

How
INCLUSIVE
and
HUMAN-FIRST
*Circulation Policies &
Practices Can Impact
a Child's Relationship
with Elementary
Library Spaces*

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Introduction

In a time where social-emotional learning (SEL) and best-practice initiatives can be found plastered over any and all education-related resources, how can we ensure that school librarians are living up to those expectations? School librarians are tasked with helping students to build a positive relationship with their library spaces and see the value of consistent interactions with the central informational hub in their school. What does SEL have to do with that relationship? More than you might think. Students are drawn to spaces in their school that make them feel safe, accepted, and cared for. The school library should be a place in which SEL occurs naturally (Sansbury and Bongiorno 2020).

The words, phrases, and policies we use with students in elementary library spaces could have long-lasting impacts on their willingness to interact with the school library and see it as a space designed just for them. Words and tone of voice are incredibly powerful. How we use them with small children can be the difference between uplifting or ostracizing them. Inclusive, human-first language and circulation policies allow us to prioritize social and emotional development in children.

Library Circulation Policies and Practices Student Survey

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools students began virtual learning in March 2020 and remained in virtual learning until March 2021, when the hybrid model was implemented through the remainder of the school year: some students returned to in-person learning; some students remained at home and continued learning remotely. In fall 2021 all students returned to the building with no options available for virtual learning. For some students, it had been seventeen months since they had been in a classroom for in-person instruction. Even the students who had returned to in-person learning in spring 2021 had missed a year of in-person school interactions. Those students had experienced a unique and disjointed schedule during the few remaining months of the 2020–2021 school year. Because of this disruption in all students' education, as an elementary school librarian I knew it was important to be intentional and purposeful when creating and enforcing library circulation policies and to adopt best practices that would prioritize learners' social and emotional needs when they returned to in-person learning for the 2021–2022 school year.

When March 2022 approached, the students at our school, Mary Scroggs Elementary, had had a little over six months of in-person academic experiences so far that school year. I was in the last semester of working toward my MLS degree, and for my final artifact I needed to produce a paper focused on a passion project topic. I was most curious to see how the school library circulation policies and practices I had put into place earlier in the fall were faring with students and what type of emotional reaction the policies and practices might be invoking. Those policies and practices included: a careful use of words when reminding students in person about overdue materials, automated weekly "gentle reminder" e-mails to students and families about overdue materials, and checking out three books at a time.

After putting together a short survey, I decided to request feedback from the highest three grade levels in my K–5 school building. I chose this sample because I knew these students would be able to access the content of each question in the survey, independently use the digital platform on which the survey was presented, and provide self-aware, anonymous feedback. The third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students in my school were surveyed through a Google Form link and (in addition to a

couple of demographic questions) were asked four questions related to library services and circulation policies since the start of the school year.

The Library Circulation Policies and Practices Student Survey questions were:

- Where do you get *most* of your reading materials from?
 - Choices provided: Books from home, books from a public library, books from the school library, classroom library books, or other
- Do you find it helpful that overdue book e-mails are sent out to students and families each week?
 - Yes or No
- Which sentence do you prefer more when being reminded about your overdue library books?
 - "These books are overdue," or "These books are ready to come back"
- Do you feel that the circulation policies in your school library are fair?
 - Yes or No (with an additional short-answer box to provide specific feedback and suggestions)

Of the 186 third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders surveyed, 40% identified as male, 44% identified as female, and 16% preferred not to say. The grade-level breakdown of respondents was: 37% in third grade, 25% in fourth grade, and 38% in fifth grade.

Most students answered that the majority of their reading materials were either from the school library or books they have access to at home. The breakdown for most common source of reading materials was: 37% from home, 9% from a public library,

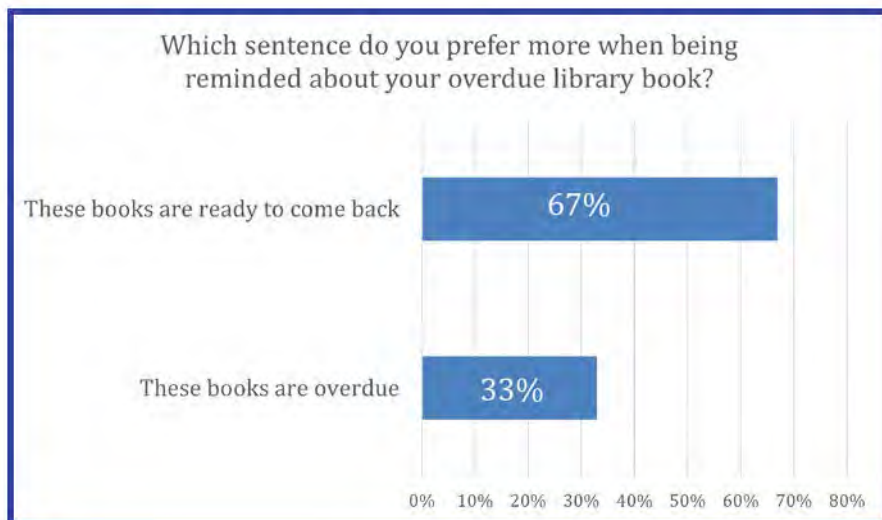


Figure 1. Preferences for wording of overdue reminders.

35% from their school library, 9% from their teachers' classroom libraries, and 10% responded "other."

Choose Your Words Carefully

After transitioning from a full-time elementary classroom teacher for nine years into the library media specialist role at my same school, I entered the position with several advantages: knowledge of the school community, years of experience collaborating with the school's staff, and, most importantly, I knew the ins and outs of the former and current student population. For nine years as a classroom teacher at Scroggs I saw how my second- and third-grade students interacted with this elementary library space. This experience gave me the knowledge that many children were quite fearful of the dreaded phrase: overdue books. I decided to make a small, but purposeful change. When it came to in-person reminders and interactions with students, rather than telling a child "These books are overdue" on their account, I instead chose to say, "These books are ready to come back." To reinforce the importance of being considerate of their schoolmates who likely wanted a chance at reading those overdue

books, sometimes I also threw in, "Someone else is ready to read these."

Data revealed that 67% of students surveyed preferred to hear "These books are ready to come back," as opposed to 33% of students who preferred "These books are overdue" (see figure 1). This information suggests that the majority of students polled in this survey may have negative connotations associated with the word "overdue" and be more likely to avoid checking out books with the potential for those books eventually becoming overdue.

Encourage Compliance / Discourage Punitive Actions

Access to books is crucial in developing strong, lifelong readers (Johnson and Donham 2012), and school library policies must match our belief systems. If we believe that students have a right to access information and knowledge, inclusive and human-first circulation policies and best practices are necessary to ensure those opportunities are provided. At the same time, school libraries typically aren't supplied with budgets big enough to replace continually lost or damaged books and materials. To prevent using a

significant part of the budget to replace materials while maintaining readers' access to materials, I recommend trying policies and procedures that encourage students to comply with the systems of the library rather than fall victim to punishment that decreases or altogether eliminates their access to school library materials.

For example, try specifying the number of books a student can check out at one time, so that the task of keeping track of multiple library materials at once is not placed on young children before they are ready for the responsibility. Perhaps start with three to five items for the youngest students and increase the number as the learners progress through the grades and develop further cognitive ability to become more independent and responsible for multiple items.

Gently reminding students in person about overdue library items is likely the best course of action. This establishes a physical/emotional connection between the school librarian and student, and helps to hold the student more accountable without any punitive influence. Tone and intonation are important

in these circumstances. The way we speak to children, the warmth we convey, and the emotional balance we impart can alter their brains (Sabater 2021). If a student feels the librarian is upset with them over missing or overdue items, it could potentially fracture the relationship that students are establishing with library spaces and possibly even deter them from accessing library materials as frequently as we would like. The difference between, "Hey, don't forget to bring your library books back as soon as you can!" and "Your library books are still overdue. Please return them as soon as possible" is noticeable and significant.

Beginning in October of the 2021–2022 school year, I set up an automated e-mail report to be sent out to students and their families every Monday morning at 6:00 a.m. with reminders about overdue library items. The generic automated message provided within the library's software system was: "*The following items are overdue. Please return them as soon as possible.*" In an effort to (again) be intentional with the social and emotional aspects of library services, I tweaked the message to read: "*The following items on your library account are past due. Please return them as soon as you*

can." It may seem like a minor, insignificant change, but the impact that phrasing and word choice can have on emotional reactions may be one of the aspects of circulation policy that matters most.

I also included my name and e-mail address for families to reach out regarding any lost or damaged items, or to report a possible mistake on their child's library account. After almost six months of this practice being in place, students polled in the survey were asked: *Do you find it helpful that overdue book e-mails are sent out to students and families each week?* As figure 2 shows, 92% of students in third through fifth grades responded "yes," and 8% responded "no." In my experience, gentle reminders and consistent connections with students and families can go a long way. The overall parent response to these e-mails was also positive. I received a few "thank you" messages at the end of the year from families telling me that these reports helped keep them organized and accountable each week.

At this point you may be thinking, *What IS your consequence for lost and/or overdue books?* There are some, though I try to keep them to a minimum. The consequences make sense and take into account my concern for social and emotional needs of learners. Once a student reaches the threshold of having nine books checked out on their account, they are permitted to check out only one book at a time until some or most of the others are returned. I had only one student last year who rarely ever returned any of their library books. After losing fifteen books, I gave this student a labeled tote bag to keep at school and continue to check out a few books at a time. As I write this in late summer 2022, I plan to give that same student a fresh start (as I will with all students) at the beginning of the new school year. Everyone will be permitted to check out books as usual

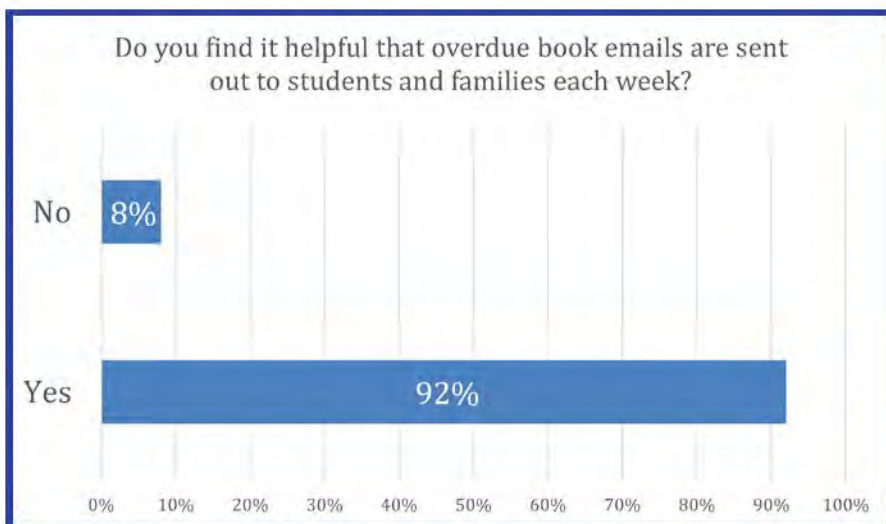


Figure 2. Views on e-mail reminders about overdue items.

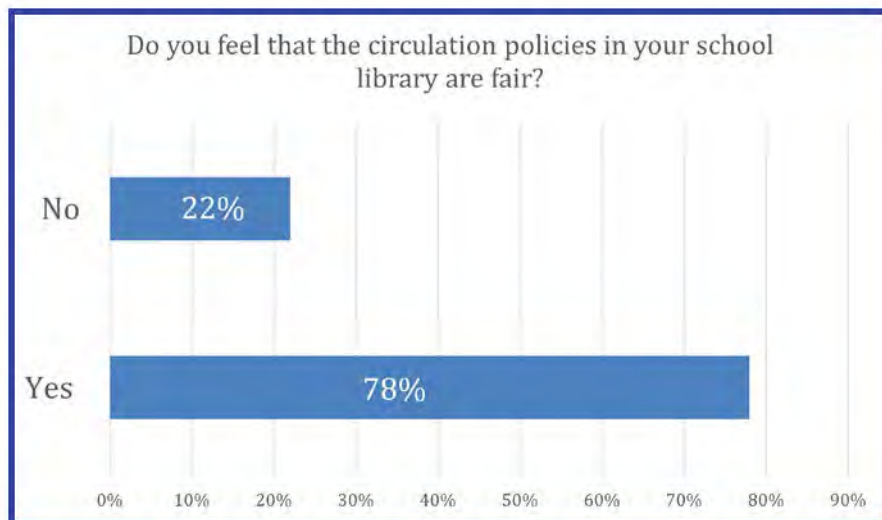


Figure 3. Opinions about fairness of circulation policies.

like their peers. If a parent reaches out to me about a lost book, I ask them to replace the copy if they are able. Most of the time they do, but I don't hinder their child's ability to access library books if they don't.

Most importantly, when students in my school have long-overdue or lost books, the most common consequence they receive from me is a discussion of how their actions will impact their own library services, as well as the other students in the school. Books checked out for weeks and months on end before they are returned mean that other students may lose the opportunity to read what interests them the most. Lost books mean other students may never have the chance to read that book, which can really impede their relationship with the school library. Lost books also may mean that funds allocated for new books the following school year have to be diverted to replacing popular or important titles that were never returned. As a result, fewer new books are available, a circumstance that can decrease interest in the collection school-wide. These are all consequences that adults may be able to easily perceive, but might require

a gentle and simplified conversation with elementary children. About forty books from the collection were lost during 2021–2022 school year, but the almost 20,000 checkouts during the school year are far more important to me than the lost books.

Allow for Flexible Circulation Policies

Towards the end of the third quarter of the school year is a good time to consider asking for feedback and suggestions from students regarding school library policies and procedures. This feedback provides librarians with an opportunity to be flexible and make changes to policies that have gotten negative feedback and implement suggestions for change, while also allowing time in the final quarter of the school year to make changes and resurvey students near the end of the school year.

The final question of the Library Circulation Policies and Practices Student Survey was a two-part inquiry that posed: *Do you feel that the circulation policies in your school library are fair?* and gave students room to provide suggestions and feedback. If students answered "no," they were encouraged to explain which

circulation policies they would make changes to. If the student responded "yes," they could skip the response box. Of the students surveyed, 78% agreed that their school library circulation policies were fair, with 22% responding "no" (see figure 3). Many of the students who answered "no" provided feedback that they wished they were allowed to check out more than one book from a series at a time (a new policy implemented at the start of the school year). In response, for the remainder of the school year I relaxed the limit on checking out only one book per series at a time. This decision did not have a major negative impact on collection availability, so I've kept the change in place. This type of flexibility in human-first circulation policy allowed for meeting the emotional needs of students who may have felt limited in their choices when selecting library materials for checkout.

Analyze Effects on Students' Behavior

When I began the role of school library media specialist in the fall of 2020, I had ample time to study the online library system that was used for circulation and library inventory. The checkout system has an option to include notes on a student's library account that will be displayed each time their circulation page is pulled up. On some students' accounts I came across several notes from a previous staff member related to lost, damaged, or overdue materials. Most of these notes advised that the particular student should be limited to checking out only one book at a time or keep their books only at school. When students returned to in-person learning in March 2021, I decided to forego adherence to the limits in those notes and give each student a fresh start, regardless of what the previous librarian's intent had been when making the notes. All

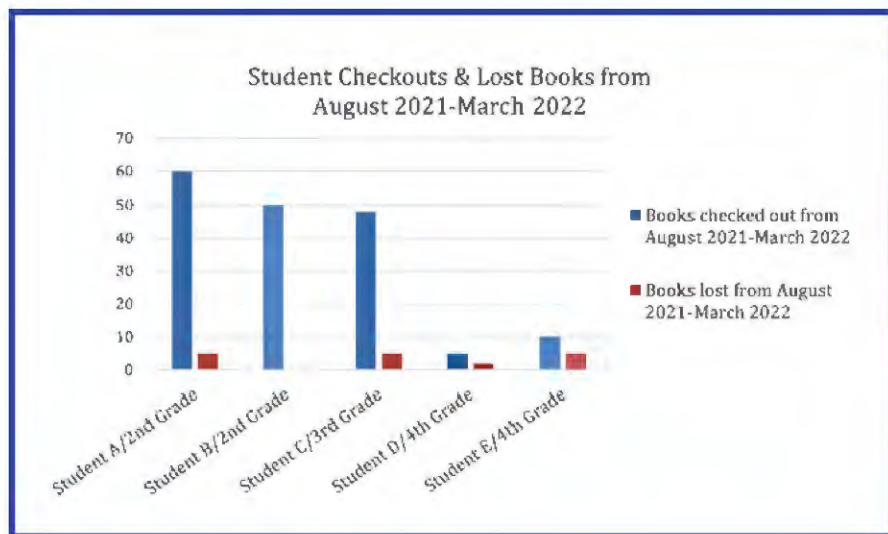


Figure 4. Student checkouts and lost books for selected students.

notes pertaining to circulation limits were eliminated from each student's account; I have no plans to reinstate that type of notetaking.

Five students currently in second, third, and fourth grades whose borrowing had been restricted pre-pandemic were chosen for "student notes" data analysis. These old notes on each student's account would have been made two years prior to my analysis. For example, students now in fourth grade would have had the initial notes added to their account when they were in second grade. In figure 4, which shows each student's current grade, you can see that once they were provided with the opportunity to freely check out books without limitation, the three youngest students demonstrated their interest in reading by borrowing many books. Unfortunately, the two students now in fourth grade who were restricted when they were second-graders have not demonstrated the same interest in resuming borrowing, perhaps because their negative experiences with the library were more entrenched or more clearly remembered. However, when provided with grace and opportunities to change previous

habits, students will often rise to the occasion as long as positive enforcements are in place and acknowledgement is given when improvement is shown. In my experience, validation is key.

Conclusion

In my experience, inclusive and human-first policies in elementary library spaces appear to increase circulation and win the approval of many students. When library account notes and ongoing limitations to borrowing were common practice in this elementary library from August 2019 through March 2020, 7,353 circulations were reported. After library circulation policies were updated and allowed for more flexibility from August 2021 through March 2022, circulations increased to 14,559.

Fear of loss of materials should not prevent librarians from focusing on their shared goal of getting books into the hands of children to encourage continuous reading (Downes, Krueger and Taylor 2017). It can be challenging to consider revising circulation policies in situations where significant loss and

damage to library materials have previously occurred. Even so, the consequences of decreased student engagement, lower circulation, and rapidly deteriorating relationships with library spaces are much more dire.



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