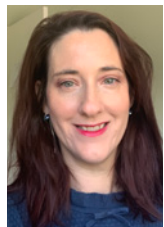




Why are teacher librarians an excellent investment in contemporary schools?



.....
Dr Margaret Kristin Merga
Senior Lecturer, Edith Cowan University
.....

Dr Margaret Kristin Merga examines recent research to explore the diverse ways teacher librarians support quality learning and student literacies.

School leaders want the best for their students and therefore many school leaders have to make difficult decisions about where to prioritise their resourcing to optimise student outcomes. As an educator outside the classroom, the teacher librarian can be vulnerable to budgetary cuts within schools. [Recent research](#) suggests that teacher librarians often don't feel that their profession is valued and understood by both school leadership and their classroom teacher colleagues. The research shows that teacher librarians believe that school leaders play an important role in supporting and promoting their role within the school. Consequently, they are keen to work with leaders to offer quality learning for students and the broader school community.

But what exactly is a teacher librarian? The Australian School Library Association [describes a teacher librarian](#) as 'a person who holds recognised teaching qualifications and qualifications in librarianship'. This means that when schools employ a teacher librarian, they are bringing a person who holds expertise in both education and libraries into the school community.

So why are teacher librarians an excellent investment within a contemporary school? While there are many advantages, here are three key reasons that all schools need a teacher librarian.

1. They are experts at fostering reading engagement

In recent times, NSW students have shown the [greatest declines](#) in student reading literacy performance across the states and territories of Australia. Australia has likewise seen a [notable slide](#) in students' attitudes toward reading. While there are issues with relying on high-stakes tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as a reliable measure of student literacy, this indicator suggests that greater attention to student literacy and related reading engagement may be warranted.

As I've reviewed in my [2018 book](#), there is strong research evidence about the role that reading engagement plays in boosting students' literacy scores.

Recent research has found that library visitation may be the [most influential factor](#) when it comes to improving students attitudes toward, and frequency of participation in, the beneficial practice of reading for pleasure.

One of the reasons for the powerful relationship between reading engagement and students' literacy performance is likely to be the [unique reading promotion role](#) of the teacher librarian, which is not typically duplicated by any other staff member. Their combined [library, literacy and literature expertise](#) means that they are uniquely situated to build [whole-](#)

[school reading cultures](#) in partnership with their school leaders, and encourage our young people to enjoy the benefits of being life-long readers. However, we need to understand what teacher librarians offer in relation to this role so that we can [support them](#) to have the time and resourcing they need to meet student needs.

2. They are ahead of the information literacy game

Want to enhance your students' cyber safety skills? Want to ensure your students understand correct source attribution and related intellectual property issues? Want to make sure your students move into higher education with a strong understanding of what constitutes plagiarism more broadly?

Building students' knowledge and skills in all these areas is within the scope of the teacher librarian role. As information literacy experts, teacher librarians also help schools to keep students safe by teaching them to make good choices online.

Teacher librarians often collaborate with classroom teachers as partners in building students' related [inquiry-based learning](#) skills, which are a key component of the Australian Curriculum in [Humanities and Social Sciences](#).

As explored in my [recent paper](#), teacher librarians do the following as part of their information literacy educator and support role:

- Perform background curation of sources for research classes and create research guides.
- Teach information skills such as search strategies, note taking, referencing and constructing bibliographies.
- Contribute to parent information literacy skills sessions.
- Teach students critical information literacy skills, such as evaluating information and sources.
- Plan and deliver training and support in inquiry-based learning.
- Support the delivery of quality online information services.
- Support the ICT staff with troubleshooting.
- Promote understanding and compliance around issues of academic integrity and plagiarism, copyright and digital rights management,

- research ethics and online safety.
- Develop resources to support information skills in staff and students.
- Provide dyadic assistance with student searching.

As students spend [more and more time online](#), both at home and during school hours, the need to build their capacity as safe and responsible digital citizens is only growing over time.

3. They support struggling literacy learners

In addition to building students' reading engagement, teacher librarians also work with struggling readers to help to close the literacy achievement gap and enable them to meet their academic and vocational goals.

This is important, because the number of struggling literacy learners is growing over time. The gap between high and low literacy performers in a Year 9 classroom can be as great as [eight years](#).

The diversity in student literacy skills poses a significant challenge for classroom teachers, and thus teacher librarians can play a valuable supporting role.

[In many cases](#), low English literacy cannot be explained by English as an Additional Language or Dialect status or a diagnosed learning difficulty, meaning that support for struggling students can be [hard to resource](#). Our [recent research](#) suggests that 'school leadership commitment to ensuring that struggling literacy learners have their literacy skills developed across all learning areas may be crucial to the realization of a supportive whole-school culture for struggling literacy learners'. A teacher librarian can help leaders to achieve this goal.

Teacher librarians help struggling literacy learners in many ways. Here are 10 common research-supported practices they use to help close the achievement gap. You can read more about them in [How do librarians in schools support struggling readers?](#) (Merga, 2018).

Teacher librarians:

1. identify struggling readers so that they can get extra support
2. provide them with age and skill-appropriate materials to keep them reading
3. teach them how to choose books that fit their interests and abilities
4. support the unique needs of students with special needs
5. provide one-to-one matching so that the unique interests of each individual student are taken into account
6. promote access to books so that reading can happen
7. enhance the social position of books and reading
8. read aloud to students
9. facilitate silent reading
10. prepare students for high stakes literacy testing.

As such, teacher librarians are a key part of the literacy support team for struggling literacy learners.

Watch this space

Most would agree that 2020 was a tough year, and 2021 also offers many ongoing challenges for young people and their families to grapple with. One of the many roles of the teacher librarian is to [create safe and welcoming spaces](#), and I am currently leading a team with the generous support of the Bupa Health Foundation to investigate how Australian schools [can make the most of their libraries](#) as a wellbeing resource. We look forward to sharing our findings with you.

Final note

This article focusses on a small part of teacher librarians' [complex work role](#). I would strongly encourage school leaders to weigh up the value of teacher librarians' contribution for students' literacies. I also urge leaders without teacher librarians to consider bringing one into their learning team as an important investment in student achievement.

References and further reading

Darmawan, I. G. N. (2020). The changes in attitudes of 15-year-old Australian students towards reading, mathematics and science and their impact on student performance. *Australian Journal of Education*, 64(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944120947873>

Goss, P., Sonnemann, J., Chisholm, C., Nelson, L. (2016). *Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress* (report number 2016-3). Grattan Institute.

Merga, M. K. (2018). 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. (2018). *Reading engagement for tweens and teens: What would make them read more?* ABC-CLIO.

Merga, M. K. (2019). Do librarians feel that their profession is valued in contemporary schools? *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 68(1), 18-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2018.1557979>

Merga, M. K. (2019). 'Fallen through the cracks': Teachers' perceptions of barriers faced by struggling literacy learners in secondary school. *English in Education*, 54(4), 371-395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2019.1672502>

Merga, M. K. (2019). *Librarians in schools as literacy educators: Advocates for reaching beyond the classroom*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Merga, M. K. (2019). School libraries fostering children's literacy and literature learning: Mitigating the barriers. *Literacy*, 54(1), 70-78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12189>

Merga, M. K. (2020). School librarians as literacy educators within a complex role. *Journal of Library Administration*, 60(8), 889-908. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1820278>

Merga, M. K. & Mason, S. (2019). Building a school reading culture: Teacher librarians' perceptions of enabling and constraining factors. *Australian Journal of Education*, 63(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944119844544>

Merga, M. K., Roni, S. M. & Malpique, A. (2020). Do secondary English teachers have adequate time and resourcing to meet the needs of struggling literacy learners? *English in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2020.1838897>

Merga, M. K., Roni, S. M. & Malpique, A. (2020). School leadership and whole-school support of struggling literacy learners in secondary schools. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220905036>

Roni, S. M. & Merga, M. K. (2019). The influence of extrinsic and intrinsic variables on children's reading frequency and attitudes: An exploration using an artificial neural network. *Australian Journal of Education*, 60(3), 270-291. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944119880621>

Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C. & Schmid, M. (2019). [PISA 2018 in brief I: Student performance](#). Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

How to cite this article – Merga, M. K. (2021). Why are teacher librarians an excellent investment in contemporary schools? *Scan*, 40(2).