

School libraries should not be taken for granted

Many of us will have fond memories of our experiences in school libraries as children. These libraries were spaces where we felt safe, and where we could encounter magical new worlds and characters beyond our imaginings in books. Contemporary schools face complex and competing demands, such as crowded curriculums and the implementation of high-stakes testing, which can lead to reading for pleasure falling by the wayside. However, we know that reading for pleasure is strongly associated with diverse literacy benefits (as I explore in my 2018 book [Reading Engagement for Tweens and Teens](#)), and for some students, their [only opportunities](#) for reading for pleasure may be in school. Therefore, reading for enjoyment needs to be supported in schools, and school libraries and their staff can play an important role in realising this objective.

Libraries as sites of reading for pleasure

In the course of my research with children in primary and secondary schools, I met many amazing school librarians who devote a great deal of time and passion to bringing a love of reading to their students. In their [recent research](#) in England, Teresa Cremin and Joan Swann also found that school librarians can play a powerful role in creating a shared space for reading enjoyment.

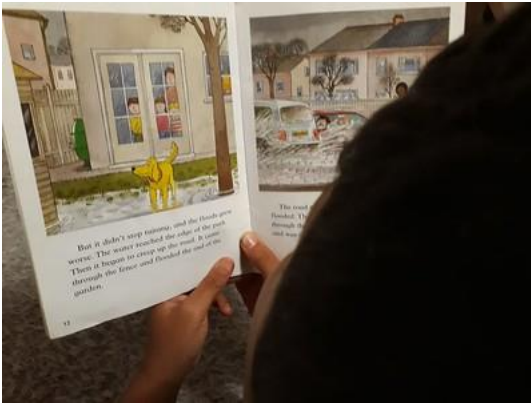
In 2018 I travelled to 30 schools and conducted in-depth interviews with school librarians to explore the role they play in supporting the reading engagement and literacy learning of their students. Findings were published across a range of journal articles and a 2019 book, [Librarians in Schools as Literacy Educators](#). I found that school librarians employ a wide range of strategies to build students' reading enjoyment, confidence and skills, with libraries invaluable sites of reading for pleasure.



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Libraries supporting struggling readers

Schools are particularly concerned with supporting struggling literacy learners to improve their skills in order to enhance their academic, social and vocational opportunities. However, the role that libraries can play in improving literacy outcomes for students is not always understood. US researchers Keith Lance and Debra Kachel draw on a [wealth of research](#) that links the presence of well-resourced and staffed school libraries and student literacy performance. [A recent Australian study](#) found that increasing opportunities to access a library can have a stronger positive influence on students' reading engagement than many other factors commonly associated with reading engagement.



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However, relatively little is known about what school librarians actually do to confer this benefit. [My research](#) found that amongst many other practices, librarians identified struggling readers, provided them with age and skill-appropriate texts, and taught them how to choose reading materials. They also supported students with special needs, provided one-to-one matching, promoted access to books, enhanced the social position of books and reading, read aloud to students, and facilitated silent reading.

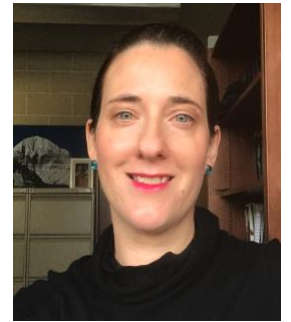
Barriers faced by school librarians

Despite the research showing what libraries offer our students, cuts to library resourcing and staffing have been severe in recent times in the [UK](#), the [US](#) and [Australia](#). Recent research suggests that librarians can also face notable [barriers](#) in their schools that can impede their capacity to support young people's reading engagement and literacy learning, and librarians may struggle to secure the support of their colleagues and school leaders, as the learning experiences they offer occur outside the classroom. Unfortunately, schools with libraries do not always make effective [use of them](#), and there is also unequal access for students within a school. For example, children in the lower years of primary school have higher access than those in the upper years, [reflecting previous research findings](#), and children in the upper years of secondary school may miss out when compared with their lower school counterparts. This means that students may not always have easy access to reading materials even when they have a school library. On one hand schools claim to value supporting student literacy, but on the other, they often fail to support the very resource that can be pivotal to student engagement and achievement. Therefore, school libraries should not be taken for granted.

URLs for in-text hyperlinks:

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8. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35940002>
9. <https://theconversation.com/the-calamity-of-the-disappearing-school-libraries-44498>
10. <https://www.softlinkint.com/blog/softlink-apac-school-library-survey-report/>
11. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/lit.12189>
12. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-21025-0_3
13. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01930826.2017.1340774>
14. <https://asla.org.au/>

Dr. Margaret K. Merga works at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. She primarily conducts research in reading, literacy, librarianship and higher education. Currently she is working on projects related to the role of teacher librarians in fostering literacy in schools, how secondary schools support struggling literacy learners, adult literacy intervention, silent reading in schools, handwriting and keyboarding skills in young children, as well as projects in higher education research communication. She is the author of three recent books in reading, librarianship and quantitative data analysis, and the 2020 Inaugural Patron of the [Australian School Library Association](#).



Margaret is committed to sharing research findings beyond academia, and was awarded the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research) Outstanding Public Engagement Award 2019 in her institution.