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# Literacy Focus: Welcoming Places, Safe Spaces

## How four librarians make their libraries the place to be

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jan 09, 2023

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With the ongoing stress and anxiety due to the pandemic, the impact of remote learning, plus cyberbullying, lockdown drills, and standardized testing in schools, now more than ever kids need welcoming spaces to feel emotionally secure and to engage with others in order to learn. In light of these social emotional needs, we spoke with four librarians about how they create safe spaces for their students, and why it matters so much to them.

As a first-generation American whose parents emigrated from Colombia, **Rosie Camargo** remembers when she was a child holding her mother's hand as she climbed the stairs to her local library. It was where Camargo first learned English and received homework help, too.



Rosie Camargo.

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Today, Camargo is the Spanish-language specialist and Spanish program coordinator at the Niles-Maine District Library in Niles, Ill. (soon to be the cultural literacy supports non-English speaking families, hoping to bring them clarity.

"In my current role, I work with the Spanish-speaking community, so many times I'm working with families that recently immigrated in order to help them feel welcome," Camargo said. "I begin by explaining how the library works, how to use a library card, and tell them all the services we provide here."

Camargo said that the concept of public libraries as we know it is often quite different abroad, especially in Spanish-speaking countries. “Here, you can check out books, take them home, and bring them back after you are done reading them,” Camargo said. “This concept is foreign to many.”

Camargo familiarizes her new patrons with the features of the library, and details the long list of services available to help them and their families acclimate to their new home. “These [resources] include providing passports and notaries, workshops on banking and citizenship, bilingual books, and tutoring services to help their children at school,” Camargo said. “And, I let them know that all of these services are free!”

In addition, Camargo assists teachers in the library’s surrounding areas to help create literacy-rich, authentic, multicultural classrooms, and to help Spanish-speaking students and their families have what they need to promote early literacy at home. A few ways Camargo does this include supplying teachers with books in English and Spanish, offering bilingual storytimes, and hosting a “Family Day” at the library. During this popular event, families get a tour of the library (including the library’s sewing machine area)—and receive goodie bags with the 5 Steps of Early Literacy theme.

Camargo is also a speaker and trainer of teachers/librarians across the country, encouraging authentic multicultural teaching and learning—and creating welcoming places. “It can be scary when you come to a new country, and you have all of these aspirations, but you don’t know where to go. I let them know that the library is the place,” Camargo said. “Just like my mother taught me.”

Growing up Korean Japanese American **Lori Misaka** saw her Korean-born mother struggle to learn English and be accepted in a new country. As a former high school English teacher and the current intermediate school librarian at Waipahu Intermediate School on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, and an advocate for multicultural education and diverse libraries, Misaka understands the cultural and language issues that her diverse and immigrant students face.

Misaka helps teachers with instructional support for their curriculum needs, offers reference and circulation assistance, develops programming, and creates a safe space for her students with a sense of family and community.

“Misaka said, “I am in the process of ordering more culturally relevant books, and making sure our space reflects the many cultures of the students that we serve.” This means choosing titles with characters and authors who reflect the countries her students have emigrated from across the Pacific and Asia (including the Philippines, Micronesia, and Samoa). In addition, she encourages her students to share their rich and diverse cultural heritages through creative writing.



© Isaiah Misaka

Lori Misaka.



“This year, thanks to a literacy grant my school received, interested students are working with a local publisher, Bess Press, to write their own book. They’ll be writing a compilation of stories in their home languages, receiving help with the translation into English, and doing all of the illustrations,” Misaka said. “When it’s published, it will become a part of our collection, and the kids will be able to check copies out.”

Misaka also invites her students to hang out in the library throughout the day at recess, lunch, and after school. It’s at these times they often discover new titles, use the internet,



© Lori Morihara

Lori Misaka with students.

and lend a hand as part of the school's library club. "The library club helps me shelve books, dust shelves, process books, create displays, recommend books to fellow students—and they learn library skills at the same time," Misaka said.

While there is no experience necessary to join the club, members must have a permission slip filled out by their parent or guardian, as well as a love of books. "Many students come in every day to help. I always have different library projects to complete," Misaka said.

Other classmates come into the library at lunch or recess for refuge from playground conflicts and bullies. "Some of them may have issues with other students outside of the library and need a safe place to be," Misaka said. "As long as they leave any aggressive behavior at the library door, they're welcome to seek safety here."

Misaka says her welcoming ways are aligned with the Hawaiian concept of "kuponono," which means being upright, honest, and fair in your relationships, and taking care of yourself and others. "We remind our students of this often so they can be themselves, have a sense of peace, celebrate their diversity—and help build community in the library, and throughout the school."

In his library, **James Klise** believes that creating a welcoming and safe place for his students at CICS Northtown Academy in Chicago is his number one job. Klise said, "If we don't create a space where students want to be, and where they feel safe and comfortable, none of our programming efforts will matter, because we won't be getting kids in."

A few of the ways he gets and keeps students in the library is by greeting each of them with a welcoming smile, and knowing nearly all of the academy's 900 students by name. He's also forever creating—and recreating—an inviting space with splashes of color, posters, student artwork, Black Lives Matters and Rainbow flags, and a colorful rug that is the library's centerpiece. "We also have signage designed by our school's Gay Straight Alliance [one of three after school clubs Klise runs] to remind students that *this* space is safe for *everyone* in our school."

Klise's carefully curated book collection and dynamic shelving displays that feature forward-facing books and color-coded book spines (the brainchild of librarian Kelsey Bogan) echo this message, and celebrate the uniqueness of his student population, which is the most diverse of any charter high school in the city. "I make sure that the names on the books and the faces on the covers reflect our student body."



© Kuras Photography

James Klise.



He officially welcomes his students to the library at the start of each school year. "Beginning freshman year, I invite students in small groups to tour the library, to see the books, and to experience the space." At that time, Klise sets expectations of student behavior to provide structure and safety.

One of these guidelines is the library's ear bud policy. "When wearing ear buds while studying or doing research, etc., in the library, I tell students that they can wear them, but that they can only wear one," Klise said. "This way, they can hear my voice and instructions in case of an emergency."

Klise's colorful library.

While this policy may seem like a small matter to some, it's not for Klise or his kids. "The students recognize that if I care about the little things, I care about the big things, too," he said. "By meeting this and other expectations, they feel successful and safe, which then allows them to do all the things they want to in the library, including getting work done and exploring anything that interests them in terms of career, creatively or even personally."

In turn, these positive feelings and actions increase the level of comfort in the library space, and offer ample opportunities for conversations about research projects and writing projects (one of Klise's secrets to learning students' names), and lively discussions about books.

Klise's expansive diverse book collection—including what he calls a "very large section of LGBTQ books"—connects students to a variety of narratives and to each other. "Teen readers want to see the world they know reflected in books, their own experiences. It isn't enough for the resources in a library to serve *most* students. We need resources for *every* student."

As always, Klise will be there to help his students find these resources, and a comfortable space to sit and stay a while. At the same time, he's there to assist his students in becoming better readers and to love books—and themselves. "It's important to me that my students know that this space is loved and cared for—and that they deserve a space that is created especially for them—and hopefully, in that space they will feel the same."

As an award-winning middle grade school librarian, president of the Louisiana Association of School Librarians, **Amanda Jones** (AKA Defender of Wonder on Twitter) fearlessly stands up for her students' right to read the books they want and need to read. But, first, like all librarians, she needs to get students into her library—and keep them there. And, she has her own welcoming ways to do this.

Jones begins with a kid-friendly space. "Our library was gray, filled with computer built-ins, and no place to sit or hang out. So we ripped out the computers, got sectionals, couches, armchairs, and beanbag chairs." Next, the walls got fresh coats of brightly colored paints.

And then, Jones hands over the library to her students. "At the beginning of the year, I give a big talk about how it's truly *their* library, not mine," Jones said. "It's not the school's, not the teachers—it's theirs!"

This ownership isn't taken lightly. Jones and her students walk around their library, get to know each other, ask questions, and explore the different sections—especially the graphic novel corner. "I know that their elementary schools didn't have as many graphic novels as they needed," Jones said, "so, I let them know that here they can check out whatever and however many books they want. No limits. No grade levels. If they can see it, they can read it!"



© Kathryn and Travis Photography

Amanda Jones.



Jones increases the odds of her students finding the books they want by having an abundant selection of diverse books, and using dynamic shelving. She also bases her book purchases on her students' backgrounds, needs/interests, and professional reviews of titles geared towards the age levels of her students. "This way, I have all kinds of books that they'll want to read. But I'm very careful," Jones said. "If my students want to read about a particular topic, for example, LGBTQ+ experiences or

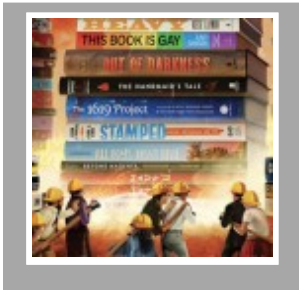
Jones and students in her library's Maker Space.

foster care, I'll find an age-relevant book. I will not have a title like *Gender Queer* in our fifth and sixth grade library, because it's written for older kids.

Students can stop by anytime to visit the library's escape room, use the virtual reality headsets, the Maker Space, or Lego Wall, feed the library's pet Hissing Madagascar Roaches, or talk about difficult topics in a private setting. If, however, they tell her anything about being in harm's way, she tells them that she's a mandatory reporter.

While this reporting is part of Jones's job, it's also personal. "I've known too many kids who have ended up taking their own lives as they got older and faced issues," Jones said. "I've lost 30 students over my 22 years. And I'm tired of it," Jones said. "I want kids to know that there's someone in their community, someone in their school that is there for them."

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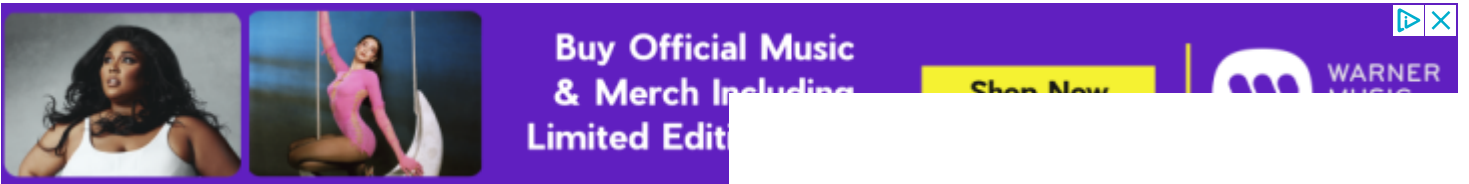


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