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# Reading librarians and libraries

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## Abstract

Reading Librarians can offer a pathway to reading for pleasure which is both distinct from and complimentary to the role of a Reading Teacher. Not only are Reading Librarians highly skilled and knowledgeable reading professionals, but their position outside of the classroom provides a unique opportunity for them to lead, build, develop and be members of reading communities. As an 'assessment-free zone', the school library offers an environment in which children can explore and express the diversities of their reading identities beyond what may be seen in the classroom. Reading Librarians work across year groups, developing relationships with readers over many years, and can bring together not only children but also staff, caregivers, and the local community to create truly reciprocal communities of readers. As such, Reading Librarians play a powerful role in developing reading for pleasure.

## Introduction

There are few places more suited to developing a love of literature than the school library, a place referred to by the Libraries All Party Parliamentary Group as 'The Beating Heart of The School' (APPG, 2014). National Literacy Trust reports repeatedly note that for pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds the presence of a school library is vital, as they are less likely to have access to books at home (Clark, 2010; Clark & Poulton 2011; Clark & Trevainen-Goff, 2020). The reports also note that young people who use their school library are consistently more likely to state their enjoyment in reading. The librarian is just as, if not more important than, the library itself. Studies from several Anglophone countries have shown that successful school libraries require well-trained, well-supported librarians (see, for example, Goodwin, 2017).

Whilst the impact of libraries and librarians on attainment has been well traced, there is less research about the role of libraries in developing reading for pleasure. Here, we explore the practice of two school librarians to demonstrate how school libraries, run by Reading Librarians, can form the centre of outstanding whole school reading for pleasure provision. By considering professional practice in the context of the existing literature, we identify key aspects of the librarian's role, as well as the library environment, which offer a pathway to reading for pleasure which is distinct from but complementary to that of the class teacher.

The evidence for this chapter comes from the practice of two school librarians, Carol Carter and Mary Rose Grieve. Carol works as a librarian in a state primary school in Northampton, England, whilst Mary Rose works as a librarian in a private school in Dubai, UAE, for children aged 4-17. Both Carol and Mary Rose exhibit the characteristics of a fully developed Reading Teacher as conceptualised by the continuum in the introduction to this book. Not only are they reading role models, sharing their own reading practices, but they also have a deep understanding of the diverse reading practices and identities of their pupils, beyond what may be seen in the classroom. In addition, both librarians are highly knowledgeable and reflective professionals, who continually consider the pedagogical practices they undertake and how these impact upon children as readers. Crucially, it is their position as librarians, outside of the classroom, which enables them to develop and utilise these characteristics so effectively. As this chapter demonstrates, the role of the school librarian is

both complex and highly skilled, and the practices of these Reading Librarians showcase the value that the school library and the school librarian offer.

## **Reading Librarians and Libraries – evidence of and for practice**

The themes for this chapter were developed through discussions of our professional practice as librarians and educators. These themes also reflect existing scholarship drawn from academic studies and professional reports on libraries, education, and reading for pleasure. Rather than having a separate section exploring the literature, this has been interwoven with the examples of practice provided by Carol and Mary Rose. In doing so we demonstrate how their successful practice reflects or extends our current understandings of the role of libraries and reading librarians in the development of reading for pleasure, whilst providing rich models that practitioners can draw on for their own work.

### **Relationships with children**

One of the key principles for successful reading for pleasure practice is the need to create “diverse, supportive and social reading environments” (Safford, 2014, p.90). Both Carol and Mary Rose highlight that the position of the library outside of the classroom, and their roles as librarians rather than teachers, enables the development of these reading environments and positive reading relationships. Research by Sue Shaper and David Streatfield (2012) identifies the potential for the positive pastoral role of school libraries and school librarians in the secondary school context, and how the library can provide a safe space where students are able to have agency. The following sections demonstrate how this can also be true within the primary context, and provide some key examples of how to develop this positive environment and the impacts it can have on developing a culture of reading for pleasure.

#### *Library environment conducive to relationship building*

The physical space of the library is of key importance when developing a whole school culture of reading for pleasure. Mary Rose states that:

An underlying principle of our education goals is to create an environment where curiosity, wonder and inquiry flourish and are promoted and there is nowhere more fundamental to this than the library; it is both the incubator and the radiator of curiosity and inquiry.

Of great importance to the construction of this environment of curiosity and inquiry is that the library is what Prue Goodwin refers to as an “assessment free zone” (Goodwin, 2017, p.49), a feature mentioned by both Mary Rose and Carol. As Margaret K. Merga and Saiyidi Mat Roni (2018) identify, it is common for schools operating within a high-stakes testing environment to inadvertently stress reading for testing rather than reading for pleasure. Within that context, the separation of the library from the classroom can lead to the construction of a space which encourages spontaneous, autonomous recreational reading, led by student choice rather than curriculum goals (Merga, 2013; Goodwin, 2017). Beyond this, constructing the library as a ‘safe space’ away from the pressures of assessment also promotes children’s wellbeing, described here by Carol:

The library is open to all children from Year 1 upwards, three breaktimes and lunchtimes each week. There are sofas, cushions and comfy corners, as well as ‘Book Buddies’ – soft toys with name tags saying the types of stories they like to be read. Children can stay as long as they like to read, browse, colour, share

stories. While for many their reason to visit is specific e.g. change their library book, for others the library space is a safe space if they are having friendship issues, or need a break from the hustle of the playground. Many of my visitors are regular, meaning I get to know them well and can spot if things are 'not quite right'. My position outside of the classroom means they can sometimes be willing to share in a way they may not with their class teacher.

As a space with children's wellbeing, comfort, and choice at its heart, the library can offer children the association of books with their well-being and interests, rather than with academic skills and achievements. In addition, as this comment highlights, the library provides time and space for children to read and browse at their own pace and according to their own interests. In this way, the library environment can bring together the three elements identified by Maria Mallette & Diane Barone (2016) as being the most impactful for developing readers: access to books, free choice of what to read, and time to read. However, not all children will come to the library without an introduction, which is where having a librarian who can reach out becomes highly valuable, as described by Mary Rose:

The Bookeroo service has enabled me to create relationships with students who might not otherwise have visited the library. I can curate a small selection of books to put on the trolley that will appeal to the classes I am visiting at lunch and breaktimes and I have found that I have been able to lend books to students who might have been daunted by the searching the bookshelves, not knowing what to look for.

The importance of library resources being easily discoverable by pupils was highlighted in a study by Patricia Larkin-Lieffers (2011) who notes that considerations such as shelf height and organisation can be a barrier to young children meaningfully accessing the library. The expertise of a librarian in organising the library space is therefore a key facet in ensuring a productive environment for reading exploration. As Carol says:

Without a librarian, a library is just a big collection of books - from a child's eye, a jungle of words often hard to penetrate and navigate. With a librarian as guide, the child can have the confidence and support to explore and find the magic within.

### *Time and expertise to build relationships*

As a specialist role, librarians also have the time and a level of expertise to engage in meaningful conversations with individual children which might be difficult to achieve within the restrictions of the classroom. Whilst the expertise of librarians is frequently mentioned in scholarship (see for example Goodwin, 2017), the importance of time has been overlooked. Carol describes one initiative which draws on not only this time and expertise, but also the environment of the library, to help readers develop a love of reading:

Teachers can 'refer' a child to me for a Book Conference, maybe because they are a reluctant reader, don't know what to read next, are looking for a book on a specific topic etc. The Conference takes the form of a 10-15 min structured chat in the library, during lesson times, where we collaboratively fill in a form asking questions such as 'What do you like to do outside of school?' and 'What is your favourite book and why?' The Conference enables me to give targeted personal recommendations (the children often leave with a whole stack of books!) and is sometimes followed up with a second Conference 2-4 weeks later. Sometimes, we will choose a new book to order for the library together (e.g. if they have a

specific request such as a book about karate). The combination of having a chance to chat about their interests, habits, home lives etc. and browse when the library is peaceful and there are no expectations has been really successful in engaging the children and gives me the opportunity to suggest reading material they may not have tried before. The relationship is two-way in that I also get useful feedback on gaps in library stock.

Librarians also have the time to be able to build and maintain relationships with readers over several years, offering a level of continuity and development which a teacher is less likely to be in a position to provide. Carol notes:

While teachers develop intense year-long relationships with their class, the multi-year aspect of my role enables me to nurture children over longer time spans. A child may begin visiting the library café with their parent when in Reception, then visit independently at break time in Year 1 before joining a Book Club in Year 2. Each year, I build on my knowledge of them as reading individuals, considering when they are ready for chapter books, and which author they will love next.

Being in a position to nurture readers over several years, particularly within a non-assessment based role, enables librarians to make a unique contribution to the development of children as readers. Amelia Hempel-Jorgensen et al. (2018) note the importance of knowing children as readers to building productive and reciprocal reading relationships and practices. Teachers gain a great depth of knowledge into a snapshot of a child's reading, but are also embedded in curriculum and statutory requirements to move children's reading 'forward' from a skills-based viewpoint. A librarian can complement this role by drawing on their knowledge of a child's interests and reading habits over a long period, and are also able to encourage a broadening of reading interests rather than focusing on 'moving on', which may be more in line with the development of reading for pleasure. As such, librarians are uniquely positioned to develop reading for pleasure by getting 'the right book to the right child at the right time' (Collins and Safford, 2008, p.415).

## **Building community**

As well as developing positive reading relationships with individual students, librarians are also uniquely well placed to develop reciprocal and interactive communities of readers. Identified by Cremin et al. (2014) as a key strategy for the development of reading for pleasure, communities of readers create social spaces for reading which encourage choice, reader autonomy, and equal relationships between members.

### *Whole-school strategies to build community*

Both librarians felt that an important part of their role was their ability to work at a whole-school level, rather than the classroom level that teachers work at. They use a variety of methods to develop a whole-school community of readers. Carol discussed some of the strategies she employs:

I regularly co-present whole-school Book Assemblies with our English Lead. I will usually read a book, but a key feature is a child from each year group sharing a short review of what they are reading. We will also announce competition winners, give out reading certificates, choose Book Bingo winners to collect a book prize etc. – all of which raise the profile of reading within school and allow children to experience reading across year groups.

We also have various ways for children and staff to share their reading likes and dislikes with others within the school. The library has several books/folders where children can write reviews and browse those written by others, but most successful has been a 'Flyleaf Book Review' sheet pasted into the front of each book. Children add their first name, age, star rating and 1-3 words describing the book. The sheet then acts as a record of who has read and enjoyed the book previously.

Carol enables interactions within the community through various pathways, so readers have opportunities be involved in ways which are comfortable to them, fostering autonomy and enabling choice, both key aspects of successful reading communities. The value of all readers' views and opinions is also continually highlighted, which maintains a social and dialogic aspect to reading even when readers are not in the same spaces at the same time.

Alongside ongoing initiatives, special events which respond to particular needs can also be very powerful in building a community of readers, as described by Mary Rose:

While we were online in the summer of 2020, I used platforms such as Genially and Canva to create interactive treasure maps, posters and virtual bookshelves to introduce children to the plethora of resources that were available to them. All these were accessible from the Library channel on their class Teams, and this became a place for informal discussion, book recommendations and chat. However, the class teams are not places for whole school involvement, and it was important that we were able to maintain a sense of community when everyone was so isolated from each other.

I delivered three Library Live sessions a day to primary pupils. I had to grapple with working out how to ensure that our online reading communities were still characterised by the four principles identified by Teresa Cremin (2019): Reader Led, Informal, Social and with Texts that Tempt. Given that I was delivering the Library Live sessions as a live broadcast and therefore unable to see or interact with the students, I had to find ways to allow the sessions to be directed by the children and to ensure that there were safe, informal ways for them to communicate about the books. I set up a daily Survey Monkey poll with the covers of four books – Old, New, Non-Fiction and Boo! (Mrs Grieve's choice) – for the children to vote on, and they tuned in live to listen to their choices and see which one won. There was a very strong informal online community in the Library Channels in the class teams as children discussed the books we read and made suggestions of books that might be read the next day.

Mary Rose's description of her approach to maintaining communities of readers during online schooling is characteristic of the potential for innovation which comes from having a dedicated and knowledgeable librarian. Working with the whole school, she is able to see trends across classes and year groups, and draw on her expertise to prioritise maintaining the key elements of reading communities. As such, her practice is simultaneously strategic, creative, and evidence-based, leading to the highly positive reading for pleasure outcomes she describes.

In addition to these initiatives, the physical space of the library also plays an important role in developing whole school reading communities, as noted by Carol:

The open safe space of the library enables children of different year groups to interact in a natural way which benefits both younger and older children.

Sometimes this may be an older child reading a picture book to a group of Reception children or recommending a good book as they see a younger child browsing, but just as often the relationship is non-hierarchical, such as several year groups spread on their tummies all spotting 'Where's Wally'.

The position of the library and librarian as serving the whole school creates the perfect opportunity to be able to establish, nurture, and maintain communities of readers, enabling children to interact with readers beyond their own classes and have a wide range of reading role models amongst both staff and other pupils. A trained, knowledgeable and creative librarian can make the most of this opportunity to ensure that these communities are truly reciprocal, promoting choice, the development of autonomy, and social connections (Cremin at al., 2014).

### *Building community by working with families*

When building communities of readers, school libraries are also in a strong position to reach out to families. Margaret K. Merga and Shannon Mason (2019) observe that school libraries can be highly effective at connecting local communities with their schools, and through those connections promoting a reading culture in the community as a whole, with the library providing a valued community resource. This role of the school library is especially important in areas of low socio-economic status, where children are less likely to have books at home, and cuts to public libraries mean that the school library is often the only local source of free reading material (BMG Research, 2019). Both librarians view this aspect of their role as an essential part of building a community of readers, and implement innovative and creative ways of forging links with the local community. Carol describes one of her ongoing initiatives, the library café:

The library is open twice a week after school for an hour. Access is as informal as possible - families can pop in for 5 minutes or for the whole hour. There is a different theme each week (superheroes, Ramadan, author focus etc). The general format is that I read 2-3 picture books, followed by drinks, snacks and craft activities. Families are free to browse, read and become comfortable in the library setting. We also have a shelf of books for adults to support parents in modelling the reading habit.

As an ongoing touchstone, the reading café offers a sense of regularity to family reading activities. By including both themes and informality, Carol capitalises on the attractive nature of special events, as well as a need for accessibility by enabling the space to work for families with different reading requirements and at different stages in their reading journeys. As a social time, which includes the provision of books for adults as well as children, the café encourages reciprocity in the reading community, helping to develop the equality of reading relationships.

Alongside regular opportunities for family reading, special events can bring a level of excitement about reading to the whole community. One example from Mary Rose was putting on family events in collaboration with other teaching staff:

One of the ways we did this was through a collaboration with the Art Department on an initiative called *Picture A Story*. With me in one house, the Art teachers in their respective houses, the producer in another, and four or five hundred families in their own homes across Dubai, we embarked on what was one of our most talked about and successful projects of our online school experience. I read a folk tale, fairy tale or myth from books by Hilary McKay, Kevin Crossley Holland, and others (with their permission) as the art teachers responded to the

story in their own unique way, using a visualiser to film their live painting and drawing. The families watched and listened and joined in with us, creating some wonderfully imaginative and creative works of art. We displayed the art online, but I think it would have continued to have had a more significant impact this year if we had created a display at school which would have generated more talk, memories and connections amongst the students.

By bringing together different members of the school community, Mary Rose was able to create an engaging event which encouraged powerful responses to literature. Her assessment of how the event might be improved also demonstrate another key aspect of the librarian's role: to take a critical and reflective approach to new initiatives to maximise their positive impact. As a specialist in her field, Mary Rose has not only the time, but also the knowledge and experience to be able to make these assessments and continue to improve upon her practice.

## **Supporting teachers**

Being a Reading Teacher, with a wide knowledge of children's literature, has a powerful impact on developing the habit of reading for pleasure among children (Cremin et al., 2014). However, as Goodwin (2017) observes, this can be a difficult feat for teachers to achieve given the numerous demands of teaching, and even the most dedicated Reading Teacher can benefit from the specialist support of a Reading Librarian.

### *Curating resources and making recommendations*

Both librarians discuss the importance of curating resources and making recommendations as a way of supporting teachers, both overtly through conversations with specific teachers, and by ensuring library collections include high quality resources and identifying any gaps in provision. Carol discusses using her specialist knowledge to support curriculum topics in a way that simultaneously encourage reading for pleasure:

While teachers often have easy access to non-fiction linked to topic learning (through topic boxes, Dewey-decimal shelving etc), a librarian can recommend fiction, picture books, poetry and so forth, linked literally or tangentially, which may not be so easy to find. Librarians can also suggest books linked to subjects that may come up through class discussions or events, such as refugees, bullying, or bereavement.

Carol's support enables children to pursue the curiosity raised by a topic through volitional reading, and ensures a range of different text types that are likely to appeal to different readers. Her in-depth knowledge of her collection also enables her to provide appropriate texts on a short time scale, which teachers may not have capacity to do themselves within their busy working schedules. In addition, Carol notes that her position as the librarian can also assist with whole class reading choices:

Librarians will often have an overview of what has been read throughout the school. In September, they may be in a better place to suggest a class reader than a teacher that does not know the individuals yet.

Similarly, Mary Rose uses her expertise to ensure that children have access to a wide range of texts:



We subscribe to a range of magazines and comics as well as Encyclopaedia Britannica online. We have a smaller collection of Arabic, French, German and Mandarin titles to ensure that all students are able to read books in their own language, but I am keen that our library becomes more reflective of our diverse student population and contains far more multilingual texts.

Mary Rose's approach to collection development reflects Jake Hope's (2017) argument that children need to be able to engage with a wide range of texts which recognise the multimodal nature of reading, as well as the importance of providing children with choice. In addition, this approach acknowledges that a key facet of engaging children with reading is ensuring that books provide them with both 'windows' into the lives of others and, crucially, 'mirrors' for their own experiences (Sims Bishop, 1990). Children from marginalised communities are far less likely to see their own experiences reflected in the literature they read (CLPE, 2020), and so it is important to seek out where a collection has gaps in representation and find resources to address these gaps. Specialist knowledge and time are essential to completing this task, both of which are often in short supply for overburdened teachers.

### *Sharing and developing good practice with teachers*

As professionals with a great deal of specialised expertise, both Carol and Mary Rose have also taken a role in developing the reading for pleasure pedagogical knowledge of other members of the school community. Carol has worked with her English lead to deliver staff meetings on reading for pleasure, and has run an after-school session for parents on how to foster the habit of volitional reading. Mary Rose drew on her knowledge of the field to recognise an opportunity to engage more teachers with reading for pleasure by starting a Teacher's Reading Group:

I started the first Teachers' Reading Group (TaRs) in Dubai in 2018 and it has been perhaps the most significant force in fostering a reading for pleasure culture in school. We have developed a mutually supportive and collaborative group, with each of us learning from each other's expertise and experience. I have found that leading the group has allowed my role to be seen by teachers as being on a more equal footing to theirs in terms of academic teaching and pedagogical practice which goes a long way towards ensuring that the librarian's role is seen less of an administrative one, and hopefully not a luxury but a necessity.

As Mary Rose identifies, developing good practice can serve a dual function in supporting reading for pleasure. As well as the sharing of expertise, it can highlight to staff the wide range of support they can gain by engaging with the school librarian. This is an especially valuable point as understanding of what the role of a librarian actually involves tends to be low amongst non-librarians, and common stereotypes can become barriers to engagement with libraries and librarians (White, 2012).

## **Support from school**

Understanding the role of the librarian is key to ensuring that librarians are given adequate support in order to be effective. Merga and Mason (2019) note the importance of leadership

support, stating that not only do effective school libraries require an adequate budget, but also leadership that explicitly and visibly values the role of libraries in schools.

Mary Rose, whilst acknowledging much of the support she does receive from her school, also stated:

As is the case with many librarians both here and in the UK, I am still battling to have the role recognised as an academic not an administrative one and to get the traction I need to be able to make lasting change and to be allowed and empowered to be involved in making strategic decisions.

It is hoped that this chapter will go some way to improving understanding of the complex, multifaceted and powerful role of the school librarian. Both Mary Rose and Carol talked about the importance of working closely with colleagues, and being able to have the greatest impact when the extent of what their role can offer is understood. In addition, they noted the need to be seen as equal partners when collaborating with colleagues. Carol commented:

A librarian does not work in isolation but needs reciprocal relationships with a range of staff. Most key will probably be with the English Lead. A librarian needs to be given a balance of support/structure and freedom/trust, so they can work within the school's ethos and development plans with structure, focus and prioritisation, whilst also having the opportunity to develop their own ideas and activities.

This equality of position also extends to the need for training. Both librarians discussed the importance of training and continuing professional development, with Carol stating:

Librarians need access to high-quality library-specific training, but also to be included in more general events. Falling somewhere between a teacher and a TA, I have sometimes been missed off both lists and missed out on training that would inform my understanding of what happens in the classroom.

Effective communication within the school community, where teachers and leaders are informed of library initiatives and the services the librarian can offer, and librarians are kept informed of what happens in classrooms, was seen as of key importance by both librarians to the success of their practice. Within this need for good communication was the importance of having time to adequately plan, by being informed of budgets and needs in good time to be able to make strategic decisions or order resources. Unsurprisingly, the librarians also both noted that they are unable to fulfil their roles without an adequate budget, reflecting a common recurring theme in the scholarship on libraries (see, for example, BMG, 2019).

## **Recommendations for practice**

From these discussions of our experiences, we make the following recommendations for practice:

### *Recommendations for librarians:*

- Library spaces should be organised so that resources are easily discoverable, enabling readers to browse purposefully and make autonomous choices about what to read
- Library spaces should be comfortable, assessment-free environments
- Use your position outside of the classroom to build positive relationships with readers over time, and feed back relevant information to class teachers and senior leaders

- Use your overview of the whole school to build reciprocal communities of readers across classes, including staff and families, through both ongoing initiatives and special events
- Keep your expertise up to date through relevant training, reading, and networking, and ensure new initiatives draw from evidence-based principles
- Assess the impact and effectiveness of new initiatives and make changes as required
- Analyse your collection and prioritise purchases to ensure you have a diverse range of material
- Identify related texts to go alongside topics which allow children to follow their curiosity with volitional reading
- Share your expertise with staff members and families, and communicate so they are aware of the full nature of your role and what you can offer

*Recommendations for teachers and senior leaders:*

- Ensure your school library environment remains a safe space where curiosity and comfort are equally nurtured. Do not use it as a place for sanctions or assessments
- Recognise the librarian's position as complementary to that of the class teacher, and work together to maximise the impact that can be gained from having different perspectives
- Support your librarian to make strategic decisions across the whole school community by respecting their expertise, creativity, and the positive impact they can have on building communities of readers
- Involve your librarian as a full member of the school community, keeping them informed of developments in the classroom and offering them the opportunity to bring their expertise to school policies where relevant
- Provide an adequate budget for resources and initiatives
- Visibly support and celebrate your library and librarian by being a member of the reading community and a positive reading role model for children

## **Conclusion**

The examples of practice discussed in this chapter demonstrate that a dedicated school library, run by a dedicated, well-supported Reading Librarian, can have a powerful impact on developing a whole school culture of reading for pleasure. Placed outside the classroom and across all year groups, the library forms the natural centre for the development of a reciprocal community of readers which includes children, staff, families, and the wider school community. The potential of the role of the librarian is best summed up by the librarians themselves:

A school librarian is invaluable as a bridge connecting and communicating between staff, children and books. The librarian acts as a change-maker, agitator, provocateur, activist, rebel, and gentle disruptor. Unencumbered by the demands of a classroom, and of assessment, marking and curriculum, they exist in a space where they are able to take a more strategic big-picture view but also to develop close individual reader to reader relationships with students. Properly supported and trained, they have the time, space, expertise and relationships to find the right book for the right reader at the right time – they perform the wonderful alchemy of placing a book in a child's hands and saying 'Read this!'

## Recommended reading

BMG Research. (2019). [Report] *National survey to scope school library provision in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales*. Available at: [https://d824397c-0ce2-4fc6-b5c4-8d2e4de5b242.filesusr.com/ugd/8d6dfb\\_8b81a7c94c2c4c4a970265496f42307a.pdf](https://d824397c-0ce2-4fc6-b5c4-8d2e4de5b242.filesusr.com/ugd/8d6dfb_8b81a7c94c2c4c4a970265496f42307a.pdf)

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