

School library spaces, resources, and services in Aotearoa New Zealand

Executive summary

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This report presents the findings of a research project carried out by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) for the School Library Association of New Zealand Aotearoa Te Puna Whare Mātauranga a Kura (SLANZA) and the National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa (the National Library) in 2024.

School libraries are not mandatory in Aotearoa New Zealand schools. Consequently, investment in library spaces, collections, and staffing is discretionary and variable between schools. Research about school library provision in Aotearoa New Zealand including library spaces, resources, staffing, and services is limited. There is also limited understanding about what constitutes an effective school library, and its role and value. The aim of this study is to address some of these gaps in research knowledge and understanding.

Our research questions and design

The research focused on the provision of library spaces, resources, and services across English-medium schools.¹

The research questions were:

- What library spaces, resources, and services are provided by schools?
- How equitable is the provision of library spaces, resources, and services?
- How do leaders support the provision of library spaces, resources, and services?
- What are the benefits, challenges, and enablers for schools in providing library spaces, resources, and services?

¹ The Steering Group is considering separately how they might approach Kura Kaupapa Māori and Kura-a-iwi about their views on library services.

We used a mixed methods approach involving a national survey and case studies of schools. The survey was designed to provide a snapshot of the current number, distribution, and types of school libraries and school library services across the motu, and to indicate whether there are any correlations between the findings and variables such as school size, location, and socioeconomic barriers to achievement.

The case studies sought to identify successful approaches that schools used to ensure access to the core elements of an effective school library. These include access to quality resources; staff with the ability to connect the resources to learners; practices that engage learners; strong relationships within the school; and commitment to the library by school leaders.

The survey

The survey was aimed at the person with the greatest responsibility for the library at a range of primary, intermediate, secondary, and composite schools. We contacted 1,853 staff from individual schools representing around 76% of English-medium schools. We received a total of 659 responses, giving a response rate of 35% of English-medium schools.

The use of a convenience sampling approach for the survey is likely to have resulted in a higher overall response rate but also some bias. The results may be skewed towards schools that have library spaces and paid library staff. Schools that were slightly underrepresented in the final sample included: schools with more socioeconomic barriers (those schools in the top two of the seven Ministry Equity Index [EQI] categories); smaller schools (schools with rolls equal to or less than 300); and rural schools (Rural Other and Rural Settlement). Readers should, therefore, be cautious about generalising the findings to all schools.

The case studies

We selected six case study schools from a list provided by SLANZA and the National Library of schools known for their effectiveness in meeting the needs of their students, staff, and communities. The selected schools ranged in type, size, location, and Schooling Equity Index (EQI) groups. At each school, we ran Zoom interviews with school leaders, staff with library hours, teachers, and students. In total, we interviewed six school leaders, eight library staff, 14 teachers, and 25 students (from Year 4 to Year 13).

Findings from the survey

There were commonalities across responding schools

Most responding schools (89% of respondents) had a permanent, onsite library space and their own library collection that supported reading for pleasure and curriculum learning.

Nearly all respondents considered their collection supported te reo Māori and the diversity of their students and whānau, either “well” or “very well”. However, only around one-third considered their collection supported Pacific languages “well” or “very well”. A very small proportion considered their collection supported students with disabilities “well” or “very well”, highlighting equity concerns for these students.

Most responding schools had staff with at least some paid hours for library work and offered a range of library services to students and staff.

For responding schools that provided library services, these usually included the following:

- services for students—support with choosing or finding books, issuing and returning books, accessing resources for curriculum learning, recreational reading, and wellbeing
- services for staff—informing teachers about new resources, providing resources to support curriculum learning, helping to develop a school culture of reading, and assisting teachers to run class sessions on reading for pleasure.

However, of the responding schools that provided library services, less than half said these included the following:

- services for students—sessions to help develop inquiry, research, or information literacy skills; managing technology or devices for student use; help with homework or study skills
- services for staff—assisting teachers with class sessions on inquiry, research, or information literacy skills or helping teachers develop their own such skills; engaging teachers with their own reading for pleasure; supporting teacher professional learning and development (PLD)
- services for whānau—providing access to library spaces and resources; learning sessions for whānau; access to technology.

There was also variation across responding schools

Survey responses reveal a range of concerning equity issues, especially for small schools, rural schools, and schools with more socioeconomic barriers.

These schools were less likely to:

- have a collection that provided “very well” for reading for pleasure and for curriculum learning
- have staff dedicated to providing library services
- have paid staff hours dedicated to library work
- have staff with library qualifications
- provide library services for students other than issuing and returning books
- provide library services to teachers other than informing teachers about new books or resources in the library.

School leaders’ aspirations were not always matched by actions

Overall, survey respondents at schools with a library considered that school leaders had high aspirations for use of their library spaces, resources, and services. Nearly all agreed or strongly agreed that school leaders were committed to having a library space all year round, and understood the value of having effective library spaces, staff, and services. Most agreed or strongly agreed that their school’s collection management processes ensured that the collection met staff and student needs; and that ongoing funding was provided for an up-to-date collection.

However, fewer agreed or strongly agreed that their school leaders set clear expectations about valuing and using the library or provided ongoing funding for library staffing and PLD opportunities for library staff. Only half agreed or strongly agreed they had a library strategic plan connecting its services and resources with the school curriculum or goals. These differences suggest a gap between the perceived beliefs and aspirations of some school leaders and the practical actions they take to support and integrate library services within the curriculum and priorities of the school.

Equity issues were also evident, with respondents from small schools and rural schools more likely to disagree or strongly disagree with the statements “Ongoing funding is provided for library staffing” and “PLD opportunities are provided for library staff”.

School libraries benefited learning, reading engagement, and wellbeing

The most frequently identified benefits in having library spaces, resources, and services included:

- access to a curated collection tailored to the school community
- support for curriculum, teaching, and learning
- support for recreational reading
- support for student wellbeing.

These benefits are well aligned with current cross-government priorities for a knowledge-rich curriculum, and for improving student engagement, achievement, mental health, and attendance.

Shifting attitudes and funding were challenges for school libraries

The main challenges faced by survey respondents fell into two main categories. The first was challenges associated with changing attitudes to the value of books, reading, and libraries in schools and society more generally. The second was challenges associated with funding of library resources and library staff.

These challenges were also unevenly distributed, with some schools more likely to experience them than others. Respondents from small schools, rural schools, and schools with more socioeconomic barriers were more likely to rate lack of funding for paid library staff hours and lack of funding to provide a balanced and broad collection as challenges. Schools with more barriers were also more likely to rate finding engaging resources to cater for a range of reading abilities, low staff use of the library’s resources, and students’ decreased interest in reading books as challenges. In addition, respondents from small schools were more likely to identify difficulty staffing the library at lunch or break times and low staff use of the library’s resources as a challenge. Respondents from rural schools were also more likely to identify difficulty staffing the library at lunch or break times as a challenge.

Findings from the case studies

The challenges highlighted in the survey data associated with changing attitudes to the value of books, reading, and libraries were less pronounced in the case study schools. Although they faced many of the same funding challenges that survey respondents identified, the case study schools had found ways to meet the needs of their students and staff. Despite the challenges, they were able to provide a range of library services to support recreational reading, curriculum learning, information skills, critical thinking, and wellbeing.

Our interviews with staff and students at each case study school identified several key factors underpinning the success of their school library.

School leaders understood, valued, and invested in their school library

Leaders and library staff at the case study schools valued and promoted use of library spaces, resources, and services. These leaders and library staff had set up schoolwide systems to ensure school staff understood, valued, and used library spaces, resources, and services to support curriculum, teaching and learning, recreational reading, and student wellbeing. These systems supported close connections between library and teaching staff. For example, one school had a committee of teachers representing a range of class levels and learning areas who met regularly with library staff to discuss upcoming needs, and another school had library staff who taught library-related skills (such as library, information, or digital literacies) for, or with, teachers so they could learn from each other.

Library staff were skilled, trained, and well-connected

Case study schools identified their library staff as key to the success of their library. Most of the case study schools employed staff with library qualifications. Many library staff were actively engaged in further professional development and regular networking within the school library sector to maintain and build their knowledge.

The positive relationships library staff had with school leaders, teachers, students, and the wider community helped ensure the library was welcoming, engaging, and responsive to the needs of the school community.

Teachers and students were advocates for the library

Teaching staff at the case study schools were vocal in their support of the library and incorporated regular use of the library into their teaching and their own reading for pleasure, while encouraging others to do so as well.

The case study schools actively encouraged student involvement in the school library, including opportunities to help with day-to-day operations, organising and running events and activities, and input into decision making about the library. This gave students a sense of agency and ownership of the library, and helped created a “buzz” about the library within the school.

What are the implications for equitable provision?

Findings from this study show variable provision of library spaces, resources, and services across schools, with inequities for students attending small schools, rural schools, and schools with more socioeconomic barriers. This variability is echoed in other Western jurisdictions, including in Australia, the USA, and the UK (Dix et al., 2020; Merga, 2019; Teravainen & Clark, 2017). It is also evident in the results of national surveys of Aotearoa New Zealand school libraries undertaken by the National Library and SLANZA since 2018.

Schools that are small, rural, and face more socioeconomic barriers were hardest hit

The impact of inequitable school library provision is particularly pronounced for small and rural schools, as well as those serving communities with greater socioeconomic barriers to achievement. These schools often have fewer financial and staffing resources, making it more difficult to maintain

a dedicated library space, employ qualified library staff, and build a well-rounded, up-to-date collection. Geographic isolation can further limit access to other library services, professional development opportunities, and community partnerships that could help supplement their resources. For some students in these schools, the school library may be one of the only places where they could freely access books, digital resources, and learning support outside of the classroom. Without equitable access to school libraries, these students risk being further disadvantaged in their learning, literacy development, and engagement.

This variable and inequitable provision matters because libraries are a vital resource for building engagement in both school and wider communities, with librarians being crucial members of these communities (Wilkinson et al., 2020). School libraries provide freely accessible books and other resources that can be shared in and between households, and support school and community cultures of reading (Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa—National Library of New Zealand, 2021, 2022). Furthermore, school libraries and school librarians may support teaching and learning, research and inquiry, literacy outcomes, and student wellbeing (Dix et al., 2020).

Addressing the challenge of funding

Findings from the case study schools show that they had variously addressed the challenges for their libraries in meeting curriculum, teaching, learning, and recreational reading needs by:

- investing Operations Grant funding in their library
- using voluntary unpaid time for library work
- fundraising, seeking philanthropic funding, and using grants to cover library costs.

These last two options rely on external input and may not be possible for all school communities to access—they should not be relied on as systemic. Other solutions are clearly needed. One solution identified by numerous survey respondents is a per capita pool of funding—separate from the Operations Grant—dedicated to school libraries to ensure more equitable access to library spaces, services, and resources across schools.