



HEALING THROUGH LITERATURE, ART, AND GOATS

Stephanie G. Persson

stephanie.persson@outlook.com

For many students, whether they want to admit it or not, school is a welcoming place. They get to see their friends, partake in extracurricular activities, step into leadership positions that build confidence and organizational skills, and support one another. They often even have fun. However, when the 2021–2022 school year began, the anxiety and loneliness that many students had felt while quarantined for the previous year and half followed them. Masks were still mandated, and the threat of catching COVID-19 had many students keeping their distance from others. Contact tracing had everyone in the building recounting where they'd been and with whom they had been in contact. Furthering the anxiety and isolation was the ban on clubs meeting in person, live theater and musical performances being relegated to streaming only, and cancellation of many traditional school events.

This scenario probably sounds very familiar, and I know that my school district was not alone in these measures, nor were my students alone in the struggles they were feeling socially and in regard to their health. However, the students in my school also held the burden that is becoming too common in many places: deadly violence. In

the third week of December 2021, a student from my school was shot in the parking lot of one of the district's high schools after a sporting event. He was declared dead at the scene. That was the second gun incident for my school district since the start of the school year. My school is an urban Title I school in which 76.4 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced meals, and 81.3 percent of the 1,700 students identify as BIPOC. Trauma from the pandemic and shootings was another weight added to the heavy load the students and staff were already carrying.

As an adult I felt numb at times as I tried to process what was happening around me, but I knew the students were struggling even more. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to help students outside of listening to them when they needed an ear. Additional school counselors were made available at the school, but many students did as I had done, grieved briefly—and then pushed on as classes resumed and deadlines loomed. Their stress, anxiety, and worries—even more amplified—were hidden behind brave faces.

Inspiration for Action

In January 2021 I read *Hey, Kiddo* by Jarrett Krosoczka. I connected

on so many levels with this graphic novel memoir, and I knew that it would speak to my students, as well. I was even more certain after watching some of Krosoczka's TED Talks in which he shared how art and "[his] imagination saved [his] life" (Krosoczka 2012). Krosoczka not only wrote *Hey, Kiddo*, but he illustrated it, as well. I knew the healing impact a book could have when a reader connected with characters, events, or themes. How could I combine literature and art for the students to provide them with a safe outlet for their own healing? Slowly, different ideas started to weave themselves together as the "Healing through Literature, Art, and Goats" event was born. I searched for grants to fund the event and found the AASL Inspire Special Events Grant. Through the grant awarded to us, one hundred copies of the book, traditional lined journals, graphic novel-formatted journals, and boxed sets of colored pencils could be purchased, and a local farm that had baby goats for therapy and yoga sessions was contacted. The \$2,000 grant covered the cost for all aspects of the event.

My high school houses the district's arts magnet school, and since the Inspire Grant proposal had an art focus, I reached out to the director of the magnet program. I shared my

ideas for working with the magnet classes to connect with students to participate in what would eventually become a multilayered event. The program was voluntary, and we ended up with approximately eighty students choosing to participate. Originally, I had purchased materials for one hundred students, and not reaching that goal was disappointing, but I had to remind myself that students were focused on preparations for spring art exhibits. The event was also a way to rebuild relationships between the magnet classes, in which a majority of our students participate, and the school library after almost two years of COVID quarantine and social distancing.

The premise behind the grant was for students to know they weren't alone and to provide them with outlets for healing. Even if students hadn't experienced broken homes due to drugs and alcoholism as Krosoczka had, the feelings of not being able to control a situation, loss, and anxiety were felt by so many at our school, especially after events of the previous year. The graphic novel format removed a literacy barrier and made the book accessible to students at many reading levels throughout the school.

Moving Ahead

Before the books were delivered, I met virtually with the digital art, 2D art, photography, and creative writing classes to talk about the event and the book. In my book talk I shared that it was a memoir of growing up in a family of addictions and how art was a refuge for the author throughout his youth and teenage years. I then showed Krosoczka's TED Talk "How a Boy Became an Artist." The feedback on the connection of the TED Talk to the event was enthusiastic, and one teacher commented on her

appreciation for its connection to art and her class.

Once the books were delivered to students, small-group sessions with counselors were scheduled to take place two weeks out, allowing students time to read the book. Copies of the book were supplied to the school counselors, as well. "Bibliotherapy is the act of reading to heal emotionally and support positive mental health... [B]ibliotherapy can foster the psychological and emotional safety that our young readers need, creating human connection and belonging where there was once isolation and loneliness" (Sansbury and Bongiorno 2020). The goal of the small groups was to provide students a safe place to discuss the emotional story and to process feelings and personal connections that arose from their reading. Students would be encouraged to remove their stoic masks and reflect on and express what they've been feeling in recent months. Unfortunately, because of the timing of the award for the grant and other unforeseeable scheduling conflicts, the small groups were pushed to approximately six weeks out to occur after state testing.

One of the small groups met in a classroom. The others used the school library during different class blocks. In the small groups, school counselors began the conversations with students about events in the book. From there, the conversations branched out into personal connections articulated by the school counselors and students. The school counselors helped students talk about how they were coping with anxieties driven by the pandemic, the death of the classmate, and the state testing they just finished. Students shared personal stories that paralleled events in the book, such as absentee parents, divorce, and the effects of

drugs and alcohol on individuals and their families.

The small groups also helped students see the strong allies that school counselors can be. Often, students recognize school counselors as experts in scheduling and preparing for graduation, but a great number of students don't realize the other supports that school counselors can offer. The collaboration between the school library and the school counseling department helped reinforce that we educators and other professional staff are a community of adults that care deeply for the students. I truly believe in the often-quoted African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child."

Hey, Kiddo is one of many books that have been challenged recently in various districts. However, from my perspective the conversations that stemmed from *Hey, Kiddo* reaffirmed the need to have books that represent all people available for student choice in the school library. These stories can be healing, and sometimes they are the only place where students can find refuge and connections to what can seem at times to be a very lonely and isolating world. The We Need Diverse Books organization recognizes that "diverse books... make a child feel seen. They teach empathy and resilience. They even save lives" (2022). When we returned this year, one student who participated last year but had seemed to remain distant throughout, stopped me to ask if we were doing another event this year. He asked to participate if we do. Sometimes in education we don't realize the impact we have until months or years later—if at all.

Continuing the Impact

Because the grant also provided funding for the purchase of colored pencils, and lined and graphic novel-formatted journals, these were given

to the students who participated in the event. We wanted them to have outlets for their creativity through words and art. Because materials were purchased for one hundred students and the participation numbers were lower, a *Hey, Kiddo* display has been in our makerspace this year. A copy of the book, the extra blank journals, and watercoloring supplies purchased through a school library fundraiser have been available to all students in the school. Students keep the journals. Some students have created small watercolor paintings and left them

to share with others. Starry nights, name graffiti, and exaggerated faces depicting an array of emotions are just a few of the original works they've shared.

The grant also included a school visit with goats. The goat visit was scheduled to be the final part of the event. Why? Literature has shown "that interaction between patient and animal prepares a ground to boost self-confidence in the patient, alleviate the symptoms, and improve the quality of life. Short-term contacts or looking after animals in

long-run (horse, cat, birds, small animals) alleviate a large number of diseases" (Ines Pandzic, cited in Tahan et al. 2022). The idea of animal therapy was not new to me. In fact, just before schools closed for the pandemic in 2020, my family and I had adopted a dog from a shelter. The backstory: Back when I was still in the classroom and feeling overwhelmed and stressed, I spent time with a colleague's dogs. I realized how much petting them and talking to them helped me reduce my stress level. The summer before, I had heard about one of the

THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY AND THE SCHOOL COUNSELING DEPARTMENT HELPED REINFORCE THAT WE EDUCATORS AND OTHER PROFESSIONAL STAFF ARE A COMMUNITY OF ADULTS THAT CARE DEEPLY FOR THE STUDENTS.





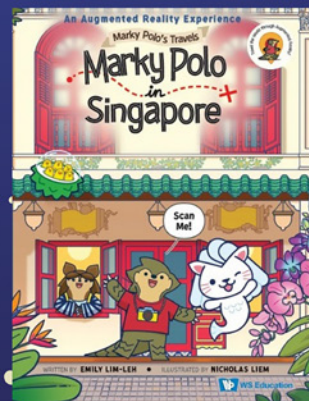
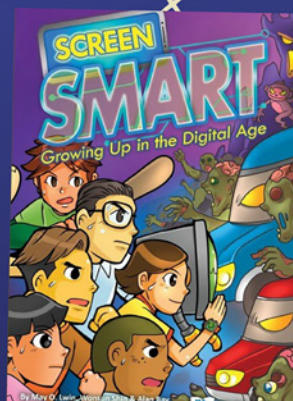
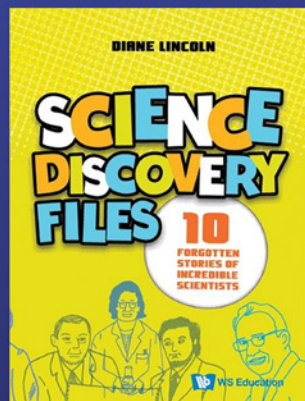
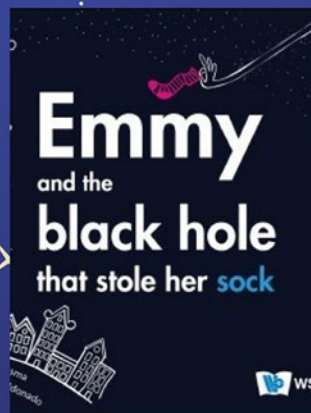
WE WANTED THEM TO HAVE OUTLETS FOR THEIR CREATIVITY THROUGH WORDS AND ART.

public libraries in a neighboring town sponsoring a “painting with goats” event for social-emotional learning. Inspired by my own experiences and by the public library program, I decided to incorporate an additional element in the event.

I think, for many students, it was the idea of sitting with and petting baby goats that

originally drew them to participate in the event. After all, little goats are absolutely adorable. Unfortunately, on the day the goats were originally scheduled to visit the school, I got bad news from the farm. Because of a family emergency, they were going to have to cancel the visit and refund all money. Students and teachers were very disappointed, so after a lot of searching for other therapy animal programs, I found The Barnyard Foundation established in our area

 **WS Education**
CONNECTING YOUNG MINDS



<https://worldscientificedu.com>

by an active-duty military family. Our area has a very large military population, so supporting this foundation, its military family, and its local farm was a perfect solution. This change of plan delayed the animal portion of the event by several weeks as we had to schedule around state testing and the farm's already full schedule.

The event was worth the wait! The Barnyard Foundation brought rabbits, a miniature horse and donkey, an alpaca, a llama, ducks, and several goats. All students who participated in the event were provided passes for a specific 30-minute time slot to spend time with the animals. In addition to the participating students, the entire faculty was invited to attend if they had a planning period during the visit. The special-needs students in the self-contained classroom were

also invited, as was the district's library supervisor, Ramonia Lynch. Ms. Lynch and approximately twenty-five teachers and school counselors were able to join us, some bringing a few additional students they thought would benefit from the time with the animals.

The graphic novel had received a lot of praise from students, but the animals definitely stole the show. Students were able to sit and hold the rabbits. They brushed, braided, and added bows to the horse's and donkey's manes and tails. Even the teachers enjoyed bedazzling the animals. Our building is not a quiet place. Visitors are constantly coming and going; students are filming for class inside and outside the building; and, on this day, animals took over the rotary greens in the parking lot. Still, despite the constant flow and noise of people, there was an overwhelming calm and peacefulness among the students while they were

with the animals. Students of all grade levels, social groups, and ability levels sat side by side with staff to pet and groom the different animals. We were one community healing together.



Stephanie G.

Persson is a library

media specialist at

Woodside High School in

Newport News, Virginia,

where she sponsors a book club and the Key

Club. An ALA and AASL member, she received

an Inspire Special Event Grant from AASL for

the social-emotional, literature, and arts event

discussed in this article. Her article "Reaching

All Readers" was published by Teacher

Librarian in April 2020.



Works Cited:

Krosoczka, Jarrett J. 2012. "How a Boy Became an Artist." <www.ted.com/talks/jarrett_j_krosoczka_how_a_boy_became_an_artist/transcript?language=en> (accessed December 3, 2022).

Sansbury, Sarah, and Martha Bongiorno. 2020. "Two Key Ways School Libraries Can Impact Social-Emotional Learning." *Perspectives on Reading* (May). <<https://perspectivesonreading.com/social-emotional>> (accessed December 9, 2022).

Tahan, Mohammad, et al. 2022. "Assessing the Effectiveness of Animal-Assisted Therapy on Alleviation of Anxiety in Pre-School Children: A Randomized Controlled Trial." *Contemporary Clinical Trials Communications* 28. <www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9240716> (accessed December 9, 2022).

We Need Diverse Books. 2023. "#Bookssavelives." <<https://diversebooks.org/programs/bookssavelives>> (accessed December 1, 2022).