# Librarians in Schools as Literacy Educators

Advocates for Reaching Beyond the Classroom

MARGARET KRISTIN MERGA

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"One of the best-kept secrets in the field of education is the value of teacher librarians to students' engagement with reading and their attainment on high-stakes literacy assessments. Why this is so and ways of redressing the issue have elevated Margaret K. Merga's research to international acclaim. She writes with the authority of a researcher and the passion of an activist!"

 —Donna Alvermann, *Distinguished Research Professor and The Omer Clyde & Elizabeth Parr Aderhold Professor in Education, University of Georgia, USA*

"This book gives insights into the working world of the teacher librarian, a position that is often not fully understood. Dr Margaret Merga's research highlights the breadth and richness of the teacher librarian's role in fostering students' literacy and literary skill development. Also of significance is the fact that we have an internationally acclaimed literacy researcher presenting a strong and grounded argument for greater recognition of teacher librarians as educators. The author has been successful in writing a book that is accessible to a broad readership, including teachers, educational leaders, parents, community and the media."

 —Lyn Hay, *Online Learning Innovation Leader & Senior Lecturer, Charles Sturt University, Australia*

"Margaret Merga's work is unique in giving voice to librarians, whose essential work in literacy building is seldom recognized. I recommend this book to anyone who wants to find out more about literacy, school libraries and librarians."

 —Chin Ee Loh, *Assistant Professor in the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

Margaret Kristin Merga

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# Preface

*I reckon lots of teacher librarians are like little ducks, you know, that whole story where you're sort of floating on the top, but underneath you're really going for it.* (Liana, teacher librarian)

Librarians in schools can be highly effective literacy and reading advocates but their efforts are often poorly understood or not recognised. The above quote from Liana, a participant in my recent research project, *Teacher Librarians as Australian Literature Advocates in Schools (TLALAS)*, encapsulated what is clearly apparent in both anecdotal evidence and in the extant research. More needs to be done to make visible the paddling legs: the efforts employed by teacher librarians that keep them afloat, that positively contribute to the learning experiences of students in contemporary schools.

My previous literacy research has brought me into close interaction with these professionals, however, before 2018, teacher librarians typically sat outside the direct lens of my research focus. During my Ph.D. and across a range of other research projects (as detailed in Appendix C: Current and Previous Research Projects in Literacy Related Areas), I explored the role of social influences such as primary teachers, English

teachers, parents, friends and peers on young people's attitudes toward and frequency of engagement in reading. Since 2012, I have been conducting literacy research in schools and, through this experience and my work as an Older Reader Judge for the Children's Book Council of Australia, I began to meet many passionate teacher librarians who placed fostering a love of books and reading at the core of their role. They began to describe their efforts to foster reading engagement and literacy attainment when I met them in various contexts, and they were typically hungry for research to draw upon in order to refine their practice. Teacher librarians have been some of the most energetic advocates for my research, showing commitment to support the dissemination of my research into schools and homes. I could not ignore their efforts even if I wanted to. As my research and research dissemination efforts brought me into increasing contact with teacher librarians, it was obvious that I needed to focus on the potential influence of this other key, but often overlooked, social influence: the teacher librarian.

It also became clear to me that this work would need to be achieved as soon as possible. This was due to the realisation that the work of these educators was at risk, in the context of cuts of library funding and staffing (Softlink, 2016). These "little ducks" had become sitting ducks, easy targets for funding cuts. I explore these cuts and their implications in more detail in the chapters of this book, and I evaluate the cause and effects of persistent devaluing of the profession.

In the context of dwindling support for, and numbers of, teacher librarians I felt that exploring the contribution of teacher librarians to young people's literacy learning was essential. Qualified librarians in schools, including teacher librarians, may exist on the periphery of the educational experience, with their educational contribution poorly understood and acknowledged in many cases. While the devaluing of this profession is commonly discussed within the professional community, in this book I have delved deeper, using my research and the research of others, to explore how poor recognition of the role of teacher librarians in schools can impact on their professional role and job satisfaction (Chapter 2).

There seemed to be an odd tension inherent in the under-appreciation of the teacher librarian in many school contexts. While supporting students' literacy is one of the *many* roles that teacher librarians enact, it is

perhaps the most important, in the context of widespread concerns about stagnant literacy attainment in Australia and elsewhere. Students need higher levels of literacy than ever before in order to achieve their academic, vocational and social goals (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000). If, as the research suggests (Lance & Kachel, 2018), qualified librarians in schools make a meaningful contribution to students' literacy and broader educational attainment, this contribution needs far greater attention. We know that librarians in schools make a valuable contribution to children's learning (e.g. Coker, 2015), though their role in supporting this aim is not well understood. Thus, there is merit in exploring the role that librarians in schools play in supporting children's literacy learning, so that researchers and schools can better gauge what may be lost in terms of educational possibilities when librarians lose their positions. We have established that qualified librarians in schools offer value for our students, but we have yet to make visible the kinds of practices that are specifically employed to this end. While teacher librarians may educate and show leadership in a range of areas, such as information technology, information literacy, digital literacy and digital citizenship, this book confines its scope to one of the most valuable contributions that teacher librarians can make to young people's learning: literacy and literature skill, engagement and knowledge development.

Rising to this challenge, this book identifies 40 recurring literacy-supportive practices that teacher librarians reported using, which can be readily related to sound, research-supported principles (Chapter 4). By highlighting what teacher librarians can and do actually do in order to support young people's literacy attainment, this book seeks to make visible the contribution of teacher librarians to our students' literacy learning, which is essential in light of the current issues facing the profession. It urges greater recognition of teacher librarians' role as educators both in leadership and in the school community.

This book reports on findings from this project, as well as research from the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, the United States (US) and other nations to explore the role that qualified librarians may play as literacy educators in our schools, making visible some of the contributions of this beleaguered profession. While, as I explore further in Chapter 1, most of the academic conversation about school librarians occurs in the

library and information sciences space rather than the education space, this book strongly argues that we also use an education lens, which needs to be applied in the context of what we know about the relationship between teacher librarians and educative benefit. It seeks to inspire further educational research in this area, while also providing an immediate argument for greater support to be given to school libraries and their qualified staff.

The book strongly draws upon recent data from the TLALAS project, which sought to determine how teacher librarians in primary and secondary schools support children's literacy and literature learning from the early years of schooling and through high school. The TLALAS project also investigated how teacher librarians act as advocates for national literature (Chapter 7). More detail about the method used in the TLALAS is provided in Chapter 1, providing information about the participants and their schools.

While this book presents a large volume of unpublished data from the TLALAS and its implications, writing this book also offers an opportunity for me to build on some of the findings that I have presented from the TLALAS as peer-reviewed papers, to continue and expand upon the inquiry raised. This is an absolute luxury for an academic for which I am very grateful. For example, while Chapter 2 also covers teacher librarians' perceptions of their role in schools as explored in my paper (Merga, 2019a), I did not face the same rigid word constraints in producing this chapter as I did in constructing a paper on this topic, and thus was able to include the unpublished but highly relevant and substantial data that explores teacher librarians' perceptions of their role in society more broadly, and to perform a more fulsome analysis. These data could not be incorporated into the paper due to word count, and, as such, this chapter has greater depth than the paper with which it shares some common data.

Similarly, while I selected and adapted 10 recurring strategies to support literacy and literature learning that particularly met the needs of struggling readers for exploration in a recent paper (Merga, 2019b), in this paper I acknowledge that there were in fact 40 recurring strategies that could be linked to research supporting their benefit. Again, the restrictive word count of academic journals precluded publication of an

article encompassing all 40 strategies, and thus Chapter 4 plays a key role in fleshing out findings that had only begun to be unpacked elsewhere. None of the chapters of this book reproduces academic papers, though some quotations are shared as cited within the book. This adds to the rigour of this work, as five papers have been published or accepted from this data set in quality peer-reviewed journals in literacy, education and librarianship, as I will explore further in Chapter 1.

While the TLALAS is confined to the Western Australian context, it has become clear through my examination of the extant research, and discussions with librarians in schools elsewhere, that many of the issues raised in this book in relation to TLALAS findings and the broader research in the field have national and international relevance. As such, they can form the basis for opening a new dialogue about the positioning of qualified librarians within our schools that urgently needs to begin before staffing numbers are reduced further. This book can also constitute a valuable contribution to the available literature to support teacher librarians seeking to be more effective advocates, an area in which it has been indicated that further research is needed (Ewbank & Kwan, 2015; Haycock & Stenstrom, 2016). As it grapples with issues of immediate concern to librarians in schools, students, school leaders and the school community more broadly, the book also raises a raft of areas for additional research with high dissemination value. I hope that this book can be drawn upon as a foundation for further research in this field, as well as being of immediate use to practitioners today.

Bentley, Australia                                    Margaret Kristin Merga

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# 1

# School Librarians Are Educators Too

*With a UK, US and Australian focus, this chapter will explore the role of librarians as educators in schools, investigating the various names they are known by, and the benefits associated with their presence in schools. With the fostering of reading engagement positioned as a broadly accepted facet of their role, the educative significance of students' reading frequency and attitudes will also be explored. The challenges currently faced in terms of poor valuing and funding cuts will also be introduced here. Finally, I raise concerns about limited reliable research sources and the value of moving inquiry about school librarians further into a broader education research agenda.*

What is a school librarian? When exploring the role of school librarians as educators, a necessary starting point includes consideration of what they are called, what they are expected to do, and the research linking their presence with literacy and broader educational benefit.

The nomenclature relating to librarians in schools is actually extremely complex. Someone who calls themselves a school librarian may be a qualified librarian, a qualified librarian *and* a qualified educator, or neither, having qualifications in another area, or no qualifications.

In our discussions of the merits of employing qualified library staff, we need to avoid demonizing unqualified staff and their efforts, which

may be considerable. However, at the same time, it is imperative that we acknowledge that the research supporting the association of qualified library staff with superior outcomes is compelling; for instance, Lance and Hofschire (2012) found that while schools with at least one full-time qualified librarian had higher average scores on reading testing, "school library programs that were not managed by endorsed librarians—whether the alternative was a non-endorsed librarian or library assistant—had no measurable association with CSAP reading scores" (p. 6). As such, unsurprisingly, qualifications count.

As I outline further in Chapter 2, the replacement of qualified librarians in schools with unqualified staff, typically known as library officers and library managers, is a notable concern in current school libraries. This is also a valid concern in USA and UK schools, with UK research suggesting that nearly a third of librarians in schools may not be qualified librarians or graduates (Streatfield, Shaper, Markless, & Rae-Scott, 2011).

## Names for Libraries

The school library and school librarians may be hard to find in contemporary schools even where they do exist; both are known by a range of names. School libraries are known as library media centres, learning hubs or information centres amongst other titles (Bleidt, 2011; Merga, 2019c). While collecting data on participants' views on naming of libraries and librarians was not a goal of the TLALAS, Diane shared her strong view about the alternative name that her school library had been branded with.

> I think it's like calling a doctor's surgery, "medical facility". Everyone knows it's the doctors, it's the GP, that's what it's called. You know, if we change university and called it, you know, "institution for once you leave school", people will go, "What the heck is that about, you know?" Like, because all of a sudden we don't want to be associated with the other universities, we want to have a fresh name, well, you know. I think a library's a library, is a library. And I don't know if it was changed because

they want it to be something else. If they wanted to get rid of the past, if they wanted a different direction, but I just think changing a name doesn't do that. Just changing a name.

When libraries are no longer called libraries, perhaps to free the facilities from perceived outdated associations, little is known about the impact that this has on the position of reading in the building and in the school more broadly. As I contend elsewhere,

> while I do not suggest for a moment that libraries should exist for the purpose of supporting reading only, this purpose should remain integral to any school library and that, before libraries undertake the significant transformative changes that we are often exhorted to make in the name of being progressive, we remain sensitive to the importance of making informed decisions based on research rather than trends. (Merga, 2019c, p. 125)

When renaming shifts the association of the building from books to information consumption, this communicates a new purpose which hopefully will not exclude or devalue the reading purpose inherent in the title of library, or lead to a loss of the unity and cohesion desirable for effective advocacy through the loss of a united front under common names.

## Names for Librarians

Libraries are not the only institutions to face rebranding. Librarians in schools hold varying titles which may be reflective of a range of specialities and qualifications which they may hold, and which may also be reflective of a desire to construct the librarian as a modern and reinvented profession that retains relevance in the current context (Davis, 2008). These titles include, but are not limited to: school librarian, school library media specialist, and teacher librarian. However, there has been a shift back to acknowledge the value of the traditional title. In 2010 the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) board of directors voted to revert their nomenclature from "library

media specialist" to "school librarian" in order to be responsive to the "role of the 21st-century school library professional as a leader, instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator" (Scholastic, 2016).

This shift back has not been without controversy, with blogger respondents such as Bunn (2010) contending that the diversity of the role is lost in the name change, and suggesting that the name librarian is associated with outdated stereotypes. Others such as Rendina (2016) argue that the terms library and librarian are still valuable, with some of the new terms such as media specialist leading to confusion in those outside the education profession. She also argues that there are numerous positive as well as negative associations with the term.

Davis (2008) locates the debate about naming of librarians amongst broader concerns facing the profession, as a symptom of "a deeper malaise or 'condition of discomfort' underlying the library profession", noting that

> symptoms can be found in the profession's difficulty in naming itself–there is much debate about whether to call oneself a librarian, information scientist, information manager or knowledge worker. Is the object, purpose or product of our work data, information or knowledge? (p. 58)

The debate reflects changes to the nature of the library, and to the role of the librarian, that are shifting points of contestation both in school and public libraries.

There are varying educational requirements for the role in international contexts (Lupton, 2016). The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) is "the leading international body representing the interests of library and information services and their users", and the "global voice of the library and information profession" (2019). In the most recent edition of the IFLA School Library Guidelines (2015), it is noted that

> Staffing patterns for school libraries vary depending on the local context, influenced by legislation, economic development, and educational infrastructure. However, more than 50 years of international research indicates

that school librarians require formal education in school librarianship and classroom teaching in order to develop the professional expertise required for the complex roles of instruction, reading and literacy development, school library management, collaboration with teaching staff, and engagement with the educational community. (p. 8)

In Australia, school librarians are often *teacher librarians*, meeting the IFLA recommendation of dual expertise in the form of "recognised teaching qualifications and qualifications in librarianship" (Australian School Library Association [ASLA], 2018). As such, Australian teacher librarians are typically fully qualified educators and fully qualified librarians. The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and ASLA *Standards of Professional Excellence for Teacher Librarians* note that

A teacher librarian holds recognised teaching qualifications and qualifications in librarianship, defined as eligibility for Associate (i.e. professional) membership for the Australian Library and Information Association [ALIA]. Within the broad fields of education and librarianship, teacher librarians are uniquely qualified. This is valuable because curriculum knowledge and pedagogy are combined with library and information management knowledge and skills. (p. 1)

As such, while the research explored in this book will be of interest to all librarians working in schools, regardless of their title, the findings are most relevant and applicable to dual-qualified teacher librarians, though they may be known by another title. Many librarians in schools in nations other than Australia will also hold this dual qualification, regardless of their title; Hughes, Bozorgian, and Allan (2014) notes that "the dual qualified teacher librarian where applicable, includes school librarian, school media specialist, etc." (p. 30). In other nations, teacher librarians may be commonly known as *school librarians* or *school library media specialists* and these librarians may not necessarily be required to hold both library and education qualifications in order to be considered qualified or certified (American Association of School Librarians [AASL], n.d.; Streatfield, Shaper, & Rae-Scott, 2010). However, Kaplan (2007) contends that in the US, librarians are typically dual qualified.

> All 50 states and the District of Columbia have certification requirements
> for school library media specialists. While it may be true that a specific
> school or district opts not to hire certified school library media special-
> ists, the fact remains that there is a certification requirement in each state.
> The licensed school library media specialist will be trained as a classroom
> teacher (by virtue of a bachelor's degree in education or via an alternative
> certification program) and as a specialist in the subject area of informa-
> tion literacy (by virtue of a graduate degree or credits in library and infor-
> mation science or in education). (p. 301)

While there are also dual qualified librarians in schools in the United
Kingdom, the rate would appear to be comparatively low (around 6%).
A 2011 study found that of the 1044 participants,

> 44% were qualified librarians; 6% held dual qualifications in education and
> librarianship; 3% were teachers who had been assigned additional respon-
> sibility for day-to-day management and operation of the library; 9% had
> an HE qualification in another subject discipline (i.e. not librarianship or
> education; these people are identified as 'Graduates' below); and 31% were
> neither qualified librarians nor graduates. (Streatfield et al., 2011, p. 9)

However, there is much diversity within the UK, with the majority of
Scotland's secondary schools "staffed by professionally qualified librarians
who are in an excellent position to support teaching and learning by pro-
viding appropriate curriculum related resources, a range of reading mate-
rial, and helping the school community to develop skills required to be
proficient users of information" (Williams, Wavell, & Morrison, 2013,
p. 1). As the participants in the TLALAS project were employed as teacher
librarians, for ease of readability, the title teacher librarian has been adopted
from here into reflect this dual-qualification, unless otherwise specified.

## Professional Expectations

Regardless of their title, qualified librarians in schools are expected to act
in an educative capacity as defined by their professional associations. For
example, teacher librarians in Australia are expected to "maintain literacy

as a high priority, engaging students in reading, viewing and listening for understanding and enjoyment" (ASLA, 2018). As part of their key learning and teaching role, they are expected to provide students with activities that focus on literature, reading promotion and literacy (ALIA & ASLA, 2004a, 2004b), amongst other duties. Likewise, school librarians in the USA are increasingly expected to position themselves as "learning leaders" (AASL, 2017). The *AASL Standards Framework for Learners* is intended to support the curriculum development of school librarians. One of the 6 Common Beliefs in this document states that "Reading is the core of personal and academic competency".

> In the school library, learners engage with relevant information resources and digital learning opportunities in a culture of reading. School librarians initiate and elevate motivational reading initiatives by using story and personal narrative to engage learners. School librarians curate current digital and print materials and technology to provide access to high-quality reading materials that encourage learners, educators, and families to become lifelong learners and readers. (AASL, 2018, p. 3)

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, school librarians are expected to act as "a leader and partner with teaching staff in the collaborative design and implementation of information literacy programmes throughout the school" (School Library Association, 2016).

There is one other obvious area where nomenclature may cause confusion in this book. American readers should note that unless specified, where I refer to the English subject area in this book, I am referring to the US equivalent of Language Arts, not English as an additional language. This choice reflects typical UK and Australian use.

## What is the Benefit?

This chapter will also outline some of the extant research linking the presence of school librarians with improved academic outcomes for students, though it will not be all-inclusive, as the volume of available data could warrant an entire book focusing solely on this goal. While the benefit is

clear, far less is known about the practices and attitudes of qualified school library staff that confer this benefit. In relation to the extant research, it is important to note is that similar findings have been found across multiple contexts (e.g. Lance & Kachel, 2018; Scholastic, 2016), suggesting that many of the benefits highlighted herein have broad applicability.

Firstly, school library use is related to reading attainment and positive attitudes toward reading (Clark, 2010). As a valuable instructional resource, school libraries are linked with improved student achievement across a number of third world contexts, with findings indicating that "students who reported that they used the library more frequently performed at higher levels (as always, controlling for pupils' family background)" (Fuller, 1987, p. 279). However, even where students have access to school and/or public libraries, they do not necessarily visit them with high frequency. While Australian research with children in upper primary school suggests that these children typically visit the library relatively often (Merga & Mat Roni, 2017a), over a third of high school aged students may never visit a school or community library (Merga, 2016a). As students with limited access may also experience limited benefit, attention needs to be given to facilitating this access, as explored in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Qualified librarians and strong library programs are associated with student achievement. US research conducted by Lance and Kachel (2018) found that "data from more than 34 state-wide studies suggest that students tend to learn better standardized test scores in schools that have strong library programs" (p. 15). Lance and Kachel (2018) also contend that across these studies, "the most substantial and consistent finding is a positive relationship between full-time, qualified school librarians and scores on standards-based language arts, reading, and writing tests, regardless of student demographics and school characteristics" (p. 16), and students experiencing economic disadvantage often outperformed students not experiencing this constraint (Lance & Scharz, 2012). As such, the presence of qualified, full-time librarians in schools can help to attain equity in literacy attainment for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Certified school librarians are associated with higher scores in English and language arts (ELA) than schools without qualified teacher librarians (Small, Shanahan,

& Stasak, 2010). It should also be noted that access to well-resourced school libraries is associated with higher performance in writing in US research (Lance & Schwarz, 2012). Australian research found that in schools without a qualified teacher librarian, high-stakes literacy testing scores in both reading and writing were typically below the national average (Hughes, Bozorgian, Allan, & Dicinoski, 2013).

Staffing levels are also associated with benefit. Australian research has found that greater library staffing numbers are associated with better results on high-stakes testing (Softlink, 2016b), with an earlier review of the literature by Lonsdale (2003) noting that "a strong library program that is adequately staffed, resourced and funded can lead to higher student achievement regardless of the socioeconomic or educational levels of the adults in the community" (p. 1). Where school librarians are lost, "there is likely to be a negative influence on student learning and achievement" (Dow, Lakin, & Court, 2012, p. 11). US research has found an association between improved scores on standardized testing in reading and English and greater hours of library staffing during the school week (Burgin, Bracy, & Brown, 2003), and earlier research also found that the size of the body of library staff is a significant predictor of academic achievement (Lance, Welbourne, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1992).

## Fostering Reading Engagement

One of the most important educative roles that teacher librarians may play relates to their expertise in fostering reading engagement. As noted by McKenna and Kear (1990), in concerns that retain their immediacy despite being expressed around 30 years ago, "the recent emphasis on enhanced reading proficiency has often ignored the important role played by children's attitudes in the process of becoming literate" (p. 626), and indeed, as lifelong committed readers. While reading engagement has been conceptualized in variety of ways (Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017; Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012) literacy advocates and educational practitioners are primarily interested in encouraging young people to enjoy reading, as "engaged" students like reading, and they choose to read.

For the purposes of this paper, I draw upon a previous construct devised with a colleague (Fig. 1.1).

This simplistic model positions reading engagement as related to positive attitudes toward reading, and regular reading frequency, with reading engagement in turn having reciprocal relationship with reading skills, as explored in discussion of the Matthew Effect in reading (e.g. Stanovich, 1986).

As contended by Yoo (1998), "when school libraries were established in the 1920s, their main function was to meet the reading interests of students" (p. 4) and, while numerous competing interests have been added to this role, connecting students with books in ways that encourage their reading frequency and positive attitudes toward books and reading remains a broadly accepted facet of the school librarian role. While US research suggests that for students, "knowledge of their reading interests, availability of a range of books, access to current best-seller literature, and follow-up dialogue motivated them to keep reading" (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005, p. 80), as explored in this book (Chapter 4), teacher librarians may do far more than this to foster reading engagement and literacy learning in contemporary school libraries. However, both the role of teacher librarians in fostering reading engagement, and the relationship between reading engagement and literacy skill development and maintenance may be poorly understood. As such, I believe that the undervaluing of teacher librarians is linked to an undervaluing of the benefits of reading engagement.

I will now briefly highlight the relationship between reading attitudes, reading frequency and literacy skills. For those seeking a more in-depth
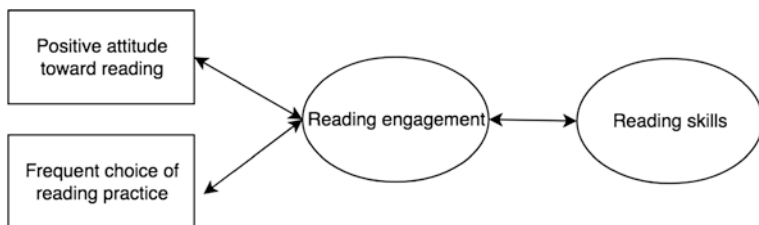


**Fig. 1.1** Reading engagement (from Merga & Gardiner, 2019)

exploration of reading engagement, and how to foster this in young people, I refer you to my previous book (Merga, 2019c).

Firstly, positive attitudes toward reading are associated with reading frequency. This means that if we want students to read more frequently, unsurprisingly, we need to acknowledge the role of motivation to read, and attitudes toward reading, as essential (De Naeghel, Van Keer, & Vanderlinde, 2014), with reading frequency closely linked with reading skill (Gambrell, 1996).

The reading frequency fostered by reading motivation is linked with reading and broader literacy skill attainment across a range of indicators. It should be noted that "time spent reading is related to reading success" (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 102), as substantiated across a range of literacy and reading attainment indicators (e.g. OECD, 2010) including performance on international testing (e.g. Ho & Lau, 2018). For example, reading frequently provides opportunity for exposure to vocabulary, allowing an individual's vocabulary to grow (Cunningham, 2005), and it enhances spelling, reading comprehension and oral language skills (Mol & Bus, 2011).

The benefits of reading frequency are not confined to literacy. Regular reading is linked to improved performance in other areas such as mathematics (Sullivan & Brown, 2015). In addition, recent research has found that while causation is not established, "children and young people who enjoy reading very much and who think positively about reading have, on average, higher mental wellbeing scores than their peers who don't enjoy reading at all and who hold negative attitudes towards reading" (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018). The regular reading of fiction is associated with the development of pro-social characteristics such as empathy and perspective taking (e.g. Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009), and it may offer a protective effect against cognitive decline into old age (e.g. Vermuri & Mormino, 2013; Wilson et al., 2013).

We cannot afford to ignore the contribution of teacher librarians to students' reading engagement and subsequent literacy attainment, as this is an area of concern in many nations, with literacy attainment tied to academic, vocational and social opportunity in the modern world (Daggett & Hasselbring, 2007; Keslair, 2017; Kirsch et al., 2002). For example, even when controlling for socioeconomic factors, higher

literacy skills are associated with higher earning potential (McIntosh & Vignoles, 2001).

All nations seek to improve their literacy attainment. US research suggests that around a quarter of 8th graders score below basic level on national reading assessments (Kim et al., 2017), with reading comprehension declining over time (Spichtig et al., 2016). The number of Australian students deemed "low performers" in reading literacy proficiency in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) program has grown over time (2000–2015), while the percentage of high performers has decreased. The 2015 PISA results place around one in five Australian participants in the low performer category (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Underwood, 2016, p. 18). More than two-fifths of Australian adults lack the functional literacy skills needed to meet the communicative demands of contemporary life, meaning that at present more than seven million adult Australians have their life opportunities limited by their literacy level (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2013). While English literacy scores reached a notable high in recent international testing, analysts note that England remains "significantly below the top-performers" internationally (McGrane, Stiff, Baird, Lenkeit, & Hopfenbeck, 2017, p. 12), indicating room for improvement.

In addition, literacy attainment may be at risk due to the slide in reading engagement in young people. US research suggests that there has been a significant decline in adolescents' reading of print materials, with daily reading of books or magazines dropping from 60% in the 1970s to 16% by 2016 (Twenge, Martin, & Spitzberg, 2018). While it can be argued that students may fill this gap to some extent by the reading of online sources, it should be noted that while the research supports the literacy benefits associated with the reading of print books, and particularly works of fiction (OECD, 2010), digital reading does not confer the same level of literacy benefit (e.g. OECD, 2011; Pfost, Dörfler, & Artelt, 2013; Torppa et al., 2019; Zebroff & Kaufman, 2016). While it can be suggested that it is the type of reading, rather than the medium, which is relevant to reading development, research suggests that medium also matters, with a recent meta-analysis finding that "reading on paper was better than reading on screen in terms of reading comprehension" (Kong, Seo, & Zhai, 2018, p. 146).