

FEATURE

**Intentionally Creating a Safe Space for All**  
**THE SCHOOL LIBRARY AS**  
**REFUGE**

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# @Your School Library Everyone Belongs

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*“School libraries are safe havens, often for the student you least suspect.”*

—Pam Muñoz Ryan (2019)

The value and importance of offering safe spaces within the complex environment of a busy school cannot be overestimated. For students in need of a respite, the school library can be a refuge. There seems to be an instinctual attraction to this unique space.

What makes a student seek out the school library on their own? The manifold answers depend on a child’s life circumstances and their innate personalities. Sometimes it is for the books, to meet up with friends from other classes, or to use the computers, but many often simply want to visit the space. These students may come with friends, but they often come alone.

This piece focuses on creating a safe space for several subsets of

the elementary school student population, including Muslim students, children with autism spectrum disorder, and students with social-emotional challenges. These groups do overlap and intersect, and they are united in their reliance on the library as a refuge. However, as school librarians, we know that any child might seek out the library at any time, depending on their situational needs and the day. Thus, our final subset is the nucleus of even-keeled, neurotypical children who still express the need for a school library’s sheltering space.

## **Building and Cultivating the Library as Refuge**

It takes conscious effort to create an atmosphere of social-emotional safety in a school library. Mindful of the core values embedded in AASL’s *National School Library Standards*, especially the Shared Foundations of Include, Curate, and Explore, school librarians can shape an environment that beckons to children and inspires them to become partners in

protecting the unique space where everyone is welcome.

At Paula’s elementary school, this atmosphere is taught and reinforced throughout the year. Paula sets out the expectations for the library at the beginning of the year, noting that the library is a quiet, respectful place where everyone should feel welcome and safe. She leads classes in a discussion of the many places in the school that can be noisy and sometimes overwhelming for students, like the gym, playground, lunchroom, and even classrooms. Paula stresses that part of the purpose of the library is to provide a space for those who need a more peaceful space. Students practice transitioning to a calm demeanor as classes come to the library, and when things start to get loud, students are reminded to respect the space.

Our guiding concept as school librarians is the relationship. When children come to the school library, they are stepping into a known world with clear expectations and

a welcome vibe. As stewards of the space, we are uniquely poised to appreciate the whole child; we learn their interests, their stories, and their concerns. Walking into the library means going to a place where children know they'll be seen, but never judged. We understand that any time children choose to be in the library is an important opportunity to build relationships.

In the library, the watchwords are inclusivity, flexibility, and respect for others' needs. Books, magazines, games, and makerspace activities offer a natural path to collaboration; even in a mixed-age setting, students who are not necessarily acquainted with one another display a natural ease in playing or creating together. This is where the library works its special magic.

## Muslim Students at Nancy's School

An intentional focus on school library services for Muslim students—including the provision of a safe and welcoming space—has received considerable attention in the professional literature (see the "Recommended Reading" section). Islamophobia remains a pervasive issue in the United States; inevitably, societal issues find their way into schools, including elementary schools. Compounding the challenge, young Muslim girls—especially those from immigrant families—visibly stand out in our school hallways, with their flowing dresses and colorful hijabs. When acts of terrorism occur, Muslim students, including the children at Nancy's school, vocalize feelings of fear.

Being of service to Muslim students requires a commitment to professional learning. This is an example of doing the necessary work to cultivate a safe space; it is essential to select professional development

based on the specific environment of one's building. Islam is often poorly understood in Western countries. One of the most common errors is to think of Islam (and Muslims) monolithically; in reality, the Muslim world is remarkably diverse. The Muslim student population at Nancy's Title I school is a perfect illustration. Over the years, the Muslim students have been African-American, Gambian, Oromo, Somali, Iraqi, Egyptian, Saudi, Pakistani, Kurdish, Filipino, and Indonesian. Muslim staff members are Somali and Cham (a Muslim ethnic group from Cambodia and Vietnam). Statistically, the "typical" Muslim is not Arab, despite American perceptions to the contrary (Diamant 2019).

Within the United States and inside of American schools this diversity is

in full bloom. The effort to create a safe space for Muslim students is two-fold: affirming the identity of Muslim children and informing the rest of the student population about Islam, both globally and locally.

Because the school library is a stronghold of knowledge, the librarian can play a powerful role in offering information that counters biases and tempers microaggressions. The educational goal is not merely tolerance but understanding and ideally supportive interest. Carefully curated library materials and programs can erode ignorance and build knowledge within a community; ideally, Muslim students can experience relief from anxiety about stereotyping, and can focus on what they are at school to do: learn.



Mixed-age students in the library during lunch recess. Activities under way at this table include drawing, reading, origami, and Rubik's cube.



The school librarian's obligation here is to curate a collection that offers "mirrors and windows" for Muslim and non-Muslim readers. Fortunately, the publishing world is waking up to the need for engaging and authentic literature that features Muslim characters or portrays Muslim life, both religiously and culturally. Led by Muslim-American authors of children's and middle-grade literature Karuna Riazi and Hena Khan, Salaam Reads (an imprint of Simon & Schuster) made its debut in 2016. Other recent titles portray Muslim-American characters seeking balance between their inner and outer worlds and yearning to be understood. (A fine example here is Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Towers Falling*.)

A school librarian can weave these texts into teaching and learning in natural ways, without seeming overly deliberate. During the month of Ramadan at Nancy's school, first graders engaged with alacrity during an interactive read-aloud of *Under My Hijab* by Hena Khan. The outstanding illustrations by Aaliya Jaleel supported students' efforts to determine when and where a contemporary American Muslim woman would wear a hijab. Our collective conversation was imbued

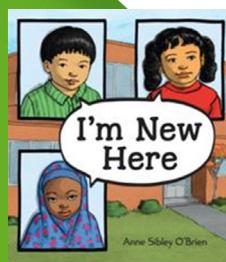
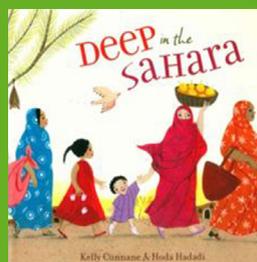
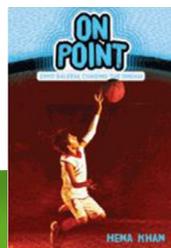
with respectful curiosity. At the close of our reading, one child announced joyfully: "That book is about me!" Such is the power of literature to create a sense of cultural safety and belonging in a school library. Another girl approached Nancy quietly after class and asked to borrow the book.

In addition to creating a robust collection that offers insights into Muslims as individuals and Islam in general, a powerful means of offering knowledge is to invite a speaker from the local community. School librarians should be aware of community resources, and well poised to include other voices in children's learning experiences. Through a professional development opportunity, Nancy had visited the Muslim Association of Puget Sound (MAPS), a religious and cultural center for the Seattle area's Muslim community. Coincidentally, one of her school's parents worked there. During Ramadan 2018, this parent connected Nancy with Adam Jamal, the assistant imam and executive director of education at MAPS. Adam kindly visited Nancy's school to meet with third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students.

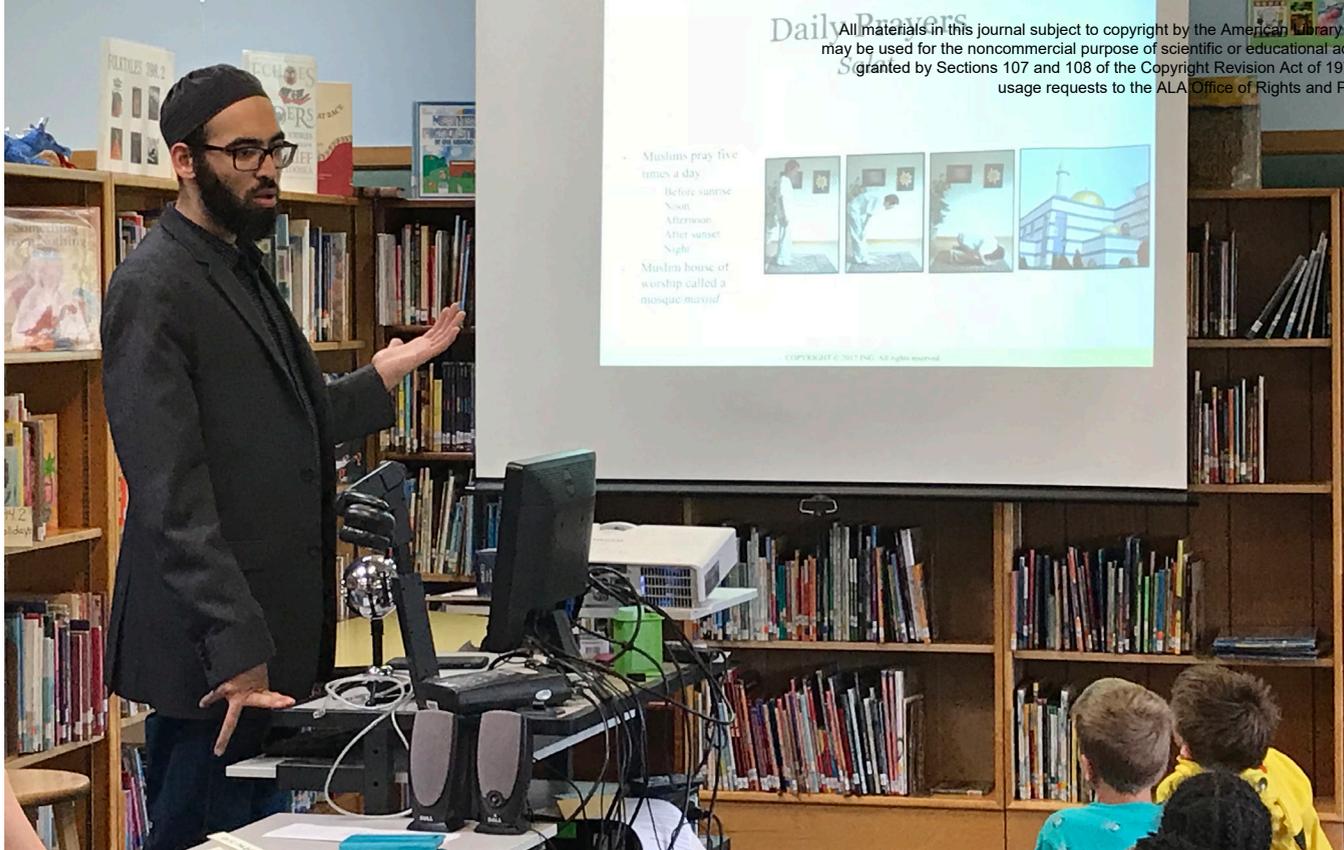
His presentation covered not only the global history and central tenets of Islam, but also the contributions of Muslim-Americans to civic life in the United States. The presentation drew scores of questions from children. Muslim students in the audience were visibly proud and affirmed, while non-Muslim students became more informed in an engaging and informal way.

Although it is difficult to quantify the effect of carefully selected acquisitions and other knowledge resources on Muslim students' sense of place in the library, anecdotal evidence from Nancy's school suggests that Muslim students view the library as their special space.

S. and her brother arrived at Nancy's school in September 2019. They were both book-hungry, and immediately attached themselves to the library (and the librarian). The fall of 2019 was also a time when Nancy decided to launch some makerspace programs. With encouragement from district leadership (and in accordance with her meager budget), she introduced several simple activities, including jigsaw puzzles, potholder weaving, and Rubik's cubes. All recess activities from previous years remained in place (reading, book-borrowing, arts and crafts, use of designated computer programs, and board games). S. had a strong, quiet presence, but was not ready to spend recess in the swirling frenzy of our playground. She was an



A sample of curated titles about Islam, Muslim culture, and Muslim Americans.



*Imam Adam Jamal from the Muslim Association of Puget Sound speaking with students in Nancy's school library.*

avid seeker of the library's informal offerings and was drawn to the jigsaw puzzle table. Her seatmate from class, A. (a Mexican-immigrant boy), would have been comfortable anywhere, but he joined S. regularly in this pursuit, and the two soon brought others along.

The jigsaw table proved to be a remarkable opportunity for collaborative recreation; Nancy watched students who had no previous relationship with one another forge bonds as they pursued the common goal of completing a challenging puzzle. S.—new to the school, and under a hijab—found not only a safe space but camaraderie.

### **Students with Social-Emotional Challenges**

At Paula's school, some students have scheduled library breaks, and others regularly visit the library with teacher permission. When those students who have permission to visit the

school library arrive, Paula knows that they are feeling overwhelmed or are having a hard day. These students are usually on the radar of many adults in the building due to sensory issues, learning challenges, challenging home lives, or a hard time fitting in socially. Visiting the library "...helps me relieve stress," one student noted. A library visit is one tool for providing support to these students.

This past year, M. arrived at Nancy's school as a fifth grader. Even under the best circumstances, it is not easy to join a fifth-grade cohort; most of Nancy's fifth graders had been together since kindergarten. As an added challenge, M. was a beleaguered veteran of the foster-care system; she had experienced childhood trauma and trusted no one. Fortunately, she had landed in a nurturing home with committed foster parents; furthermore, she had enrolled in a neighborhood school

with a strong community ethos and a dedicated staff.

M. had multiple layers of defensive emotional skin. A., a fellow student, also extended a welcome to M. Perhaps because A. was a bit of an outsider himself, M. accepted his offer of friendship. A. loved the library's puzzle table; initially, M. came to the library during recess simply because A. was there. Over time, she started to enjoy the space for its own merits. It was a nice place to hang out, and she appreciated the quiet.

In addition, she noted that no one teased her when she was in the library; in other places, kids or even teachers would make comments in a teasing manner that made her uncomfortable. M. felt that the library was calm and liked having

an alternative to the playground. J., another fifth-grade girl who connected with M., explained that their new friendship group viewed the playground as “rowdy and crazy,” and sought a place where “everyone was not arguing.”

During formal learning periods, M. struggled to maintain behavioral control and frequently fled the classroom. Midway through the year, as M.’s guardians worked with school staff to develop a behavior plan, her guardians asked M. whether she would like to designate a “break space” for times when she needed to be away from peers. Her answer: the library.

### Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Students on the autism spectrum instinctively gravitate toward school libraries (in fact, many elect to serve as library volunteers or teaching

assistants). For these children, the library is an excellent place to practice spending time with others in an informal social setting. It is also a place to share activities, find commonalities, and enjoy being noticed and appreciated for one’s unique self.

Children on the spectrum are frequently “othered,” sometimes in brutal ways, but just as often in subtle ways. In our schools, the Access room (a room designated for students with special needs) is available to students with IEPs as a comfortable refuge, but the virtue of the school library is that it is more socially mixed and it has materials that allow students to immerse themselves in their passions. Students with ASD, like everyone else, seek a measure of acceptance; libraries, with their welcoming, nonjudgmental vibe (and the librarian’s watchful eye), allow for safe interactions between ASD children

and neurotypical children. In this respect, it is especially helpful to have makerspace activities on hand; they unite children in common creative purpose.

### Everyone Belongs at Your School Library

Personal challenges are not a requirement for seeking sanctuary in the library. All children experience the need to nourish their spirits and regain emotional equilibrium; the library is there as a protected and sheltering place for them. In many schools, the library is the only public space intentionally put forward as a refuge. Certainly, students with chaotic lives crave safety and often find refuge in the library, but it is important to remember that every student craves safety and a place to feel protected. With its mission to serve every student, the school library can be that refuge.



*M. and her friendship group in the “E” section during lunch recess.*





A student with special needs in the library during recess.

*E. finds a place to relax, read, and enjoy the peace of the library.*



### *Calm, Quiet, and Peaceful*

Throughout the school day students stop by Paula's school library. Students must ask for permission from their classroom teacher, so often they stop by to get a book to take back to class or to ask for help. However, students also drop in to take a break in a serene space. The library is their chosen escape spot. As V., a fourth grader, says it is, "getting away from the commotion."

Some students need a "reset" after lunch before the second half of the day. Others make special arrangements to eat lunch in the library, whether to avoid the thundering din of the lunchroom or to have private conversations. At Nancy's school, the counselor initiated a weekly lunch circle for fifth-grade girls, with a table reserved in the library. In this sacred little circle, the group discussed some weighty issues. Subsequently, several of the girls arranged to have lunch in the library on an ongoing basis. In a sense, the counselor had endorsed and reinforced the perception of the school library as a safe zone.

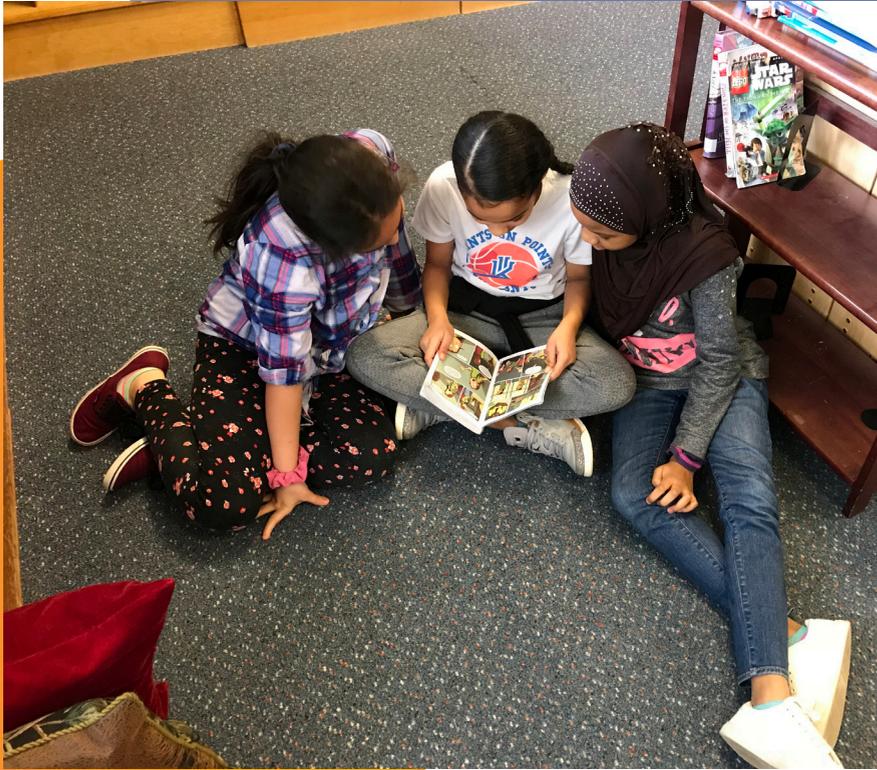
The majority of students who visit outside of their scheduled class time have sought the library on their own. They come in, find something to look at, and settle into nooks, corners, and tables. Other times they sink into their book and eventually need to be reminded to return to class. The ability to self-select to visit the library is important.

Our schools use the RULER program (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotion) from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence to support social and emotional learning. Self-selected use of the library as a break encourages students to monitor their own emotional needs and find solutions to regulate them. Some students are regular visitors and may visit multiple times during the day. However, many are occasional visitors; they know the library is there if they need a different type of break. One parent told Nancy that her daughter "went to the library sometimes if she wasn't feeling 100% ... It made her feel better about whatever was ailing her."

### *Fun*

As school librarians we know that our time is limited with any class. We work to ensure that the learning is memorable and impactful. This means carefully planning lessons that integrate the standards we are working on with compelling learning activities and resources that catch the interest of students. Lessons are deliberately planned so students get to explore ideas and resources that they may not encounter in class. Often the lessons support the topics and learning in the classroom, but show students a different way of looking at a topic. The lessons also offer additional resources that expand students' understanding. By teaching memorable lessons we are building the understanding that ideas and learning are fun and engaging, and that the school library is a place to look forward to visiting during both structured and unstructured times.

At Paula's library, scheduled classes earn library choice time through good behaviors: quietly transitioning in the library, positively participating during lessons, and being able



During lunch recess, shared reading in the Graphica section.



Potholder weaving during recess—the perfect brain break!

to focus on choosing, checking out, or reading during check-out times. This structure reinforces positive routines and productive lessons, but it also provides students with the opportunity to use the library as a place of self-choice and joyful exploration.

When a class earns choice time, they can choose various activities such as drawing, creating mini-books, using the finger puppet theater, working with different STEM-related activity sets, or reading. These activities allow students to explore different ways of learning and self-select who they would like to work with and what they would like to do.

Students may also self-select to visit during one of their recesses at Paula's school. Because of scheduling, this often coincides with another class's library time. The library is fairly small, and students know their options at recess are quiet browsing and check-out, reading, working, or art. If they are too loud, they are asked to leave. One student noted, "It's quiet and I don't feel alone outside." If there is another class in the library, they often follow along with the lesson being taught. As one student put it, "It's fun to listen to storybooks while checking out books."

Besides providing a space to feel safe emotionally and physically, the library is also a place to safely

explore ideas of personal interest. "It is a place full of learning stored in the books. It is a safe place to be wrapped in the books," explained one student. It is easy to forget that many of students' passionate interests are not covered in the classroom. In the library students can feel validated and explore those interests.

Another student added that coming to the library outside of class meant, "It's not a race for the books." At Nancy's school, where students are only able to borrow one graphic novel at a time (due to purchasing limitations), the graphic novel cart is a magnet during recess. Some students want a safe place to explore ideas or have time to browse for just the right book. A student of Paula's summed it all up: "I can read whatever I want, it's quiet...in the library I feel at home."



After lunch classic board game action in the library.



## Conclusion

Schools today often cater to students who are extroverted or feel comfortable in active spaces. Class is full of expectations of participation in discussion and group work. Students are expected to work regularly in cooperative groups on projects and learning activities both large and small. The lunchroom is loud, and recess can be stressful. This can be compounded if a child feels alienated, disconnected, or overwhelmed. The school library can be an antidote for these students.

Through careful nurturing of relationships, environment, collections, and structured and unstructured learning, school librarians can create a critical refuge in the ecosystem of a school. The school library can be an invaluable resource to meet the regular and occasional needs of students to have time to relax and explore ideas on their own. By working to encourage the school community as a whole to accommodate flexibility for students to

visit on their own, schools can promote the library as a haven for any student who decides they need it. Students today are often anxious and overwhelmed. Many of them just need a place to take a break, relax, explore ideas, or simply feel that they belong and are welcome.

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is the NBCT-certified teacher-librarian at West Woodland Elementary in Seattle, WA. She is

a member of AASL. She also serves on the Washington Children's Choice Picture Book Award Committee.



**Nancy Fisher-**

**Allison** recently retired as the teacher-librarian at John Rogers Elementary School in Seattle. She is a

member of the Washington Library Association and the National Council for the Social Studies. She has presented at the annual K-8 Conference of the Washington State Council for the Social Studies. She received recognition from the Urban American Indian Alaska Native Education Alliance (Seattle) for making the school library a safe place to explore cultural differences.