

Book Review

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Dr Cathal Coyle

Assistant Librarian, Ulster University.

Email: c.coyle@ulster.ac.uk

ORCID: [0000-0001-7137-5887](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7137-5887).

X: [@cathalcoyle](https://twitter.com/cathalcoyle).

Merga, M. K. (2022). *School libraries supporting literacy and wellbeing*. London: Facet. pp. 198. ISBN 9781783305841. £50. Pbk.

Merga's *School Libraries Supporting Literacy and Wellbeing* offers a timely and persuasive examination of the contribution of school library professionals to students' literacy development and holistic wellbeing. At a point when schools are navigating heightened accountability pressures alongside growing concern for young people's mental health, the text positions the school library as both pedagogical partner and pastoral space. The book will be of clear interest to practitioners, school leaders and researchers concerned with evidence-informed library practice.

The opening chapter, the most substantial in the volume, establishes the professional landscape within which school library staff operate. Drawing primarily on contexts in Australia and the UK, Merga argues that an understanding of literacy and wellbeing initiatives must be situated within a nuanced appreciation of role expectations. Comparative tables outlining the requirements and characteristics of Australian teacher librarians and UK school librarians are particularly helpful. While similarities are evident, Merga highlights subtle yet significant distinctions, notably the stronger expectation of "collaboration far more likely" in the Australian role (Merga, 2022, p. 15). This comparative framing provides a foundation for the chapters that follow and underscores the structural factors that shape practice.

The subsequent chapter turns to reading engagement and literacy, extending the discussion beyond attainment to encompass employability and life chances. A substantial section on Reading for Pleasure (RfP) synthesises research evidence and interrogates persistent misconceptions. Merga suggests that the benefits of RfP are not always fully recognised within schools and may "struggle to compete" for legitimacy alongside more overtly instructional activities (Merga, 2022, p. 36). Her cross-contextual analysis concludes that, in both Australia and the UK, library professionals are expected to model reading, promote student choice,

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maintain current knowledge of literature and foster a “whole-school reading culture” (Merga, 2022, p. 44). The discussion is grounded in research yet retains a strong practical orientation.

Merga then addresses support for students experiencing literacy difficulties beyond the early years. Drawing on findings from the 2019 Supporting Struggling Secondary Literacy Learners (SSSLL) project, she examines the complexity of adolescents’ literacy challenges and the targeted strategies required to address them. Her careful reflection on the term *struggling* is noteworthy; she deploys it strategically while cautioning that minimising students’ difficulties risks undermining the case for adequate resourcing. This section is particularly effective in linking research evidence with actionable school-based interventions.

A further strength of the book lies in its sustained engagement with evaluation and impact. Acknowledging the data-driven cultures of many contemporary schools, Merga provides practical guidance on implementing and measuring literacy-supportive initiatives. Although recognising the time demands involved, she contends that systematic evaluation can position the school library professional as a “reflective and research-informed expert” (Merga, 2022, p. 69). For readers seeking to evidence the value of their provision to senior leaders, this chapter is likely to prove especially useful.

Chapter four explores the relationship between reading engagement and student wellbeing, drawing explicit connections between RfP and empathy, aspiration and belonging. Merga considers a range of interventions, including the affective benefits of being read to, while noting the relative paucity of research on librarians reading aloud in library spaces. The discussion reinforces the library’s role as a site not only of cognitive development but also of emotional support.

The later chapters broaden the focus to encompass health information and information literacy, situating school librarians as key mediators of reliable knowledge in an era marked by misinformation. The discussion of health literacy is particularly resonant in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Merga draws on international evidence, including a Croatian study that identifies adolescents’ desire for greater school-based health education (Martinović et al., 2021, p. 15), to underline the global relevance of these concerns. In doing so, she demonstrates the value of aligning school library practice with wider public health and digital literacy agendas. The book concludes by highlighting the importance of inclusive, safe library spaces and by identifying priorities for future research (including more robust evidence on collaborative practice), showing how it can “benefit schools leading to tangible advantages” and its alignment with school leadership priorities (Merga, 2022, p. 156). Throughout, Merga combines a strong research base with practical exemplification, resulting in a text that is both scholarly and accessible.

Overall, *School Libraries Supporting Literacy and Wellbeing* is a well-structured and thoughtfully argued contribution to the field. It will serve as a valuable resource for school library professionals seeking to articulate, evidence and extend their impact on students’ literacy and wellbeing, and it offers a compelling case for the centrality of the school library within contemporary educational ecosystems.

References

- Martinović, I., Kim, S. U., & Stanarević Katavić, S. (2021). [Study of health information needs among adolescents in Croatia shows distinct gender differences in information seeking behaviour.](#) *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 40(1), 70–91.
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