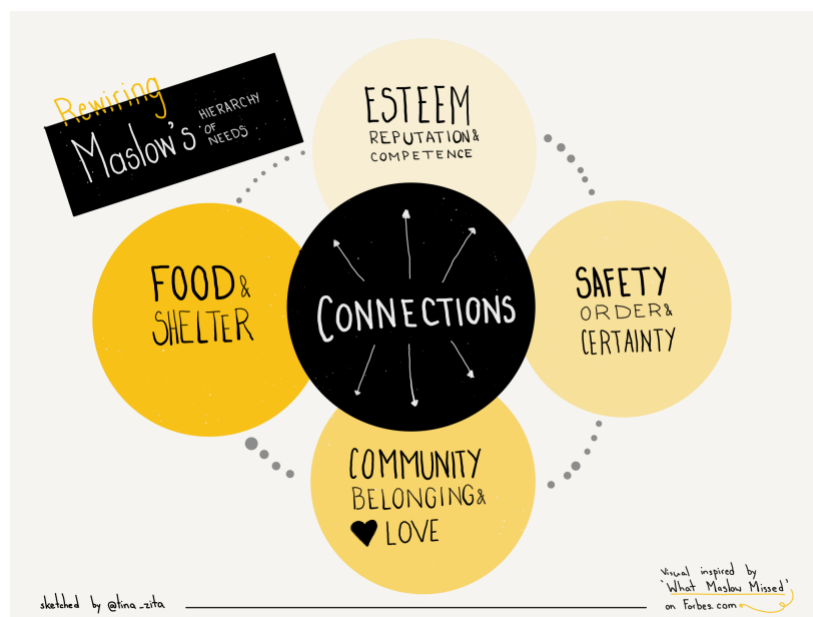


Maslow Connection and the Library Learning Commons

By Jennifer Casa Todd

Every educator is familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and for many of us, have learned about it as a hierarchy, understanding that in order for the students in our care to become fully self-actualized, they need to have their basic and physiological needs met. Maslow (1970) posits that in order to become our truest selves or self-actualized, we must have our physiological needs including food and shelter, must feel safe, a sense of belonging and love, and have our esteem needs met. There is some dispute about whether or not we should really look at our human needs as a hierarchy at all. In the blog post "Social Networks: What Maslow Misses" Pamela Rutledge says we need to rethink Maslow with connections at the center because "Maslow's model misses the mark in a very fundamental way. It doesn't give enough credit to the role of social connection" (Rutledge, 2011). Rutledge states that as our society becomes more complex that connection and a reliance on one another are at the heart of our physical and emotional survival. Tina Zita sketched what this looks like for my book *Raising Digital Leaders: Practical Advice for Navigating Today's Technology* (Casa-Todd, 2021).



Casa Todd, 2021

Rutledge also speaks to social networking as a new place for us to build connections and community.

Why does this matter?

During the pandemic, technology became fundamental to our learning and connecting. We saw students getting smartphones at younger and younger ages and social media use increasing across every age group (Robb, 2022). I have been thinking about that quite a bit as I watch students engage with those powerful devices which fit in our pockets. Apart from food and shelter, a smartphone can meet a child's needs on so many levels. Here's an example: when students play a video game where they work hard and get rewarded with XP or get to the next level, their need for competence is being met in a way that may not be in their in-person lives. They know that no matter how chaotic their life gets, the game will always be there and for the most part looks the same (Order and Certainty). The in-game chat or platforms like Discord connect them to a community by giving kids access to a like-minded group of people. Similarly, when kids are on TikTok or Instagram or Snapchat, the consistency of the platform gives them order and consistency; there is always something new to see, but the format looks the same. The likes they get trigger their esteem needs (or not and therefore they are striving to meet their esteem needs) and they feel a sense of connection to the people they follow. Many YouTubers or TikTokers nurture this connection by addressing their "fans" directly, looking into the camera, and ending their short videos with "I love you." Social media influencers utilize ways to "communicate authentically" with their followers. Emma Chamberlain, a noted YouTube star with over 11 million followers, for example, fosters intimacy and friendship within her following and leverages her likability for engagement and monetary gains. This is a common tactic amongst influencers (Gault, 2022).

Although we can never compete with a child's device, this paper will consider ways in which we can help create a culture anchored in connection for students to grow and thrive within the Library Learning Commons, using Maslow's Rewired definition.

Safety, Order, and Certainty

In, the book, *Educating Students with Refugee and Asylum Seek Experiences*, Maura Sellars looks at the importance of schools as safe spaces, stating that schools can be, places of safety and support for all students, adding that positive experiences with teachers and peers are critical for students, especially refugee and asylum seekers, to develop physically, emotionally, socially, and academically (Sellars, 2020). A school's Library Learning Commons can provide that physically safe space but can also be a place of psychological safety as well. The Library Learning Commons may also be a factor in school climate which includes school safety or the norms, values, and expectations that "support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe" (Sellars, 2020, p. 86), and where people feel respected and engaged. Safety, order and certainty while still ensuring student agency are important considerations for our Library Learning Commons.

In the paper, *Libraries as Wellbeing Supportive Spaces in Contemporary Schools*, Merga interviews students and Library managers to determine how students make use of the school library and how the library is perceived as a safe space. Her findings reinforce the fact that libraries themselves are perceived by students as a sanctuary, while [s]tudents identified the library staff as a key factor in their enjoyment of, and safety in the library (Merga 2021). This seems to be true of our Library space with students commenting verbally that the library is their "favourite space in the school" and that one student who recently stated, "there is something about our Library that makes me feel like I am home".

Security and Order can be seen in the norms or routines established by our Library Learning Commons. When our students walk into the space or when they visit our virtual commons they know what to expect. Every day we post a riddle of the day on our Whiteboard as well as on our Instagram story. On Fridays we have Boggle Friday. Although it may seem like an insignificant thing, a ritual as simple as the riddle of the

day or Boggle Friday can help kids to feel a sense of order and it has proven to also be a source of fun and connection. In our high school, we have students who come into the library regularly for their e-learn courses or for spare, and many of them love to put up the riddle or the Boggle. On the rare occasion that there isn't a riddle on the board, students will invariably comment on its absence.

Like most of the world, last school year we had a Wordle obsession and so we began every day with the Wordle (there are obviously variations now varying from the World-le to Heardle (music trivia) and even had a 10 day Wordle challenge. A group of students showed me a Wordle generator in which they created a Wordle a week around the theme of mental well-being.

Furnishings also play a role in creating a safe and secure environment according to the students in a study examining the wellbeing of students in the school library (Merga, 2021). When purchasing furnishings for our newly renovated library, I invited students from the Interior Design class to design the space for comfort, seek prices, and pitch their ideas. The students interviewed other students in the school and made their recommendations to myself and their Interior Design teacher. As a result, we purchased "bean bag" chairs, swivel seats and a combination of tablet and cafe style chairs. I hear students say how much they enjoy the flexibility and comfort of our space on almost a daily basis. Where budget doesn't allow for a renovation, connecting with a high school design or manufacturing class can help you achieve a student-centered space for less money. The Library Learning Commons must definitely consider the concept of the "third teacher", in other words seeing the environment and the physical space of our Library Learning commons as ways kids can learn and interact (Strong-Wilson, Ellis, 2007). The space itself should invite quiet spaces, collaborative pods as well as comfortable seating. The artwork on the walls is also important. On one wall, I created a large poster which says "Everyone is different, Everyone belongs" (author anonymous), and along the main walls, I have mosaics of noted people in history and from different countries. The mosaics themselves are former students and the effect is incredible. Our

visual arts council created a mural for us with the word welcome in each of the languages represented in the school.

Esteem, Reputation, and Confidence

Self-confidence and academic achievement are invariably linked according to research. Students who have positive opinions about themselves and their abilities are more likely to do well in school. In a paper examining elementary school Library Media programs, the results suggest that Library Media Centers can play a positive role in developing positive self-concepts in children, in particular when it comes to reinforcing cooperation, independence, success, challenge, and a feeling of value or acceptance (McAfee-Hopkins, 1989). We have the power to help students gain confidence and esteem in a variety of ways in the Library Learning Commons. In particular, I see our role as co-planner and co-teachers as a way to support teachers to try something new. For example, I co-plan, co-teach and co-assess a sustainable city project using Minecraft EDU with our geography teachers. Many of the teachers themselves do not feel comfortable using Minecraft and are grateful for the collaboration. One of the things I do at the very beginning, is establish who my “Minecraft techsperts” are. These students then become the leaders of the class and support others. Typically, these students have not been leaders in an academic sense before and so the result is students feeling a sense of competence that they have not yet experienced in the subject area. Similarly, when we have engaged in design thinking projects when working with Science teachers, students shine in ways that they may not if success is determined simply by test and assignment success.

Community and Belonging

In *What Schools Need to Know about Fostering School Belonging: a Meta-analysis*, the authors define belonging in school as the extent to which students feel respected, included and supported by others and state that belonging in large part

depends upon: “(1) School-based relationships and experiences, (2) student-teacher relationships and (3) students’ general feelings about school as a whole” (Allen et al., 2018, pg 2). A significant relationship has also been identified between classroom community and perceived cognitive learning, learning engagement, and learning outcomes (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk & Lee, 2007). Something as simple as welcoming our students by name and with a smile is an important and research-based practice which has contributed to our students feeling welcome (Allday & Pakurar, 2007). We make a point of greeting each child as they walk in and walk out and try our best to get to know our students; particularly those on spare and e-learn who frequent our high school library every day.

The time and energy we spend as teacher-librarians and library media specialists to foster relationships with our users is time well spent. We need to think carefully and thoughtfully about the extent to which student voice is consulted and valued. A Library Advisory Council can be an effective way for students to feel like they have a say in the happenings of the library. In the case of our school, the Book Club not only talks about books and helps create book talks, but also helps to run the social media account and is consulted whenever a major decision about the library needs to be made.

Sellars (2020), says that many students who are refugees or asylum seekers have lost their sense of belonging to a family group and posits that literature may be one way to create empathy by encouraging dialogue that investigates different perspectives and the “values and beliefs that underlie them (Sellars, 2020, pg 93). Rudine Sims Bishop’s metaphor of books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop 1990) further emphasizes that reading can become a way for students to feel reaffirmed as members of a larger human experience. Bishop says: “A book can sometimes be a window. The view from the window can be imagined or real, familiar or new, panoramic or narrow. Usually, the window is also a door, and a reader has only to walk through in imagination to become a part of whatever world has been created or re-created in the book. When lighting conditions are just right, a window can also be a mirror, reflecting back for us the joys and sorrows, the loves and hates, the pain and pleasure of living. One of the reasons literature exists is to transform human experience, and reflect it back to us so that we can better understand it” (Bishop 1990 pg. 3).

We can create community and belonging by ensuring that students see themselves in our collections and in our spaces. A space supportive of reading and books may also foster a sense of belonging for students identifying themselves as readers (Merga, 2021). Part of the grade 9 orientation with students at my school is to show them where they might suggest a book; this is a simple Google form that invites students to participate in the purchase of books which they would like to see as part of our Library collection. Recently, a student asked me to purchase the *Shatter Me* series because in her words: “We don’t have very many Persian authors in our collection, Ms. Casa-Todd.” When we received the books, I invited her to create an “unboxing video” for our social media account and put a student recommendation sticker on the series; an idea I got from Jonelle St. Aubyn in a panel discussion for the OLA Superconference called, *Fostering an Inviting and Inclusive Secondary School Library Learning Commons* (St. Aubyn, 2022).

Last year, our Student Council invited students to share their culture heritage with us and in turn we created a Google Earth project showcasing the various countries that make up our school community. I use this project as a basis for book-buying as well as a series I call “Carter Travels” whereby I create a newsletter featuring more about the country and the authors in our collection from that country. This is an ongoing project which seeks to value and celebrate the diversity of our school.

It is worth mentioning that five of the seven themes within the [Designing Learning Environments to Support Participatory Learning](#) (Canadian School Libraries (CSL), 2020), standards created by Canadian School Libraries focus on connection. In particular, as Teacher-Librarians we continue to strive to design for collaborative physical and virtual LLCs, design for responsive print and digital collections, participatory culture, as well as student well-being.

Each of us craves connection and belonging. Being intentional about addressing Maslow’s needs in our libraries in an age where students can get these needs met by their smartphone is something to keep at the forefront of our minds.

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