

2020

How can school libraries support student wellbeing? Evidence and implications for further research

Margaret Merga
Edith Cowan University

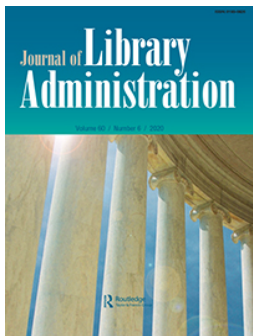
Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

[10.1080/01930826.2020.1773718](https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1773718) Merga, M. (2020). How can school libraries support student wellbeing? Evidence and implications for further research, *Journal of Library Administration*, 60(6), 660-673, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1773718>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/8201>



How Can School Libraries Support Student Wellbeing? Evidence and Implications for Further Research

Margaret Merga

To cite this article: Margaret Merga (2020) How Can School Libraries Support Student Wellbeing? Evidence and Implications for Further Research, Journal of Library Administration, 60:6, 660-673, DOI: [10.1080/01930826.2020.1773718](https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1773718)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1773718>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC



Published online: 01 Jul 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

HOLDING THE CENTER: TEACHING, COLLABORATING AND LEADING IN SCHOOL LIBRARIES



OPEN ACCESS



Check for updates

Kelly Ahlfeld, Librarian and Technology Coordinator, Mettawee Community School,
West Pawlet, VT, USA

COLUMN EDITOR'S NOTE

School librarians are teachers, technologists, and professional development coordinators, while also managing collections, budgets, facilities and public relations. This column explores issues of importance to school librarians and attempts to reflect the complexity of tasks, points of view and constituencies in school libraries. Contributions are accepted to this column and may be submitted to kahlfeld@brsu.org.

How Can School Libraries Support Student Wellbeing? Evidence and Implications for Further Research

Margaret Merga 

Senior Lecturer, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia

ABSTRACT

Concern about student wellbeing and related mental health is a global issue, and schools are increasingly expected to support student wellbeing. While the focus on libraries and wellbeing in research is more commonly on public libraries, school libraries can also play an important supportive role in this regard. Robust research evidence is needed from school library contexts to support targeted advocacy in order to enhance student wellbeing. This paper explores how school libraries may support student wellbeing by operating as safe spaces for young people, promoting and resourcing mental health and wellbeing initiatives, and supporting and promoting bibliotherapeutic practices and reading for pleasure. It then highlights implications for future research to support the development of a sound, research-supported evidence base for advocacy moving forward.

KEYWORDS

School library; school librarian; teacher librarian; wellbeing; mental health; bibliotherapy; health literacy; safe space; reading for pleasure

Introduction

Poor student wellbeing and related mental health issues are of concern, with young people substantially affected (e.g. Lawrence et al., 2016). Student wellbeing can be defined as “a sustainable state of positive mood and attitude, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school” (ACU, 2008, p. 5), and many intrinsic and extrinsic factors can impact upon student wellbeing. As a global issue, “worldwide, 10% to 20% of children and adolescents experience mental health problems, with age of onset for many disorders reported to be from 12 to 24 years” (Dray et al., 2017, p. 813),

CONTACT Margaret Merga  m.merga@ecu.edu.au  @MKMerga  Senior Lecturer, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Western Australia 6027, Australia.

© 2020 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

therefore, the middle and high school years are particularly implicated. School libraries can play an important role in helping these schools to foster the wellbeing of young people, however, there is relatively little known about how they can comprehensively achieve this goal.

Research on school libraries more typically focuses on their capacity to deliver gains on academic benchmarks, such as students' literacy and numeracy scores (e.g. Lance & Kachel, 2018). Recent research has also focused on school libraries' capacity to support struggling literacy learners (e.g. Merga, 2019b) and foster student reading engagement (e.g. Merga, 2019a). As contended by Harper (2017),

much research has confirmed that school librarians do positively influence and impact academic achievement. A lesser-known role is that of how a school librarian positively affects students' feelings of being cared for and how thoughtfully designed instruction, collocation of a collection, and the school library facility all contribute to helping students who hurt. Yet, when asked, many school librarians offer multiple anecdotal accounts of touching a child one heart at a time and of creating a safe, enriching environment based on understanding the needs of the whole child and not just for the purpose of supporting the curriculum. (p. 41)

With school library research focus on achievement rather than wellbeing, unsurprisingly advocacy typically aligns with these areas where research is generating evidence. Advocacy for school libraries in the United States (US) and Australia tends to focus on student achievement, foregrounding the benefits of school libraries for student learning (e.g. American Association of School Librarians (AASL), n.d.; Godfree & Neilson, 2018). This emphasis is understandable as there is a growing body of research supporting the association between well-resourced libraries adequately staffed with qualified individuals and enhanced student outcomes (Burgin et al., 2003; Dow et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2013; Lance & Kachel, 2018). However, school libraries may offer even more benefits for students beyond those academic goals that are most commonly cited and celebrated.

As contemporary schooling systems increasingly value the fostering of student wellbeing, it is pertinent to also explore the role that school libraries can play in this regard. This valuing has been demonstrated in the US where there is increasing focus on student mental health and related wellbeing, with the National Association of Secondary School Principals' position statement on student mental health seeking to "articulate recommendations that promote student mental health as a critical component of improving school climate, safety, and learning" (p. 1). An Australian emphasis on promoting student wellbeing in schools has been increasingly present since 1998, with Lawrence et al. (2016) noting that

since 1998, most Australian jurisdictions have implemented new mental health policies and plans, and reviewed or reconfigured their child and adolescent mental health services. Many schools and school jurisdictions within the public, Catholic and independent sectors have developed general student wellbeing programmes as well as recognising the need for individual help and support by student counsellors and mental health professionals where necessary. (p. 877)

Wellbeing has been given ever-increasing attention in recent times, with the Australian Government launching the *Australian Student Wellbeing Framework* in 2018, which is intended to support "Australian schools to promote positive relationships and the wellbeing of students and educators within safe, inclusive and connected learning

communities” (Education Council, 2018, p. 2). While the Framework itself contains no mention of the role that school libraries can play in this regard, the associated website (Education Services, 2019) includes reference to resources and activities perhaps typically facilitated in the school library, such as “reading stories about bushfire survival,” which “can help children recover from disaster-related trauma and build their emotional resilience” (para. 1).

Dual-qualified library staff are likely to play a significant role in identifying and implementing any wellbeing initiatives in school libraries. As noted by Spear (2018), “a school librarian is a manager. Chief among her responsibilities is teaching but she also supervises people, collections, and spaces” (p. 518). Known variously as school librarians, teacher librarians, and school library media specialists amongst other titles across contexts and times, the current favored title in the US is school librarian, whereas in Australia it is teacher librarian (Australian School Library Association [ASLA], 2018; Merga, 2019b). To avoid cross-contextual confusion, in this paper, qualified library staff will consistently be referred to as *school librarians*. The AASL standards promote inclusion in their advice to school librarians, with their recent guide (2019) emphasizing and outlining how to support inclusivity, empathy and activities catered to diversity, highlighting how supporting student wellbeing is positioned as part of the role of school librarians. However, while there seems to be an implicit expectation and a wealth of anecdotal evidence that libraries can play a valuable role in upholding wellbeing initiatives such as by fostering “a clear culture of respect for all” (Ahlfeld, 2019), and also expectation from professional associations such as AASL that school librarians support students in this manner, informing research about how school librarians may support values and initiatives that promote mental health and wellbeing as part of their role is needed.

This paper was inspired by the 2019 Australian Productivity Commission Draft Report (PCDR, 2019a) on mental health which inadvertently drew attention to this research gap with its focus on public, rather than school libraries in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of young people. The PCDR (2019b) includes consideration of the role of public libraries in supporting wellbeing, noting that they create a “safe, common space” (p. 823), and the “important role that public libraries play with respect to people at risk of social exclusion is increasingly recognised” (p. 823). The PCDR also acknowledges the important role that schools can play in fostering student wellbeing, noting that “much is already expected of schools in supporting children’s social and emotional wellbeing, and they should be adequately equipped for this task” (p. 2). Most Australian schools have school libraries, and libraries can make an important difference to the wellbeing of young people. If school libraries are to be included in such influential reports, more needs to be known about the role they can play.

Three points of alignment

Exploration of the literature on the role that school libraries can play in fostering student wellbeing yields an array of possible points of alignment that warrant inquiry. Herein I explore three of these points. These three have been selected as there is some research support in each of these areas, and at an anecdotal level, these areas were also

felt to have a degree of currency in contemporary schools. All of these areas have also been explored in both Australian and US research to some extent.

I provide brief background on how libraries may:

1. operate as safe spaces for young people,
2. promote and resource mental health and wellbeing initiatives, and
3. support and promote bibliotherapeutic practices and reading for pleasure.

Safe spaces

Students need safe spaces that foster a sense of wellbeing. While school environments are not always supportive spaces conducive to student wellbeing, ideally all schools should be safe spaces. Butler et al. (2017) describe this, explaining that

the idea of a learning environment being “my safe space” contains two fundamental elements. The school must be a “safe space,” a space where students feel comfortable and secure, and it must also be “my space,” a space over which students have some ownership and which they have the freedom to transform. (p. 891)

Within the school, researchers have become interested in how the school library offers a unique safe space. As observed by Hughes et al. (2019), “the physical environment is an enabling wellbeing factor” (p. 123), and creation of a physical environment in the library that is conducive to the fostering of student safety and comfort can support student wellbeing. However, the role of the library as a safe space can be a tangential consideration for researchers, rather than a research focus. For example, Cordell (2017) noted that “during my dissertation research, I discovered, by coincidence, that all the librarians I interviewed said that their libraries were informal safe places for students marginalized and/or bullied due to various reasons of diversity” (para. 1), and further details of her research could not be sourced beyond this abstract for a conference poster. As such, school library research that focuses on wellbeing is not always broadly disseminated and readily accessible.

There is also a need for more research around libraries as safe spaces to be subject to peer review, as searches of the literature around libraries as safe spaces are more heavily weighted toward anecdotal work rather than research. Recently, Wittmann and Fisher-Allison (2020) drew on a range of anecdotal observations and their own experiences to contend that

Personal challenges are not a requirement for seeking sanctuary in the library. All children experience the need to nourish their spirits and regain emotional equilibrium; the library is there as a protected and sheltering place for them. In many schools, the library is the only public space intentionally put forward as a refuge. Certainly, students with chaotic lives crave safety and often find refuge in the library, but it is important to remember that every student craves safety and a place to feel protected. With its mission to serve every student, the school library can be that refuge. (p. 46)

While these views are compelling as they are put forward by experienced practitioners with practical experience, we also need supporting research with a focus on libraries as safe spaces to substantiate these claims if we want to influence advocacy, and subsequently, policy and resourcing.

While recent research argues that school libraries are “learning spaces that contribute to the wellbeing of students” (Willis et al., 2019), there is a greater body of research on the public library as a safe space (e.g. Wexelbaum, 2016), which has influenced public perception of the role of libraries in the general community. This has meant that the role of school libraries has been comparatively absent from considerations around fostering wellbeing. Greater attention should be given to investigating the role that school libraries can play. Despite a wealth of anecdotal evidence around school libraries as safe spaces, more needs to be learned about how libraries can operate as safe spaces for young people, providing practical examples from contemporary school libraries across a range of geographic contexts, that can be used to inform schools seeking to enhance school libraries’ capacity to function in this regard.

Promotion and resourcing of wellbeing initiatives

School libraries can play a valuable role in promotion and resourcing of wellbeing initiatives. This can be provided through school libraries, as school librarians can play a key role as “health information gatekeepers” (Lukenbill & Immroth, 2009, p. 3). Despite acknowledgement of the importance of resourcing the population with self-help information and resources (PCDR, 2019c), and the potential of school libraries to play an important role in this regard (Adkins et al., 2019; Lukenbill & Immroth, 2009), very little is known about how school libraries can promote and resource diverse mental health and wellbeing initiatives. This supposition is supported by a 2016 review, which noted that “school librarians have a unique opportunity to improve the health literacy of children and teachers, but these libraries are underrepresented in the literature” (Barr-Walker, 2016, p. 200). Dotson-Blake and Dotson (2012) suggest that school librarians can work collaboratively with school counselors to resource them with educational materials focused on mental health and wellbeing issues.

School libraries can be important resources for identifying and building young peoples’ digital health literacy skills, which can support them to access resources in mental health and wellbeing. St. Jean et al. (2017)

worked with school librarians in local public middle schools to design and implement an after-school program (HackHealth) that aims to increase tweens’ (i.e., young people approaching or at the beginning of their teen years) interest in science and health, improve their digital health literacy skills, and increase their health-related self-efficacy. (p. 42)

They found that while tweens had typically good digital literacy skills in relation to identifying search engines and creating queries, they had poor knowledge around “trustworthy websites to which they might directly navigate when they need credible health-related information.” While respondents had a basic understanding of information credibility, “they commonly confused credibility and relevance,” and respondents “had some potentially dangerous misconceptions regarding the meaning and degree of trustworthiness suggested by some URL endings, particularly .com” (p. 55). While this research does not specifically examine the role of school librarians or school librarians in connecting young people with credible and relevant resources around wellbeing, it nonetheless recognizes that school libraries can play an important role in meeting these

knowledge and skill gaps as inherent in the design of the study. Making visible how school libraries can promote and resource mental health and wellbeing initiatives drawing on pragmatic examples can highlight how this can effectively be done in our schools, though we also need a research base that can explore the extent to which such strategies are typically applied in real-world libraries.

Reading for pleasure and bibliotherapeutic practices

Both reading for pleasure and bibliotherapeutic practices can have a positive impact on student wellbeing, though the role of libraries in facilitating or conferring these benefits has not been foregrounded in much of the research in this area. Research suggests that positive attitudes toward reading may be associated with mental wellbeing (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018). The regular reading of fiction is associated with the development of prosocial characteristics such as empathy and perspective taking (e.g. Mar et al., 2009), and book reading can be used as both a mental health and social support by adult readers (Merga, 2017a). However, while avid book readers have described reading for pleasure have a powerful impact on their sense of wellbeing, their capacity for perspective taking, and their protective ability to distance themselves from hostile contexts, more research is needed that explores the “psychological benefits of the ‘escape’ for reduced stress and possible mental health outcomes” (p. 154), and the role of school libraries specifically in supporting this practice.

School librarians can also support students to engage with literature in meaningful and healing ways. Bibliotherapy which is “literally ‘healing through books’” (Harvey, 2010, p. 29), can help students deal with issues challenging their mental health and wellbeing from a safe distance (Fanner & Urquhart, 2008; Prater et al., 2006). Harper defines bibliotherapy as

a strategy for librarians and teachers to help students identify, work through, and ultimately find resolution to stressful situations. School librarians can share specific literature with the intent to assist students experiencing emotional distress. Non-clinical bibliotherapy, used primarily by librarians or teachers, assists children in the coping and healing process. (p. 48)

While relatively little is known about the percentage of Australian and US school libraries that actively use bibliotherapeutic strategies with their students, recent research drawing on small Indonesian and Nigerian samples suggests that more than half of school librarians may have awareness of bibliotherapy, though “they do not have adequate knowledge of how to implement it to address issues arising among students making use of their school libraries” (p. 6). This research illustrates why such research is also needed in Australian and US contexts, Oyewusi et al., 2019, p. 6 as knowledge clearly cannot be conflated with implementation. Even if both Australian and US school librarians are found to have good knowledge of what bibliotherapy is, if they too lack the knowledge (or perhaps the resources or staffing) to implement it, this would constitute an important gap to be addressed in both initial training and ongoing professional development, as well as potentially impacting on resourcing considerations. Despite a growing body of research linking bibliotherapeutic practices and reading for pleasure to positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes for young people (e.g. Clark &

Teravainen-Goff, 2018; Harvey, 2010), relatively little is known about the role of school libraries in supporting and promoting these practices, which may also deliver significant benefits for student literacy (as explored in Merga, 2019c). Research is needed that can strengthen school libraries' capacity to support and promote bibliotherapeutic practices and reading for pleasure through making visible how this is practically enacted in contemporary schools.

Implications for further research

We need further research on these points of alignment and others related to student wellbeing which can allow for a current body of evidence around the role of school libraries as a support of our vulnerable middle and high school years students. As contended by Ewbank and Kwon (2015), school library research needs to mature to include more research informing its advocacy. While there are numerous valuable advisory and advocacy pieces around libraries and wellbeing, some of which have been cited in this paper, a rigorous research base is essential.

As school libraries are increasingly under threat of diminishing staff and resourcing in both Australia and the US (e.g. House of Representatives [HOR], 2011; Kachel, 2015; Softlink, 2019), the role of school libraries in fostering student wellbeing needs to shift from being a marginal or peripheral consideration to a central concern. As school libraries' capacity to meet student needs is reduced due to these cuts, we need to understand how this can potentially impact upon student wellbeing. In order to inspire school librarians, educators and researchers to collaborate and forward this research agenda, I clearly outline implications for further research that go further than the usual cursory considerations included at the end of academic articles. I ask the reader to consider the suggestions I raise and imagine the kinds of inquiry they might stimulate in their context. I do not contend that the possibilities I raise are definitive; rather, they are intended as a starting point for further research planning and collaboration in this area.

Partners

To improve the rigor of the research conducted in this space, school librarians can benefit from academic research partners, and academic research partners desperately need the valuable insights and pragmatic understandings that school librarians can impart (e.g. Merga, 2019b). As such, I propose that practitioner/researcher partnerships are essential going forward, and I also suggest that while conflict of interest will need to be managed across these partnerships, professional associations and advocacy groups such as AASL and ASLA could also bring a wealth of knowledge to facilitate such research.

Exploratory and generalizable

As far more needs to be learned about how school libraries can support student wellbeing, I suggest that at least some of the future research designs in this area will need to be *exploratory*, typically using qualitative and mixed-methods approaches, rather than

purely quantitative methods. School librarians already have diverse, complex and challenging roles to undertake as part of their daily practice as educators and managers (e.g. Spear, 2018). As such, rather than focusing on adding a range of additional practices and expectations to their role, it may be far more pragmatic to identify which student wellbeing-supportive practices are *already* incorporated in school libraries that see themselves as exemplars in supporting student wellbeing. Drawing on these practices being employed in identified exemplar contexts can allow for a practical base of strategies and resources to be discerned and promoted. Rather than imposing an externally-concocted intervention, such exploratory approaches recognize that school librarians are likely to have a wealth of knowledge in this area, which can be identified and shared for the collective good.

As such, I suggest that starting with an exploratory qualitative approach, such as through use of semi-structured interviews or focus groups. For example, a researcher might conduct interviews with library managers and students at exemplar school in order to investigate how school libraries:

1. operate as safe spaces for young people
2. promote and resource mental health and wellbeing initiatives
3. support and promote bibliotherapeutic practices and reading for pleasure.

The library manager interview for this phase could also explore what resources and training are needed to enhance the capacity of school libraries to meet students' diverse mental health and wellbeing needs.

The methods employed will of course be dependent on alignment with the research questions and proposed data analysis. Research questions do not necessarily need to focus on the points of alignment I raise in my previous example; they can instead more broadly capture the kinds of strategies and practices that are felt to support student wellbeing, that also align with some extant research supporting the contention of benefit, informing the criteria for analysis.

I suggest that any "Phase One" exploratory qualitative data can then be potentially tested for *generalizability*, which could be one effective avenue to really optimize the time and resources afforded to a project for maximum impact. This combining of research activities into multiple phases and using multiple methods is not new; rather such phases can be part of a rigorous and integrated mixed-methods research project. The researchers might use a fixed approach to mixed methods that most closely aligns with an *exploratory sequential design*, whereby the initial Phase One qualitative data collection informs key components of the Phase Two quantitative approach, which includes an opportunity to determine the generalisability of Phase One findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) explain that

the exploratory design begins with and prioritizes the collection and analysis of qualitative data in the first phase. Building from the exploratory results, the researcher conducts a second, quantitative phase to test or generalize the initial findings. The researcher then interprets how the quantitative results build on the initial qualitative results. For example, the researcher collects qualitative stories about adolescents' attempts to quit smoking and analyzes the stories to identify the conditions, contexts, strategies, and consequences of adolescent quit attempts. Considering the resulting categories as variables, the researcher

develops a quantitative instrument and uses it to assess the overall prevalence of these variables for a large number of adolescent smokers. (p. 71)

As such, Phase One qualitative data findings might directly inform the creation of a survey tool to be tested in Phase Two, which will include quantitative items, which can then be tested for this broader generalisability which should ideally be the feature of research that can be used for advocacy work. In addition to exploratory qualitative insights, we also need to collect this quantitative data, as on their own, qualitative data lack statistical-probabilistic generalizability (Smith, 2018). This generalizability goal to Phase Two (or subsequent phases) is important, to enable early determination of whether or not exploratory findings hold broader generalizability, and are therefore ready to begin to inform practice, resourcing and training in schools, quantitative and evaluative research models can be employed, potentially gaining recognition as a core competency (Dole, 2013).

However, I also note that we do not need to adopt a dichotomous pure qualitative Phase One and quantitative Phase Two. Phase Two quantitative research can be done in parallel with further exploratory qualitative work if required. For example, in addition to testing the generalisability of Phase One findings, a Phase Two survey tool can be a mixed methods tool rather than a purely quantitative tool, allowing for open-field qualitative data collection around potential further gaps that still need further exploratory investigation before moving into generalizability testing is possible. Where the research questions suggest that both quantitative and qualitative methods are needed, a “within-stage mixed-model design” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 20) such as a mixed-methods survey is appropriate and has been used to meet this dual purpose (e.g. Merga, 2017b). Qualitative and quantitative findings can be meaningfully brought together or integrated both within and across phases, using measures such as the joint display (Guetterman et al., 2015).

Peer-reviewed

While peer-review is admittedly a flawed process, as noted by Smith (2006), “famously, it is compared with democracy: a system full of problems but the least worst we have” (p. 178). Without peer review, readers are solely reliant on the authors’ representation of the quality of their research, and as such, where peer reviewers have vouched for the research, the quality may be higher (Benos et al., 2007). Where readers are busy practitioners or the public who do not necessarily have the time, qualifications or experience to accurately evaluate the merits of various methodological approaches, the importance of peer-review as a quality measure is particularly apparent.

Many of the supporting sources around libraries and wellbeing are advocacy pieces or reports that may not have undergone peer-review. This is a broader issue in the field of school library research, and I have noted that “there is always a risk that such reports may not have been conducted with the same degree of rigour as academic research, and they may have been funded by bodies with a potential conflict of interest” (Merga, 2019b, p. 14) which they are not obligated to divulge. Lack of a peer-reviewed research base means that we are forced to be over-reliant on sources such as the Softlink (2019) reference cited in this paper, which was the only source of reliable recent data around

the resourcing and staffing of Australian libraries currently available, but which has a conflict of interest as a seller of library software, or the Cordell (2017) material that is an abstract only, providing a tantalizing glimpse into possible interesting research findings, without the detail necessary to evaluate their contribution. I do not mean to diminish the work of Softlink as their data are extremely useful, however I do suggest that in the absence of further supporting data sources without this conflict of interest, sole reliance on this data source is problematic when attempting to mount an argument for advocacy based on reliable and reputable research.

Inclusive of youth perspectives

The voices and perspectives of young people in school libraries should feature in this research. While wellbeing has relevance across all age groups, it may be of particular concern in the middle and high school years (Dray et al., 2017). Middle years students may have greater wellbeing needs as these students move into the challenges of adolescence, and data collected from these students may also be more useful, as self-report is thought to be more reliable with these older students (e.g. Fraillon, 2005). Research also should focus on these middle years and adolescent students as their communicative competence will be sufficient to ensure active participation.

Shared broadly

Research needs to be widely available in order to be useful. Research findings with implications for both educators and libraries are typically published in either public/school librarianship or education journals. As noted by Hartzell (2002), library staff “tend to write for each other, so it is not surprising to find that they have virtually no presence in the journals other educators read or on the program schedules of the conferences they attend” (p. 95). In more recent times, Steff-Mabry et al. (2016) have argued that findings about the impact of libraries on student achievement are not well-known in the education field, because “school library research related to academic achievement over the past two decades has been published largely within the library and information science (LIS) arena” (p. 1). As school library research moves beyond a somewhat exclusive preoccupation with academic achievement, to explore additional valuable goals that libraries support, such as student wellbeing, findings must be communicated across academic disciplines and professional communities. Findings in this space are likely to generate implications for health promotion researchers and health professionals as well as educators and librarians, and therefore the span of potentially directly implicated professions is broad. To this end, findings will need to be shared across library, education, health and health promotion spaces.

In addition, when applying for grants to conduct research in this space, where possible, researchers should factor in at least some funds to support open access publication to ensure that practitioners without institutional access can read the research. I also suggest that considerable consideration be given to broadly sharing research findings beyond academia through meaningful research translation pieces, which can also

include references or hyper-links to the original peer-reviewed research. For example, in 2019 I wrote a piece for *The Conversation* that has had 22,455 views as at February 27, 2020, and which is heavily peppered with relevant hyperlinks to peer-reviewed research (Merga, 2019d). Many school librarians have contacted me to let me know that they have shared this piece directly with their school leadership team, which may not have been interested in reading an academic journal article. Researchers need to understand the value of translation of their findings in this space beyond academia for leading to real-world impact. However, first we need the peer-reviewed base for such translations and advocacy to be effective.

Conclusions

While research suggests that school libraries can play an important role in supporting student wellbeing, a stronger research base is needed before school librarians and their professional associations can effectively position this contribution of libraries as a key component of their advocacy. The role of school libraries in promoting wellbeing needs to be understood and recognized in policy, resourcing, and influential reports such as the aforementioned PCDR on mental health. Promising findings on how school libraries operate as safe spaces for young people; promote and resource mental health and wellbeing initiatives; and, support and promote bibliotherapeutic practices and reading for pleasure, suggest that these, amongst other areas of relevance, can be useful starting points for furthering this research agenda. We need research in this area that involves partnership between school libraries and academia, and that is exploratory *and* generalizable (though not necessarily simultaneously). The research also needs to be subject to peer-review in quality journals, inclusive of youth perspectives, and it must reach its interested audience in library, education, health and health promotion spaces. It is the author's hope that this contribution can forward this ambitious agenda, to improve wellbeing outcomes for young people.

ORCID

Margaret Merga  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9009-3700>

References

- Adkins, D., Brendler, B., Townsend, K., & Maras, M. (2019). Rural school libraries anchoring community mental health literacy. *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries*, 8(4), 425–435.
- Ahlfeld, K. (2019). A resource that inspires: Exploring the “include” foundation of the national school library standards for learners, school librarians, and school libraries. *Journal of Library Administration*, 59(2), 214–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2018.1562802>
- American Association of School Librarians (AASL). (2019). *Developing inclusive learners and citizens activity guide*. http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org/aasl/files/content/advocacy/tools/docs/InclusiveLearners_ActivityGuide_190719.pdf.
- American Association of School Librarians (AASL). (n.d). *Strong school libraries build strong students*. http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org/aasl/files/content/aaslissues/advocacy/AASL_info-graphic.pdf.

- Australian Catholic University. (2008). *Scoping study into approaches to student wellbeing*. https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/appendix_1_literature_review.pdf.
- Australian School Library Association (ASLA). (2018). *What is a teacher librarian?* <http://www.asla.org.au/advocacy/what-is-a-teacher-librarian.aspx>.
- Barr-Walker, J. (2016). Health literacy and libraries: A literature review. *Reference Services Review*, 44(2), 191–205. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-02-2016-0005>
- Benos, D. J., Bashari, E., Chaves, J. M., Gaggar, A., Kapoor, N., LaFrance, M., Mans, R., Mayhew, D., McGowan, S., Polter, A., Qadri, Y., Sarfare, S., Schultz, K., Splittgerber, R., Stephenson, J., Tower, C., Walton, R. G., & Zotov, A. (2007). The ups and downs of peer review. *Advances in Physiology Education*, 31(2), 145–152. <https://doi.org/10.1152/advan.00104.2006>
- Burgin, R., Bracy, P. B., & Brown, K. (2003). *An essential connection: How quality school library media programs improve student achievement in North Carolina*. <https://www.lrs.org/documents/impact/NCSchoolStudy.pdf>.
- Butler, J. K., Kane, R. G., & Morshead, C. E. (2017). “It’s my safe space”: Student voice, teacher education, and the relational space of an urban high school. *Urban Education*, 52(7), 889–916. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085915574530>
- Clark, C., & Teravainen-Goff, A. (2018). *Mental wellbeing, reading and writing: How children and young people’s mental wellbeing is related to their reading and writing experiences*. National Literacy Trust.
- Cordell, S. P. (2017). Is the school library a last safe place? *National Youth-At-Risk Conference Savannah*. 121. https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/nyar_savannah/2017/2017/121
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Dole, W. V. (2013). What’s all this I hear about core competencies for library planning and assessment? *Journal of Library Administration*, 53(7–8), 472–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2013.882201>
- Dotson-Blake, K. P., & Dotson, K. B. (2012). School counselors and school media specialists: Innovative leaders in partnerships promoting student mental health with online resources. In *Educational media and technology yearbook* (pp. 199–208). Springer.
- Dow, M. J., McMahon-Lakin, J., & Court, S. C. (2012). School librarian staffing levels and student achievement as represented in 2006–2009 Kansas annual yearly progress data. *School Library Research*, 15, 1–15.
- Dray, J., Bowman, J., Campbell, E., Freund, M., Wolfenden, L., Hodder, R. K., McElwaine, K., Tremain, D., Bartlem, K., Bailey, J., Small, T., Palazzi, K., Oldmeadow, C., & Wiggers, J. (2017). Systematic review of universal resilience-focused interventions targeting child and adolescent mental health in the school setting. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 56(10), 813–824. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2017.07.780>
- Education Council. (2018). *Student wellbeing framework*. https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/media/9310/aswf_booklet.pdf
- Education Services. (2019). Children’s books about bushfires. *Student Wellbeing Hub*. <https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/educators/resources/childrens-books-about-bushfires/>
- Ewbank, A. D., & Kwon, J. Y. (2015). School library advocacy literature in the United States: An exploratory content analysis. *Library & Information Science Research*, 37(3), 236–243.
- Fanner, D., & Urquhart, C. (2008). Bibliotherapy for mental health service users Part 1: a systematic review. *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 25(4), 237–252. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2008.00821.x>
- Fraillon, J. (2005). Measuring student well-being in the context of Australian schooling: Discussion paper. *The Australian Council for Educational Research*. https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=well_being
- Godfree, H., & Neilson, O. (2018). School libraries matter! The missing piece in the education puzzle. *Access*, 32(1), 28–41.
- Guetterman, T. C., Fetters, M. D., & Creswell, J. W. (2015). Integrating quantitative and qualitative results in health science mixed methods research through joint displays. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 13(6), 554–561. <https://doi.org/10.1370/afm.1865>

- Harper, M. (2017). Helping students who hurt: Care based policies and practices for the school library. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 23(1), 41–54.
- Hartzell, G. (2002). The principal's perceptions of school libraries and teacher-librarians. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 8(1), 92–110.
- Harvey, P. (2010). Bibliotherapy use by welfare teams in secondary colleges. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(5), 29–39. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2010v35n5.3>
- House of Representatives. (2011). *School libraries and teacher librarians in 21st century Australia*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Hughes, H., Bozorgian, H., Allan, C., & Dicinoski, M. (2013). *School libraries, teacher-librarians and their contribution to student literacy development in Gold Coast schools: Research report*. School Library Association of Queensland & Queensland University of Technology. <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/60260/38/60260b.pdf>.
- Hughes, H., Franz, J., Willis, J., Bland, D., & Rolfe, A. (2019). High school spaces and student transition: Designing for student wellbeing. In H. Hughes, J. Franz, & J. Willis (Eds.), *School spaces for student wellbeing and learning: Insights from research and practice* (pp. 97–119). Springer.
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033007014>
- Kachel, D. (2015). The calamity of the disappearing school libraries. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/the-calamity-of-the-disappearing-school-libraries-44498>.
- Lance, K. C., & Kachel, D. E. (2018). Why school librarians matter: What years of research tell us. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 99(7), 15–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721718767854>
- Lawrence, D., Hafekost, J., Johnson, S. E., Saw, S., Buckingham, W. J., Sawyer, M. G., Ainley, J., & Zubrick, S. R. (2016). Key findings from the second Australian child and adolescent survey of mental health and wellbeing. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 50(9), 876–886. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004867415617836>
- Lukenbill, B., & Immroth, B. (2009). School and public youth librarians as health information gatekeepers: Research from the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. *School Library Media Research*, 12, 1–35.
- Mar, R. A., Oatley, K., & Peterson, J. B. (2009). Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy: Ruling out individual differences and examining outcomes. *Communications*, 34(4), 407–428. <https://doi.org/10.1515/COMM.2009.025>
- Merga, M. K. (2017a). What motivates avid readers to maintain a regular reading habit in adulthood? *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 40(2), 146–156.
- Merga, M. K. (2017b). Meeting the needs of avid book readers: Access, space, concentration support and barrier mitigation. *Journal of Library Administration*, 57(1), 49–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2016.1185854>
- Merga, M. K. (2019a). How do librarians in schools support struggling readers?. *English in Education*, 53(2), 145–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2018.1558030>
- Merga, M. K. (2019b). *Librarians as literacy educators in schools*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Merga, M. K. (2019c). *Reading engagement for tweens and teens: What would make them read more?*. ABC-CLIO/Libraries Unlimited.
- Merga, M. K. (2019d). Ten ways teacher librarians improve literacy in schools. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/ten-ways-teacher-librarians-improve-literacy-in-schools-110026>.
- National Association of Secondary School Principals. (n.d). *Position statement: Mental health*. https://www.nassp.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/NASSP18A_DV-0005_PositionStatements__MentalHealth_P1a-1.pdf.
- Oyewusi, F. O., Nicolau, M. F. S., Aramidu, K., Messakh, F. (2019). Librarian's roles on students who are hurt: A comparative study of two countries. In *Proceedings of the 48th Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship and the 23rd International Forum on Research in School Librarianship*, Dubrovnik, Croatia October 21–25, 2019. Retrieved from <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/slw/index.php/iasl/article/download/7399/4315>.

- Prater, M. A., Johnstun, M. L., Dyches, T. T., & Johnstun, M. R. (2006). Using children's books as bibliotherapy for at-risk students: A guide for teachers. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 50(4), 5–10. <https://doi.org/10.3200/PSFL.50.4.5-10>
- Productivity Commission. (2019a). *Mental Health, Draft Report Overview and Recommendations*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Productivity Commission. (2019b). *Mental Health, Draft Report: Vol. 2*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Productivity Commission. (2019c). *Mental Health, Draft Report: Vol. 1*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Smith, B. (2018). Generalizability in qualitative research: Misunderstandings, opportunities and recommendations for the sport and exercise sciences. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 10(1), 137–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2017.1393221>
- Smith, R. (2006). Peer review: a flawed process at the heart of science and journals. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 99(4), 178–182. <https://doi.org/10.1258/jrsm.99.4.178>
- Softlink. (2019). *The 2018 Softlink Australia, New Zealand, and Asia-Pacific School Library Survey Report*. https://www.softlinkint.com/downloads/2018_Softlink_Australian_and_New_Zealand_School_Library_Survey_Report.pdf.
- Spear, M. J. (2018). Reflections on managing a school library. *Journal of Library Administration*, 58(5), 503–518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2018.1468672>
- St. Jean, B., Greene Taylor, N., Kodama, C., & Subramaniam, M. (2017). Assessing the digital health literacy skills of tween participants in a school-library-based after-school program. *Journal of Consumer Health on the Internet*, 21(1), 40–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15398285.2017.1279894>
- Stefl-Mabry, J., Radlick, M., Armbruster, D., & Keller, Y. (2016). *Breaking down information silos: Sharing decades of school library research with educational researchers*. Paper presented at the 2016 Annual Meeting “Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies,” Washington, DC.
- Wexelbaum, R. (2016). The library as safe space. *Advances in Library Administration and Organization*, 36, 37–78.
- Willis, J., Hughes, H., & Bland, D. (2019). Students reimagining school libraries as spaces of learning and wellbeing. In H. Hughes, J. Franz, & J. Willis, (Eds.) *School spaces for student wellbeing and learning: Insights from research and practice* (pp. 121–137). Springer.
- Wittmann, P., & Fisher-Allison, N. (2020). Intentionally creating a safe space for all: The school library as refuge. *Knowledge Quest*, 48(3), 40–49.