

Gazette Focus CURRICULUM SUPPORT



THE TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOOL LIBRARIES

With the rise of new technologies, the humble school library is rapidly transforming into a multimedia learning hub. SHANE CUMMINGS interviewed several librarians about the role and future scope of school libraries and discovered the potential for change is limitless.

The traditional view of the library is that of a transactional space – students check out a library book, go away and read it, and then return the book two weeks later. School librarians were custodians of books and rarely had significant input into students' learning experiences beyond recommending a book or hosting class visits.

This perception is rapidly changing due to the efforts of forward-thinking librarians. Content is king, and in this increasingly digital age, the 21st century school library has an opportunity to take centre stage as a school's information hub and deliver this content, in print and digitally, as part of a modern learning environment.

THE RISE OF E-BOOKS

One of the biggest impacts on libraries – and publishing – is the advent of the e-book. With it has come the ability to read on portable devices and download whole catalogues quickly and easily without students having to drag home heavy stacks of books. E-books are game changers, but are our school libraries in the game?

St Patrick's College in Wellington is all over e-books, but reading them isn't without problems, said library manager Karen Clarke. "I introduced e-books and the students use them. They feel they read quicker with them, which encourages the students who struggle. Many do not know about e-readers and are not really interested in reading on a device. I have 30 iPads in the library and they are extremely popular, but they take up a huge amount of time as they often develop problems."

Fiona Mackie is the president of the School Library Association of New Zealand (SLANZA) and library manager at St Cuthbert's College in Auckland. She said her school is a similar early adopter of technology.

"Our students all have laptops and have had them for several years. Students are also permitted

to bring e-readers during SSR (sustained silent reading) periods in the library, so many are reading online as well as hard copy material. We will be providing access to e-books mid-year, with the upgrade to our library system, and are looking forward to having another format for reading. We do show students how to borrow e-books from the Auckland Libraries system and that is very popular, too."

Librarian Miriam Tuohy said her library at Palmerston North Boys High School is at the other end of the e-book spectrum. "We have none to speak of in my current library, as mobile devices are not permitted for reading at school (we are probably not alone in having rules like this, I think).

"At my previous school, our library issued e-books to students, and many had access to iPads through the school, for reading at home. Although the number of e-books issued wasn't big compared to existing print circulation, the kids certainly were excited about reading e-books, so that's a real benefit."

Bridget Schaumann, SLANZA president-elect and librarian and careers adviser at Kings High, Dunedin, said she was about to launch e-books in her library.

"I don't expect the uptake to be huge as there are large numbers of students who don't have smartphones yet, but I intend to use them to try and hook some of the non-readers, the students who already have a device or who are happy to read on a screen. I'll add popular books so that there is an extra copy. We have lots of enquiries for classics at the moment and e-books are an easy way to provide them when space is at a premium on the shelves.

"iPads are used with our wireless network in the library. They merely provide extra devices for the students to use for research. They haven't changed our lives and students need to learn great search strategies to use them in the same way they would use any other device for their research."

ENCOURAGING READING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

With the plethora of new choices for reading content, plus the usual issues of literacy levels and developing a culture of reading for non-readers, there are new challenges facing librarians in their efforts to encourage students to read.

"I talk about books to students during class time and informally out of class," Karen said. "I have a website for new books, and I use displays to promote the books. I also give books to teachers to read who will then talk about them in class."

Bridget said she gives book talks to all the junior classes in the library – promoting reading by using humour and giving students the option to write their own story.

"This is hugely successful and the students find them hard to resist. We have a book club, online communities, and as many other promotional activities as I can dream up."

"Book talks work a treat with our younger readers, too," Miriam said. "Staff also appreciate book talks, and annotated lists of new items so that they know about, and can promote, books to students. Displays that are changed regularly really help."

Fiona echoed the strategies of the others, and she also used technology to encourage enthusiasm for reading.

"Every Year 7–10 class comes to the library once per cycle for literature promotion and discussion. We take heaps of fabulous books, drop lots of hints about how wonderful each is, and encourage all the girls to try something new. We also have book trailers on our library website, intriguing displays created by students and staff, and a large stand with brand new material, too. Library staff talk to the students and staff about what they are reading, too, and email staff weekly with contents pages for the new journals, so they are aware of what is available that will support their programmes."

Paula Eskett is a programme adviser for the School Library Futures project at the National Library of New Zealand and was previously school library manager at Riccarton High School – Upper Riccarton School and Community Library (a blended school and community library) for nine years. She said establishing a reading culture in children's formative years was valuable.

"You often have to break down a book for kids and say to them it is ok to break it down. It is all about having a dialogue and having the right person to connect with in the library."

THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN'S CHANGING ROLE

While reading seems to be as popular as ever, the school librarian's role has changed from transactional custodian to content adviser, with a growing emphasis on ICT initiatives.

"I believe that it is part of the modern school librarian's job to be part of the ICT coalface in their school," said Bridget. "Librarians are ideally placed to show students how to use technology to enhance their learning, to use tools which make their learning lives easier, and to connect with other learners."

Karen said that the use of IT has always been at the forefront of libraries she'd worked at over the last 15 years, and that's just going to increase.

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Paula Eskett



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Karen Clarke

"We will still have books, magazines etc. but with added technologies and small meeting rooms for tutorials or study."

Miriam agreed with Bridget and Karen: "I've always thought of school librarians as 'reading enthusiasts' and as information professionals, and I don't see that changing, actually. The way that we develop collections [of print and e-books and other e-resources] will change. Tools will change. But I think any school librarian worth their salt will keep up with technology changes, and will continue working to ensure that staff and students keep up, too."

"We will continue to be many things to many users, but we will need to keep abreast of developments in information and learning technologies to maintain our relevance to our users and enable us to continue to contribute to student learning and achievement," added Fiona.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Funding and staffing were consistently mentioned by librarians as the biggest issues affecting their libraries' futures.

"Many schools when trying to balance the budget do not see the need for a school library, especially as they see the internet as the end all and be all," said Karen. "I love the internet,

but I know it has its limitations. Critical thinking skills and information literacy will

be tremendously important in the future due to the huge amount of information out there for people to access. The ability to find the correct information will be very important. That is something that librarians can teach their school community."

"The way that many schools manage their library – low budgets, part-time staffing – means that school librarians need to prove their worth (the library and themselves) to their community if they are to continue to have a role in the school," Miriam said.

In addition to appropriate funding, Fiona said students and staff will need a range of spaces in order to work collaboratively, and the library is a perfect place for this to happen, but the physical space needs to be flexible enough to cope with this.

"This also means a shift in understanding of the role of libraries and library staff for senior management, teaching staff, and boards of trustees, so this fantastic resource can be utilised fully."

Bridget believed there is an issue of relevancy: "School librarians need to upskill themselves so that they are able to work with students in an educational environment that uses modern mobile technology. It isn't only about the books in libraries! School librarians who don't keep up with technology and who don't embrace change will find themselves and their libraries underfunded and at risk of being irrelevant."

Paula said her role at Riccarton High School's

library changed significantly over the nine years she was there.

"It moved from taking a fact from a book to giving you access to a range of resources (both print and digital) to curate what you need with that information. The librarian is aware of all the different ways information can be used (for example, a blog post), curated, and made valuable to support student learning. The whole teaching and learning inquiry process has had a huge impact on the way the library is used and has expanded its potential limitlessly."

Despite the challenges, the future of school libraries is looking bright. The National Library of New Zealand is embarking on a School Library Futures project, which aims to strengthen the provision of school library services throughout New Zealand by working with principals and key stakeholders (such as boards of trustees) to provide a more strategically focused programme of collaborative action to influence and shape library services nationally.

The project's preliminary findings may be shared at the ULearn conference in October.

LINKS

National Library's inspirational excellence in school libraries case studies:

- <http://schools.natlib.govt.nz/developing-your-library/school-library-futures/learning-facilitation>
- School Library Association of New Zealand (SLANZA): www.slanza.org.nz ✽

I THINK ANY SCHOOL LIBRARIAN WORTH THEIR SALT WILL KEEP UP WITH TECHNOLOGY CHANGES, AND WILL CONTINUE WORKING TO ENSURE THAT STAFF AND STUDENTS KEEP UP, TOO." – MIRIAM TUOHY

