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Beyond books

High school librarians as champions of pupil inclusivity, autonomy, and reader development

Beyond books: High school librarians as champions of pupil inclusivity, autonomy, and reader development

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Abstract
School librarians can support and enhance pupils' reading and personal development. However, there is very little research which has sought high school librarians' perspectives of the diverse ways in which they do this. In this study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 18 practitioners responsible for school library services from 18 geographically dispersed high schools in Scotland to gain in-depth insights into the practices they use to support pupil development. Inductive data-driven thematic analysis identified two themes. The first concerned reader development beyond reading for attainment. Within this theme it was identified that those with library responsibilities (a) cultivate a love of reading; (b) support diverse reading activities; (c) ensure book provision reflects the school community and (d) align reading with pupils' contemporary lives. The second concerned pupils' personal development. Within this theme it was identified that those with library responsibilities (a) support personal development; (b) expand pupils' worldview through books; (c) support aspects of pupils' lives; (d) provide support for minority pupils; (e) create a safe and social space and (f) support pupil autonomy. It is hoped that these findings will be of use to librarians and schools seeking to promote the vital role of libraries in supporting pupils beyond their academic attainment, as well as providing recommendations to researchers and practitioners seeking to support pupil inclusivity, autonomy, and individuality through school library services.

Keywords
Adolescent, inclusivity, librarians, library practitioners, school libraries

Introduction

School libraries play a vital role in supporting both academic achievement and pupil wellbeing (Merga, 2017, 2019a, 2020a; Yi et al., 2019). The strength of school libraries in terms of quantity and quality of books (Loh, 2016; Loh et al., 2017), space (Loh, 2015; Loh et al., 2017; Merga, 2017), librarian knowledge and pedagogy (Merga, 2019a, 2021; Merga and Roni, 2017) and pupil use (Teravainen and Clark, 2017) can play a vital role in academic outcomes including improved literacy and writing levels, greater educational attainment and the promotion of independent learning behaviours (Barrett, 2010; Great School Libraries, 2023; Lance and Kachel, 2018). School library use is also positively related to reading enjoyment, reading amount and frequency, self-reported reading ability and attitudes towards reading (Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2018). School libraries and library practitioners also

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play a vital role in supporting pupil wellbeing (Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2018, 2018; Merga, 2021), offering spaces of comfort and safety (Butler et al., 2017; Willis et al., 2019). Furthermore, librarians and library services play a vital role in identifying and supporting pupils in need of additional support (Merga, 2019a) and in mitigating socio-economic impacts on student reading achievement (Lance and Kachel, 2018).

However, despite accumulating evidence regarding the essential service provided by school libraries and librarians, the profession remains at risk (Merga, 2019b). Declines in library budget, provision and staffing (All Party Parliamentary Group for Libraries, 2014; Butler, 2022; School Library Association, 2012) pose significant risks to the support which will be available to pupils in the future. For example, in the U.S., a recent investigation reported almost 20% fewer school librarians in 2018–2019 than in 2009–2010, with a ratio of 1199 pupils per librarian (Lance and Kachel, 2021). In the U.K., the lack of a systematic monitoring tool means that there are no official figures on the number or proportion of schools that have a school library or a school librarian in the U.K., let alone the quality of their provision (Teravainen and Clark, 2017). However, a recent campaign by the UK library and information association, CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) reported that secondary schools with school libraries have dropped by 10% between 2019 and 2023, with a reduction in both physical stock/resources and staffed hours over the same period. Two-thirds of school libraries in Scotland reported having no library budget, and there are significant regional inequalities, with rural areas less likely to have access to a school library and librarian than urban areas (Great School Libraries, 2023). In times of tightened UK government spending, there is a very real risk that funding support for school libraries may be reduced due to misguided assumptions about the library only being an archival space for books (Loh, 2023).

Therefore, understanding the role school libraries and librarians play in pupil development and wellbeing is urgent, given the risks posed to their ongoing resources and funding. Research on school libraries typically focuses on their potential to support academic achievement (Merga, 2020a). However, concerns about pupil wellbeing are increasing (Merga, 2021) and may be compounded by the ongoing diverse challenges posed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Houghton et al., 2022). Globally, it is estimated that 1 in 7 10–19-year-olds experience mental health conditions, with anxiety disorders and depression particularly prevalent (World Health Organization, 2021). In this climate, secondary school libraries have been identified as a key source of support for pupil wellbeing (Merga, 2021; Willis et al., 2019), yet the specific practices used by librarians towards supporting pupil wellbeing remain underexplored.

Furthermore, the role of school libraries in supporting academic and wellbeing outcomes is often not distinguished from the role of library practitioners (librarians, library assistants, English teachers responsible for library services) themselves. The role of the librarian is broad, diverse, and evolving (Lo and Chiu, 2015), with the literacy-educator aspect of the role being part of a complex and disparate set of responsibilities (Merga, 2020b). For example, increasing requirements for digital literacy necessitates that librarians also take on the role of being competent administrators, teaching partners, ICT consultants, and teachers of information literacy (Lo and Chiu, 2015). As noted above, librarians in many schools also take on a pastoral role, providing general support, cultivating positive relationships with pupils, creating and maintaining a welcoming environment, contributing towards social inclusion and pupil self-esteem and providing emotional support (Shaper and Streatfield, 2012). Despite school librarians having 'the potential to be transformative in the development of every child and young person' (Scottish Government, 2018: 6), the pastoral aspect of their position remains 'a significant, if largely hidden, role' in the care of pupils (Shaper and Streatfield, 2012: 68). In addition, while there is growing recognition of the importance of including the perspectives of children and teachers in discussions and decisions affecting schools (McGeown et al., 2023), the perspectives and experiences of library practitioners are often overlooked. Given the diverse and complex roles and responsibilities of library practitioners in supporting pupil attainment, development and wellbeing, sharing their experience is essential in highlighting the vital role they play as part of the school community.

This article reports on data from a collaborative research project between researchers at the University of Edinburgh and a national literacy organisation (Scottish Book Trust), which adopted an exploratory qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews with 18 practitioners responsible for library services across Scotland. The project initially aimed to explore the ways in which secondary school library practitioners support adolescents' reading experiences. However, over the course of the interviews, practitioners also described at length the ways in which they use the school library to support pupils beyond reading and literacy. Therefore, this article focuses both on how librarians support adolescents' development as readers, as well as highlighting the vital, yet 'largely hidden' aspects of the role in supporting pupil wellbeing.

Method

Participants

In total, 18 practitioners responsible for school library services (school librarians, $N=9$; library assistants, $N=3$; network librarians, $N=1$; English teachers responsible for

Table 1. Demographic information (school level).

Job title/role	School location (rural/urban/small town)	School role N	SIMD Q1 %	FSM %	Minority ethnic %	EAL %	ASN %
Network librarian	Rural	707	0.00	7.5	1.56	2.26	52.19
PT learning and teaching/English teacher	Urban	1225	12.57	17.5	3.02	11.76	54.12
Librarian	Rural	1089	2.94	13.9	2.85	4.22	48.76
Librarian	Urban	1035	3.67	4.3	8.31	3.19	18.74
Librarian	Urban	726	59.92	34.7	21.90	22.87	70.52
Librarian	Urban	770	16.36	23.6	30.00	22.21	59.48
English teacher	Urban	1248	20.67	14.8	21.55	16.51	54.89
English teacher	Urban	1447	8.91	10.9	8.09	4.22	33.52
School librarian	Urban	919	67.68	50.3	14.58	15.45	49.62
Librarian	Urban	2226	45.10	34.6	44.34	46.54	53.55
Library assistant	Rural	194	0.00	5.2	0.00	<1	43.81
Library assistant	Urban	1115	<1	8.7	4.39	4.22	41.88
Librarian	Urban	1028	7.49	7.4	4.18	5.35	46.79
Library assistant	Small town	1058	0.00	7.8	2.27	2.08	42.16
English teacher	Small town	963	<1	4.4	5.82	2.70	41.23
Librarian	Rural	493	0.00	14.6	4.26	5.07	39.55
English teacher (former librarian)	Urban	1643	3.04	12.8	9.74	4.63	24.83
Librarian	Urban	1162	10.76	11.4	10.93	5.34	35.71

EAL: pupils with English as an additional language; FSM: pupils receiving free school meals; ASN: pupils with additional support needs; SIMD Q1%: percentage of datazones within local authority ranked as the most deprived.
Retrieved from https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-level-summary-statistics/(last accessed 16/10/2023).

school library services, $N=5$) from 18 schools in Scotland participated in online semi-structured interviews. A recent systematic review to provide guidance on sufficient sample sizes within qualitative research has indicated that 9–17 interviews are sufficient to reach saturation point (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). In this project, a larger sample was used to ensure inclusion of participants from different local authority areas to achieve geographic representation. All schools had existing relationships with Scottish Book Trust (e.g., had previously attended Scottish Book Trust's events and/or used their online resources) and purposive sampling was used to ensure geographic representation within the final sample. In total, 14 local authority areas were represented, with schools representing diversity in terms of location (rural/urban/small town), school size, percentage of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), percentage of pupils receiving free school meals (FSM), percentage of pupils with additional support needs (ASN), percentage of minority ethnic pupils and SIMD (Scottish Indicator of Multiple Deprivation) score (see Table 1).

Interview schedule

The semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix A) was developed by the entire research team, who have knowledge of the sector and experience conducting qualitative research. The schedule included six open-ended questions related to the current practices that library practitioners use to support their pupils' reading practices, however the interviews were framed broadly as an opportunity for library practitioners to talk about the practices that are important to them and their pupils.

Procedure

The research team complied with Third Sector Research Forum (2021) ethical guidelines throughout the study. Ethical approval to use the data for the purpose of publication was granted by the University of Edinburgh Ethics Committee. All participants gave written consent for their participation and consent procedures complied with University of Edinburgh ethics criteria.

Semi-structured interviews took place online using Microsoft Teams. Interviews were conducted by the second and third authors, with the fourth author present to support transcription and note-taking. All interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams, with automatic transcription enabled. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted at a time that was convenient for participants, typically during the school day. Participants booked an interview slot using an online scheduling tool, which also required them to complete the online consent form, and provided information about the project and contact details of the research team, should they have any questions prior to their interview.

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed in full and checked by the fourth author before being shared with the full research team. The analysis was conducted from within a constructivist paradigm, using a data driven inductive approach and following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis. The first author initially worked with the first five interview transcripts independently, reading them twice in full (Phase 1), and generating initial codes to identify interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion (Phase 2). For example, the quotes 'that sort of safe space creation for me is the big thing . . . where it's somewhere they can go to, just they know that they're gonna be safe there and protected' and 'you're just trying to kind of make the library a place for them to kind of take a breath, get back to themselves if they're having a bad time, they can kind of let go of that' were both tagged with the code 'The library is a safe space'. The researchers then met to discuss initial codes and build consensus. Phases 1 and 2 were then repeated for the entire dataset by the first, second and fourth authors. Once completed, the first author initially grouped codes into themes (Phase 3), which were then reviewed and refined by the whole research team (Phases 4–5). For example, the codes 'The library is a safe space' and 'Creating a welcoming physical space' were both incorporated into the theme 'Creating a safe and social space'. Seven subthemes were identified at this stage and were subsequently organised under two themes (Reader Development: three subthemes, and Personal Development: four subthemes). During the peer review process, following one reviewer's suggestion to revisit the structure and named subthemes within the manuscript, the first and final author critically reflected on the number and names of the subthemes and agreed that the same two themes, but with revised and more specific subthemes (Reader Development: four subthemes, and Personal Development: six subthemes) was a better reflection of the data. This offered greater clarity and specificity in terms of the breadth of librarians' support, and conceptually these revised subthemes and their placement within themes better reflected the data. These were discussed, agreed and finalised between the first and final author for the purposes of publication (Phase 6).

Results and discussion

Following inductive data-driven thematic analysis, we have organised the following integrated results and discussion section into two themes highlighting the ways in which secondary school libraries and library practitioners support pupils. The first theme *Reader development: beyond reading for attainment*, has four subthemes (1) *cultivating a love of reading; (2) supporting diverse reading activities; (3) ensuring book provision reflects the school community* and (4) *aligning reading with pupils' contemporary lives*. The second theme *Personal development: inclusivity, autonomy and building a safe space* has six subthemes (1) *supporting personal development*; (2*) expanding pupils' worldview through books; (3) supporting aspects of pupil's lives; (4) providing support for minority pupils*; (5) *creating a safe and social space* and (6) *supporting pupil autonomy*. While we have presented these themes separately, we note the overlap between the two in recognition of the ways library practitioners support 'the needs of the whole child' (Harper, 2017: 41). It should also be noted that as school library resources and services vary across Scotland (and indeed across other country contexts), it should not be assumed that all school librarians will support pupils in the ways outlined below. The data presented here represent the activities currently carried out by librarians and library practitioners in the sample; we recognise that librarians in other contexts may use different approaches depending on factors such as budget, location, local policy, experience and the specific needs of their school community.

Reader development: Beyond reading for attainment

Supporting pupils' reading and literacy engagement is typically perceived as one of the core roles of the school librarian. This role is clearly vital, as pupils in schools with strong library provision and a full-time, qualified librarian typically achieve higher standardised test scores (e.g., Lance and Kachel, 2018). Librarians are often expected to work in an educative capacity, implementing literacy programmes to engage pupils across the school (Merga, 2019b), and providing tailored and multifaceted support for 'struggling readers' (Merga, 2019a). Although supporting academic outcomes is typically regarded as a core feature of librarians' role, when asked about how they support pupils' development as readers, library practitioners in the current study more often reported practices which supported volitional reading. This included cultivating 'a love of reading' in pupils, helping them align reading with their lives outside of school and encouraging them to broaden their worldview by choosing books which teach them about others.

Cultivating a love of reading. Providing creative, tailored support for pupils who are not engaged readers was central to efforts to springboard an engaged reading community in school. One means of doing this was gaining deep understanding of pupils' reading interests and preferences and using this knowledge to match them with inspiring reading material. For example:

> I'm working in a community in which, actually, people need a high degree of tailored suggestion because they don't know

what kind of 'reader' they are . . . So I just decided, send them down to me. I'll do even 5 minutes with them. I'll try and come up with something. (School Librarian)

I would find a book that maybe had elements of escapism, of the places they wanted to see, or the characters or the people they wanted to meet and try to introduce them to some of those characters, maybe just by doing a few short bits of reading. (Library Assistant)

As identified by the school librarian above, library practitioners described the importance of working with pupils one-on-one to explore their individual reading preferences. Notably, they described the importance of looking beyond ability labels and helping pupils to explore their reading preferences in more detail.

I do prefer a one to one, relational type of reader development. I take that approach really, of being, 'who's the kid in front of me? How can I get them into a book now, rather than counting up all of the books that they've read?'. (School Librarian)

Engaging with the pupils very much through just listening to what they say, what books they ask for . . . I would never say to pupils, 'Oh, do you not want to try something else, have you not grown out of that?'. (School Librarian)

The limitations of relying on reading levels to guide instructional practice have been recently outlined by Svrcek and Abugasea Heidt (2022). For example, reading levels and levelled reading groups can negatively influence pupils' reader identity, self-esteem, sense of autonomy and motivation (e.g., Hoffman, 2017). The relational practices described by library practitioners in the current study reflect recommendations to rethink the way pupils are framed as readers; in identifying and celebrating pupils' current reading interests and practices, librarians can contribute towards an environment where pupils feel empowered to read in line with their own interests and motivations. This in turn has the potential to 'foster their lifelong love of reading and support their development as strong and strategic readers' (Svrcek and Abugasea Heidt, 2022: 311).

Supporting diverse reading activities. Library practitioners also noted the importance of not prescribing or judging what pupils choose to read but of being open to the reading experiences they bring to the library space:

And it doesn't matter what they're reading or listening to or anything like that. They know that it's OK to do that in the library. And they know that it's OK to ask me for the books, the comics, the graphic novels. And without any kind of judgment or prejudice there. (School Librarian)

I think that's the challenge of the job, is to find ways to make everyone feel welcome and make everyone feel like they

actually can read anything that they want, which is why I am so clear when it comes to reading that, even if they want to read a pamphlet, that's absolutely fine as long as they're reading something and they're enjoying it. (School Librarian)

Taking a non-judgmental approach and not restricting the ways in which pupils can engage with texts in the library can support their autonomy. Previous research has indicated that autonomy supportive contexts can support pupils to develop self-concept ('general self-perceptions related to an object or a task'; Conradi et al., 2014: 154) founded on their own successes, rather than comparison with peers (Guay, 2022). Furthermore, pupils' motivation to read appears to be greater when pupils have opportunities to make choices about the texts they read and how they engage with those texts (e.g., Gambrell, 2011).

Ensuring book provision reflects the school community. Participants reported that ensuring the texts available in the library reflect the lives, interests, experiences and needs of their school community was a key aspect of their role. They noted that this requires them to discuss provision with pupils regularly, reflecting on how well what is available in the library aligns with pupils' interests and needs, and tailoring provision accordingly (i.e., seeking out specific texts which match the needs they have identified).

I know that a lot of boys like football books for example. So I always make sure I have plenty in the library for them to read. Some of these students really like to read information books, and I have bought some graphic novels, like the *Sapiens: A Graphic History*, so instead of having a brick of a book to read, they can look through the graphic novel version of it. (School Librarian)

We've got also then things like-, we call them quick reads, but they're Barrington Stoke reads, which have still got good content, but just not as wordy because a lot of young people, from what I'm hearing, just as soon as they see a book of any length, they won't even look at it. (Library Assistant)

Key to championing pupils' needs was providing access to resources that they may not be able to obtain elsewhere. For example, a recent survey found that 1 in 15 pupils do not have a book of their own at home, a figure that increases to 1 in 10 for pupils who receive free school meals (FSM) (Cole et al., 2022). As the quotes below illustrate, library practitioners reported the importance of ensuring that those pupils had access to books, especially those which represented their experiences.

My school is in a particularly poverty-stricken area and so there are plenty of kids who come in and ask me for books because they can't buy them themselves. And if I can't get them, I'm able to refer them to the local library that does have them or find a way to track them down for them, because it's just my goal to give the kids what they want. (School Librarian)

We've new children almost every week who are seeking asylum or are refugees. We have got a lot of poverty, and I've brought in some new books like *The Young Team* by Graeme Armstrong, and just, I want them all to see themselves in stories. (English Teacher)

There's lots of EAL kids in our schools in CITY . . . so we put a lot of work into buying more language stock so that there's more options there . . . We started a-, it's a CITY guide. So, all our EAL clubs and different schools got together to discuss with kids, you know, what's important when you first move to this city . . . We're in the process of making it into this multilingual guide. (School Librarian)

Aligning reading with pupils' contemporary lives. Learning about pupils' interests and preferences was necessary in discovering ways for practitioners to link recommendations to their lives beyond school. For example, linking books with film and TV/streaming, reading trends on social media, and other hobbies and interests which were meaningful to pupils. This practice is especially important for adolescent readers, who are motivated to read books which are relevant to their lives and interests (Lapp and Fisher, 2009; Merga, 2016). Indeed, a mismatch between the reading material adolescents have access to and their own reading interests contributes towards declining reading motivation and engagement (e.g., Applegate et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2023).

I felt it was more about trying to get books which they could maybe relate to or were maybe about situations that they were familiar with. (School Librarian)

And the S1s just started classic novels, so trying to link that in, perhaps with Netflix, like, *Ann with an E* with *Anne of Green Gables*, or there was a *Little Women* film, or we look at *Swallows and Amazons*. (School Librarian)

I've recently been trying to add some newer books, maybe books that are trending on TikTok and that kind of thing, to our senior fiction section. And then quite a few of the students who are maybe S5-6 who don't normally borrow books from the library have been taking those out, which has been good. (Library Assistant)

Recent research has indicated the influence of TikTok 'BookTok' communities on adolescent reading engagement (e.g., Jerasa and Boffone, 2021; Wiederhold, 2022), and the ways in which library services can employ language of the community to signpost to related texts (Merga, 2021). Despite the fact social media is often criticised as 'an unproductive waste of young people's time' (Roberts, 2021: 27) library practitioners in the current study described the importance of working 'with' social media, rather than against it, recognising these online communities as components of adolescents' modern realities. Notably, two library practitioners noted that they would

like more training or information on how to use social media to inform their practice, identifying TikTok in particular as a potential key point of contact between the library and their pupils.

Personal development: Inclusivity, autonomy, and creating a welcoming social space

Alongside supporting pupils to develop as readers, secondary school libraries and librarians also support pupils beyond reading. Previous research has highlighted the numerous ways that school libraries can support pupils' wellbeing. For example, through 'development of positive and ethical values in relation to the use of information, feelings of success and accomplishment, resilience, developing positive self-concept, self-esteem, independence and collaborative learning' (Teravainen and Clark, 2017: 24). School librarians also play a pastoral role by maintaining a safe and secure environment and providing individual support for vulnerable pupils (Shaper and Streatfield, 2012).

Supporting personal development

Librarians also explicitly encouraged pupils to think about the ways reading could benefit them beyond their academic attainment. In secondary school, the emphasis on reading for attainment generally increases (Bokhorst-Heng and Pereira, 2008; Merga, 2016); the focus of instructional practices being on developing pupils as proficient readers has been criticised previously for diminishing reading attitudes and engagement amongst adolescents (Gallagher, 2009). In this sense, library practitioners can play a vital role in supporting reading attitudes in secondary school; maintaining a focus on the value of reading beyond academic achievement:

I have made it more clear why we are doing what we're doing in the library . . . Why it's important to read, all of the statistics about emotional well-being and sleeping, and feeling part of something, lowering anxiety and all of these things. (School Librarian)

[Reading] is a lifelong skill. And it's not just about what you can read in the classroom, to show what you can write and what you understand. It's about being able to cope in the real world outside. (Library Assistant)

These comments are illustrative of library practitioners' focus on the 'whole' pupil and their aim to use the library to support development beyond academic attainment, even beyond their time in formal education. Helping pupils develop/maintain a love of reading, over and above supporting them to meet instructional standards, was a clear priority for library practitioners. While the educational contribution that librarians play in pupil development

should not be overlooked (Merga, 2020c), given that adolescent reading engagement and enjoyment is at an all-time low (Clark et al., 2023), recognising library practitioners' role in broadening access, deepening engagement, and supporting enjoyable reading experiences is paramount in advocating for their necessity in secondary schools.

Expanding pupils' worldview through books. As well as linking pupils with books which reflect their current interests, library practitioners also described the importance of broadening pupils' worldviews through reading. Linking with work by Bishop (1990), which highlights books not only as 'mirrors' which reflect our own experiences back to us but also as 'windows' into the lives of others, library practitioners recognised the role they played in supporting pupils to learn about those different from themselves. For example:

> Because our library project was in particular to address our rural area that our pupils were not exposed to different identities and cultures. So that's what our project was about. (School Librarian)

> It's this idea of reading about people and situations that you do not know about. So, some of the books feature kids who are in foster homes, or they feature kids who are refugees, or it's written by a Black author about Black characters, or it's written by someone who's disabled about a disabled character . . . it's trying to get them to kind of see the kind of wider stuff. (School Librarian)

Merga (2020b) notes that in the context where canonical texts (especially those which lack diversity of cultural representation) remain privileged, school librarians can play a valuable role in introducing pupils to texts which present culturally diverse perspectives and themes. In this sense, in supporting pupils to develop as readers, library practitioners also 'challenge' them to engage with experiences different from their own. As reading fiction can support the understanding of others (Mar and Oatley, 2008) and has the potential to reduce prejudice towards those perceived as different (Vezzali et al., 2015), we note this aspect of reader development (developing breadth and depth of reading engagement) to link with personal development more broadly (i.e., learning about and being more accepting of others).

Supporting aspects of pupils' lives. In the current study, library practitioners identified their role as being more than simply providing access to books, but about supporting aspects of pupils' lives. For example, library practitioners noted that a key aspect of their role was providing information and support to pupils about a broad range of topics including relationships, sexuality, mental health, future careers, university applications, and studying for exams.

> One of [my roles] is just support with literacies and reading but another aspect of my job is also, you know, I'm providing information. Particularly things that are in the health and wellbeing area . . . sexuality, or just about growing pains or relationships. (Library Assistant)

> I always try to provide help and support, and the sixth years when they're doing whatever they're doing, whether it's applying for university or studying, I do always try and point out, you know, websites or helpful information and chat to them about things. (Library Assistant)

Recent research has highlighted that providing 'pastoral support, including as a pastoral tutor or student mentor' and safeguarding 'student welfare, pastoral care, health and safety' sit within the typical job description of U.K. school librarians (Merga, 2020d: 607). Notably, in the current study, library practitioners identified their pastoral role in supporting aspects of pupils' lives (both within and outside of school) as being as important as their educative role, highlighting the 'broader, often competing demands' of their relationships with pupils (Merga, 2020d: 602).

Providing support for minority pupils. While library practitioners aim to support the needs of all pupils across different aspects of their lives, they also described providing specific additional support to pupils who were within a minority in the school community. For example, pupils who needed support with their mental health, LGBTQ+, neurodivergent (e.g., Autistic, ADHD, dyslexic) and EAL pupils were all identified as in need of specific support; library practitioners aimed to make the library an inclusive and supportive space for these pupils in particular. As these quotes illustrate:

> A lot of them want to read LGBT books [books have] a small holographic silvery star on the spine, and if you see that there's an LGBT character as a major character in the story. (Librarian)

> We have things that represent all of our pupils, whether that be gender based or race based or, I guess, anything, just lots of different experiences and making sure that we have a variety of books as well. (English Teacher)

As reading books containing personally meaningful content can support identity development and self-understanding (Fialho, 2019; Schachter and Galili-Schachter, 2012), it is important that all readers have opportunities to 'see themselves' in the books they read. Librarians showed awareness of the fact that pupils within minority groups are less likely to see themselves represented in books, as reinforced by research showing that the majority of the U.K.'s best-selling YA titles from 2006 to 2019 have featured White, nondisabled, cisgender and heterosexual main characters (CLPE, 2020; Ramdarshan Bold, 2018, 2021). Librarians made efforts to curate inclusive books stock and make pupils aware that the library represented them.

I very visibly display things about neurodivergence, about LGBTQIA. I openly talk about those things and make every accommodation that we can for people and very much want to work with individuals to make them feel comfortable and safe in this space. (Network Librarian)

I think, never underestimating the power of a really small gesture, like, literally just hanging up a pride flag can create so much buzz among certain pupils, and then you get the confidence of them asking for certain books. (Network Librarian)

Librarians who can 'actively work' with disadvantaged students can 'go a long way towards closing the gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds' (Loh, 2016: 12). Library practitioners described supporting vulnerable pupils by connecting with them regularly, 'checking in' to support their emotional wellbeing. One librarian reported that due to lack of provision elsewhere, they had taken on additional training to support their pupils' mental wellbeing. While they felt that this was beyond what they were qualified for, knowing that pupils were unable to access support elsewhere meant that this had become a vital aspect of their role.

Within our authority anyway, there's not the support that there should be there. There's not the funded support for these pupils any longer . . . it's outrageous. I've done my First Aid for Mental Health Training, but, you know, I don't feel that I'm in a position qualified to do what's needed . . . I only did [mental health training] because of some of the situations I found myself in as a librarian. (Librarian)

For kids who have got the anxiety and suicidal ideations and things like that, it's really just about connecting with them on like a daily basis . . . It's just being like, actually I see you, you're valid, and your place here is important, just as everyone else. (Network Librarian)

The most important part of my job isn't about reading, it's not about information. It's about having that safe space where pupils can come in and you think, if you need to speak about something, you've got an adult that you can do that with . . . I think that space is by far the most important part of what [the library] is. (Librarian)

This illustrates elements of the pastoral role of librarians described by Best (1999) whereby librarians undertake 'reactive' pastoral work to support 'problems of a social, emotional, physical, behavioural, moral or spiritual nature', 'proactive, preventive pastoral care' and the cultivation of a school community where there is a 'pervasive ethos of mutual care and concern' (pp. 58–59). This pastoral work is seen by many library practitioners as a significant and important part of their job yet is often largely 'hidden' or overlooked in the broader context of school teaching and learning (Shaper and Streatfield, 2012).

Creating a safe and social space. As noted by the third quote above, part of the work to support vulnerable pupils also saw library practitioners making the library a safe and inclusive space. Previous research has conceptualised school libraries as 'safe spaces' where pupils feel comfortable and secure (e.g., Shaper and Streatfield, 2012). Indeed, Wittmann and Fisher-Allison (2020) write that 'all children experience the need to nourish their spirits and regain emotional equilibrium; the library is there as a protected and sheltering place' (p. 46). The construction of the library as a 'safe space' concerns not just the librarian themselves, but also the physical environment (Loh, 2016). The physical library environment can be considered an 'enabling factor' (Hughes et al., 2019: 123) in cultivating a space which supports pupils' feelings of safety and comfort (Merga, 2020a). In the current study, librarians described the ways they organised the library space to make it feel safe, relaxed and welcoming, as well as incorporating specific resources and activities to help pupils feel comfortable.

We usually always have, like, a collaborative jigsaw on the go and [pupils] were like 'Is the jigsaw going to be here, that's a big stress reliever and we need that!', and I was like 'Yeah, like of course, I'll always have the jigsaw!'. (Network Librarian)

There's a lot that just like that bit of time off on their own. So we've got some, like, cozy reading corners and our bean bags and things. (Librarian)

As well as maintaining a welcoming physical space, a key aspect of cultivating an atmosphere of safety and comfort is school librarians themselves being welcoming and approachable. Indeed, the librarian being approachable is fundamental to building relationships with pupils (Shaper and Streatfield, 2012). In the current study, library practitioners highlighted the importance of building connections with pupils, for example:

Once they start to build up those relationships with you and there's a trust and a respect . . . because they feel that you've listened to them and are trying to help them. (Library Assistant)

Just trying to really get to know the kids . . . make them feel comfortable with me and let me see what they're into, let me find out what their interests are. And it might take like a month, it might take a year, it might take three years but, hopefully, eventually I will build a connection. (Network Librarian)

That sort of safe space creation for me is the big thing . . . where it's somewhere they can go to, just they know that they're gonna be safe there and protected. (School Librarian)

You're just trying to kind of make the library a place for them to kind of take a breath, get back to themselves if they're

having a bad time, they can kind of let go of that. (School Librarian)

As well as fostering relationships between pupils and the library practitioners themselves, library practitioners also described activities which foster relationships between older and younger pupils. Previous studies of librarians' practices have reported activities such as organising paired reading schemes between older and younger pupils (Shaper and Streatfield, 2012).

> The relationship between the 6th-years and the 1st-year pupils was sometimes just amazing. How kind they were, how they would go out of their way to just chat, try and help them choose books that they would enjoy. (School Librarian)

Fostering relationships between pupils of different ages can support the development of an inclusive school community. The social element of school is central for many pupils and fostering relationships between pupils is key in supporting their social needs (Gristy, 2019). In the current study, librarians reported numerate examples of practices which 'see young peoples' need to interact with each other as a resource rather than as a disturbance' (Gristy, 2019: 237). This included allocating time and space for social interaction (which did not necessarily have to focus on reading).

> Then we also have like a sort of social area, where you can just sit in our cozy corner and chat about books too. (School Librarian)

> Lunchtime and break time, for example, isn't really a reading time . . . they want to come in and have a blether. (School Librarian)

In this sense, librarians noted the importance of pupils having permission to use the library space in ways which meet their needs. For some, this meant using the space in the traditional sense (i.e., reading quietly, searching for books etc.), for others this meant simply being in a space that felt safe and welcoming, and for some this meant using it as a social space. Library practitioners also described other events and groups which took place in the library (e.g., chess clubs, film and book clubs, creative writing events, author events, Dungeons & Dragons groups and LGBTQ+ groups). These activities reaffirmed the library as a community space that 'everyone is able to get something from' (School Librarian).

Supporting pupil autonomy. Librarians also described the ways in which they provide opportunities for pupils to take charge of how the library space is used and supporting them to have autonomy over the services the library offers. Developmentally, adolescence is typically characterised as a period where individuals are striving for increased independence and autonomy, whilst still seeking to maintain a level of connection and interdependence (Spear and Kulbok, 2004). Reeves (2004) recognises the lack of autonomy adolescents have over their reading choices in secondary school in comparison with other times in their lives, noting that 'only in middle school and high school are people's reading choices so controlled' (p. 242). In this sense, meaningfully involving adolescents in library activities could support their autonomy needs, especially where they may feel that this is restricted in other aspects of their education (Webber et al., 2023). In the current study, library practitioners described the value in supporting pupils to take ownership over library activities, both for fostering pupil engagement and for generating new ideas for library activities:

> That's why I like the Pupil Library Committee, because they come up with ideas that I wouldn't necessarily-, they're a wee bit off the wall sometimes, but actually that's good. (Library Assistant)

> Something I found, particularly, the pupils like is to take ownership of what's happening. So asking a class, you know, 'if I were to teach another novel to a second year class, what novels do you think I should be looking at?', and they quite like making those suggestions. (English Teacher)

> We started producing a reading newsletter . . . and that is pupil led . . . [the pupils] write all sorts of book reviews. There's always an interview with a teacher or a member of staff . . . I must admit, they keep me going, because they'll come up with these ideas. (Librarian)

This also links to the above point about making the library an inclusive space; welcoming suggestions from pupils about how the library can better work for them necessarily requires working in ways which foster their autonomy and reinforce the library as a space they have ownership over. Library practitioners emphasised the expertise of their pupils with regard to the type of support they want their library to provide and repeatedly provided examples of creating spaces for pupils to take the lead. Where other aspects of adolescents' time in school might be much more tightly controlled, and where many pupils face additional barriers (see Ciuffetelli Parker and Conversano, 2021), libraries remain a refuge for inclusivity, autonomy and safety.

Limitations and considerations

The above discussion highlights the vital work that practitioners with library responsibilities do to support secondary school pupils' reading motivation and engagement, as well as their sense of autonomy, individuality, inclusion and safety. Notably, regardless of job title (e.g., librarian, library assistant), all participants provided rich examples

of the ways they supported pupils beyond the administrative and literacy-educator elements of their role. Participants had different levels of experience, training and support available to them, yet all displayed a strong focus on facilitating pupil engagement with library services and ensuring their practices met the needs of their school community. However, we note several limitations of the study. First, all practitioners interviewed were situated within the Scottish context. While this enabled us to build up a detailed picture of the principles and practices which guided their work, the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other contexts is not clear. However, in recent research from Australia (e.g., Merga, 2020a, 2020b) and Singapore (e.g., Loh, 2023), as well as increasing advocacy work taking place in the U.K. and U.S. (e.g., Hinton, 2021), it is clear that advocating for the role of libraries and library practitioners in supporting pupil development is a priority elsewhere.

Additionally, we note that even within the Scottish context, inequalities exist in terms of the way school library resources are distributed and managed between schools and across local authority areas. This means that different libraries/librarians can offer different levels of support to pupils, which may or may not meet their needs. In the current study, whilst practitioners reported numerous ways of supporting pupils in their community, they also spoke about the barriers to their practice which differed between individuals, schools, and local authority areas. For example, limited time, competing priorities in school, budget restrictions, difficulty sourcing resources, restrictions based on rural location (e.g., facilitating author visits, pupils' access to books outside of school), fear about cuts to their role/sector, lack of collaboration with other members of staff in school and lack of a community of other librarians to share their practice with. Indeed, a recent report on school libraries in the U.K. identified inadequate funding for library provision to limit the ability of librarians to provide the support needed by pupils (James, 2021) This perhaps emphasises the resilience and resourcefulness of high school library practitioners as they continue to be champions of their pupils' needs, even under these conditions. In recognising the vital role that librarians play, we hope to advocate for work to remove these barriers and ensure that library practitioners are able to act on the deep knowledge and experience that they hold about how to support adolescent pupils.

Relatedly, we also note that all the participants in the current sample were volunteers and had existing connections with the organisation (e.g., having previously attended events and/or used online resources). However, this is the case for a large number of schools across Scotland. In the interview, participants were encouraged to provide as honest and accurate a reflection as they could of their role and practices to support young people, with examples to support these points. Furthermore, they were informed that their identities and responses would remain anonymous, to encourage open and honest reflection. We also note that, while purposive sampling was used to recruit practitioners from different contexts and with different levels of experience, we note that the participants may have been homogeneous in other ways. For example, all participants had the time and capacity to meet with the research team (online) during the school day and were enthusiastic to share the ways they supported pupils. Those with library responsibilities who felt less confident in their practice might have been less inclined to participate, meaning their experiences are not represented here. Nevertheless, participants were often reflective, questioning the role they play in pupils' reading experiences (for example, one librarian considered their role as a 'gatekeeper') and the limitations that other practitioners might have in supporting pupils. Several librarians expressed a desire for greater connection with other library professions to share practice and resources in recognition of the vast variation in provision and support nationwide.

Conclusion

It is well established that school librarians support the academic needs of pupils. Increasing research is also contributing towards understanding the vital role of school librarians in supporting pupil wellbeing. In a climate where the role of the secondary school librarian is under increasing threat, the findings presented in this article are vital in advocating for maintaining support and funding for the role. As well as supporting pupils to develop as readers beyond academic attainment (e.g., enjoyment, engagement), school librarians also champion support for pupils from minority groups, support aspects of pupils' lives, broaden their worldview through books, foster autonomy and create safe and social spaces for all members of the school community.

Contribution statement

CW, KB and HC contributed to the conception and design of the study. KB, HC and JE carried out interviews and transcription in accordance with the process outlined in Methods. CW, KB, HC and JE carried out data analysis in accordance with the process outlined in Analysis. CW wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision and approved the submitted version.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project was conducted in collaboration with Scottish Book Trust, a national literacy organisation who deliver

and evaluate literacy and arts programmes across Scotland. The interviews were conducted as part of the development of Scottish Book Trust's teenage reading programme and the second, third and fourth authors are employees of the organisation.

Rights retention statement

For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

Open research statement

The research team intend to make all anonymised data available on the UK Data Service in September 2024.

Positionality statement

Authors KB, HC and JE are all employees of Scottish Book Trust, a literacy advocacy organisation. CW and SM are researchers working at the University of Edinburgh who have a professional relationship with Scottish Book Trust. In their research, they use qualitative and participatory methods to work alongside pupils and teachers to shape literacy and reading research which is relevant to their needs and experiences.

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Appendix A

Appendix A. Semi-structured interview schedule

1. What do you or your library already do to support teen reading?

Prompt(s):

   a. Why are you using this approach?

   b. What works well about this approach?

   c. What doesn't work well about this approach?

   d. Do you know how the pupils feel about this approach?

   e. If you could make changes to this approach, what would they be? Why?

2. Have you tried different approaches in the past? If yes, can you tell me a bit more about them?

Prompt(s):

   a. Why are you no longer using this approach?

3. If money and time were no object, what would you like to do to support young people to find a love of reading?

Prompt(s):

   a. Why do you think doing it this way would work?

   b. What are the barriers to doing it this way?

4. Is there anything else would help <u>you</u> to support young people to find a love of reading? For example, training, information, resources. . .

5. What would you like to see as part of an Scottish Book Trust teen reading programme?

6. Is there anything else you'd like to say about supporting young people's reading that we haven't covered already?