

New Zealand school libraries after pay equity

By *Miriam Tuohy*

Snapshot

Miriam Tuohy, Senior Specialist (School Library Development) at the National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa Services to Schools, shares with us the complex data on school libraries in New Zealand that has been collected across a range of areas and in relation to their work on pay equity.

In 2017 National Library's Services to Schools started discussions with the School Library Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (SLANZA) and the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA), both organisations who share with us a common interest in understanding and supporting schools, and school library staff. From those first talks, we decided to survey all schools in New Zealand, to find out more about their libraries. I've written previously about results from earlier surveys. Across the five surveys that make up the series, we have captured information about many aspects of school library provision:



- library spaces and access to them
- library services and how often they're used
- library support for priority learners
- the current school library workforce including roles, hours, skills and pay
- expected changes to the school library workforce
- support and professional development for school library staff
- collection holdings and trends
- collection development funding
- the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This article shares some of the latest findings from our 2023 survey. In it, I focus on the impact that settlement of the School Librarians and Library Assistants' Pay Equity Claim (LPEC) has had for school library staff and discuss some of the ongoing issues that school library staff face.

Survey findings as an advocacy tool

School libraries in New Zealand are not mandated – each school determines whether they'll invest in library provision, and to what extent. Because there is no obligation for schools to provide a library – including library staff, space, collections, or services – there is no requirement for schools to report on any aspect of library provision. Historically it's been difficult to provide information about the state of school libraries here. The reasons that this information is still needed include:

- to advocate for libraries generally
- to advocate for school libraries as a whole
- to advocate for more library resourcing and support within an individual school.

In the case of this last point, at the National Library's Services to Schools we are regularly asked to provide advice about funding for school libraries. For school leaders who are making funding decisions about their library, existing data and evidence from our survey findings can help. The findings make it possible for decision-makers to benchmark their current library investment against similar schools and decide what changes they might make.

Figures 1 and 2 show the sort of information we can share with schools, drawing on survey data, to clearly show their school in relation to other similar schools. The first chart shows paid library staff hours for an example school compared to findings for schools

Paid library staff hours per week

Decile 6-8 schools with 900-1200 students

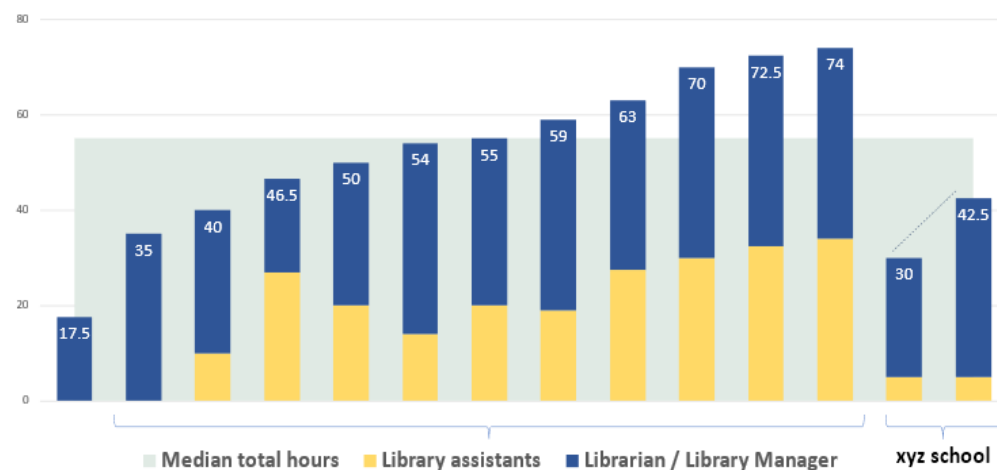


Figure 1: Paid library staff hours across a range of responding schools

Collection development \$ per student

School roll = 676-1075, n=19 schools

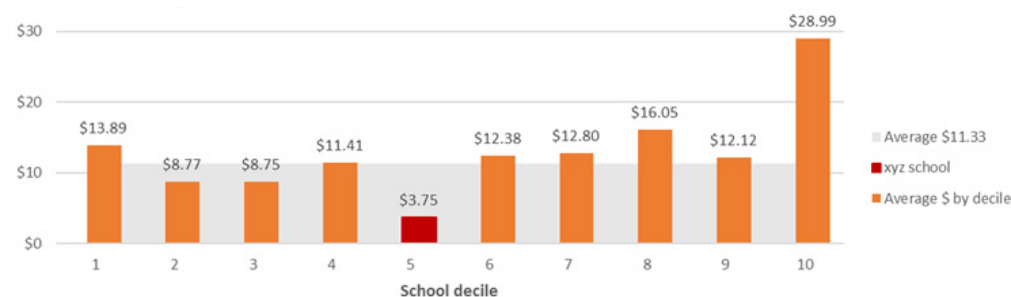


Figure 2: Collection development funding per student across a range of responding schools

of a similar size and decile. The second chart shows a comparison of per-student collection development budgets across similarly sized schools for each of the 10 deciles.

We know that when our advice or support is provided alongside the data, it helps school library staff develop the confidence they need to start what can sometimes be difficult conversations with their school leaders.

“One thing I would say to anyone looking at these numbers and considering your own hours, is to remember that although these figures are useful, the main thing is that your hours need to provide time for you (and your library team if there’s not just you!) to do all that’s expected in your role. So – you’ll need time for developing, organising and promoting the collection; time to maintain the library space; time to spend with students; time to plan with teachers perhaps; time to work on developing and delivering the full range of services your library provides...”

The author’s advice to members of the NZ School Library Listserv

“I just wanted to say thanks for your useful comments [...] The way that you articulated it really resonated and helps me frame my conversation. I did a bit of maths, and it appears that I spend 1.25 minutes on each student! Not enough!”

Email response from a member of the NZ School Library Listserv

Significant improvements in school library staff pay

Settlement of the school librarians and library assistants’ pay equity claim corrected historical inequities that existed because this workforce is predominantly women. Post-pay equity settlement, we expected to see a positive change in findings about library staff pay, and this is indeed shown in the 2023 data. Table 1 shows librarians and library assistants’ current pay rates,

2024 pay grades and hourly rates

Grade	Steps	Hourly rates
A	1-3	\$27.87 - \$30.57
B	1-7	\$30.96 - \$36.67
C	1-5	\$39.17 - \$44.87
D	1-4	\$47.54 - \$51.89

Table 1: 2024 library staff grades and range of hourly pay rates

which have risen significantly post-LPEC settlement. The [Work Matrix Table within the Support Staff in Schools Collective Agreement](#) provides further information about the type of work as well as degrees of autonomy and responsibility expected within each grade.

There was a marked increase in 2023 in the percentage of library staff respondents who said their pay is appropriate for their role and responsibilities.

“With my successful regrade, I now feel valued and that being a librarian is recognised as a professional career. During this process I believe I was able to convey to my principal some of the work that I do that he was unaware of. I think both the pay equity and the ability to see the matrix definitions allowed this conversation to take place – which was a good thing and will lead to a new job description.”

The author’s advice to members of the NZ School Library Listserv

School library staff pay is appropriate for role and responsibilities (%)

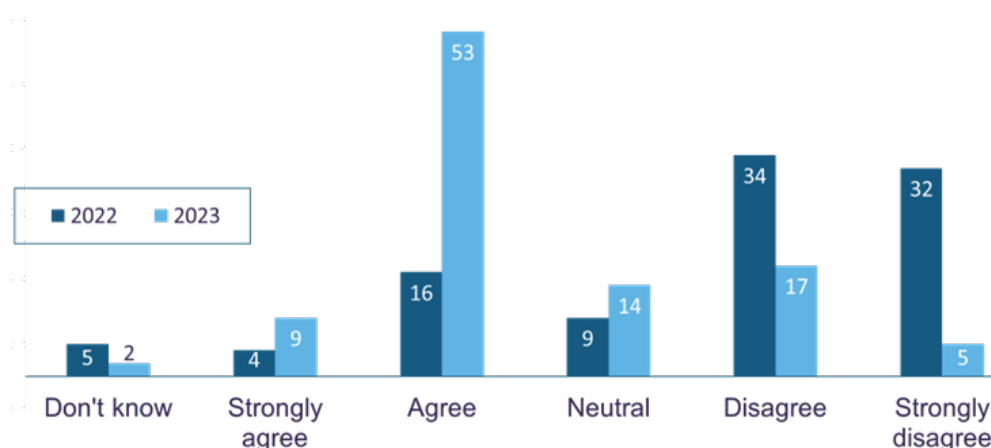


Figure 3: School library staff pay is appropriate for role and responsibilities

Remaining workforce challenges

It’s important to remember that although the pay equity claim was enormously positive for school library staff, it did not set out to address all the issues facing New Zealand’s school library workforce. The challenges below aren’t unique to New Zealand’s school library staff. You may also have some of these challenges in your own role, or indeed in any job.

Adequate income and good work-life balance

Alongside an appropriate hourly rate, having enough paid hours is essential to earning an adequate income. 2023 survey findings show that 79-93% of school library staff (depending on school type) are employed and paid term-time only (40 weeks + 3-4 weeks annual leave). Additionally, library staff here are generally employed part-time, with the exception of secondary school employees. As the year levels within a school rise, so does the likelihood that library staff

will be employed full-time, as shown in Table 2 below.

Another challenge that some school library staff face is insufficient paid hours to complete the work that's required in their role. Survey comments illustrate that some staff work unpaid hours to manage the workload or provide the level of service they'd like, with a negative impact on their working conditions and work-life balance.

Job security

"I could work through the holidays which would allow more time for planning and making changes which are not possible when the library is in full use, as it is during term time."

School Type	Part-time in just one library	Part-time in more than one position in the school (%)	Part-time in more than one library (%)	Full-time in just one library (%)
Primary schools (Years 1-6 or 1-8)	57	19	4	20
Intermediate schools (Years 7-8)	67	7	n/a	26
Secondary schools (Years 7-13+)	31	4	2	63
Composite schools (Years 1-13+)	36	21	n/a	43

Table 2: School library staff part-time and full-time employment 2023

11% of school library staff respondents said it's likely or very likely their hours will be reduced. For state and state-integrated schools, library staff salaries are generally paid from the school's operating grant. For private schools, student fees may be used for library staff salaries. In both cases, funding for library staff is entirely at the school's discretion and can therefore be impacted by other competing priorities.

"I don't get breaks during the day but, I'm told, that is my choice. This is because I keep the library open at lunchtimes and staff it so that students are not unsupervised in here."

"I actually work 40 hours per week, to accommodate the demand. I would like to see this being recognized and remunerated."

Skills are a good fit for the job

In the 2022 survey findings, prior to the LPEC settlement, 69% of school library staff respondents felt that the skills they personally had were higher or much higher than what was expected of them in their role. In 2023 those figures had dropped to 56%. It's good to see that more people feel their skills closely match what's needed in their job. However, the percentage who felt their skills are lower than what's required has risen to about 10%, indicating a need for professional learning opportunities for these library staff. At the other end of the spectrum there is still a high percentage of library staff whose skills may be under-utilised. We hope that schools would make good use of all their staff, including by establishing library roles that recognise the potential positive impact library staff can.

Autonomy, but also connections with others

School library staff often have a great deal of autonomy about developing and delivering library services – both what they'll offer, and how they'll do it. Often this is because librarians and library assistants in Aotearoa are the sole library staff member in the school, or they're part of a very small team. In our surveys library staff have told us that they're trusted to do their job, with support from leadership and teaching colleagues that's often reactive rather than proactive. While the autonomy that comes with working solo can be empowering, it can also lead to a feeling of isolation. The networks that survey partners National Library and SLANZA facilitate are vital for providing school library staff with collegial support.

School library staff skills compared to skills needed in their role (%)

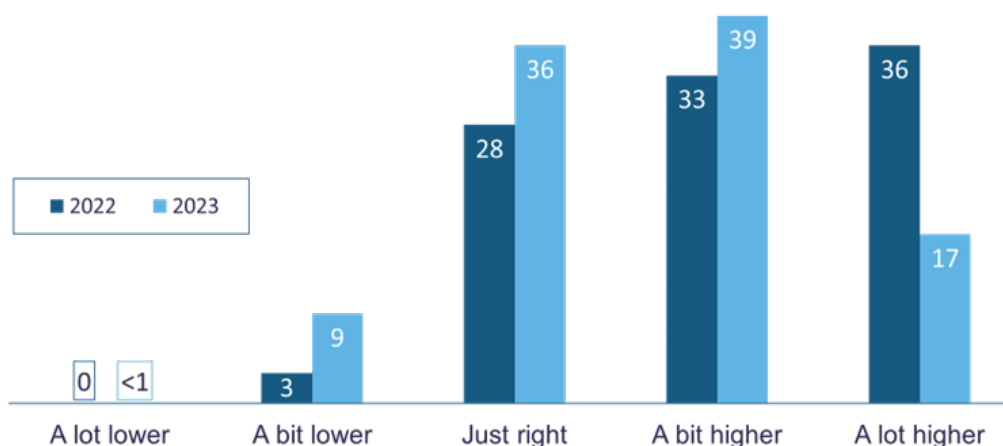


Figure 4: School library staff skills compared to skills needed in their role

Career development

The Work Matrix Table (Ministry of Education, 2023a) and the [General Areas of Responsibility](#) (Ministry of Education, 2023a) introduced as part of the LPEC settlement document the work that library staff may be expected to do. They have provided much-needed clarity for school leaders and library staff about the depth and breadth of this work. As part of the LPEC implementation in 2023, school principals had to consider whether their library staff would move from the old to the new grades automatically ('point-to-point translation') or whether to support an application for regrading. During this process, it became apparent for some

library staff that their job descriptions did not accurately reflect the work they were doing, nor expectations around decision-making within their role. Some 'job creep' (where additional tasks and responsibilities are gradually added to a role) happens because school library staff are proactively using new or additional ways to support their school community. When change happens like this, without agreement between the staff member and their employer, including updating the job description, there is potential for conflict and disappointment.

What's next?

Later this year the National Library and SLANZA, working with NZCER, will undertake further research about school libraries in New Zealand. This research will help us:

- continue to develop a shared understanding of the school library landscape and the challenges in providing school library services
- support schools through advocacy and services that are designed to strengthen literacy, learning, and wellbeing outcomes as well as increasing equity
- provide an evidence base to help inform schools' decision-making about effective library services.

"I'm so thankful for the pay equity negotiation team and what they achieved [...] but it does nothing for career development and recognition that any librarian managing a library and staff is on grade C and within 5 years is at the top of the band with no scope to increase their pay. No recognition for librarians going above and beyond and no incentive to stay in school libraries, as to get more money people will have to leave. I feel this is very concerning for our profession!"

In this article I've linked our survey findings to some of the issues facing school library staff in New Zealand. It's important to talk about these issues, but somewhat difficult to do without being too alarming. So, I'd like to reiterate here that there is also very positive news!

Pay equity has significantly improved library staff remuneration, and for many has increased the feeling that their work is valued. The pay equity process has raised the profile of library staff and helped school leaders in particular understand better the complexities of school library work. Most school library staff feel they are well-supported in their role by school leadership. School library staff continue to seek out opportunities for professional growth. They continue to deliver great library services for their community.

I invite you to read [the full report from the 2023 survey of school libraries in Aotearoa New Zealand](#). In sharing our reports – including the voices of school library staff – we hope to help ensure school leaders and communities everywhere are aware of the contribution that school libraries make to student learning, reading, and wellbeing.

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