Rural School Libraries
Anchoring Community
Mental Health Literacy

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Children Who Have One Or More Emotional, Behavioral, Or Developmental Conditions (Percent) - 2015-2016

ONE IN FIVE CHILDREN HAS SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS
Suicide surpassed homicide to become second-leading cause of death for teenagers, ages 15-19, in the United States.

More people die by suicide in rural areas.

Health Professional Shortage Areas: Mental Health, by County, 2017

RURAL COMMUNITIES LACK MENTAL HEALTH CARE

RURAL SCHOOLS SERVE AS DE FACTO CHILDREN’S MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

CHILDREN IN RURAL AREAS WITH MENTAL, BEHAVIORAL, AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS MAY NEED

- Better access to mental health care for children and parents
- Programs that support parents
- Opportunities to learn, play, and socialize
HOW CAN RURAL SCHOOL LIBRARIANS SERVE AS COMMUNITY ANCHORS TO SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS?
METHODS

- Initial data generated by 4 focus groups
  - 14 school librarians

- Member checked with participants during focus groups
METHODS

- Grounded theory

- Transcripts separately analyzed by three members of the research team
  - Coded for themes

- Transcripts code checked by each member of research team
  - Overarching themes and strengths
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
THEME 1: RESOURCES
THEME 2: CHALLENGES
THEME 3: DESIRES
THEME 4: EXAMPLES TO FOLLOW
THEME 1: RESOURCES
SUBTHEME
PROVIDING NONFICTION RESOURCES IS CHALLENGING.
• “We don’t have a lot of resources, and the [nonfiction] resources we have are not flying off the shelves. Now, stories that involve mental health issues are very popular and excellent for the students to be able to relate to.”

• “Nonfiction doesn’t always have the best covers. Walking around with a book that says ‘Getting to Know Your Feelings,’ something like that or with kids from the [19]90s on the cover, it’s not going to help. That’s not good.”
SUBTHEME
HIGH-INTEREST AND FICTION MATERIALS HAVE MORE USE THAN NON-FICTION.
“Lucky for us, a lot of those books with those really deep themes on mental health have been popular and the last few years, and have been award nominees, so that helps too because, you know, a lot of the kids are reading them because they're nominees for book awards. It helps remove that stigma as well because a lot of people are reading them.”

“I do have a set of books there by American Girl, A Girl’s Guide to Money, A Girl’s Guide to Babysitting, and one of them was A Girl’s Guide to Worry. It was a surprise [for her students], to realize that they do worry, and what to do about it.”
SUBTHEME

THE SCHOOL LIBRARY SERVES AS A SAFE SPACE FOR STUDENTS.
“I have a lot of kids that hang out in here, and I know an awful lot about them. I think that's just because of who I am and the big open room, you know? I'm not making them do homework and stuff. I have about three or four kids right now that check in with me. … I get a lot of things told to me by kids and moms.”

“People don't see us as being someone that kids might reach out to. But we all know how much kids do talk to us and tell us their business, whether we want to know it or not. It happens more than people realize.”
THEME 2: CHALLENGES
SUBTHEME
SCHOOL LIBRARIANS DO NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE PROVIDING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT.
“If someone came to me, I would send them to the counselor. Because … I don't necessarily feel that that is my area of expertise and, having a few books, I think, is fine, but I feel like for some of that other stuff, there's someone else who is trained better than I am to use as a resource to get that.”

“I feel like it could quickly become a [problem] if someone took issue with study materials. … In my district, that [would] come home to the library, so it would really benefit the program to have strong administrator support and tie-in with the counseling department.”
SUBTHEME

MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA CAN DETER STUDENTS’ ACCESS TO RESOURCES.
“If the other kids know what that book is about, they’re all going to start pointing fingers, whispering, and saying because you’re reading it, you know, do you have a problem?”

“It’s one thing for the kid whose grandma just died and he’s carrying around a book about death and say ‘I’m reading this because my grandma died.’ It’s something else to be carrying around a book on opioid addiction and being able to talk about that.”
THEME 3: DESIRES
SUBTHEME
SCHOOL LIBRARIANS WANT MORE TRAINING.
“I definitely think that best practices from other libraries, that would help. ... Just personally, I think I would be a lot more empowered to do some sort of socio-emotional programming or kindness programming.”

“I would like to see some sort of professional development or training on any kind of middle ground, what we do and what we don’t do [as school librarians].”
SUBTHEME
SCHOOL LIBRARIANS WANT MORE AND BETTER RESOURCES.
“I have had parents, call me where the child has experienced the death of a grandparent or something. So, then they're wanting books on that, and **I’m not sure if I have enough**. So to know other titles and to be able to have access to that, I would love that.”

“**Booklists can be shared among schools.** So, one could say, well here's a list of books in the deal with divorce that are good for three to five year olds.”
SUBTHEME

RURAL SCHOOL LIBRARIANS ARE OVERWORKED, AND SO ARE COUNSELORS.
“I’ll be honest. If it were part of a program that I wasn’t personally initiating, I have so many irons in the fire, I am really about to the point where there’s no more capacity for me to spearhead something else.

“This is an important topic, and I don’t know that I have the resources left to do it well.”

“Next year my workload will increase. I will be responsible for teaching several classes every day and keeping the library open while those classes are being taught.”
SUBTHEME

LIBRARYANS SEE POTENTIAL FOR PARTNERSHIPS ACROSS THE SCHOOL.
“It would be **nice to know from the counselors** which seem to be the biggest issues in our school, and maybe I could target some of those resources for collection development.”

“**In my district, I think they think it’s all up to the counselor, and they don’t understand or even realize that [the school library] can be a resource for them.**”
THEME 4: EXAMPLES TO FOLLOW
SUBTHEME

HARPER’S ETHIC OF CARE MODEL IS USED BY SOME SCHOOL LIBRARIANS.
“I just saw something on Pinterest so I typed up this sign, **Tough Topics for Kids**, like abuse and self-harm, LGBTQ issues. I've had that little display there for a while now, but just this week I've had two kids ask me for books, nonfiction, about how to talk to your family, how to come out to your family.”

“In book club, we've picked books this year, one was a student with Asperger's, and the other was called Fire Girl. The girl is badly burned, and she has to move schools all the time. We had a lot of really good discussion [about these issues] with both of those books.”
SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS ARE FOCUSED ON AMELIORATING EXISTING PROBLEMS, RATHER THAN ON MAINTAINING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH.
“All our schools participate in the county mental health survey three times per year. Teachers at all grade levels and fourth- and fifth-graders are surveyed, and I know that data is looked at pretty closely and the counselor does then meet with **children in need.**”

“We have a program that’s specifically a suicide screening. A presentation is given and every student fills out a questionnaire, and then based on those answers, any student who wants to, or if they have answered certain questions in that way, they [the district] follows up with the students. That is probably our **main mental health support**, and that was **prompted by several suicides** in the district.”
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
School librarians recognize the potential of the school library to be a support for school counselors, but do not currently feel empowered to provide counseling support.

- Additional support for youth mental health training should be incorporated into education for school librarian candidates.
- Domain-specific resources (such as booklists, exchange forums, and other sharing opportunities) have potential to minimize professional isolation of rural school librarians and increase their confidence.
- Support of district and school personnel is necessary to ensure that mental health support is not one more burden added to the school librarian’s plate.
Several of our focus group participants are engaging in Ethic of Care practices for student mental health support.

- These Ethic of Care practices generally align with the mission and traditional practices of school librarianship, and can be taught in professional development and pre-service educational programs.
WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN?

- Ethic of Care (Harper, 2017; Rubinstein 2012)
- Safe Spaces (Brewster, 2013; Takahashi, 2017)
- Collections and Informational Resources (Harper, 2017)
  - Bibliotherapy (Cornett & Cornett, 1980)
- School librarians are key stakeholders in improving literacy and information literacy – why not also health information literacy and mental health information literacy?
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Project website:
https://schoolmentalhealth.missouri.edu