ARRANGING A LIBRARY TO SUPPORT ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

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When designing a school library, the first consideration is often the space’s ability to meet students’ academic needs. Most decisions are typically centered on the users’ cognitive development; spaces are designed to advance learners’ ability to think and understand the world around them. These are certainly important goals, especially with the pressures of standardized testing. Unfortunately, if a space is designed with the single-minded focus of cognitive development and academic success, it may fail to address other essential aspects of adolescent growth.

When designing a school library space and deciding how to arrange resources, it is important to consider multiple components of adolescent development, including social, emotional, and behavioral aspects. Acknowledging these developmental facets and their importance can provide additional justification for some of the more controversial aspects of modern school library spaces, like gaming tables, lounge seating, and areas devoted to resources related to teen issues.

Social Development

Educators are well aware that students undergo changes in social development in their teenage years. During adolescence, students transfer their focus to peer groups, transitioning from the earlier importance of family as they work toward becoming independent adults (APA 2002, 21). Adolescents form close, caring relationships with their peers, where friendships become less about shared interests and more about emotional intimacy. These relationships are centered on openness, honesty, loyalty, and the ability to keep secrets (Wolfe, Jaffe, and Crooks 2006, 80).

Students’ social development often frustrates educators and may serve as a distracter in an academic environment. Although it may seem superfluous, this aspect of adolescence serves an essential role in ensuring academically motivated students. Students that form peer friendships are shown to have higher perceptions of self-worth, better self-image, and perform better academically (APA 2002, 21). Research suggests that high-quality friendships or at least one close friend can protect adolescents from becoming victims of bullying (Massari 2011, 11). In contrast, students that fail to form close ties are more likely to display negative behaviors like delinquency, drug abuse, and dropping out of school; in addition, their lack of close ties places them at great risk for psychosocial problems in adulthood (APA 2002, 21).

Supporting Social Development in the Library

When designing a school library space, we need to consider the social-development needs of adolescents. This goal means finding ways to encourage the development of close, personal relationships among peers, especially among students that historically struggle to do so. A library can easily be arranged to encourage budding friendships, once a school librarian accepts the importance of adolescent socialization.

Historically, we have arranged academic spaces, especially libraries, to eliminate talking and limit social interaction. To encourage social development, school libraries should provide students with opportunities to form friendships during the school day, especially at the beginning of a new school year (Bergin and Bergin 2012, 443). School librarians can encourage
this friendship formation in their space by creating zones where quiet conversation is permissible. Conversation zones should feature soft lounge furniture placed in a grouping around a coffee table or footstools (see figure 1) or at the very least, contain tables that accommodate multiple seated students.

When students are forming new friendships, spontaneous conversation may be difficult; providing students with a group activity helps minimize social anxiety. To encourage interaction, school librarians can set small gaming tables with chess or checker sets, Mancala, or Bananagrams (see figure 2) or devote a table in the library to a collaborative jigsaw puzzle.

Of course, social interactions among adolescents are not always positive; in arranging a school library’s physical space, ensuring adequate supervision to prevent bullying and aggression is also essential to adolescents’ healthy social development (Bergin and Bergin 2012, 404). The library’s circulation desk should be centrally located with clear visibility to all areas, allowing for close monitoring of student behavior. Also, consider the installation of security cameras in difficult-to-monitor areas; the simple presence of a camera is often a successful deterrent to unwanted behaviors. Lastly, make sure the rules and expectations for positive social interactions are clearly posted in the space and understood by students.

**Emotional Development**

Emotional development in adolescence is characterized by a desire to explore and refine individuals’ personal identity (APA 2002, 15). An adolescent’s identity includes components of personality such as self-concept, what people think about themselves, and self-esteem, how people feel about their self-concept (APA 2002, 15). Adolescents explore and refine their self-concept and self-esteem by experimenting with different ways of looking, behaving, and sounding.

An important aspect of emotional development in adolescents is the development of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence requires competency in relationship skills like empathy, effective communication, perseverance, and cooperation (Massari 2011, 9).

During adolescence students are refining their personal identities and building emotional intelligence. Supporting the development of emotional intelligence is a worthy goal for school library programs.

Students with competent emotional intelligence are more likely to have better mental health, positive self-image, and better self-esteem (Ahmad, Imran, and Mehmood 2009, 7). They are also more likely to form friendships and be well liked, be more productive, be capable of setting and obtaining goals, and ultimately get better grades (Massari 2011, 9).

Most importantly for a school setting, improving the population’s emotional intelligence can reduce bullying. Students who can’t regulate their emotions are more likely to be bullies, and students with higher degrees of sadness and emotional vulnerability are more likely to become targets for bullies (Massari 2011, 9–10). Therefore, if students are able to establish emotional awareness and develop self-regulation skills—components of emotional intelligence—incidences of bullying may decrease dramatically.

**Supporting Emotional Development in the Library**

School librarians can help students’ emotional development by providing safe ways for them to experiment with their identity and opportunities for them to build emotional intelligence and self-
SCHOOL LIBRARIANS CAN HELP STUDENTS’ EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT BY PROVIDING SAFE WAYS FOR THEM TO EXPERIMENT WITH THEIR IDENTITY AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEM TO BUILD EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM.

Esteem. School library programs should encourage students to explore their interests and provide resources to help them do so (APA 2002, 16). Adequate signage is essential; students should be able to find books devoted to their interests without having to ask an adult. Consider moving to a subject-based or “bookstore style” classification system for nonfiction or at least clearly labeling sections like “Hobbies” and “Sports” with large prominent signs so students can easily find materials that address their interests (see figure 3).

Another way school librarians can help students develop a strong and positive sense of identity is to demonstrate that the school library, and by extension, the school culture, values their peer group (Bergin and Bergin 2012, 525). A peer group may be defined by race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. A library’s physical space can demonstrate this validation through resources, book displays, and posters. For example, in addition to selecting books featuring GLBT characters, school librarians may post rainbow flag symbols indicating

Behavioral Development

Lastly, behavioral development is an important consideration when designing a school library space. Influenced by development in other realms, this aspect is characterized by experimentation. Experimentation in adolescence provides a feedback loop that allows students to further fine-tune other areas of their development. One hallmark of experimentation in adolescents is risk-taking (APA 2002, 29).

Adolescents engage in risk-taking behavior for a multitude of reasons. Some research suggests the teenage brain craves “excitement, fun, and novel” experiences, and, although these experiences may be inherently dangerous, the intense sensations they provide override any concern. Risk-taking frequently occurs in group settings, so the behavior is also viewed as a way for adolescents to gain status and acceptance from their peers. Lastly, students engage in risk-taking behavior because it provides a means for them to identify with their parents and other adults (APA 2002, 30).

Although risk-taking may make adults in the school community nervous, it is an important part of adolescents’ behavioral development because it helps students shape their identity, try out their new decision-making skills, and realistically assess themselves, others, and the larger world (APA 2002, 29). The challenge for school librarians is to design a space that encourages adolescents’ safe risk-taking.

Figure 3. Subject-based classification and adequate signage to improve students’ finding information independently.
Supporting Behavioral Development in the Library

School library spaces can be designed to support adolescents’ behavioral development. Risk-taking is an undeniable aspect of this stage, so it is important to promote safe opportunities for adolescents to do so (APA 2002, 31). An easy strategy for school libraries is a bulletin board featuring information about club opportunities, sports team tryouts, and contests, providing students with avenues for safe risk-taking.

Additionally, adolescents, as part of their behavioral development, need accurate information about risks associated with particular activities they may find attractive, including smoking, drug use, promiscuity, and drinking (Wolfe, Jaffe, and Crooks 2006, 179). To address this need, school librarians can create a “Teen Issues” section. This section should be a collection of books devoted to providing accurate information about risky behaviors, including resources on alcoholism, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases. Ideally, the collection should be easily accessible, located near lounge areas where students tend to congregate naturally. School librarians will find that these titles are a go-to for students with downtime during study halls.

It may also be useful to organize this collection using a “bookstore” model, eschewing the more formal Dewey classification. Additionally, because teen issues collections see so much use, it is much easier to organize the books when spine labels are color-coded by subject.

Not all students may be comfortable with exploring these subjects in the public setting of the school library, so posters promoting electronic resources on these subjects, like Rosen’s Health & Wellness subscription database (see figure 4) or the Nemours Foundation’s free TeensHealth site <http://teenshealth.org/teen>, should be prominently displayed. Include a QR code on the posters so students can quickly access the site or create business-card-size handouts that include passwords and usernames for accessing the information later privately.

Supporting Academics and Development

In summary, school librarians have many ways to use their physical space and resources to support adolescents’ social, emotional, and behavioral development. Some ideas, like lounge seating and gaming areas, are not new concepts; however, supporting all areas of adolescent development may provide convincing justification librarians can use in schools where administrators are slow to warm to more enlightened models of a modern school library program.

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