

The school library as sanctuary: Supporting students social and emotional well-being

By Emma Wallace

Snapshot

Emma Wallace, a school librarian in London, UK, explores the many ways a school library can support the emotional well-being of students through its environment, attitudes and programming.

Working in a school library, you quickly realise that one of its key roles is as a place of sanctuary for many students, one that supports both their social and emotional wellbeing. With the reported decline in children and young people's mental health over recent years, this has never been more important. Whilst the library has an essential role to play in supporting learning, through providing resources as well as access to computers and study space, many students see the library as a place they can retreat to, away from the hustle and bustle of the playground or canteen. This is one of the few spaces in school where there are not the academic pressures of the classroom, where their time is not directed or assessed and there are fewer expectations placed on them.

When they enter through the doors, teens often shed the exterior armour they have donned for their parents, teachers, coaches, and peers. Libraries have long been a refuge for teens who might struggle to find their place at school, and it is often the one space that is readily open and available to the entire campus community. (Davis, 2019)

It is the school librarian who helps facilitate this, through creating a welcoming and safe space that is accessible to the whole school community.

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In this article, I will be looking at how library design, staffing, codes of conduct, social interactions, library lessons, projects and activities all work together to support and enhance a student's mental wellbeing whilst at school. I will be using examples from the library I work in at St Benedict's Senior School in Ealing London, case studies from other school libraries, as well as reports from key library, charity and government bodies, to analyse and draw evidence from.

It is essential that the whole school community, including staff, view the library as an accessible and inclusive space. This can be achieved through effective library design, most significantly

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by positioning the library centrally within the school, so it is seen as a main hub for students. As author Alan Gibbons identifies, 'A good library is at the heart of the school.' (Gibbons, 2013) Attention also needs to be paid to the library's interior design, making sure there are differentiated

spaces that support various types of learning and interaction. This has been identified in Scotland's national strategy for school libraries, which states:

'To support health and wellbeing, children and young people require access to a flexible space for reflection and conversation where learning and creativity are encouraged in a nurturing environment.' (Scottish Library & Information Council, 2018)

Indeed, students access the library to carry out a wide range of activities, including relaxing and reading for pleasure, working in small groups, browsing the internet or studying in silence. To cater to these contrasting needs, various types of seating, study tables, display units and shelving must be included in the library design (as well of course, as resources). At St Benedict's, we have three distinct areas within the library, including a Middle School Book Room, eLearning room, and main library study space (see [here a history of St Benedict's Library](#)). Whilst the eLearning Room is a separate room, the other areas are differentiated through the various furnishings and resources available within them. This consequently helps to ensure students feel supported and welcome in their use of the library and allows for different types of behaviour, interactions and learning to occur. These spaces, along with the staffing of them, will be discussed further as a means for supporting student well-being in the proceeding paragraphs.

To ensure that the library is welcoming to the whole school population, it is important that they feel involved in the space and have a sense of ownership of this. This can be achieved through running frequent activities and events in the library, that inspire interest and participation. In St Benedict's library, we hold a new competition every term, often tied to a department's scheme of work or a national day of celebration. We also make sure there are frequent opportunities to create and 'craft' in the library, such as designing alternative book covers or bookmark making opportunities. 'When students engage in the many activities and opportunities provided in a library or library makerspace, they relax and have fun. It is non-threatening and students can fulfil their own desires to give things a go. It gives students wings and the permission to forgive themselves for not being perfect; failing becomes part of the fun.' (Child, 2018 (Issue 105)) These enjoyable, informal activities held in the library space are an example of the unique role it can play in providing students with a sense of belonging and fostering a sense of wellbeing during the school day.

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Libraries also can play a vital role in providing students with a sense of purpose and responsibility whilst at school. Recruiting student assistants to work in the library, either on the check-out counter or shelving books, is a great way of involving them in the day to day running of the library. This has a really positive impact on students' confidence and also helps give them a sense of identity and pride in the library and school.

School libraries are often particularly important places for quieter students, the ones who may be marginalised, are less inclined to join in the rough and tumble of the playground, club group activities or debating clubs. Reading is often an activity that is favoured by these students, as

it is ultimately a solitary and silent activity, one which permits an escape into imagination and other worlds. Reading is of course associated with the library and consequently contributes to the perception of the library as a place where it is ok to be alone. It is where the

‘more isolated students can use them without standing out like a sore thumb. Students can go by themselves and relax with a book or magazine or take part in an activity. There is no need to be seen to be popular in a library and being part of a large group is surplus to requirements.’ (Flint, 2019)

Furthermore, students have the freedom to choose what they read and exactly how they spend their time, something that is not always possible during lesson time or whilst at home. This contributes towards a student developing their own sense of identity and interests, which in effect can help towards raising their self-esteem and sense of belonging.

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The benefits of reading for pleasure have been identified in countless studies, including the many social benefits, such as an increased understanding of other people and relationships, as well as an ability to empathise and understand their own feelings. There are also real-life health benefits, including the reduction in depression, anxiety and stress (The Reading Agency, 2015). Reading therefore has a key role to play in the mental well-being

of students and it is one that should be promoted and encouraged at all points of their education. In St Benedict’s library, we encourage reading by providing an area that is designated just for quiet reading, called the Middle School Book Room. This informal area encourages reading and relaxation through its contemporary design, bright colours, low rise shelving, front facing fiction displays, posters and sofas and bean bags. This is in stark contrast to the more austere classroom spaces or indeed, the main library, with its oak panelled walls, shelving and heavy tables, which evoke a more academic and studious atmosphere. The staffed library counter is positioned away from the Middle School Book Room, ensuring students don’t feel that there is an overbearing eye watching them, but still someone on hand to help if needed. The area is stocked with items that students can browse and read, including the latest children’s and YA fiction, picture books, graphic novels, manga and magazines.



This range of resources is particularly attractive to reluctant readers, or those who don’t necessarily believe the library is a place for them, allowing them to hopefully find something that suits their interests and reading ability. There is no judgement placed on what students read or borrow

from the library, providing them with a sense of freedom and relief from academic pressures. As described by author Alan Gibbons 'A good school library supplements the prescribed curriculum with that other curriculum, the hidden, secret world of your own favourite books, comics, DVDs and websites.' (Gibbons, 2013)

The school library is also a sanctuary for students who may have pastoral issues, perhaps undergoing a difficult time within a friendship group, are being bullied, feel lonely, or have experienced bereavement or divorce at home. The library is often viewed as 'the third space, between school and home' (Korodaj, Students Need School Libraries, 2018), acting as a bridge between the two. I believe as a school librarian it is very important to cultivate and support this essential role by creating a safe space for students to retreat to. This can be achieved through ensuring the library is supervised by a member of staff throughout the day. Librarian Bonnie Barr created a silent study area in her library to help provide a safe space for students:

'This space provided crucial respite for students who needed a safe place to be alone. These students knew that if anyone came in there with the intention of subtle bullying, they would be asked to leave immediately under the 'no talking' rule. Most importantly, this would happen without drawing attention to the bullied student, and without them having to engage in any confrontation.' (Accessit, 2018)

In St Benedict's library, we have a silent study computer room, which is staffed at break and lunch to ensure that any bad behaviour, intimidation or bullying is acted upon and stopped. Students consequently know that they can visit this room during break or lunch and feel protected and supported whilst carrying out their homework or research.



Librarians have the opportunity to create a library space that is welcoming and a relationship with students that is approachable and non-judgemental. As Librarian Angela Jouris Saxe describes, 'Even though I was an authority figure, I wasn't involved with student assessments and evaluations or restricted by the rigid structure of the curriculum. I was free to make then library a safe and exciting place to learn.' (Saxe, 2019)

Working in a space that is accessible throughout the day, librarians have the unique opportunity to build a more informal relationship with students than is often possible between teachers and students. We often have more time than other staff to chat and listen to students, ask how their day is and how their studies are going.

'For some of our students: the school library may be the only space where they can come and speak to like-minded peers and/or a trusted adult that isn't their classroom teacher or a parent.' (Korodaj, The library as third space in your school, 2019)

Through working in the same space every day, we also get to observe students at different times of the day, spotting the ones who may be repeatedly visiting the library before or after school, who look like they are going through a difficult time, who are vulnerable or perhaps isolated. This insight into possible arising social or emotional issues means the librarian has a key role to play in supporting the wellbeing of students, acting as a direct link to the pastoral department, where any issues of concern should be reported.

Students with special educational needs (SEN), who have difficulty interacting with others or are overwhelmed by noisy spaces such as the lunch hall or playground are often frequent users of the school library. These students require familiar spaces that are well regulated and have clear expectations. This can be achieved in the library through implementing a clear 'Library Code of Conduct', which aims to create a safe and secure space where learning and reading can occur. At St Benedict's, our code of conduct requests students to not run, take a seat, carry out work, read or talk quietly. This is prominently displayed on posters around the library and reinforced in year 7 and 8 library lessons, ensuring all students know the behaviour expected of them when they enter this space. The teaching staff who are on duty in the library during break and lunch are also clearly briefed on the library rules to ensure that they help enforce them consistently. This all works to ensure that the library is a calm and well managed space that students feel happy to spend time in. As identified in the National Literacy Trust's 2010 'School Libraries' report,

'the school library has a significant role to play for children who for a variety of needs find the school environment particularly unwelcoming. As a space which is regulated by adults at times of the school day when spaces are largely peer regulated this is understandable.' (National Literacy Trust, 2010)

The library is often seen as a place to destress before and after exams. Indeed, the forms of learning that occur in the library are often markedly different from those found in the classroom or as tested in the exam hall. Students can select their own resources to read or study, put in to practice independent learning skills and direct their own learning. This is essential at a time when the curriculum, with its focus on frequent testing, fosters 'increasingly competitive and individualistic attitudes and ways of learning, requiring teachers to become more traditional in their pedagogy.' (Child, 2018 (Issue 105)) This often results in stressed and anxious students (and teachers), who are forever comparing themselves to others. One of the key reasons children's mental health has been deteriorating over the last decade can be attributed to the increased focus given to exams and academic attainment 'with 80% of young people saying that exam pressure has significantly impacted on their mental health.' (Cowburn & Blow, 2017) To counter this at St Benedict's, we have created a library lesson programme for years 7 and 8, which is unassessed and aims to be fun and interactive. Students are invited to take part in different activities in each library lesson, learning for example how to select a good fiction book, understand the Dewey system or select relevant information. In these lessons, students move around the library, work together in pairs or groups and towards the end of the lesson, have time to browse, borrow or read a book. Students consequently develop independent learning skills, have autonomy over their reading choices and a chance to unwind and have fun. I have received reports from a number of teachers that these are students' favourite lessons of the week!

The role the school library can play in learning has been identified in the IFLA School Library guidelines, which states that it should operate as a

‘safe space where individual curiosity, creativity, and an orientation toward learning are encouraged and supported and where students can explore diverse topics, even controversial topics, in privacy and safety.’ (IFLA, 2015)

This can be achieved through implementing an Inquiry based programme, which allows students to explore and develop a project within a clear learning framework. Inquiry based learning counters the teach to test model by empowering the student to direct their own research and develop their own critical thinking skills. It is also often collaborative, ensuring that it is a more interactive, fun and supportive way of learning than individually testing students.

Libraries are at the forefront of Inquiry based learning, as attested by the recently launched ‘Inquiry as an approach to learning - phase two’ of the Great School Libraries campaign (Hutchinson, 2020). Many librarians follow the [FOSIL framework](#) to teach Inquiry skills, and whilst we have not yet implemented the FOSIL model at St Benedict’s, we have successfully embedded the HPQ and EPQ in to our school curriculum. This project-based qualification guides students through identifying a topic, researching and selecting sources, writing (or creating an artifact) from their findings and then reflecting on what they have learnt during this process. I work closely with the EPQ centre coordinator, Dr Julie Greenhough, to support these students, helping deliver the ‘Taught Element’ part of the course, as well as being the EPQ Lead Supervisor (more info on our successful partnership [here](#)). This helps to ensure that students understand the important role the library and librarian can play in supporting their projects and the research process. Project based learning is a brilliant way for students to learn an array of independent learning and critical thinking skills, one that frees them from the confines of memorising and testing and ultimately create more rounded, independent and self-assured learners.

It is through the above-mentioned practices, relationships and spaces that the school library really does have a unique role to play in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of the school community. From the library’s physical spaces and design, to its staffing and management, students have the chance to explore their own reading and learning journey in a supportive, safe and non-judgemental environment.

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Through directly involving the students in library activities and supporting a wide range of behaviours, interactions and learning needs, the library can help them develop a sense of belonging and identity that is often much harder to achieve in the larger, busier spaces of a school. It is also through library lessons and the introduction of creative, open-ended Inquiry based learning, that students really develop a sense of autonomy and the critical thinking skills needed to be successful and confident in their future studies and careers. Of course, every school is made up a diverse population with varying social and emotional needs, requiring the librarian to adapt and adjust their support, but through careful consideration and flexibility in design

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and activities, the library can be inclusive and open to all. This understanding and openness is what makes school libraries a sanctuary for many students and such an integral part in their overall mental well-being. It is also what makes them such an exciting and rewarding place to work. As author Barnhill states 'School libraries are part sanctuary, part laboratory, part university, part launch pad; every library on earth is a multiverse — truth inside of truth, story inside of story, idea inside of idea —which is to say, infinite.' (Barnhill, 2017)

'I will head to a library or museum when I'm feeling troubled, in search of a temenos, a sanctuary, for this is my church.' (Anderson, 2015)

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Editor's Note: This article first appeared in the SLA UK journal *TSL: The School Librarian* in 2020. It is reprinted here with their kind permission.

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