Cultivating the 'Third Place' in school libraries to support student wellbeing

By Danielle Raffaele

Snapshot

Danielle Rafaele explores how school libraries support student wellbeing within the Third Place paradigm and the role of the teacher Librarian in cultivating this supportive environment.

Introduction

Over time, libraries have evolved from houses of books and silent reading to hives of bustling activity and spaces of refuge. As centres of learning, research, technology, makerspaces and community hubs, libraries have undergone multiple revolutions to adapt to the needs of their patrons and the broader society. Likewise, school libraries are following in close pursuit, guided by the research and trends that indicate how libraries can serve students as places of inquiry, sanctuary and connection.

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Emerging educational studies have found that school libraries foster wellbeing in students by offering a sense of belonging within a safe and caring environment (AIHW, 2012; Child, 2018; Korodaj, 2019; Willis et al., 2019; Merga, 2020). The inception of 'wellbeing' across Australian schools has become a rapidly increasing trend over the past two decades where its strategic implementation can be found in policy, pastoral programs and cognitive assessment (Hamilton & Redmond, 2010; Lawrence et al., 2016; Education Council, 2018; Willis, Hughes & Bland, 2019; Merga, 2020), yet there is still scope for further research within the school library context. The recent findings on school libraries as promoters of wellbeing can be further supported by Oldenburg's theory of the 'Third Place' (1989). The Third Place, argues Oldenburg (1989), is the 'great good place' where people dwell in between home (the First Place) and work/school (the Second Place).

Contemporary scholarship has argued that the public library environment fulfils the characteristics of the Third Place as a realm of escape, sociability and leisure imbued with a loose structure and sense of equality (Harris, 2007; Lin, Pang & Luyt, 2015; Potet, 2015; Morehart, 2016; Bruxvoort, 2017; Besson, 2018; Castro, 2018; Child, 2018; Hardenbrook, 2019). Teacher Librarians have already begun to address this research by adapting their roles and their spaces with the implementation of new library designs, policies and programs (Bland et al., 2013; Harper & Deskins, 2015; Little 2015; Lorraine & Raechel, 2016; Gray, 2017; Child, 2018; Stewart,

2018; Korodaj, 2019; Willis, Hughes & Bland, 2019). This paper will examine how school libraries support student wellbeing within the Third Place paradigm and what ways the role of the teacher Librarian needs to adapt to cultivate such an environment.

School libraries as centres of wellbeing

The increase of wellbeing initiatives within Australian schools reflects the growing global concern for the wellbeing of young people, where '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). These statistics indicate how essential schools, especially secondary schools, are in fostering wellbeing amongst its students, which is undoubtedly why policies and initiatives such as the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework (Education Council, 2018) are being implemented across Australian schools (Hamilton & Redmond, 2010; Willis, Hughes & Blank, 2019). A growing body of research seeks to improve the wellbeing markers of adolescents, yet little has been done on how school libraries can achieve this (Merga, 2020). To date, the majority of research on school libraries and library design have focussed on student academic outcomes, such raising as literacy and numeracy markers, ICT capabilities or the importance of well-resourced spaces and adequately trained library staff to improve student learning (Burgin et al., 2003; Dow et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2013; Harper & Deskins, 2015; Coleman, 2016; Lorraine & Raechel, 2016; Lance & Kachel, 2018; Willis, Hughes & Blank, 2019; Merga, 2019; Merga, 2020). Yet, libraries have the potential to offer students so much more than scholastic achievement. Research has identified how both the school setting and public libraries support the mental health of young people (Public Commission, 2019; Merga, 2020), so it follows that school libraries are also places that have the potential to cultivate student wellbeing (Child, 2018; Korodaj, 2019; Willis, Hughes & Blank, 2019; Merga, 2020).

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Within the framework of a school setting, the definition for student wellbeing is multi-faceted, involving a sense of belonging and feelings of inclusion in a safe and caring environment (AIHW, 2010; Korodaj, 2019), likewise, being in a state of positive mood and attitude while experiencing a sense of resilience and satisfaction with self, one's relationships and school experiences are essential for student mental health (ACU, 2008; Merga, 2020). This research indicates how both internal and external factors contribute to a student's sense of wellbeing in school, which can arguably be nurtured within a school library, offering students a sense of belonging within a safe and caring environment (AIHW, 2012; Child, 2018; Korodaj, 2019; Willis, Hughes & Bland, 2019; Merga, 2020).

Australian school libraries have begun to address student wellbeing through a number of avenues, including spatial design. The work of Willis, Hughes and Bland (2019) discovered a direct correlation between the design of the school library and student wellbeing (Korodaj, 2019), where their qualitative research across several Queensland school libraries involved case studies and

interviews of 44 students who shared their experiences of their newly designed or refurbished library and perceptions of an ideal library space. They found what students valued most in their school library was a combination of spaciousness, technology, social connectedness and a sense of control, while imagining their ideal library as one of comfort, peacefulness, connection to the outside world through natural and technological links as well as a sense of adventure (Willis, Hughes & Bland, 2019). These responses indicate the importance of place in feelings of wellbeing, such as comfort, spaciousness, peacefulness and technological access, including WiFi and digital gaming, while also emphasising the significance of the intangible experiences of social connectedness, connection to one's world, personal agency through choices and control and a sense of adventure through the opportunity to play and explore one's environment (Willis, Hughes & Bland, 2019). It is evident that the design of the library is not enough on its own but must work in tandem with cultivating a sense of community to foster student wellbeing. These elements of space and community are characteristic of Oldenburg's (1989) Third Place, a paradigm for which teacher librarians can actively address student wellbeing needs within their library space and design in new and unique ways (Morehart, 2016).

School libraries as the Third Place

In Oldenburg's (1989) original work, he identified an important sociological construct to characterise social behaviour in different places, identifying the human need for a place to relax, unwind and belong as an equal outside of any formal hierarchical structures that typify one's working environment or the privacy and seclusion of one's personal residence. While published over three decades ago, Oldenburg's ideas are still influencing modern scholarship and our understandings on how place and community directly influence one's social and emotional wellbeing. Oldenburg (1989) identified that a person needs three different important places to belong, namely home, work and a 'third undefined place' to create a sense of balance in one's life (Oldenburg, 1989; Castro, 2018). Oldenburg (1996-97) recognised the importance of belonging to a third place for maintaining one's wellbeing and mental health:

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> Life without community has produced, for many, a life style consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and- back-again shuttle. Social wellbeing and psychological health depend upon community (p. 7).

The Third Place, therefore, is a place to escape from the stress of daily working and home life with a loose yet interactive structure where one belongs on a level playing field, building relationships without status and not being reduced into a customer (Besson, 2018; Castro, 2018). Oldenburg (1989) argues the Third Place is unique yet common to all great civilizations and cities, including the forums of classical Rome, the piazzas of Florence, the corner pubs of London and the tearooms of Japan (Harris, 2007). Third Places are informal community focal points and have been historically characterised within traditional social structures such as churches, recreational

clubs or political parties (Harris, 2007), yet research has revealed there is a community shift towards libraries as the new Third Place (Harris, 2007; Lin, Pang & Luyt, 2015; Potet, 2015; Morehart, 2016; Bruxvoort, 2017; Besson, 2018; Castro, 2018; Child, 2018; Hardenbrook, 2019). Libraries, both within public and school settings, are no longer spaces strictly designated to book reading and research but also places of sociability and encounter (Purcell, 2010; Bruxvoort, 2017; Besson, 2018). Characteristics that define the Third Place are well within the scope of a library environment: a Third Place is an openly accessible safe place, free of charge, welcoming to all without prejudice, low stress, loose in structure, interactive and collaborative, which by definition is also what constitutes a library (Bruxvoort, 2017; Besson, 2018; Productivity Commission, 2019). Librarians have begun to grasp this concept within the ever-evolving role of the library in society. A Parisian librarian has embodied the Third Place by stating her library's new-found purpose is 'to teach people how to be citizens and to develop their critical faculties, with the ability to choose their own leisure activities, meet others and take part in social life' (Potet, 2015). Similarly in Australia, **Chatswood Library**, has adopted the Third Place praxis by offering a range of workshops in craft, technology, computing, community languages, writing and local history, as well as support groups, book clubs, reading programs, slam poetry evenings and author talks. It is no longer just a library, but a bustling centre of community life.

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Teacher librarians are paralleling the success of the public libraries by adopting the Third Place philosophy in their school libraries. Informed by research and practice, they are altering their library spaces and policies by embracing the changes required to embody a true Third Space environment that addresses students' wellbeing needs (Bland et al., 2013; Harper & Deskins, 2015; Little 2015; Lorraine & Raechel, 2016; Gray, 2017; Child, 2018; Stewart, 2018; Korodaj, 2019; Willis, Hughes & Bland, 2019). Yet, is this something new to the role of teacher librarians? As Gray (2017) argues, the Third Place is a way of identifying what teacher librarians have already been cultivating for many years:

> In this computer age, when the changing role of the library is often speculated on, we can position ourselves in the role we have always fulfilled but not often talked about. A role that cannot be denied; a space for everyone who needs it, a space that can do what the other places can't, a space that already exists. A third space (p. 37).

While this may be the case, the question remains how does the teacher librarian measurably and successfully foster the Third Place atmosphere to promote wellbeing within their school library?

The role of the teacher librarian in supporting student wellbeing through the Third Place paradigm

Harper (2017) and Merga (2020) argue school libraries play a significant role in helping schools foster wellbeing through the active role of the teacher librarian by identifying and implementing

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initiatives to support the mental health of young people. Additionally, Willis, Hughes and Bland (2019) found that student wellbeing is supported by a unique combination of a library's spatial design and atmosphere, arguably akin to Oldenburg's (1989) Third Place paradigm. In adopting the Third Place concept to support student wellbeing, the teacher librarian's role is to develop strategies and initiatives for its successful implementation. The teacher librarian is essential in promoting the Third Place within a school library as they develop significant relationships with their students and support their feelings of being welcomed, safe and cared for (Harper, 2017). Additionally, the teacher librarian's expertise within the informational-pedagogical environment is tangential to fostering wellbeing through their guidance of students in safe, responsible and critical practices in learning and digital citizenship (Willis, Hughes & Bland 2019). There is no doubt the ideal (and arguably only) person to lead wellbeing initiatives within a school library is the appropriately qualified teacher librarian.

Research indicates there are a number of protocols teacher librarians can embrace to embody the Third Place paradigm within their library (Bland et al., 2013; Harper & Deskins, 2015; Little 2015; Lorraine & Raechel, 2016; Gray, 2017; Child, 2018; Stewart, 2018; Korodaj, 2019; Willis, Hughes & Bland, 2019), however Little (2015) identifies a significant roadblock to how the school library could ever achieve this: 'how can a school library be a third-place when it is also part of the second place? It is essential for the teacher librarian to be aware of this apparently contradictory situation and seek to reduce or remove the rigid structures of the Second Place (school) when students enter the realm of the Third Place (school library). Some significant ways to achieve this is by adapting the library's policies, developing popular programs and rethinking library design and the use of space to become centred on students.

Third Place libraries must be centred on their users by catering for their social, technological and environmental needs and desires (Besson, 2018). Teacher librarians who have successfully implemented a Third Place library have relaxed their policies around talking, food and drink while extending the opening hours to before and after school (Jackson, 2015; Bruxvoort, 2017; Gray, 2017; Castro, 2018; Child, 2018). Furthermore, a loose structure vital to the Third Place has been achieved by relaxing rules around using the library for non-academic purposes by promoting the activity and autonomy of student-led clubs, digital gaming, craft workshops and makerspaces, to name a few (Bruxvoort, 2017; Besson, 2018; Child, 2018). These policy changes are essential for promoting a welcoming, open and accessible space for students to escape from the stress of school or home and enter the library relaxed with a feeling that this truly is 'their place' (Bruxvoort, 2017). Reducing stressful interactions with teacher librarians around the 'appropriate' use of library spaces and avoiding the endless list of 'thou shalt nots' also helps to build positive relationships while prioritising the needs of the students over the protection of furniture or books (Bruxvoort, 2017). The research of Jackson (2015) in Canada reported that students felt less stressed in school libraries with extended opening hours, accessibility to

caffeine and snacks as well as offering various programs such as pet therapy and yoga. This study found that after leaving these libraries students demonstrated improved and positive coping mechanisms for dealing with stress (Jackson, 2015; Child, 2018), and therefore an increased sense of wellbeing.

Rethinking the library's design and use of space is another essential component to fostering a Third Place atmosphere. Beyond the open access to technology, spaces must be functional for educational and social purposes while catering for the different needs and motivations of students using the library (Gray, 2017). Accommodating for both social interactions and silent readers can be difficult to balance, so the creation of organised library spaces is fundamental in achieving the Third Place goal (Castro, 2018). The Third Place is somewhere one feels a strong sense of control by being independent while in community (Oldenburg, 1989; Harris, 2007; Lin, Pang & Luyt, 2015; Little, 2015; Potet, 2015; Bruxvoort, 2017; Besson, 2018; Castro, 2018), so teacher librarians need to develop spaces to reflect this. Such could involve a combination of open spaces and glass rooms that mitigate noise where students could still feel connected and not alone while being within their own space (Castro, 2018). Drawing on the research of Willis, Hughes and Bland (2019), large windows with plenty of natural light and views of nature further promote a strong sense of wellbeing while alleviating the enclosed feelings often experienced within classroom spaces (Castro, 2018). Additionally, comfortable chairs and couches and sanctuary hideaways meet the Third place requirements of relaxation and downtime (Oldenburg, 1989; Harris, 2007; Lin, Pang & Luyt, 2015; Little, 2015; Potet, 2015; Bruxvoort, 2017; Whisken, 2017; Besson, 2018; Castro, 2018).

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To begin to address if a school library is successfully embodying a Third Place environment, the teacher librarian can reflect on their practices by addressing the following questions (adapted from Hardenbrook, 2019):

1. Who uses your library?
2. What policies and structures do you have in place that might impede library use? (e.g. no food/drink, no talking, no sleeping, overdue fines, rules on activities)
3. Who are your programs and initiatives geared towards?
4. How would you describe your library's physical space?
5. How does the lack of resources or design impact your library?

Gray (2017) argues the role of the teacher librarian is to encourage social and learning opportunities by reflecting the needs of the school community and the students who come to use the space; he argues if students know the

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library is welcoming and open to them, then they will come in to work or unwind. Ultimately, the school library is not merely a resource but a centre hub of the school (Child, 2018; Morehart, 2018) where teacher librarians adapt to change and foster student wellbeing by instilling a sense of belonging, community, relaxation and personal space characteristic of the Third Place.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, libraries have evolved to reflect the social and technological changes within society. Once hushed spaces for silent reading and research, libraries are now community centres and technological hubs serving their patrons in multiple ways beyond their traditional purposes. Research on the benefits and importance of the library space and design in fostering a sense of social connection and sanctuary has informed educators to adapt their own library spaces within the school context.

With the increasing concern around the mental health of young people, school libraries have been found to support student wellbeing by offering a sense of safety and belonging within a caring environment. The research supporting student wellbeing in school libraries can be further supplemented with Oldenburg's (1989) theory of the Third Place, which articulates the need for individuals to have a place to belong to outside of home and work/school.

Elements that characterise the Third Place, including somewhere of leisure, refuge and social connection within a loose structure, are also characteristic of libraries. Teacher Librarians have begun to adapt their role to successfully cultivate Third Place libraries by modifying library policy, programs and spatial design to better cater for the needs of students. In creating a place where students are welcomed and accepted, with feelings of agency and choice while deeply connected to their community, it is evident how the role of the teacher librarian is crucial to promoting student wellbeing within the school library.

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