

The safe haven of the library

- some preliminary research

by Martin Gray, Singleton High School



School libraries are often seen as a refuge where students who are uneasy in the playground can feel more comfortable. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this role is actively encouraged in many schools, often with head teachers recommending or requiring certain students to attend breaks in the quieter, more structured environment of libraries - to both relax and avoid trouble. Hard numbers on how common this is can be difficult to find.

This article seeks to quantify the occurrence of what may be one of the library's most important social functions within a school: that of the beneficial physical space, or the "safe haven".

Martin is a secondary teacher librarian. In the last issue of iLeader, he discussed the benefits of attending the Google Teacher Academy.

Introduction

Last year, I became aware of an increase in the number of students on the Autism spectrum, or with social welfare issues, being sent to the school library by staff. This was due to the library being seen as a place where socially or physically vulnerable students could be given respite, or be kept out of trouble. In most cases I was consulted;

on occasion, though, I had to read the week's school welfare notices to discover that such recommendations for a particular student had already been made.

I believe that the library as a refuge is one of the most important roles for our space, and decided to ask informally, on the *nswtl* listserv, if this was common. It was. An summary of results later appeared on the listserv addressing the idea of a library as a safe haven.

At Singleton High School, I often find that the two weeks I close for annual stocktake are accompanied by an increased number of incidents and suspensions of some of my more interesting patrons. This has also been noticed by my school executive and Principal, who are all very supportive of the school library as a safe haven.

I wanted to see if there were any writings on this phenomenon. There were several mentions on the use of libraries for both physical and educational benefits. With regard to *public* libraries, research on the benefits for women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth, found that public libraries were seen by these stakeholders as a valuable resource.

For example, Denise Agosto, Kimberly Paone & Gretchen Ipock (2007), in *The female-friendly public library*, say:

"Perhaps the most surprising of these three major roles of the public library is the library as a beneficial physical environment. Some of the teens who used the library in this way viewed it as a place of refuge, either from a dangerous home or neighborhood environment, or from the higher noise levels of home and of public places."

Lyn Hay & Ross J Todd (2010) mentioned the library as refuge in *School libraries 21C*, while researching the roles of the library in aiding learning, concluding that the school library is an essential element for schools striving to achieve student equity. ►►

The safe haven of the library (cont.)

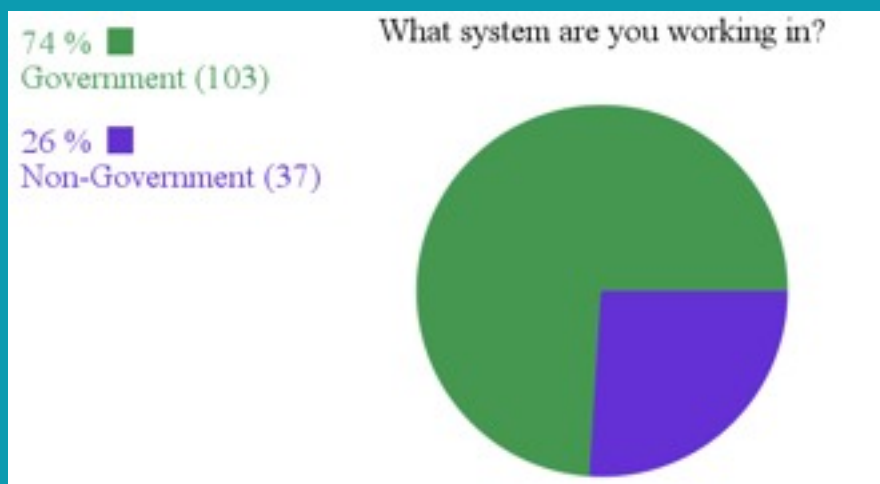


Chart 1: 140 responses were received, and a pie chart was automatically generated by the Google docs software. (This chart has been recreated for publication using the free generator at piecolor.com)

“A pervasive concept was that of safety. The school library provides a safe place, a safe haven for students (recess/lunch/before school/after school) (1A.43) for learning to work with diverse and conflicting sources available through the internet, as well as a place for the investigation of controversial and conflicting topics in safety. According to respondents: the library presents a real, yet safe environment to explore the expanse of information available (1A.8); have fun, feel safe and enjoy literature (1A.10); and some students need the space as a ‘refuge’ and others come into the space because they ‘need to be needed’ while others get the opportunity to develop leadership skills through years of mentoring and helping others in the library (1A.9)” [p. 7].

Dorothy Williams, Carolyn Wavell & Louisa Coles (2001), in *Impact of school library services on achievement and learning*, mention "... vulnerable students seeking refuge as volunteer librarians", and note that this aspect of library service was "poorly researched".

I found that while a library as a safe haven was often acknowledged, the stereotype was likely to be presented as students "hiding" in the library, and that there were no statistics available to measure how commonplace was such use. Recently, I decided to send out a more formal survey to obtain quantifiable local numbers. This was done out of a professional interest, but also as a way to show colleagues in other school roles a component of school library work that was both underestimated and underappreciated.

Method

A survey form was created using *Google docs*, consisting of five multiple choice questions:

1. Do you have students who are recommended to spend breaks in the library?
2. Do you have students who are required to take breaks in the library?
3. If "yes" to 2 or 3, were you consulted on these recommendations?
4. Do you have students in the library who you know are not comfortable with open social situations, such as free time in the playground?
5. Are you Primary, Secondary, Central?

The URL for the online survey was sent out over the *nswtl* (NSW DEC teacher librarians') listserv and the *OZTL_Net* (Australian teacher librarians and information professionals') listserv. The results were automatically collated by *Google drive*.

“The school library became my physical and psychic refuge...”

Kevin Jennings (2006), “Librarians make a difference”, *Knowledge Quest* vol 34, #5

A total of 140 responses were received. Cumulative results were coming in over the course of a week, and there was little variation in percentages over the survey period. 103 responses were from government schools and 37 from the non-government sector (*Chart 1, top*).

The safe haven of the library (cont.)

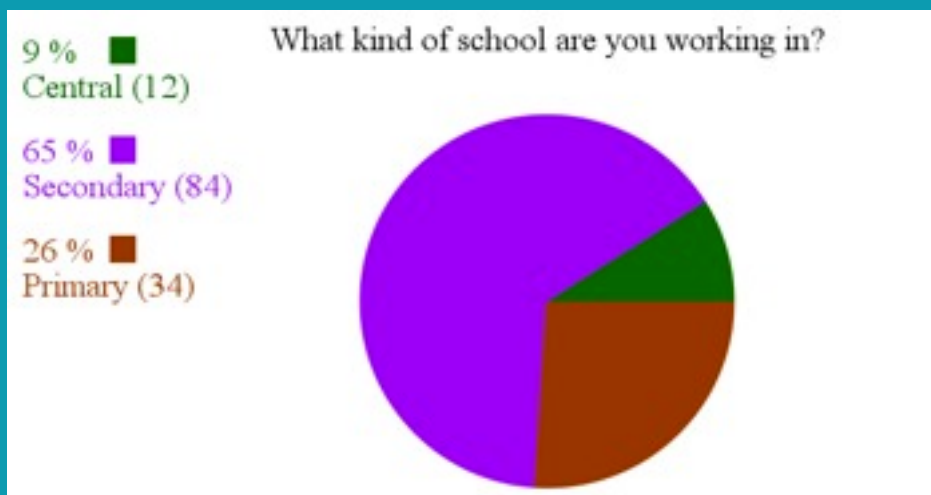


Chart 2: It was common in a large majority of schools for certain students to be encouraged to spend break times in the library, more so for government than non-government schools.

Public schools used libraries as a recommended break time location for targeted students for 86% of respondents, compared to the non-government schools with 78%. This small variation may be due to differences in cohort or in school structure; it can be stated that most schools surveyed have students who are recommended to spend breaks in the library.

Across all sectors, the majority of school libraries have students who were required to take breaks in the libraries. 54% of non-government schools and 63% of government school respondents say "Yes".

It was universal across all sectors and age divisions for the library to be used by students who are not comfortable in unstructured environments, such as playgrounds during break time. Hay & Todd's pervasive idea (2010), of the library being seen as a safe place to socialise or study, has been entirely reflected in these results.

What do these results mean for library staff?

Do you have students who are recommended to spend breaks in the library? This could be a formal or informal recommendation by any member of staff. e.g. a student being bullied.

Do you have students who are required to take breaks in the library? e.g. a student

returning from suspension, or for medical reasons.

The results of these questions show that, across all systems and all stages, school libraries are commonly used as beneficial physical space by schools, both formally and informally. Hay & Todd's study referred to the use of libraries as a safe environment. Here we see this use is recommended to certain students in most schools (84%) and for some students, in a small majority of schools, library attendance is a requirement (61%).

The use of the library for these purposes, which comes under the library's "whole school" role, shows the valuable contribution of a school library - and its staff - to school welfare. To maintain this role, a library has to exist and be well staffed, with those willing to maintain its position as both a place of learning, and as an environment of more structure and consistency, than the playground. This may have ramifications for school staffing allocations and library timetabling; for example, when negotiating trade-offs about staffing the library at breaks.

If "yes" to 1 or 2, were you consulted on these recommendations? e.g. a phone call from recommending teacher before finding out in a communications meeting.

The results of this question are of concern. While the majority of teacher librarians - 55% - said that they are consulted about individual students being required or recommended ►►

The safe haven of the library (cont.)

to use the library during specified periods of the school day, a very large minority, 45%, are consulted “sometimes” or “never” (Chart 3, below).

The reasons for this have not been examined; it may vary from the forgetfulness of an overworked executive, a simple communication breakdown, or perhaps indicate lack of professional respect from colleagues. Regardless the reasons, students are being recommended, or - more specifically - *required* to attend the library for social, medical or disciplinary reasons without prior notification, and this raises several professional issues.

For example, if the student is attending the library for medical reasons, and the library has not been forewarned, they may be unprepared for a medical emergency. Should a student who has created a disturbance in the library be required to come to the library for respite from the playground or classroom? Whose responsibility is it if a student encouraged to attend the library is elsewhere? It would seem that consultation with library staff is of high priority.

Do you have students in the library who you know are not comfortable with open social situations, such as spending their free time in the playground?

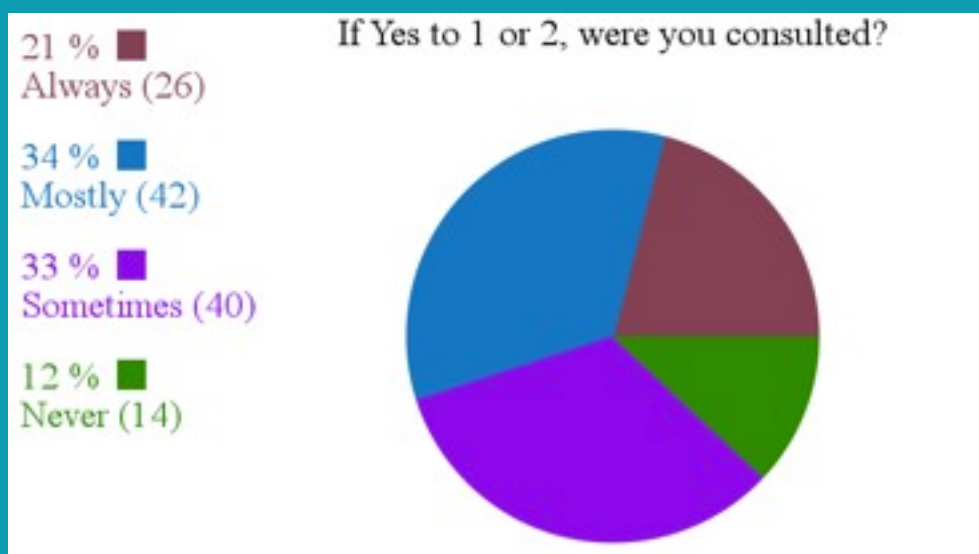


Chart 3: 122 schools responded to this question.

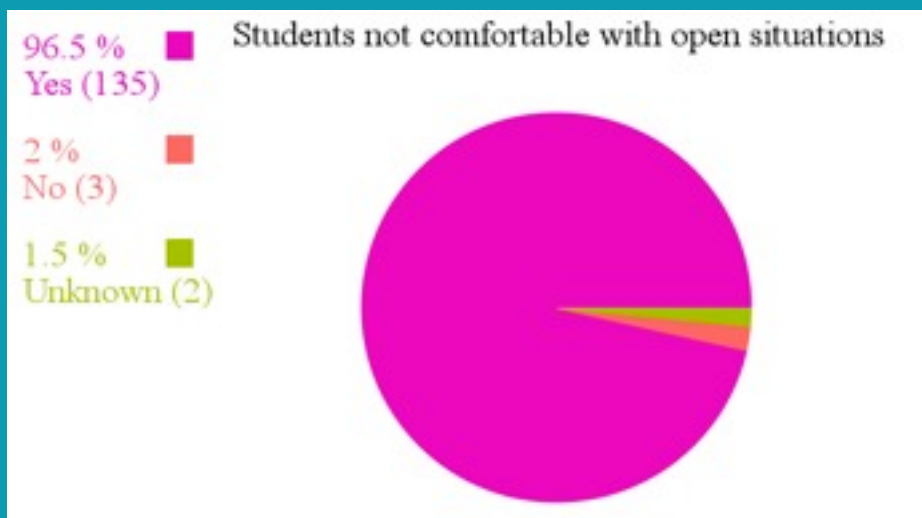


Chart 4: All 140 schools responded to this survey question.

The safe haven of the library (cont.)

Almost every school that replied to the survey stated that they had students in the library who were not comfortable with open social situations (*Chart 4, page 8*). This, once again, shows how common it is for school libraries to play a social role in schools and highlights the importance of a well staffed library, particularly before, after, and in between, regular classes.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that the societal view of school libraries being used as a safe haven are quantifiably accurate. Across all sectors and stages, students who may have difficulty in the playground environment are commonly required, or recommended, to attend breaks in the school library. Furthermore, many students with these difficulties voluntarily use libraries at break time.

These findings seemingly have ramifications for school library staffing. Ongoing, open dialogue between the professional stakeholders would seem to be essential. Justifications could be made for extending contact hours for teacher librarians and library administration, and how school libraries are staffed during break sessions.

From this study, two further questions arise. Firstly, in a situation similar to this, how frequently are libraries used for in-school isolation, such as timeouts and suspensions? Secondly, what are the views of executive staff who make these recommendations or requirements? ●

References and further reading

Agosto, DE., Paone, KL., & Ipock, GS. (2007). "The female-friendly public library: gender differences in adolescents' uses and perceptions of US public libraries", *Library Trends*, Fall: dspace.library.drexel.edu/bitstream/1860/2736/1/2006175428.pdf

Hay, L. & Foley, C. (2009) "School libraries building capacity for student learning in 21C", *Scan* 28(2), pp. 17–26. Viewed 27 September, 2013. www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/schoollibraries/assets/pdf/Schoollibraries21C.pdf

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Note: The executive summary of the above report, *School libraries 21C: the conversation begins*, was

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Snapshots: The library as a haven

Jae Rolt, TL, Cessnock West Public School, says:

"I have a few students that just need some quiet time out from the classroom. The noise of the classroom can be quite distracting for them and makes one [in particular] a bit emotional, so they are allowed to ask for time out and they come to me, or their teacher will just send them to me with a note that says 'Respite'. Respite might be for child, or teacher, or the class!"

"I have mattress squares and bean bags. Students come in and find a quiet corner, lie down and have a read while I'm teaching. Sometimes they fall asleep (for some of our students, their bed is in the lounge room, so if parent/s are watching a late movie, the child is still awake until they go to bed.)" ●

Read more about Jae Rolt, "Australia's Favourite Librarian", at www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/advocacy/Jae%20Rolt_0.pdf

Libby Saxby, TL, Bundaberg North State High School, Queensland, says:

"I would be happy to be part of the survey about libraries as beneficial physical spaces. Our library has been so busy this year at lunchtimes, especially packed with boys. I think that a large part of this has been the fact that so many of our students were (and many still are) displaced by the floods. It has been a safe, welcoming, shared space, and we are amazed at how many of the boys are in here. ►►

Snapshots (cont.)

“My own theory is that the girls will talk to each other more readily when they are upset or stressed but boys don't do it like that. They come in here and their chat is incidental to the laptop game, chess, jigsaw puzzle, graphic novel or whatever else they are doing. Also, many of them lost their books, games, etc. to the floods - and also their space, as many students had (or still have) other families living with them, even if they did not lose homes.

“It gets noisy, but they are having fun and they are not doing anything wrong.” ●

Peta Newsam, TL, Leeton High School, says:

“Yes, we have some regulars who don't want to be outside in the big wide world. They know that I will not let certain others in here to talk to them, or, as is often the case, try to pass nasty messages on.

“One positive is that these students can be encouraged to pick up a book or magazine and read. It is also a time to discuss things with them; they often open up and it probably does them good to have someone who will listen. In many cases, this doesn't happen at home. They can also get some morale building by being my ‘step and fetch it’ helper sometimes.

“The chess players were in the library practising, and a few of the respite students have now taken an interest in chess and have learnt to play. One, now in Year 10, has earned a position on the school's Reserve Chess Team.

“The down side is that some students can become reliant; the school library becomes “too safe” a haven. When we are closed, for something like Anzac Day or NAIDOC Week morning teas, they do worry. I will see them alone, reading their DEAR book, out in the sunshine.

“In a couple of cases, after discussing with them that they probably need to be elsewhere sometimes, I have made certain days a library-free day for them. That seems to have worked a little and, sometimes by choice, they are not here on other days.” ●



122 schools responded to the question of consultation (Chart 3, see page 8).

Here is the breakdown of those replies:

Schools	Total 122	Gov.	Non Gov.	Primary	Secondary	Central
Always	26	18	8	10	15	1
Mostly	42	31	11	10	29	3
Sometimes	40	30	10	10	15	5
Never	14	11	3	2	9	3