

# School libraries change lives. Cutting them would be disastrous

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They empower and educate children, and help with social mobility. With public libraries also being closed, we need their school counterparts more than ever

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Every child has the right to dream, and nothing can achieve that more quickly or powerfully than reading. School librarians, like me, will have witnessed hundreds of times the transformative power that books can have, and are addicted to the feeling we get when, finally, our efforts are rewarded and a child runs in and says, “I’ve finished it, have you got the next one?”

The gift of reading, and the joy it can bring, is something that stays with someone for life. This argument, along with the body of research that links reading for pleasure with social mobility and success in exams, should be enough to save school libraries. With so many council libraries closing, libraries in schools are more vital than ever.

Their role is more far-reaching than most people - including parents - will realise. Librarians work closely with the senior leadership team and the English department to promote literacy across the whole school. The library is essential for supporting children who are struggling to get the help they need outside the classroom, as well as working with children who are new to the country or have English as an additional language.

The school library also shows pupils how to research effectively. It is a misconception that young people are research whiz-kids. With unlimited information so readily available, knowing how to process it is not only a key life skill, but essential at GCSE and A-level. Specialised sessions that focus on periodicals and online journals, plagiarism, and how to use the internet effectively all make for more independent and high-achieving students.

The library can bridge the gap between school and university, and librarians are increasingly responsible for careers advice and university applications as school careers services are being axed.

What’s more, since teachers are overworked and exam syllabuses tight, libraries can provide the fun and the fizz that the curriculum doesn’t allow for. I’ve run graphic novel and romance book clubs, organised Alice in Wonderland Mad Hatter’s tea parties, Hunger Games archery competitions, Harry Potter sleepovers (with Quidditch matches and owl-keeping lessons), and even a Twilight wedding reception.

Creative writing clubs are at the heart of many school libraries, and are hugely successful at helping young people express their emotions. I was particularly proud of a pupil who won a competition with her Petrarchan love sonnet to Justin Bieber. And it should not be overlooked

that the library is a safe haven for many; a cosy place where everyone is welcomed and can nestle up with a book or talk through their problems.

In the literary world librarians are often termed “gatekeepers” who control what young people read. I have never found this to be the case. We understand the power of literature and above all we want to promote it.

Children need access to a wide spectrum of literature and ideas, and somewhere they can explore these safely. So we have the books that parents might not choose for their children, and books that would not be accessible to all children otherwise. We have the books that could make a young person see the world in a completely different way, and we have the time and the ability to help them navigate it.

A girl in year eight walked up to me recently with a book about the Holocaust. She showed me a page and just asked: “Is this real?” I sat with her while she processed that it was. For all the unadulterated joy that reading for pleasure brings, it can bring something much more powerful too - the desire to understand the world, and the desire to be part of changing it.

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