

FEATURE



THE EVERYDAY OF STUDENTS

Ashley Hawkins

ashleyrenehawkins@gmail.com



BRAVERY IN THE LIBRARY



“Wait, is that *alive*?” a student asks me, peering into the large tank on my circulation desk. Our library bearded dragon, Kuro, peers back at her lazily as he lounges on his basking rock.

“Of course! Would you like to meet him?” I ask, quickly going around the desk. As I swing the tank open and pick up Kuro, the student eyes me nervously.

“Does he bite?”

“Only if you’re a butternut squash. Here, you can touch him. Just run your finger gently along his back.”

The student cautiously strokes Kuro and relaxes. “He’s softer than I thought he’d be! It actually feels nice...”

“Would you like to hold him?”

She stiffens, her eyes going back and forth between Kuro and myself. Finally, a spark of resolve hardens in her eyes, and she nods enthusiastically.

I ease Kuro into her hands, instructing her to support his belly. Kuro sits patiently in her hands as she adjusts to holding him. When he touches her hand with his tongue, she proclaims, “He likes me!”

Such moments of everyday bravery from my students are the true sustenance of my job as a school librarian. Those who do not work within our spaces may not know how much we see, but the reality is that so much of what happens in the school library takes courage from our students. A certain level of bravery is required to explore new ideas and experiences, affirm one’s identity, seek out a space of safety and community, and, as we’ve seen recently, protect the space where experiences and ideas are central.

The Bravery to Explore

“Explore” is one of the AASL Standards Shared Foundations for a good reason: it is integral to our work in the library. In my experience, students are often coming to the school library to explore new ideas

and concepts that they may not be able to explore in the traditional classroom because of curricular demands or time constraints.

And the library is always open to that exploration. We build our high-interest collections for this purpose. We ensure we have books that capitalize on our students’ curiosity and allow them to learn new things about themselves—to be brave and see where they can go.

Some students are learning new languages, including students who are new to the country and are trying to improve their English—or even teach themselves English. The experience of searching for a book in a language that is not your first is daunting, and it takes an incredible amount of bravery. When I stood in a bookstore in Tokyo a few years ago, suddenly realizing I didn’t know how books were actually organized, I understood what some of my students went through when they were thrust into my library. That pressing anxiety of having to go up to someone and asking how to find something,



Those who do not work within our spaces may not know how much we see, but the reality is that so much of what happens in the school library takes courage from our students. A certain level of bravery is required to explore new ideas and experiences, affirm one’s identity, seek out a space of safety and community, and, as we’ve seen recently, protect the space where experiences and ideas are central.



admitting you don't know how to perform a task that might be simple and second nature for the other person, is a daunting experience. Our students who speak English as a second language, who navigate our libraries and need them as a bridge to their new home, are some of our bravest patrons. They are conquering so much to gain knowledge.

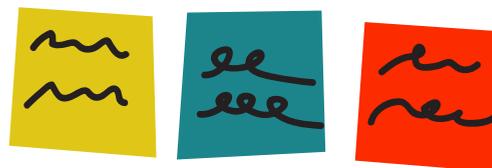
Students engage in a collaborative coding lesson in the school library.

Then there are those who come to learn in less traditional ways in the library. I'm notorious for always saying "Yes!" to trying something new in the library if students make a case for it. This is how we've gotten a bearded dragon, a sewing club, a recording studio, coding workshops, a Dungeons & Dragons club, and a forthcoming e-sports team. Saying "Yes" comes from a wish to respect students' courage to explore.

Let's look at what it took to bring Kuro into our library. First, my library aides (all students) came to me and made a collective case that the library needed a pet. I didn't make it easy on them. I found the Pets in the Classroom Grant, but they needed to pick the pet, make a case for why that pet was the best for the library, and commit to taking care of that pet as part of their job. And they came through, even though it was extra work to do the research. They learned when Kuro was obtained that they would have to feed him live bugs. Coping with the bugs, it turned out, takes the most courage from my students. To see some of my supposedly tough Brooklyn boys squirm as they drop wiggling roaches in front of Kuro is a delight—though I try hard not to show it.

But having a pet also gives the students a moment to show a different kind of bravery: feeling vulnerable but doing something anyway. Some of our students with

They read in the school library about the things they cannot talk to their parents about. I have received small sticky notes, with small notes written on them, tiny so no one but me can read: "Where are the books about girls who love other girls?" "Anxiety books?" "Can I talk to you?"



the most struggles, but who never show weakness, are the ones who come to hold Kuro. They stroke him gently and let him sit on their shoulders. They're able to explore a softer side of themselves.

The Bravery to Be Yourself

In New York City, the Department of Education has an initiative called "Respect for All." As the mentor for the LGBTQ+ Positivity Club (the name our students chose for our GSA to centralize more identities), I am one of the "Respect for All" liaisons on our campus, alongside the guidance counselors. This means students come to me when they are struggling with their gender or sexual identity or if they are being targeted or excluded in any way because of it. I have been in this position for years, but this year has been the time students need the most support.

My campus serves a primarily Afro-Caribbean population. This means my students who are queer are feeling a tremendous amount of societal pressure. Many of my students are closeted at home, and those who are open with their identity encounter prejudice from extremist groups not only for their gender and sexual identity, but also for being BIPOC

and new to the country. They are aware of what people say and are distressed by it. They receive hateful messages on TikTok and Instagram for all of their identity, and it's a horrible weight.

This is why it was an incredible gift when Lambda Literary provided students the opportunity to meet with Junauda Petrus, author of *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them* (Dutton 2019) in a virtual visit. The students were engaged so vibrantly, asking questions and listening to her every word. When I talked to a student later, they told me, "I felt like she actually got us and listened to us. This is the best thing we ever did."

To be able to be oneself is a hard thing for anyone. Sometimes, students are nervous about picking up certain books. My desk has a cabinet where I store books for students who can't take their books home, even with a protective cover. They read in the library about the things they cannot talk to their parents about. I have received small sticky notes, with small notes written on them, tiny so no one but me can read: "Where are the books about girls who love other girls?" "Anxiety books?" "Can I talk to you?"



Then there are the books I find in odd spots, tucked hurriedly into the science section or behind books on Apartheid. Books on relationships, sexuality, abuse, dealing with being arrested—resources on topics that students are dealing with but are too nervous to check out. Sometimes, books disappear altogether, only to reappear in the library a month later or be found by a custodian in a stairwell.

All of this seeking of this important and sensitive information takes bravery, even if young people choose not to interface with me to acquire it. Most of the time, it's an admission to themselves that they need guidance.

The Bravery to Lead and Collaborate

“Can we do a taco night?” the president of the LGBTQ+ Positivity Club asked me as I was in the middle of checking out a stack of *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* books to another student.

“Ahhhh,” I floundered, my mind racing. *We don't have any money! Can I get*

We are seeing civic engagement from students on the issue of protecting school libraries on such a large scale because the school library enables the bravery necessary for that civic engagement. The fact that students are going to school board meetings, starting banned-book clubs, and initiating petitions and protests is a testament to the value of our space and the incredible capability of our young people.



money? Can I afford to pay out of pocket? No, definitely not; I'm broke! But I don't like to say no!

"We already all decided who's bringing what," she explained, obviously reading my panic.

"Oh!" I said, relaxing and handing the books over to the other student. "Well, of course! Community organizing and feeding each other is an important part of LGBTQ+ culture! What do you need me to bring?"

Since I've turned clubs over to full student control, these sorts of scenes play out regularly. We have an approval process, which is mostly just checking with me before doing something that will require resources or cleanup. Dungeons & Dragons sometimes needs dice replenishment or new character sheets. LGBTQ+ Positivity usually needs craft supplies. Occasionally they ask me to participate or mediate, but I don't run meetings or dictate activities. I've had to be brave to give up control, to trust that my students are the experts. And they've had to learn to take leadership and collaborate.

The DM, or dungeon master, is the leader of Dungeons & Dragons, and the current DM, Luis, is in charge of training potential successors. Luis has had to learn how to manage a group of people and has even told me that he now appreciates how hard it is to be a teacher. Anyone who has run a game of D&D can tell you that even adults can get unruly, and keeping your peers organized and in line can sometimes be frustrating.

It takes bravery to organize your peers, to take charge, and to build a community. It takes courage to work together and to make decisions on your own. Because the school library is a center of self-guided learning, it harnesses this brand of bravery. The school library is a proving

ground for leadership, collaboration, and finding oneself. Students demonstrate this every day in school libraries across the country.

The Bravery to Protect Your Community

As we've seen recently, students have become more and more vocal as attacks on school libraries have increased. These students who are speaking up are showing a bravery that is beyond the everyday, but it is also a bravery that we all know our students are more than capable of displaying. Students know that these attacks are an attack on more than just books. As "Ez from California" said in the *New York Times* article "What Students Are Saying about Banning Books from School Libraries":

If these books get taken down for inappropriate content, we need to find out the root reason why... Is it because these books talk about severe racism, sexuality, gender, and real-life harms? Why shouldn't people learn how to identify, treat others with respect, understand how to help/support your BIPOC community, support victims, and understand the horrors inflicted upon LGBTQIA BIPOC people? Learning or understanding these issues will better your society, the empathy people have for others and have a way to have self-empowerment and community." (Alexie and Hollister 2022)

We are seeing civic engagement from students on the issue of protecting school libraries on such a large scale because the school library enables the bravery necessary for that civic engagement. The fact that students are going to school board meetings, starting banned-book clubs, and initiating petitions and protests is a testament to the value of our space and the incredible capability of our

young people. They're organized and brave, oftentimes braver than most adults. They also have the most power as stakeholders in our space. As Jonathan Friedman says, "Teachers are afraid of losing their jobs... Principals only have so much that they can do in the face of school boards. But students can protest. Students can speak out" (Morris 2022).

Students see the school library as somewhere worth fighting for, and their bravery is the truly sustaining power in our space.



Ashley Hawkins

is the campus librarian at the Samuel J. Tilden Educational Complex in Brooklyn, New York,

and an adjunct professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at Queens College. She is the Manga, Manhwa, Light Novels, & More: East Asian Popular Culture Cooperative Collection Development Librarian for the New York City Department of Education; the chair of the New York Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee; and a reviewer for Booklist.

Works Cited:

Alexie, Sherman, and Matthew Hollister. 2022. "What Students Are Saying about Banning Books from School Libraries." *New York Times* (February 18). <www.nytimes.com/2022/02/18/learning/students-book-bans.html> (accessed February 11, 2023).

Morris, Ashira. 2022. "How Teens Are Pushing Back on Book Bans." *Next City* (August 10). <<https://nextcity.org/urbanist-news/how-teens-are-pushing-back-on-book-bans>> (accessed March 4, 2023).