

Lisa McKenzie, Donna Davison, Paul Capouski and Sushma Sharma examine the essential role of the teacher librarian and the school library in low SES schools...

In schools where there is a high number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, or where there are many “high risk” students, the role of the library and the teacher librarian is vital not only for providing resources and knowledge to ensure equity but also to deliver spaces and opportunities to develop students intellectually and socio-emotionally.

Despite the importance of the Teacher Librarian and the library to these communities, in schools which have had inconsistent staffing of the Teacher Librarian position, or have little practice in effectively utilising the library, developing a culture of effective library use can be time-consuming and challenging. It can also be particularly daunting to newly qualified or appointed staff facing entrenched negative or challenging attitudes from staff and students alike towards the purpose of the library and teacher librarian.

However, in these circumstances, there are some simple and effective approaches which can be used to develop and improve perceptions towards the library and the Teacher Librarian.

Develop Collaborative Relationships

Collaboration is one of the pillars of modern teacher librarianship. It is vital on a professional level for classroom teachers and Teacher Librarians to share knowledge and skills and to develop students’ information literacy and love of reading. In low socio-economic areas where students may lack access to information sources and reading material beyond the classroom, this process is even more essential (Hughes, 2013).

In some schools, however, the concept of collaborative relationships with a Teacher Librarian may be foreign to some staff. This can be due to staff member’s own experiences as students, or because of prior modelling by a different Teacher Librarian. This can leave some teachers unaware of possible collaboration and how the role of the Teacher Librarian may fit within teaching and learning.

An effective Teacher Librarian must *actively* seek collaborators and opportunities beyond a scheduled ‘period’ paradigm. An excellent way to open staff to possibilities is to provide (within a team, faculty or all-staff context) the opportunity to view a model version of the collaborative experience (as part professional learning, part marketing).

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership five-minute video on *Selecting Resources* provides a model of a possible collaboration between classroom teachers and a Teacher Librarian (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017). This resource can provide a basis for discussion and can spark staff thinking on how to utilise the Teacher Librarian and library resources.

Structuring Library Usage

All students seek a sense of dependability and safety. For “high risk” students who often have disrupted schooling and home lives, school may be one of the few places which has this sense of dependability and safety. The library, however, with often unusual environmental layouts, technology resources and opening hours, may not match the usual school routine. This makes clear expectations and boundaries set by a Teacher Librarian in a teaching and supervisor context critical (Lester, Allanson and Notar, 2019).

Routines and expectations during classes and breaks must be made clear and consistent. Entry and exit procedures must be explicitly taught and reinforced to staff and students alike. Basic rules concerning the presence of bags, water drinking and uses of technology are required and are to be considered in tandem with school-wide expectations. A Teacher Librarian must also find the balance between users who need the space for leisure and others who wish to use it for work. Enforcement of these expectations must be ongoing. Consistency for students is key (Putland, 2018).

A Welcoming and Accessible Environment

Regular school library users may be the more vulnerable students on the playground. Therefore, the library space itself is important to student welfare; a place to meet, play games, read or do homework as well as an area that provides an alternative from the playground. Such students find the library, in which they are welcomed to sit and make social connections with their peers, both valuable and comforting. The benefits extend beyond pure amusement – the library can be a vital area for relaxation, helping to relieve stress and provide a break from the pressures of school and home life.

Furthermore, school libraries in low socio-economic areas may provide one of the only free sources of computer and internet access in the student’s immediate area, thus providing critical equitable access to technology (Australian Library and Information Association, 2010, p. 6). Apart from access to academic research, the freely accessible internet allows students to submit job applications and resumés, apply for courses, complete practice tests for their driver’s license and check emails. Enabling students to connect with the world of information, interacting with, and using, information in all aspects of their lives “fosters lifelong learning, personal fulfilment, improved decision making, knowledge development, innovation, imagination, creativity and cultural continuity” (Australian Library and Information Association, 2014, p. 1).

School libraries as critical social centres and information access points for students, who may not otherwise have these facilities but require them, should be a focus of discussion and advocacy for Teacher Librarians in schools with students ‘at risk’ or, in other ways, disadvantaged. While the educational remains a library’s core business, its importance to students goes beyond, into the social and the personal, and must be acknowledged as part of whole student wellbeing and development.

Enrichment and Professional Support

A school library has evolved from a place for reading books, borrowing resources and researching for a project to incorporate more open, fluid and interchangeable spaces, which suit different needs and purposes. While a school library's budget and furniture can limit some opportunities, a school library can still highlight its various strengths and its versatility by providing support for school curriculum needs and welfare programs while using the chance to (even passively) advocate and market during different events.

These events could include STEM activities using LEGO during classes and Minecraft during breaks; providing meeting spaces for staff; hosting professional learning; hosting ongoing enrichment activities with outside agencies; subject selection or parent-teacher nights and orientations. Each event offers the library the opportunity to raise its profile and, in the process, that of the Teacher Librarians. Each event, no matter how small, is an opportunity to network, develop connections, showcase the space and its available resources and discuss possible future opportunities. Consider when and where there may be receptive parties to begin to develop relationships.

Creating Connections with Students

We want students to “Connect, Succeed and Thrive” in school (State of New South Wales (Department of Education), 2019). The library is a crucial part of that for many students: providing choice and opportunities for students' welfare and learning in school, particularly so in a low socio-economic environment, where students may lack options outside of school. Standard 1 (from The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers) - “Know your students and how they learn” is just as important in the library as it is in the classroom (Education Services Australia, 2018).

It follows that the Library's collection development should enable students to read about experiences that match their own. Providing a range of voices and texts that represent the school population and its needs and concerns will allow students to access information to support their social development and increase engagement.

For the Teacher Librarian simple things, like knowing students' names, saying “hello” and attending school events, all help to create trust, connect with students and learn more about them. Take every opportunity to be in the classroom with students, or invite classes to the library, and try and learn about what students are doing both in and out of class.

Conclusion

These simple methods are just a few of the possible approaches for developing relationships and effective library cultures within a school library. Particularly in low socio-economic circumstances or 'high risk student' populations advocacy and marketing are vital to develop a culture of library usage or to change attitudes towards a library and the Teacher-Librarian role where such attitudes have not been optimum in the past. A commitment to equity and commitment to the social and intellectual development of students' demands that, even in some of the most difficult of circumstances, school libraries must continue to strive for effective library use.

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