindful Library: A Path to Student Well-Being, Mental Health Literacy, and Mindfulness in the Library and Learning Commons

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Context and Introduction

Supporting students' well-being, mental health and ability to learn is an important goal for school libraries where a caring and nurturing environment in the Library and Learning Commons (LLC) contributes in a positive way to the healthy growth and development of students' learning and literacy. Teacher-librarians can help promote positive mental health in the LLC by building on students' assets and strengths, and helping students find support when they are struggling.

The Ontario School Library Association's visionary document, *Together for Learning*, served as guide and inspiration as I took over the LLC headship at R. H. King Academy. Our school is a diverse, public secondary school in East Toronto with a unique timetable, special programs, a uniform and over 1000 students. As our LLC evolved, so did curriculum objectives and Toronto District School Board (TDSB) directives regarding mental health and well-being. In January 2014, the release of the *Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategic Plan* outlined the TDSB's ongoing commitment to direct and align resources to support student achievement, mental health literacy and well-being. The main idea is to nurture a school culture where emphasis on mental health and wellness is integrated into the daily lives of all students.

We knew the LLC could have a leading role in this change. In fact, R.H. King Academy had been engaged in mental health literacy and education for some time. In January 2014, I presented with Ruth Hall (Co-ordinator Library, Learning Resources and Global Education TDSB) at the Ontario Library Association Super Conference on what we've done at R. H. King Academy to build capacity in well-being and mental health and help implement this new vision for education and care of our students within the innovative and collaborative reach of the LLC.

Since the creation of the federal Mental Health Commission, we've seen a roll out of mental health and well-being strategies from various ministries to encourage educators, parents, and communities to combat stigma and increase mental health literacy in Ontario. In 2010, *Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development from the Ministry of Child and Youth Service* "guided the development of services and supports for youth province-wide". Social-emotional learning, meditation, sense of self, and support for transitions were all highlighted in this document. As teacher-librarians, we are mindful of the quote from Glaze featured in *Together for Learning*, where "Quality education includes education of the head; it includes a focus on the whole person...the cognitive, affective and behavioural domains of learning " (p.29). *Supporting Minds: An Educator's Guide to Promoting Students' Mental Health and Well-*

Being advocates the importance of positive classroom environments, and an asset-based approach building on strengths and developing student resilience.

In 2011, a TDSB student census indicated 72% of students felt stress to the point they were nervous or anxious some or most of the time. This data proved a powerful motivator to affect change. Initiatives like TDSB's "Kindness and Caring" urge teacher-librarians and educators to consider the whole child and what they bring into the LLC. Mindful speaking, compassion, respecting privacy, valuing individuals, ideas and cultures all come into play in the mindful library that creates a positive climate for learning. TDSB *Years of Action* plan and the new "Mental Health Strategy" align with goals of the LLC and draft standards of practice for school libraries in Canada especially in areas of leading the learning community to achieve school goals and collaborative engagement.

Teacher-librarians can lead in implementing school goals for student achievement and well-being in the school, district and the province. We can carefully curate, build and promote collections and digital resources in the LLC for students, teachers and parents that reflect accurate information about mental health and well-being.

Looking at my own practice, I thought of my neglected library blog, *Lamp in the Library*, and realized that where I originally intended the symbol of the lamp as the traditional lamp of learning, and while much guiding, research and information literacy was happening in our library, there was another light often needed by students. And that was a flashlight, or as I prefer to think a "head-lamp"-- something to show students where to go when things are emotionally dark, when they are blindly negotiating their transition to high school, and when they are confused and stressed about their achievement and post-secondary direction as senior students. A head-lamp that can light the path to resilience and learning within the caring and compassionate LLC.

The LLC functions as an observatory: we see a cross-section of hundreds of students every day. We help students transition in their learning and information literacy: from a "Googler" to an efficient database user, from grade 8 to grade 9 reader, from senior student to post-secondary bound researcher. There are many choices to be made in the daily life of a teacher-librarian's work. It takes a family, a community, and a school to nurture resilience in students. But when faced with the reality of sheltering, and in many cases, nurturing students in the LLC, I knew we had to step up to the plate and acknowledge that mental health and well-being have always been part of our libraries in schools. We serve every student-- often the most vulnerable, and we all know who they are: shy grade nine boys, students overwhelmed with papers to research, students who struggle with reading, students new to the country and learning English, students who may be bullied about their sexuality or cultural identity, students who are ill or bereaved, students looking for a safe space with the supervision of caring teachers *in loco parentis*.

Research from the U.K. has found that lunchtime is the most stressful time for students in schools, as peer-to-peer interactions often go unsupervised. It's little wonder our libraries are so busy at lunch. For in addition to projects and positive achievement, individuals are there simply because, *we are there*. If mental health and well-being are essential to student achievement, teacher-librarians can help build mentally healthy schools and healthy relationships within caring and mindful libraries. We can promote positive mental health, help fight stigma and respond to students who are struggling, directing them to the support they may need. The vision of the TDSB is "a culture where mental health and well-being is integrated into every student's school experience" (TDSB, 2013-17), and where teachers can be on the look-out for students struggling with their mental health. Here are some practical steps we've taken in our LLC to focus on adolescent mental health and wellness promotion, information literacy and education for our students, staff and community.

Leading in the LLC: Collaborating for Mental Health Literacy, Learning, and Well-Being

Our journey down the path of mental health and well-being through the LLC has provided exciting opportunities for collaboration among teacher-librarians, teachers, and professionals who support student achievement. As teacher-librarians at the secondary level, we have our subject specialties but often consider ourselves generalists as we keep up with curricular demands; my background is English and Drama. When presented with the opportunity to learn more about mental health and well-being for our school community in 2012, I saw an opportunity to lead and increase the value of our LLC .

We had observed that new laptop carts in various departments had cut down our library lab bookings and circulation of non-fiction has been declining with increased use of digital resources. I jumped at the chance to be part of our school team trained in *Mental Health & High School Curriculum* developed by the Canadian Mental Health Association with Dalhousie University adolescent psychiatrist, Dr. Stanley Kutcher. One of several schools chosen by the TDSB to pilot this new curriculum, we were also to be part of an evidence-based study on its efficacy. After the training, I wondered: How could the LLC be involved on the ground floor of this initiative? How could we scaffold up to help build capacity and understanding of mental health literacy in staff and students? What could we do? And maybe more importantly, what were we doing already? There is a Native American deer song that goes:

First, you just look;
Later you will find, find
First, you just look;
Later you will find, find (Swann,1996, p. 525)

Mental Health Literacy and Learning Partnerships in the LLC

I started looking for tracks in our LLC as the place where "personal, academic,

social and cultural" learning occurs (Together for learning, p.3). We had resources, space, and caring adults in the library--a good beginning. Personally, I felt passionately about the importance of mental health literacy in the curriculum, and timely neuroscience research on developing teenage brains. As a student at Queen's University in the late 1970s, my summer employment was working as recreation staff in a ward of a provincial mental health facility. That experience has stayed with me. I recall taking patients to the hospital library for books, and facilitating creative writing workshops for patients. I realized there were a lot of connections here... I cared about the patients then, and I care about moving our school forward in understanding and awareness of mental health, mental disorders, and availability of accurate resources to help reduce the stigma often associated with mental illness.

It is understood that stigma is often a barrier to treatment and support of individuals with mental disorders. The LLC seemed the perfect arena to explore new curriculum, help support it, direct students to accurate information and databases, and build our collection of mental health, well-being and neuroscience resources for staff, students, and the community. We are working to develop a space for all brains and abilities, a space for nurture, and a space for students to learn about how their brain works and what supports we can direct them to if they need mental health assistance.

I felt we could lead in the LLC to make this initiative fly. We could source resources, and provide support for teachers and the Guidance Department. I ordered curriculum documents and met with Careers teachers to see if we could collaborate on the teaching and forge new relationships with support workers helping our students achieve. Grade 10 seemed the perfect fit for this new curriculum. The average onset of mental disorders in adolescents is age 15-25. We know that one in five students may deal with a mental disorder and that three-quarters of those students will not get the treatment they need (Mental health & high school,2009). And I learned that early intervention is key to a better outcome for students. To date, our LLC has helped facilitate mental health literacy for over 600 Grade 10 students over two years. Feedback from students and teachers has been positive and we believe our involvement is helping to fight stigma and contribute to a safe and caring community. In addition, our LLC is also supporting a new school-wide curriculum pilot, Strength-Based Resilience, for the TDSB.

Reflecting TDSB priorities, we're building our collection with digital resources and books on understanding and caring for our brains. President Obama announced recently that America is putting 100 million into brain research; brain research is big. As we all know, human brains and libraries have been working together since the ancient library at Alexandria. We have books and digital resources on: neuroscience, brain plasticity, brain anatomy, mental disorders, and professional development for teachers. Let's make room in our school libraries for resources for students and staff with mindfulness, mental health and well-being in mind. Let me tell you about four things we are doing in our school library to develop: a space for all brains and abilities, space for nurture and a space to learn about mental health.

1. Prevention and Protection: Low Light Zones, Decibels and Bikes

Teacher-librarians are the available caring adults in the LLC: listening, reflecting, observing. But sometimes we need to "listen" to the big picture of sound before we can really "hear". I have a handy phone app that reveals the decibel level in our library. Since we pulled out the 30 year old carpet and replaced it with tile, we may have succeeded in making the room better for our airways, but not for our ears. Not surprisingly, we've had some sound issues, especially at lunch when students often do group work.

Many of our students live far from school and prefer to do group work at lunch as it's difficult to meet otherwise. One noon hour, I recorded the noise level at 84 decibels--that's considered very loud, like a freight train going by or noise in a factory. I flicked the lights and announced it: "We're up to 80 decibels which is not good for your ears or your brain!" Students are bombarded by loud sound, sometimes of their own volition with their headphones, but also in chaotic corridors of changing classes. We can't go back to the shushing days of libraries, but we need to be protective of a space where students can concentrate and avoid excessive noise known to compound stress. For many teacher-librarians in schools, only one teacher supervises at lunch, and monitoring chat/noise levels can be challenging.

To this end, we've provided a Quiet Room in a previously under-used corner with a quieter environment for students who may be sensitive to noise or fluorescent light. Furnished with study carrels and individual desk lamps, we turned off overhead lighting to create a lower light space for students prone to headaches. This is the LLC as sanctuary; a respite from noise and confusion and a version of "The Still Library." In another seminar room, is a "Calming Corner" with nature photographs, objects from nature, and stress-reduction CDs and audio. As students are increasingly besotted with the distractions of screens, headphones, ubiquitous texting and social networking, it's important to provide a calm environment in schools; a space to slow down, be calm, and breathe. Which leads me to our next initiative on supporting a Mindfulness Program through your LLC.

2. The Mindful Library and Learning Commons

Beginning in 2010, R. H. King introduced an eight-week mindfulness component in our Leadership Curriculum. I had an interest in, and some training in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and was happy to offer support by gathering resources and helping facilitators. Mindfulness involves the practice of paying attention to the present moment without judgement. The program provided by www.mindfulnesseveryday.org, helped students with social emotional learning and self-regulation. Results from an evidence-based study of the program encouraged the creation of a whole-school mindfulness program called the Mindful Minute. This secular, "brain-break", a recess from distraction and rushing, is broadcast daily throughout the school over the P.A. in student - voiced recordings with music. The recordings run for

about three minutes daily. Our LLC helped get this off the ground, because it provided a perfect segue into our sustained reading program, King Reads.

This was an exciting confluence of ideas and energy as library staff collaborated with facilitators to help script, record, and promote the Mindful Minute. We also introduced the concept to teachers in staff meetings and to parents at School Council. In the library, during the daily Mindful Minute, we turn off overhead lighting, and ask students to respect the Mindful Minute by not talking, sitting or working quietly so as not to disturb those who wish to participate. (I model it daily by sitting or standing, and it's sometimes my favourite part of the morning!) We encourage the whole school to stop, listen, breathe and then start to read for 20 minutes. As with sustained reading programs, our Mindful Minute has varied uptake across the staff and student population. But by modeling mindful behaviour in the LLC, and promoting the program with resources and posters, we help to create a mindful, safe and inclusive atmosphere for learning and being.

The LLC helped to develop and facilitate The Stress Less Club. This weekly drop-in program in a library seminar room is for students anxious or worried about their workloads and life balance. Students learn to deal with stress in constructive ways: by understanding the physiology of stress, and using time management, mindfulness and resilience techniques to help manage it. Our LLC teacher-librarians assist the facilitators and provide a welcoming space and resources for students who are challenged by worry and self-confidence issues.

A library seminar room is also used by students with severe anxiety who require accommodation to write tests in a quiet environment outside of the classroom. Teachers send tests to us, which we administer. Because the LLC is such a busy and welcoming place, we encourage the use of our space for agencies and youth workers to help normalize and foster support for our vulnerable students.

3. LLC Reaching to Community

R .H. King Academy's unique timetable includes a study hall period for students in the mornings. As part of our mental health and wellness initiative, we invited social workers and youth workers from Pathways to Education and another community-based support programs to meet with and counsel students on a weekly basis in a LLC seminar room. Our Guidance Department had little available space, and students feel comfortable coming to the library and feel it's less stigmatizing. With this kind of resilience building and group counselling happening onsite, our teacher-librarians are able to better understand existing programs supporting students. In this space, we've provided an exercise bike for students who need a little physical exercise to help them focus or calm down. And after school, staff can use it too, which helps teacher well-being.

Outreach to parents in School Council and engagement with the community at large around mental health literacy is important for teacher-librarians. Community,

Culture and Caring is a directive of the TDSB. To help make your library an integral part of new directives, look for opportunities to join committees dealing with mental health and well-being. Each TDSB school must form a mental health committee, and I would encourage teacher-librarians to be part of this committee to help support with resources and space for initiatives. Go to your administration and express interest, or offer to host a meeting. The following initiatives reach out to parents, other professionals in area schools, and our students.

Teacher Education and Self-Care:

Through a Mental Health Committee meeting in our family of schools (which brings together elementary and secondary school educators and other professionals), R. H. King Academy LLC offered to help pilot a Mindfulness program for educators called SmartinEducation (Educators & Professional Support Staff Program). This program, a component of teacher education at the University of British Columbia, is evidence-based and designed to address specific needs of educators and youth support professionals (K-12). It includes mindfulness, stress reduction and self-awareness.

Accordingly, in fall of 2013, our LLC hosted facilitators, elementary and secondary teachers, middle school guidance teachers, administrators and school public health nurses for an eight week after school program. Not only was it successful, but it brought together professionals who could share strategies for dealing with stressed and anxious students. (For me, it was fun to look at the library ceiling from a yoga mat!) The LLC's versatile physical space provided an environment for innovation, and professional learning linking informal leaders collaborating for change. With staff well-being and self-care in mind, we hung a portable hammock in our storage room at the back of our library office and promoted it to staff. We've even had sleep-deprived colleagues with new babies visit us at lunch to try it out.

LLC staff worked with our principal, David Rowan, to arrange for all non-teaching and teaching staff to complete on-line TDSB Mental Health training module in an extended staff meeting. Library lab computers helped facilitate this important education piece for all staff in the building.

Transitions and Well-Being in the LLC: Having a LLC head-lamp can help light the way for students transitioning to high school. Working with "feeder school" counsellors, our LLC hosted an informal gathering of Grade 8 students in November of 2013. Middle school counsellors observed that many students are worried early in their Grade 8 year about expectations for high school. So we invited them in to allay their anxieties and gave them a tour of the LLC and our virtual library resources. Meeting library staff, and knowing they are welcome, can make a huge difference. Each September, we make a point of presenting our databases to parents at the first School Council meeting. Grade 9 Library Council members create books displays featuring materials that help ease the transition to high school, and in my presentation to parents, I stress the importance of supporting students new to high school by featuring our Rosen database, *Teen Health & Wellness* as well as other excellent sites for accurate mental health and well-being

information. Our school Public Health Nurse speaks to parents about expectations, stress management and resilience and parents are informed about new Mental Health and Addiction Nurses assigned to school districts. Sourcing and presenting parents with a TDSB approved list of mental health resources available in the community, helps promote mental health literacy and lets parents know we are caring about the whole child in our LLC.

Always happy to encourage the arts in the creative space of our LLC, we inherited an old piano from our music department. This instrument, which nestles into the circulation desk, has proved a wonderful addition to what we jokingly call our "Downtime Abbey". A couple of senior students play the piano as we transition in the timetable from one class to another. On any given day, we may hear a little Mozart or the theme song from Downton Abbey. One student wrote this reflection on our mindfulness initiatives: " *I learned to reflect of my life and be kind to myself and others around me. I take time to breathe and think of the positive things in my life*".

Given the current educational climate and the needs of our students in a complex school environment, teacher-librarians can contribute to the well-being of our students in a Library and Learning Commons mindful of their stress and proactively addressing their need for accurate information. Mental-health awareness can inform our teaching and our collection building as we foster the development of healthy, resilient minds and the cognitive, emotional and social learning that can happen in caring and compassionate school libraries.

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