

# School libraries as safe spaces promoting literacy and wellbeing



School resources

There is a growing body of research that captures the contributions of the school library and its dedicated professionals to students' literacy<sup>1</sup> and wellbeing<sup>2</sup>. When schools understand these benefits and relationships, they are more likely to resist current trends toward the defunding of these valuable facilities<sup>3</sup>. Both literacy<sup>4</sup> and wellbeing<sup>5</sup> are priorities in contemporary schools and this review seeks to illustrate how the affordances and learning experiences encountered within the library can make a significant contribution to students' development in these priority areas.

School libraries can be welcoming sanctuaries within schools, and many adults will have fond memories of time spent in their school libraries as children. However, the ongoing existence of school libraries cannot be taken for granted. They compete with many other facilities within the school for adequate resourcing, often missing out on sufficient staffing and funding<sup>6</sup>. To justify an ongoing investment in the school library, the research-informed benefits of school libraries need to be understood both within and beyond the school library community<sup>7</sup>.

## The role of school library professionals

All of the literacy and wellbeing benefits described in this review are mediated and facilitated by school library professionals.

Qualified school library staff have been consistently positively associated with student literacy performance over many years of research<sup>8</sup>. A review of this literature has found that **school library use is associated with reading attainment and positive attitudes toward reading**<sup>9</sup>. There is a positive relationship between the presence and number of qualified school library professionals within the school and scores on standards-based literacy tests<sup>10</sup>.

Practices that support student literacy form a key part of the role of school library professionals<sup>11</sup>, with nurturing students' sense of safety and wellbeing also a common requirement of the role<sup>12</sup>. As such, promoting literacy and wellbeing are key professional responsibilities of these staff. However, recent analysis of the work roles of school library professionals reveals that the roles are complex<sup>13</sup> and becoming increasingly diverse over time due to job creep, so it is important that their roles are balanced so that they can continue to contribute to students' literacy and wellbeing<sup>14</sup>. Job creep, also known as role creep, refers to the iterative expansion of an existing workload through the absorption of multiple additional duties<sup>15</sup>. As the name implies, these additions are typically made without fanfare, so the school library professional can find themselves struggling with these increased expectations, but be unable to initially pinpoint why<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, many teachers and school leaders may not know what school library professionals do to support literacy learning in the school<sup>17</sup>, and their 'invisible' work is rarely mentioned in literacy-related educational policies, curricula, and research literature<sup>18</sup>.

## Struggling literacy learners

Recent research that focused on the role of school library professionals working with struggling [literacy learners](#) sought to shed light onto the kinds of activities and environments that they promote to nurture the literacy learning of the students who need the most support.

Analysis found that teacher librarians enacted a number of important roles<sup>19</sup>. Activities include:

- identifying struggling readers
- providing them with age and skill-appropriate reading materials
- scaffolding the skills supporting choice (the explicit teaching of 'choosing skills' so that students can independently select reading materials that reflect their interests and abilities)
- supporting students with special educational needs
- providing one-to-one matching to reading materials
- promoting access to books
- enhancing the social position of books and reading
- reading aloud to students
- facilitating silent reading
- preparing students for high-stakes literacy testing by focusing on factors such as building students' cognitive stamina and preparing them for testing platforms<sup>20</sup>

While the value of these contributions may be rarely understood or recognised, they have the power to make a significant impact on struggling literacy learners' knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward literacy and literacy-supportive activities<sup>21</sup>.

## Reading engagement for literacy

The most obvious activity associated with libraries is reading, although the value of sustained reading activities facilitated within the library may not be well understood or supported. School libraries are environments that are conducive to sustained reading, and this is important given that research has found both that many of the literacy skills measured on high-stakes tests can be developed through dedicating time for sustained silent reading, and that **opportunities to read for pleasure are associated with a wealth of literacy benefits**<sup>22</sup>. These include but are not limited to improved syntactic knowledge, word recognition, vocabulary, reading comprehension, spelling, and oral language skills<sup>23</sup>.

Teachers who seek to improve their students' literacy skills may do so by increasing the amount of time their students spend reading for pleasure. They may adopt strategies to enhance their students' reading engagement, which relates to students' frequency of and attitudes toward reading for pleasure so that they will read more often both within and beyond school. There are many research-supported strategies that can enhance students' reading engagement, and school library professionals are experts in these strategies<sup>24</sup> which form a key part of their professional role<sup>25</sup>.

For example, **teacher librarians encourage book discussion to nurture reading for pleasure in a variety of ways**, and for diverse reasons, the key purpose of which is the promotion of reading as an enjoyable practice which is worth the investment, and that continues to have value beyond the period of independent reading skill acquisition<sup>26</sup>. While book discussion may just sound like a potentially enjoyable activity with limited educational value, it can have a beneficial influence on students' attitudes toward books and reading<sup>27</sup>, potentially enhancing their reading engagement<sup>28</sup>.

## Reading for wellbeing

Reading for pleasure also offers wellbeing benefits that are receiving increasing attention given the many challenges facing young people in contemporary times. For example, reading for pleasure has

been related to reduced psychological distress<sup>29</sup>, and lower levels of hyperactivity and attention issues in young people<sup>30</sup>, with avid readers describing use of reading as a pleasurable escape<sup>31</sup> and a way to evade stressors of daily life<sup>32</sup>.

Recent research with children in primary and secondary schools found that the school library plays a key role in facilitating reading for wellbeing. For example, students described reading to regulate their emotions and escape stress, and to connect with characters and find role models<sup>33</sup>. Their accounts of using reading for perspective-taking and personal development link reading and the development of pro-social behaviours<sup>34</sup>. In addition, they described pleasure in listening to reading aloud within the library, and this enjoyment has also been documented in other contexts<sup>35</sup>. It is important to note that young people in high school also enjoyed being read to in the library, not just younger children<sup>36</sup>.

School library professionals understand the link between reading and wellbeing, and they have described purposefully creating inclusive and comfortable environments that facilitate reading for wellbeing<sup>37</sup>. For example, they make sure there are interesting books available that are accessible for students who have dyslexia, but that also meet these students' unique interests<sup>38</sup>.

In addition, some libraries may make a 'story dog' available so that shy children and struggling readers have the opportunity to improve their confidence and enjoyment in reading aloud<sup>39</sup>. Use of story dogs in animal-assisted reading has been related to improving self-esteem and concentration while reducing anxiety and stress<sup>40</sup>, again illustrating an interesting link between literacy-supportive measures adopted in the school library and students' wellbeing.

## Information and health literacy

When considering the contribution of libraries to student literacy, it is important that this is not limited to the traditional notion of literacy relating to reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Students actually require a wealth of diverse literacy skills in order to support academic achievement across the learning areas<sup>41</sup>.

Relatively little consideration is given to the important role of school library professionals in building information and related health literacy in their students. While many schools have invested in enhancing the technological capacity of their schools, school library professionals can play a role in supporting schools to make the most of this investment as technology and information literacy leaders within their schools<sup>42</sup>. Most school library professionals are expected to promote information literacy in students and staff as part of their job description, and this includes providing learning experiences to develop related digital and critical literacy skills<sup>43</sup>.

To make sound decisions about their health, both children and adults need access to reliable health information, and they need the skills to source, interpret, and apply this information. The proliferation of misinformation around health issues during the pandemic has further highlighted the value of having strong health literacy skills<sup>44</sup>. There has been a growing focus on the contribution of school library professionals to their students' health literacy, with findings suggesting that they may play an important role as gatekeepers of health information<sup>45</sup>, supporting students to access health resources including those focused on mental health and wellbeing<sup>46</sup>. Recent research with children in primary and secondary schools has found that school libraries and their staff build students' information literacy, directly and indirectly fostering health literacy while also providing access to current, reliable resources that address health issues<sup>47</sup>.

## Safe spaces

One of the most important roles of the school library within the broader context of the school is its capacity to act as a safe space and sanctuary for all students. A safe space within a school can be viewed as an environment where students feel both secure and comfortable, and over which they perceive some control and ownership<sup>48</sup>. Generally, contemporary schools can be competitive and demanding spaces which may be overwhelming for some students, particularly when they are grappling with wellbeing and social issues. The library can be the much-needed safe space for these children, and research has found that school libraries are places that children turn to when seeking sanctuary from unfavourable weather conditions, when they are still developing their social skills, or when they experience anxiety<sup>49</sup>. The welcoming space within the school library also supports the development of fledgling mentor and mentee relationships, and provides a secure environment for children seeking to reset when experiencing conflict within their friendship groups<sup>50</sup>. It is also a valued space for young people who love to read, or those who enjoy expressing their creativity in makerspaces<sup>1</sup>, which are 'collaborative workspaces stocked with materials and tools for creating, building, designing, and learning'<sup>51</sup>.

The expectation that school library professionals create safe and enriching learning environments is built into their professional roles<sup>1</sup>. Analysis of job description documents for school library professionals found expectations that they create library environments that are warm and welcoming, flexible and supportive of learning, vibrant, and stimulating<sup>52</sup>. The school library can be the heart of the school, providing a safe and rich learning environment for its students, but this is unlikely to evolve by accident. As illustrated in this review, the creation of these sanctuaries for literacy learning and wellbeing is intentional and devised by school library professionals. For these resources to be maintained into the future, they will need to be resistant to the many barriers that may limit the effectiveness of school libraries<sup>53</sup>.

## Securing the future of school libraries

Research has found that while school library professionals actively endeavour to support student literacy and see this as a key purpose of their role, they may find themselves grappling with many impediments to prioritising this within the additional requirements of their role and the multi-purpose library environment<sup>54</sup>. Common barriers include limited time and the competing demands of the professional role, the diverse demands of curriculum, poor teacher valuing, low student engagement, issues with parental support, and constraints on space and budget<sup>55</sup>. The presence of a school library and qualified staff are beneficial but their capacity to foster students' literacy and wellbeing should not be taken for granted, as there are clearly many factors that can erode this capacity.

In New Zealand, as in many other areas of the world, school libraries are grappling with poor funding, inadequate staffing, and a lack of recognition of their material contribution to students' lives<sup>56</sup>. Furthermore, much of the research in this review was conducted outside New Zealand, so there is a real need for current school library research to be undertaken in New Zealand to enhance understandings of the role and conditions of school library professionals and their contributions within this unique national context<sup>57</sup>.

One of the greatest frustrations with school library research lies in the fact that this research rarely features in the **broader education literature**, instead remaining bound within library and information sciences journals and academic spaces<sup>58</sup>. For the educational importance of school libraries and their staff to be well-recognised, their many benefits need to be understood and translated within the academic and professional education communities<sup>59</sup>.

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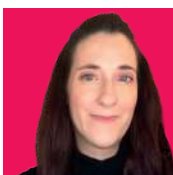
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