World Teachers Day, held on 5 October, is an opportunity to highlight the essential role they play in education, guiding, inspiring and instructing pupils. Yet they are not alone. Within the schools and communities in which they work, librarians can make a significant contribution.

Indeed, a professional school librarian, according to the standards set out for teacher librarians in California, can be a leader within their institution, a bridge between new educational technologies and school uses, a connection with the latest theoretical practices, a promoter of reading, and a manager and creator of educational resources[1].

This article draws on studies presented in recent years at the World Library and Information Congress which offer insights into three particular ways in which librarians are natural allies of teachers. These are: direct support for teachers' work; playing a complementary role within the curriculum; and through opening doors to new experiences and ideas.

School Libraries Support Teachers

School libraries are of course embedded within schools, which have a mission to promote literacy, numeracy and other skills. Their contribution should be born in mind when setting overall strategy[2]. As the Swedish definition of their role says, 'the school library can therefore be regarded partly as a material resource which is part of a school's teaching aids and other tools and partly as a function which actively contributes to the development of knowledge and is responsible for certain services'[3].

Reading promotion is a key element of this, and is a natural strength of school libraries. Evidence over many years from studies in Colorado have noted the positive impact on reading test scores of school library staff, library-centred instruction and cooperation with teachers, the size and relevance of library collections, access to databases and flexible scheduling[4].

These results are replicated elsewhere. In Sweden, the contribution to PISA results of close cooperation between teachers and librarians was also clear[5]. In Poland, libraries in schools took a prominent role in the national 'All Poland Reads to Children' campaign, which aimed to ensure children were read to for at least 20 minutes a day.

As Lewandowicz-Nosal notes, 'In schools teachers recognize very quickly the children who are read to regularly at home. These children have fewer problems with formulating statements, they handle problem solving better, are able to concentrate and focus longer on the work they are doing. Reading aloud takes away the difficulty of letter decoding from a recipient, it provides potential content interpretation, and makes it easier to struggle

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[1] Farmer (2017)
[2] Ingvaldsen (2014)
[3] Hell (2014)
[4] Mardis et al (2015)
[5] Hell (2014), ibid.

through more difficult parts of a book, such as wildlife descriptions or a character's emotional disturbance'[6].

Library based initiatives have also driven up interest in reading – and so readiness for school – through initiatives such as Boekstart and Library at School in the Netherlands which are already benefitting nearly 700 000 people[7]. A particular success story has been 'Score a Book', which used a partnership with a football club and stickers to get boys reading more. This work has also encouraged evidence collection on how libraries can most effectively promote the underlying skills necessary for success at school[8].

The benefits stretch beyond reading. In France, the specific contribution that school librarians make to ensuring the presence and relevance of educational materials and technologies is officially recognised. They work both directly with teachers, and at the whole-of-school level to improve results[9].

School librarians can also make a major contribution to the work of teachers supporting children with special needs. A well-evaluated case from the United States shows the impact of inclusive practices. The school librarian used her library – deliberately decorated to be friendly and welcoming – to offer tailored support to children with special needs, helping them not only academically, but also in their relations with other pupils. The students concerned would then be more active in class, and interact more readily, making the job of teachers easier[10].

Work in Portugal has shown similar results, with school librarians carrying out diagnostic tests to assess needs, and delivering both resources and support. In addition to the students with special needs spending more time in the library itself, there was better interaction with peers, and a sense that these students were no longer confined to their space[11].

COMPLEMENT

In addition to direct work to support teachers, school librarians often have key parallel roles, in particular around leading work to deliver information literacy, and through the spaces they provide and the resources they can mobilise.

The importance of media and information literacy in particular is increasingly clear as concern rises about fake news[12]. In France, school librarians (or teacher librarians) are responsible for offering instruction on media and information literacy, both through reflection on existing texts and supporting active creation. They have a mission to promote

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[6] Lewandowicz-Nosal, Grażyna (2017)

[7] Langendonk and Bon (2016)

[8] Langendonk and Toonen (2017)

[9] Ballarin et al. (2015)

[10] Gavigan and Copeland (2016)

[11] Mendinhos and Noguiera António (2016)

[12] IFLA (2018)

independent thinking about the outside world[13]. Similarly in Argentina, school libraries, officially, have a key role to play in advanced literacy and new forms of reading[14].

This is also true in Brazil, where Siquera discusses the work that school librarians have done in communities facing challenges with drugs and crime. Information literacy – allowing young people to make the right choices – is particularly important, and librarians can play a vital complementary role to teachers[15]. In Finland, where libraries are seen as critical to developing the media and information literacy necessary to promote community wellbeing, this is even part of the new curriculum[16].

Libraries also complement the work of teachers through providing alternative spaces. In Bangladesh, for example, children only spend 15% of their time in the classroom, and connections between schools and families can be limited. Libraries – both those based in schools and elsewhere – received support to become community partners for reading activities. A key task was to encourage awareness of what libraries could offer among teachers, who now underline that 'increased attendance at the libraries is having a direct impact on students' attention, engagement in school activities, and overall performance'[17].

This complementarity between library spaces and school spaces is also clear from the examples given above from the Netherlands[18], where working with libraries has made it possible to form wide partnerships of community actors to support education. In Norway, libraries support mental health among young people through making resources available and visible[19].

Libraries also can be a great place to mobilise volunteers keen to support education[20], as well as call on external expertise such as academics in order to develop skills[21]. They can play a particular role during holiday periods, helping to ensure that children do not fall behind[22].

GATEWAY

As highlighted in the previous section, library spaces and resources can represent a complement to the work of teachers. In this final section, this article will focus on examples of how libraries can go further, and offer a gateway to the outside world.

Clearly by giving access to a wider range of books than those on the curriculum, and acting as a 'laboratory' for trying new things already allows students to expand their knowledge and ideas. In France, Ballarin et al underline how the school library should 'contribute to the

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[13] Glass, Bon, and Reynaud (2016)
[14] Perrone and Graves (2014)
[15] Siqueira (2015)
[16] Ojaranta (2015)
[17] Phillips et al (2017)
[18] Langendonk and Bon (2016) ibid, Langendonk and Toonen (2017) ibid
[19] Berg Larsen (2015)
[20] Hoerning (2017)
[21] Allen-Overbey et al. (2016)
[22] Ekere et al (2016)

opening of the school towards an educational, cultural, professional, but also local and regional, national, European and international environment', as well as create pathways for students[23]. Indeed, this is the goal of effective media and information literacy – to allow students to become autonomous and responsible actors in the information environment[24].

School libraries can take on this challenge in very direct ways, such as through the 'rights for right' initiative in Portugal, aimed at promoting reading and citizenship. Librarians worked to provide materials and support on questions around human rights, complementing the work of teachers in areas that are not necessarily easy. In doing so, the aim was to build young people who could take an active role in public and civic life[25].

Libraries, as a network, can also help students make transitions beyond school. For example, there can be programmes such as that run by the University of Queensland Library in Australia, which collaborated with schools and school libraries in marginalised areas. This collaboration not only supported access to materials for school pupils, but also opened up perspectives to life at university – something that the pupils may not have realistically considered before[26].

CONCLUSION

As the examples offered in this article have set out, libraries – and school libraries in particular – can support and complement the work of teachers, as well as acting as a gateway to the wider world. Through indispensable support for literacy and a love of reading, through broader skills such as media and information literacy, and through opening perspectives, they are essential allies.

Of course not everywhere – or everyone – benefits from school libraries. Policies and requirements vary across countries, despite the evidence of the benefits that can be brought. Yet as Hart underlines in a contribution on the situation on South Africa, school libraries should not be a luxury. They should – as a means of driving equality – be available to all[27].

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[23] Ballarin et al (2015), ibid
[24] Ernoult et al (2014), see also Glass et al (2016) ibid
[25] Da Silva and Vaz (2014)
[26] Nibbs et al (2016)
[27] Hart (2014)

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