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What is the literacy supportive role of the school librarian in the United Kingdom?

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Abstract

Building students' literacy skills is a key educative purpose of contemporary schooling. While libraries can play a key role in fostering literacy and related reading engagement in schools, more needs to be known about school librarians' role in promoting these goals. To this end, this article seeks to identify the nature and scope of the literacy supportive role required of the school librarian in the United Kingdom. It also investigates how this aspect is situated within the broader competing role requirements of the profession. Using a hybrid approach to content analysis including both qualitative and quantitative methods, this article presents in-depth analysis of 40 recent job description documents recruiting school librarians in the United Kingdom to investigate these research aims. The vast majority of documents (92.5%) included literacy supportive roles or characteristics of a school librarian, and recurring salient components included supporting literature selection, having a broad and current knowledge of literature, promoting and modelling reading for pleasure, devising and supporting reading and literature events, promoting a whole-school reading culture, working closely with students to support reading and literacy skill development, and implementing and supporting reading programmes. This literacy supportive role was found to sit within a potentially highly complex and diverse work role which may compete with the literacy supportive role for time and resourcing in school libraries. This research suggests that the role of school librarians in the United Kingdom is both complex and evolving, and that school librarians in the United Kingdom have a valuable literacy supportive role to play in their school libraries.

Keywords

School librarian, literacy, reading engagement, job description, professional role, content analysis, library workforce

Introduction

Literacy is a valued skill linked to young people's attainment of academic, vocational and social goals (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Haasler et al., 2019; McIntosh and Vignoles, 2001), and societal productivity (Keslair, 2017). In contemporary schools, students' literacy levels are subject to high internal and external scrutiny through reporting and high-stakes testing (Jennings and Lauen, 2016). While literacy is thus highly valued and scrutinised, relatively little consideration is given to the role that school librarians and school libraries play in fostering students' literacy and related reading engagement (Merga, 2019a).

As explored subsequently in the review of the literature, the presence of qualified school librarians in well-resourced school libraries is associated with benefits for students' literacy attainment. However, while research suggests that libraries can play a key role in reading promotion in schools

through employing a range of reading and literacy supportive activities (e.g. Merga, 2019b; Domínguez et al., 2016), more needs to be known about school librarians' role in promoting student literacy. To this end, this article investigates the literacy supportive role of the school librarian in the United Kingdom (UK) to begin to address the following research questions:

1. What is the literacy supportive role of the school librarian in the UK?
2. How is this role situated within the broader role requirements of UK school librarians?

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Literacy, reading and reading engagement

Enhancing students' literacy performance is a key goal for both primary and secondary schools in the UK as well as other nations. While literacy is a multi-faceted and complex construct covering a breadth of skills, knowledge and practices (Alvermann and Moore, 2011; McKay, 1996), this article focusses on a construct of literacy concerned with functional reading, writing, listening and speaking skills to meet communicative competence requirements needed for academic, vocational and social participation. While this is the construct of literacy privileged in this article, it is not inferred that other related literacies such as information literacy, health literacy, digital literacy and critical literacy lack importance or value. UK literacy scores are high compared to international averages; however, they still lag behind the highest achieving nations (McGrane et al., 2017) indicating room for further improvement. Similarly, other nations consistently strive to enhance the literacy performance of their students. In recent times, the United States (US) has seen poor reading and writing performance in their students, with the performance gap between highest and lowest performing students growing over time (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Australian schools may seek to prevent further slide in their students' literacy attainment, with steady declines in reading performance recorded since Australia first participated in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) testing in 2000 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019; Thomson et al., 2016). As such, the role of schools as supports for student literacy is closely examined and highly valued.

While reading offers benefits for development of literacy and other academic skills (e.g. Sullivan and Brown, 2013), it may also offer well-being benefits for students. Research with a primarily adult sample found that reading can be a pleasurable escape with associated benefits for well-being (Merga, 2017), and 'readers often choose a book for pleasure and then find in it insights related to themselves, their lives, and their problems' (Howard, 2011: 53). More recent research has found that recreational reading is associated with reduced psychological distress and can be beneficial for mental health (Levine et al., 2020).

Research suggests that school librarians can play an important role in supporting student literacy, particularly in relation to reading engagement. Reading engagement is a 'multidimensional construct that includes behavioral, cognitive, and affective attributes associated with being deeply involved in an activity such as reading' (Guthrie et al., 2012: 602). Simply conceptualised, engaged readers find reading enjoyable which stimulates them to read more (Merga, 2019c); pleasure in reading is a strong predictor of reading frequency (Merga and Mat Roni, 2018), which leads to growth in literacy skills (Guthrie et al., 2012;

OECD, 2011). There is growing awareness of the relationship between reading attainment and engagement, resulting in 'increased attention to the concepts of reader engagement and reading for pleasure in both policy and practice' (Cremin and Moss, 2018: 59).

School librarians and student literacy attainment

Research exploring the benefits of school libraries for literacy have been predominantly conducted in the US, with very little research in this area coming from the UK (Ritchie, 2009). Lance and Kachel (2018) have contributed the most recent comprehensive review of the relationship between well-resourced and staffed libraries and student achievement, particularly in literacy. They contend that 'the most substantial and consistent finding is a positive relationship between full-time, qualified school librarians and scores on standards-based language arts, reading, and writing tests, regardless of student demographics and school characteristics' (Lance and Kachel, 2018: 16). More research is needed, however, as much of Lance and Kachel's (2018) review is based on findings published in reports rather than peer-reviewed articles, and 'simply put, the sustainability of the school library profession relies upon credible and reliable findings' (Stefl-Mabry et al., 2019: 19).

Research also suggests that school librarians can play an important role in fostering reading engagement (Merga, 2019c). For example, school librarians may be natural reading models as a love of literature and reading often guides their entry into the profession (Walker and Calvert, 2016), and they create and maintain spaces that make sustained reading possible (e.g. Loh et al., 2017). Further exploratory research is needed to make visible the ways that school librarians foster literacy learning and related reading engagement, as this provision cannot be taken for granted for reasons explored further herein.

Role diversity

Exploring how school librarians foster literacy learning and related reading engagement must involve situating this aspect of their role within its broader, often competing demands. Previous research from Australia (Merga, 2019c, 2020b) suggests that the sheer diversity of the role may act as a barrier to school librarians fully realising their potential as literacy supports in schools. School librarians may not have their efforts recognised, with UK research suggesting that secondary school librarians may be seen as support staff rather than leaders, despite the high level of responsibility some may exercise within their roles (Brackenbury and Willett, 2011).

The UK School Library Association (SLA) provides job descriptions that lend insight into expectations of the

role at primary and secondary school level, and these documents were kindly provided to the researcher by SLA staff in 2020. The 'Generic Job Description: Secondary School Librarian' deals with reading briefly, stating that in their capacity providing support for staff and students, the school librarians' job description includes 'promoting reading and the enjoyment of reading in all its forms' (SLA, n.d.-a: 2), and the only mention of literacy is limited, and in relation to information literacy.

In contrast, the SLA 'Job Description: Primary School Librarian' is far more detailed in relation to reading, listing 'To support all children on their reading journey and foster a reading for pleasure culture' as a 'core purpose' and describing the following explicitly reading-related facets of the role:

> To ensure the library provides a suitable and welcoming atmosphere conducive to study and Reading for Pleasure . . . To guide pupils on the choice of literature to meet their curricular and leisure needs and interests . . . To promote Reading for Pleasure throughout the school, including engaging with parents . . . To compile reading recommendations and booklists as appropriate . . . To organise and promote special events, such as: Book Week, World Book Day, Storytelling Week and author visits . . . To run reading clubs at lunchtime or after school as appropriate . . . To network with other partners, e.g. other local schools, SLS, SLA, keeping abreast of national and local reading and literacy initiatives. (SLA, n.d.-b: 1)

Furthermore, in relation to 'Person Specification Criteria', the primary school oriented document recommends 'knowledge of current children's literature' and 'knowledge of children's reading and literacy organisations to assist with school's offer to pupils' (SLA, n.d.-b: 2). Therefore, the SLA documentation more strongly envisions a reading and literacy role being enacted in the primary context than the secondary context. Reading engagement declines as students move through the years of schooling (e.g. Merga, 2019c; Parsons et al., 2018), and the most recent Australian research exploring the attitudes of 15-year-old Australian students found that 'about 23% in 2000, 26% in 2009 and 32% in 2018 of the students reported that reading was a waste of time' (Darmawan, 2020: 9). In light of this trend, SLA could consider revising their 'Generic Job Description: Secondary School Librarian' in recognition that the reading advocacy and skill development aspect of the school librarian role retains importance for older children.

It is also important to note that the literacy supportive role of UK librarians cannot be automatically conflated with their international counterparts, for in addition to varying contextual factors, the professional qualifications of UK school librarian significantly differ from their US and Australian counterparts who are likely to be degree qualified in both education and librarianship

(Merga, 2019a; Kaplan, 2007). In the United Kingdom, almost a third of school librarians are not be qualified librarians or graduates, with only 6% holding qualifications in both education and librarianship (Streatfield et al., 2011). Professional standards are a highly contentious area, and in the Australia and the US, efforts are made to prevent replacement of degree qualified staff with the unqualified alternative, with protections put in place in some states in the US (e.g. California School Library Association (CSLA), 2018).

In addition, there is marked variation in levels of access to libraries within the UK, with 90% of schools in England having school libraries, but only 57% of schools in Northern Ireland (Great School Libraries (GSL), 2019: 8), and there are also differences in how literacy is positioned in school libraries in the UK. These differences are responsive to varying geographic contexts and curriculums (e.g. Irving, 2010). Even within individual library contexts, the roles may vary considerably, as 'the norms of the school librarian are connected to the norms of the school as an everyday workplace for different people' (Centerwall, 2019: 147). In the UK, secondary schools are far more likely to have a 'designated member of library staff to run the library' than primary schools (GSL, 2019: 5). While UK librarians are typically not qualified educators, they may nonetheless be expected to support student learning, and therefore greater interrogation of the role of school librarians in the UK is indicated.

A role at risk

Finally, greater understanding of what UK school librarians specifically do to support literacy and related reading engagement is essential due to the vulnerability of school libraries in the UK and elsewhere due to funding cuts. Unfortunately, 'there is no statutory requirement for schools in England to have a school library' (Teravainen and Clark, 2017: 3). Therefore like school librarians elsewhere who also lack this security, school librarians in the UK run the risk of being viewed as an optional luxury (Dow et al., 2012) that is poorly valued both in schools and society more broadly (e.g. House of Representatives, 2011), rather than a vital requirement to support student literacy learning.

This precarity has had notable impact on school librarian numbers in the UK and elsewhere in recent times, and 'between 2010 and April 2016 figures suggest that at least 478 public libraries were closed across England, Scotland and Wales' (GSL, 2019: 7). Declines in library resourcing have also been noted in the US (e.g. Farmer and Safer, 2019), with a loss of almost 9200 full-time equivalent (FTE) school librarians (15%) nationwide from 2009–2010 to 2015–2016, with more than 10,000 total losses since 2000 (Kachel and Lance, 2018: 14). Canadian school libraries have been in decline since the early 2000s, and

many Canadian libraries operate without qualified staff (Erickson, 2019). As it is a greying profession, there may be future shortages in staffing availability in the future (Walker and Calvert, 2016).

The vulnerability of the profession has been associated with issues in staff morale elsewhere, and school librarians are not always supported within their school communities (e.g. Merga, 2019c). For example, while schools in Hong Kong are increasingly focussing attention on how school libraries can support reading, 'school administration and subject teachers' lack of general understanding about the important role of the school library and teacher librarian in promoting the schools' reading culture' (Loh et al., 2019: 5) constitutes a persistent challenge. Findings on professional satisfaction in UK school librarians have been varying. While earlier research suggests that school librarians may typically feel respected by their leadership and well-integrated in their school communities, and 'school librarians appear, as the literature suggests, to have high levels of resilience, putting up with poor pay, low status, and a lack of resources and yet being satisfied with their jobs' (Ritchie, 2011: 101), more recent findings suggest that school librarians struggle with 'insecure employment terms, low pay and a lack of investment in CPD for dedicated library staff' (GSL, 2019: 5). Therefore, exploring how school librarians may support literacy and related reading engagement can have implications for student learning, as well as staff morale and retention.

Methods

While there has been previous content analysis work around the role of librarians that has been used to identify current workplace needs, role requirements and potential training gaps (e.g. Clyde, 2002), there has been no recent content analysis focussing on the literacy supportive role of school librarians in the UK and how this facet situated in relation to the broader aspects of the role. I collected a corpus of recent (within the last 10 years) job description documents for roles advertised online. Documents were eligible for inclusion in the corpus if they

- Were for positions located in the UK
- Were published within the last 8 years (2012–2020)
- Were at least one page in length
- Were openly accessible via Google search

Documents were sourced online between April 2020 and June 2020 through Google using search terms 'school librarian job description'; 'school librarian job' and 'school librarian position description'. At around 40 documents, it became increasingly difficult to source further current job descriptions, possibly due to reductions in hiring associated with the coronavirus. Ultimately, a corpus of 40 documents was considered an appropriate threshold to allow for a

Table 1. Data on job description documents.

Characteristic	In sample (N = 40)	In sample (%)
Year		
2020	22	55
2019	6	15
2018	3	7.5
2017	0	0
2016	3	7.5
2015	2	5
2014	1	2.5
2013	1	2.5
2012	2	5
Role titles		
School librarian	14	35
Librarian	13	32.5
Senior school librarian	1	2.5
Deputy school librarian (E-Librarian)	1	2.5
Deputy librarian	1	2.5
Reading champion	1	2.5
Librarian/learning resources centre manager	1	2.5
Learning resource centre manager	1	2.5
Information centre manager	1	2.5
Library coordinator	1	2.5
School librarian and archivist	1	2.5
Library manager	1	2.5
Library/resources manager	1	2.5
School senior librarian	1	2.5
Library supervisor	1	2.5

diverse pool of documents while still being sufficiently manageable for the qualitative and quantitative methods intended. Role titles and year are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 suggests that school librarians in the UK are not typically known by that title and that they are given diverse nomenclature. This trend has also been seen in the US, though recent times have seen a shift back towards the name school librarian (Merga, 2019a). Nomenclature is significant, because changes in names can make it difficult for researchers to track fluctuations in the profession, such as staffing losses (Lance, 2018), potentially slowing corrective advocacy.

Documents ranged from 1 to 13 pages in length, with a mean of 3.4. In some cases, job description and person specification forms were presented as separate documents, and where this was the case, the two documents were merged in the count and analysed as one document. Where text has been cited in this article, it is presented either verbatim or in edited verbatim form to bring together text for purposes of cohesion or to correct typographical errors in the documents. Meaning was carefully retained. While the schools and documents are not identified, for the purposes of research auditing and accountability, each of the 40

documents has been assigned a code (S1-40), and where text is cited, reference is made to these codes.

Data were analysed using a number of approaches to content analysis rather than a single uniform approach in order to be responsive to the research questions (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). To explore the first research question, I used a conventional inductive approach (Kondracki et al., 2002) to identify the ways school librarians fostered literacy learning and related reading engagement. It is important to note that while the process of thematic coding at this stage was inductive, and a product of iterative reading of the data to identify emerging recurring salient themes, I was reliant on my background knowledge and prior research in both literacy and libraries to locate themes related to literacy learning. This is significant because while inductive analysis avoids adhering to 'a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions'; in reality, 'researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 83−84). Therefore, my prior knowledge in this field is both a strength and a limitation. I also had previously analysed Australian job description documents, which could have influenced the allocation of codes (see Merga, 2020b).

In addition, it should be acknowledged that the role of school librarian is interpreted in this article primarily through an education lens, rather than a librarianship lens, which has shaped what is privileged in this article. This lens is atypical, as school library research is more typically framed solely for the library/information sciences consumer (Hartzell, 2002; Stefl-Mabry et al., 2016) rather than the educator. The themes sought were activities, strategies, practices or personal attributes that were required of school librarians in relation to reading and literacy, and these recurring themes are presented and discussed in relation to extant supporting research.

To address the second research question, the conventional inductive approach was again employed in order to identify the different roles, characteristics and responsibilities required of these professionals. However, as the question relates to how the literacy supportive role is situated within the broader role requirements of UK school librarians, a summative content analysis approach was subsequently used to give the reader a sense of how different facets of the role were privileged within the corpus. Broader generalisability cannot be inferred beyond the sample, and silences within the sample can be for a range of reasons; an omission of a certain aspect of the role may have more to do with required word count in job advertisement or a particular facet being deemed so universal it was not worth mentioning. Nonetheless, I used this hybrid approach to content analysis in order to use both qualitative and quantitative content analysis for a strategic purpose (White and Marsh, 2006). Findings are presented in a joint display (Guetterman et al., 2015). Close attention to

integration of quantitative and qualitative data is increasingly expected in mixed-methods research, and integration is used 'to blend, weave, combine, and ultimately synthesize two or more types of data together', commonly in a 'visual presentation of data using a matrix or joint display (e.g., to study qualitative and quantitative data from the same case in parallel)' (Johnson et al., 2019: 302). As such, a joint display was selected to optimise integration and present mixed-methods research in a manner reflective of current expectations in this methodology.

In addition, as the roles, characteristics and responsibilities were so numerous, the decision was made to report only those which were deemed highly salient, recurring across at least 40% of the documents (recurring across at least 16 documents). This meant that at 15 recurrences each, themes 'library evaluation' and 'library policy adherence and development' were excluded, along with 'inclusivity' and 'support the professional development of others' at 14 recurrences each. Therefore, the role can be considerably more diverse than presented here. As part of the process, a composite statement of scope was created for each salient aspect. Overlap was common; for example, some of the 'Events and displays' were also closely related to 'Literacy and reading supportive activities and dispositions', such as participation in World Book Day. Such instances were subject to dual or even multiple coding as required. It is a notable limitation that roles, characteristics and responsibilities that could have benefit for literacy were excluded where specific reference to supporting literacy skills or engagement was not made. For example, collection building, management and accessibility can lead to students having access to appealing materials, and relationships and interpersonal skills can build valuable connections that can lead students to seek reading recommendations. However, if the link was not made between roles, characteristics and responsibilities and literacy skills or engagement in the job description documents enough times to generate salience as per previously specified, it was not included. Finally, a text excerpt was also included in the display so that readers can see how the aspect was presented in its native context, within the aforementioned limitations of textual presentation.

Results and discussion

The literacy supportive role of the school librarian

The vast majority of documents (92.5%) described literacy supportive roles or characteristics of a school librarian, and as per Table 2, this facet was the most common aspect of the role mentioned across the documents. The scope of the literacy supportive role included the following seven recurring elements.

Table 2. Role requirements and characteristics of the school librarian.

Aspect	Aspect count	Aspect scope	Text example
Literacy and reading supportive activities and dispositions	37	Support literature selection. Have a broad and current knowledge of literature. Promote and model reading for pleasure. Devise and support reading and literature events. Work closely with students to support reading and literacy skill development. Promote a whole-school reading culture. Implement and support reading programmes.	Lead role in encouraging and promoting reading for pleasure throughout the school. Reading for purpose and pleasure is our aim: you will work with students and staff to ensure that students engage in challenging texts that stretch and challenge them – most importantly, they enjoy. Organise promotions and special events (e.g. author events, shadowing book awards, World Book Day). Recruit and train student literary quiz teams. Lead or help run reading groups. Develop reading lists for each year group. Love reading and have a passion for passing this love on to others. (Have) an interest in children's and teen fiction and willingness to read widely to keep current. (S27)
Experience	34	Required or desired experience could include demonstrable experience using library management information systems and software, working in a library, collaborating for learning, working in a school context, using ICT for learning and information retrieval and other relevant ICT applications, working with young people, providing staff and/or student training, fostering reading engagement, using specific reading support programmes or methods, management and leadership, behaviour management, budget and administration, digital copyright and licencing, constructing and promoting displays and customer service.	Experience of working in a library, preferably in a school or college environment. Experience of utilising ICT and skills to access and retrieve information. Experience of working with young people and meeting their particular needs and requirements. (S33)
Administration and management	33	Perform diverse administrative tasks. Keep accurate records. Maintain and manage library data systems. Perform circulation functions on the Library Management System. Manage the library budget. Attend meetings. Schedule and coordinate student access and activities in the library.	The High School Librarian will conduct the day to day operations of the High School library. Administer budgets according to needs and objectives of the library and school community. Attend High School department meetings as appropriate. (S1)
Communication	33	Have excellent oral and written communication skills and the ability to adapt communications for a range of audiences and stakeholders. Be proficient in communication across mediums. Communicate in a professional and timely manner. Ability to understand required policies and procedures.	Communicate clearly and effectively in both formal and informal setting with all members of the school community. Curate and disseminate information relevant to the forest school community. Communicate effectively with all members of the school community. Have excellent communication skills (orally and written) and ability to follow administrative procedures and understand and follow instructions. (S13)
Relationships and interpersonal skills	33	Work well as part of a team. Foster and strengthen relationships both within and beyond the school community. Demonstrate excellent customer service skills.	Encourage and actively promote the engagement of parents/carers in their children's learning and assist with parental events including parents' evenings. Have the ability to engage constructively with and relate to a wide range of young people and their families with diverse social and ethnic backgrounds. Demonstrate excellent interpersonal skills and solution focussed approach to professional relationships. Have the ability to consult and negotiate with external agencies to reach the best outcome for the school. (S23)
Collection building, management and accessibility	32	Monitor the collection to ensure continued relevance and condition, making repairs and additions as required in response to school and student needs. Weed the collection as required. Take preservation measures (e.g. book covering). Consult with staff to support collection building. Source suppliers for securing quality resources. Ensure the collection is reflective of contemporary views on issues relating to diversity. Catalogue the collection and promote its easy access by staff and students. Manage inter-library loans.	Selecting, acquiring, maintaining and promoting stock to meet the needs of students and staff, covering the full ability, age and cultural range of students, supporting all subject fields and professional development needs of the teaching staff. (S9)
Library promotion and induction	32	Provide orientation in library services for staff and students to promote library use. Promote new and existing resources. Promote the library through internal and external social media. Liaise with stakeholders to improve the library's collection and services. Promote the library in the broader community, including meeting parents and visitors. Raise the appeal and profile of the library.	Ensure that the services offered by the school library are publicised and promoted so that the school can make optimum use of them. (S37)
Undertake professional development	31	Attend training sessions to enhance knowledge and skills and maintain compliance with policies and procedures. Keep abreast of developments in technology, professional practice and educational research relevant to the school library. Maintain productive memberships in professional associations. Show keen commitment to ongoing professional development.	Participate in training and other learning activities and performance development as required. Keep up to date with current trends and initiatives and newly released publications in order to select Library resources. Attend courses as appropriate. (S6)
Events and displays	30	Devise and support diverse library activities and events. Create engaging library displays.	To mount displays and organise competitions, activities and themed events to maintain pupil interest. (S16)

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Aspect	Aspect count	Aspect scope	Text example
Qualifications[a]	30	Required or desired qualifications could include minimum General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Grade C or above in English and Maths or equivalent, an appropriate advanced level qualification, National Vocational Qualification (NQV) Level 2, NQV Level 3, NQV Level 4, current First Aid certification, degree-level qualification, degree-level qualification in Library/Information Studies or first degree with postgraduate library qualification, being Chartered or working towards Chartership, certificates within education, completion of Department for Education (DfE) Teacher Assistant Induction Programme, professional certification in librarianship such as ACILIP or MCILIP, specific training in Children's Librarianship.	Have a minimum of NVQ3 level relevant library and information qualifications or equivalent experience. Ideally be a fully qualified Chartered Librarian or equivalent experience. (S33)
Initiative, organisation and resilience	29	Shows innovation and initiative. Is well-organised with strong time-management and planning skills. Is resilient and flexible, and adaptive to change. Has strong problem-solving skills. Creative and able to work with high autonomy. Shows attention to detail. Is optimistic and positive in outlook.	Making things happen – the drive, motivation and commitment to initiate, focusing on delivering outcomes and being proactive rather than reactive. Embracing change and coming up with new ways of working for the good of the students and the school. Having a positive outlook. Showing resilience – responding positively to pressure, remaining emotionally stable and positive when faced with challenges. Manage time and space effectively, keeping a balance of time spent in direct services to patrons and time spent on administrative tasks. (S1)
Supervision and extracurricular duties	27	Supervise students in the library. Lead or support extracurricular activities running at lunch or outside normal school hours. Provide supervision cover for absent colleagues. Attend school events, parent engagement sessions and professional development opportunities, outside normal school hours. Perform allocated lunchtime supervision duties.	Supervise students using the library area when on duty before school, during lunchtime and/or after school hours. Be involved in extracurricular activities, e.g. open days, presentation evenings. Supervise small groups of students undertaking a teacher-led learning activity by co-ordinating and explaining basic instructions for the activity. Assist in the supervision and training of volunteer helpers/student library monitors. (S9)
ICT knowledge and skills	26	Have strong ICT skills and a commitment to maintaining and developing these skills. Have strong knowledge of knowledge of library database systems and supporting online services. Expertise in using ICT to support information acquisition. Have working knowledge of current social media platforms and ICT resources. Ability to draw on knowledge and skills to provide information on the latest research applications and new technology in teaching and learning.	Be confident, knowledgeable and competent in the use of ICT skills. Have the ability to manage and disseminate information in a range of different media. (S2)
Student well-being	26	Provide First Aid as required. Provide pastoral support, including as a pastoral tutor or student mentor. Safeguard student welfare, pastoral care, health and safety. Ensure that the library environment is safe. Be compliant with all policies and procedures designed to maintain and promote student well-being.	Support and contribute to the school's responsibility for safeguarding pupils. Have the ability to develop a culture of mutual respect with the pupils. (S22)
Facilitate information literacy	25	Have strong research and information literacy skills. Develop information literacy skills of students and staff. Create and deliver training sessions in core information literacy, and related study and research skills. Support teachers' implementation of research-based curriculum. Encourage students to be ethical and critical users of information. Maintain a high level of resource awareness.	The main purpose of the role is to ensure that pupils and staff are effective users of ideas and information. Empower students to be critical thinkers, enthusiastic readers, skilful researchers, and ethical users of information. Instil a love of learning in all pupils and ensure equitable access to information. To support learners to identify, locate and access the information they require. (S22)
Manage and enhance library environment	25	Establish and maintain a library environment that is conducive to learning. Provide an attractive, safe, inclusive, stimulating and welcoming learning space. Manage all matters relating to the technological affordances, security, fittings and furnishings of the library environment.	You will develop and maintain the library as a vibrant area for individual study and to support learners and learning areas in their work. Maintain the Library in good order and create/maintain a quiet, controlled atmosphere conducive to study and learning. (S40)
Other duties	22	Perform duties not specified in the job description as directed by leadership.	Notwithstanding the detail in this job description, the job holder will undertake such work as may be determined by the Headteacher/Governing Body from time to time, up to or at a level consistent with the Main Responsibilities of the job. (S16)

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Aspect	Aspect count	Aspect scope	Text example
Alignment with school ethos and policies	21	Align the school library with the ethos and policies of the school. Maintain awareness of and compliance with school policies. Contribute to promotion of the school ethos.	Provide the expertise necessary to ensure that library provision is aligned with the mission, goals, and objectives of the school and materials are appropriate for use. (S22)
ICT resourcing and training	21	Operate and maintain ICT equipment/software. Develop and maintain the library's online presence. Organise, direct and participate in appropriate ICT training for staff and pupils. Curate web-based learning resources. Provide technical support for use of ICT resources in the library in liaison with other appropriate staff. Maintain electronic records. Contribute to the school's digital literacy strategy. Build the ICT resource collection in consultation with staff.	Responsibility for optimising the use of IT services within the school; this is to include on-line view data systems and the compilation of in-house databases as appropriate. Development of training packages for staff and pupils on the use of IT as an effective information retrieval tool. (S2)
Behaviour management	19	Promote a productive working environment through use of appropriate behaviour management strategies. Deal promptly with behavioural incidents, adhering to policy. Recognise and reward good behaviour.	Promote good pupil behaviour, dealing promptly with conflict and incidents in line with established policy and encourage pupils to take responsibility for their behaviour. Issue student rewards and recognition in line with the school policy. (S17)
Instruction	19	Deliver training sessions to staff and students. Demonstrate instructional effectiveness in small-group, large-group, and one-to-one instruction and interventions. May be required to assess student performance. Use strategies, to support students to achieve learning goals. Play a role in evaluating student skills and knowledge such as determining reading skill levels.	Plan and lead reading lessons, including targeted interventions and monitoring of the impact of the lessons and interventions. Provide individualised progress reports for students to be shared within the pastoral structures of the school. Provide support to students with their learning. (S23)
Staff and volunteer supervision and support	19	Train and supervise staff and volunteers to support them to perform routine library tasks. Be involved in the appointment of suitable support staff and volunteers. Recognise and reward volunteers for their contributions including student library monitors. May act as a line manager for library staff.	Supervising and train staff, parents, volunteers and pupil librarians working in the Library, as required. Training Library Support Team staff in basic cataloguing and processing duties, as required, ensuring that correct quality control procedures are in place and applied. (S30)
Collaboration for learning	17	Collaborates with colleagues to support student learning. Works closely with teachers to ensure that students have access to study packs and resources that enhance learning.	Work Collaboratively • Ability to engage and work with colleagues in the library section and wider School community. • Work closely with the E-learning team on projects and events, and in daily operations. Liaise closely with appropriate teaching staff to develop resource collections for particular collections, when required. (S13)
Curriculum support	17	Contribute to the development of teaching programmes, particularly those related to information literacy, library skills and reading. Work with staff to provide materials to support curriculum and ensure that these materials are readily accessible. Engage external providers such as authors to provide learning opportunities that enhance learning. Maintain current knowledge of evolving resource possibilities to meet curriculum needs.	Support the delivery of the curriculum for year groups, individual subjects and individual pupils, enabling pupils to perform independent research. (S29)
Educational knowledge	16	Has understanding of education systems, curriculum and policies. Has knowledge of current educational initiatives in library and information services. Have understanding of child development and learning. Ideally has knowledge of learning theory and teaching methods.	Knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning, of educational issues and the National Curriculum as they relate to the provision of learning resources . . . Awareness of child development and the role of reading in the educational development of the child. (S15)

ICT: information and communications technology.
aQualifications specifically pertained to educational attainment in primary, secondary, tertiary or workplace learning context.

Support literature selection

School librarians were expected to support student literature selection, which is important as research suggests that young people may struggle to choose appealing and appropriate reading materials (Merga, 2019c; Merga and Mat Roni, 2017), which can then inhibit their reading frequency. This involved knowledge of the students, 'to support the whole school drive to improve literacy, working with students to select books that match their level of literacy and areas of interest' (S40). It could also involve supporting 'students with additional needs or disabilities to access reading materials' (S20), illustrating how school librarians can play a valuable role in supporting students who may struggle with reading to find accessible and enjoyable materials, as has been found in previous research (Merga, 2019b).

Have a broad and current knowledge of literature. Supporting literature selection is clearly closely related to having a broad and current knowledge of literature, and previous research suggests that maintaining this knowledge requires significant time and resourcing (as explored in Merga, 2019a, 2020a). This involved being 'well-read and up-to-date both in digital and print publishing' (S36), and it was noted that 'you will need to have a love of reading and be familiar with the types of books that teenagers enjoy so that you can recommend key reading for students' (S3). As it cannot be assumed that classroom teachers have deep knowledge of children's literature (e.g. Burgess et al., 2011; Cremin et al., 2008; Kerkhoff et al., 2020), the role of school librarian as expert in this area may fill a noteworthy gap.

Promote and model reading for pleasure. Just as classroom teachers may not have a strong knowledge base in relation to literature for young people, they are also not a reliable model of lifelong readers who enjoy reading for pleasure (Merga, 2016; Vansteelandt et al., 2017), and even where classroom teachers are avid readers, the demands of the curriculum may inhibit their modelling of these behaviours. With fostering reading engagement an expectation of the school librarian role, they 'promote and foster a lifelong love of reading amongst students' (S35). They may do this directly with students or also engage other significant social influences such as parents and teachers as partners in this endeavour, as they

> support children's learning by promoting enjoyment of, and excitement about reading to all children. Engaging with the children, their parents and families to promote the love of reading . . . Work with teaching staff to take a strategic approach to cultivating a love of reading in children. (S15)

They may be positioned as the 'host' of the library, 'eager to share their love for books' (S31). While this aspect of the school librarian's role may be taken for granted, reading is a social practice, and students with positive social influences promoting reading in their lives may be more likely to read, and experience the literacy benefits of reading (Merga, 2019c).

Devise and support reading and literature events. Also related to the positive social positioning of reading within the school is the holding of reading and literature events that promote reading for pleasure. More research is needed in this area as evidence of student benefit from participation in these events is primarily anecdotal (e.g. Rubin, 2007), or through the perspectives of librarians or other educators rather than students (e.g. Merga, 2019c). The school librarian's role in this regard included 'to help to coordinate whole school events to raise awareness of the importance of books and reading, for example World Book Day' (S35). It could also involve 'organising promotional events such as visiting author workshops, promoting national and school literacy days/weeks and facilitating reading groups (e.g. book club)' (S9).

Promote a whole-school reading culture. A supportive whole-school reading culture is typically viewed an educative context where there is access, opportunity and encouragement for reading (Daniels and Steres, 2011; Loh et al., 2017). While creation of a whole-school reading culture can expose students to an encouraging context that privileges reading, the competing demands of the curriculum and lack of prioritisation by leadership can inhibit the fostering of this culture (Merga and Mason, 2019), and therefore having a school librarian who can advocate for this within schools is important if it is to be valued. It is contended that 'the school librarian should be a partner in creating and developing a climate to promote and support reading for pleasure across the school' (S37), and again, this role extends beyond the school, involving 'promoting reading and the enjoyment of reading in all its forms by organising and participating in activities within school and across the wider community' (S17).

Work closely with students to support reading and literacy skill development. School librarians in the UK may be expected to support students' reading and literacy skill development and have expertise in this field. This is reflective of previous Australian research where library staff conducted quite specialised interventions involving dyslexic students (Merga, 2019b). For example, they may be expected

> to support particular groups of students to develop their reading skills, for example through leading reading groups and reading interventions, as appropriate. Support training for teachers around embedding reading in their lessons and tutor time (guided reading), e.g. checking reading logs, how to have conversations about reading. Support in the development of the guided reading aspect of the pastoral curriculum. Have a track record of celebrating reading and developing a passion

for reading in others. Have confidence to lead small intervention and reading group programmes. (S35)

It was interesting to see the school librarian positioned as literacy expert, supporting training for teachers in reading, as this role did not require a degree qualification in librarianship or education, with experience accepted in lieu of qualifications. Once again, these efforts were extended beyond school, requiring the school librarian 'to support and engage reluctant readers and their families', and 'to support and engage pupils in receipt of pupil premium and their families' (S15).

Implement and support reading programmes. In addition to working closely with students to support reading and literacy skill development, school librarians also implemented and supported specific reading programmes. In this regard, they would 'contribute to teaching and learning programmes: especially those which develop literacy' (S38). In some instances, the school librarian would plan and implement a programme in a collaborative vein.

> Planning and delivering a programme to support the development and teaching of reading and research skills in partnership with teaching staff. Deliver and develop programmes of intervention and support for students who require support with reading and literacy, monitoring progression and impact. Aid in the planning and deliver of data capture from students to determine reading ages and other literacy skills. (S17)

In this instance, the school librarian again required higher-order evaluative schools, including assessment skills typically associated with education professionals. While a degree qualification was not required for this role, the school librarian needed to have 'training in the literacy/ numeracy interventions' (S17) that enabled them to have sufficient expertise to perform this role.

Reading programmes were often unspecified in nature, or developed within the school, and therefore it was not possible to determine if programmes were truly literacy supportive, in the sense that they fostered the development of both reading skills and positive attitudes towards reading. This qualification is necessarily as 'restrictive reading programs that provide scant attention to students' motivation or preferences' (Ives et al., 2020: 13) are popular with school leadership in many schools. This was reflected in some cases in the sample, where the principal literacy related role of the school librarian was exclusively the implementation of Accelerated Reader (AR). For example, the only literacy-related role mentioned in the job description for S32 was 'support the implementation of AR'. On contrast, other job descriptions position AR as part of a broader role for fostering reading engagement: has 'a love of reading and the ability to inspire others to read . . . The librarian is key in overseeing and implementing

"Accelerated Reader" in the school . . . Encourage pupils' reading for pleasure' (S34). The sole emphasis on AR is problematic as findings about the advantages of AR are inconsistent. It may be associated with high (e.g. Nunnery et al., 2006; Rodriguez, 2007) or modest benefits for literacy performance (e.g. Siddiqui et al., 2016), although these benefits have not been consistently found (e.g. Nichols, 2013; Smith and Westberg, 2011). Indeed, a recent meta-analytic review found that 'Accelerated Reader does not lead to the gains in reading advertised by the publisher when considering state test scores as an outcome measure' (Renken, 2018: 75). Therefore, it is premature to position this as the sole literacy supportive strategy employed by school librarians. Positive findings are also complicated by issues in methodology as outlined by Krashen (2003), and conflicts of interest in funding, such as in the case of positive findings where the company behind Accelerated Reading, 'Renaissance Learning funded this research and was involved in site recruitment and communication' (Shannon et al., 2015: 20).

Beyond literacy skill measurement, consideration needs to be given to potential negative impacts that such a programme could have on young people's motivation to read, showing understanding of the relationship between reading motivation and attainment (Merga, 2019c; Guthrie and Davis, 2003), and further research is needed in this area. It has been noted that

> in their zeal to promote increased reading achievement and to foster lifelong reading habits, many school districts are funneling all of their readers into the for-profit reading management and incentive program. However, reading for the sake of rewards or higher grades marginalizes reading for authentic reasons and sends the message that reading has no intrinsic value to the individual. (Cox, 2012: 15)

AR directs and constrains students' independent reading selections (Schmidt, 2008). In addition, in their current position statement, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) (2011) discusses the implications of book levelling programmes that promote high visibility of student reading levels which can be discouraging for struggling readers, exposing vulnerable students' reading levels to broad scrutiny.

The common competing demands of the role of school librarian

As per Table 2, while literacy and reading supportive activities and dispositions were the most salient aspect of the role across the corpus, there were a range of additional roles and characteristics, some of which would compete with this aspect for time and resourcing in school libraries.

In this corpus, as per Table 2, experience (85%) was privileged over qualifications (75%), and qualification expectations were highly variable. As expected from the

aforementioned previous research, degree-level qualifications were more likely to be framed as desirable rather than essential. In addition to literacy and reading supportive activities and dispositions, the prevalent aspects of the role were administration and management, communication and relationship building, collection building, management and accessibility, library promotion and induction, undertaking professional development, and creating and promoting events and displays (all occurring across at least 75% of the sample). In reading of the documents, certain kinds of school librarian emerged. Some strongly emphasised a particular role, such as the reading engagement facilitator, or information and communications technology (ICT) or information literacy expert, to meet the needs of the school, whereas other positions provided a more even expectation across these competencies.

With each of these aspects including diverse activities, Table 2 highlights the complexity of the role. The expectations of supervision and extracurricular activities were present in around two-thirds of the corpus, suggesting that the work requirements of this role may be commonly extended well beyond the typical school hours. In addition, the role required strong commitment to ongoing professional development (80%), as well as unspecified 'other duties' which featured in more than half of the documents. Competing roles that school librarians must adopt may also be concealed in these unspecified 'other duties'. The emphasis on ongoing professional development indicates the role is likely to evolve over time, with school librarians required to remain abreast of advances not just in the literacy and reading space, but also the various other duties and competencies they are supposed to exhibit. This can include such diverse changes as shifts in preferred administrative software, new advances in information technology or revisions to best-practice in literacy intervention pedagogy. In addition, the extent of the literacy supportive component varies greatly in the job descriptions, as can be seen from the 7.5% with no described literacy supportive role, the aforementioned role that solely focussed on AR and the far more comprehensive text example in Table 2.

Conclusion

This research suggests that the role of school librarians in the UK is both complex and evolving, and that they have a valuable literacy supportive role to play in their school libraries. Most of the job descriptions position the school librarian as a leader of reading engagement, and given the known association between reading engagement and literacy skill attainment and maintenance, this role is valuable, and should be valued to support students' literacy attainment and reading engagement, as well as the professional morale of school library staff. As illustrated in this article, school librarians may be required to enact potentially unique literacy supportive roles that may fall outside the scope and interests of classroom teachers. Further research should explore if the job descriptions align with the enacted role of school librarians.

It certainly seems likely that given the complexity of the role as illustrated in Table 2, that school librarians may be similar to their Australian counterparts (Merga, 2019c, 2020b) in struggling to meet the literacy supportive aspects of their role, and further research needs to explore if this is indeed the case, particularly given the vulnerability of the profession. While as previously acknowledged there is diversity in the roles played by school libraries and their librarians within the UK, the UK needs its own corpus of research to support school librarian and library advocacy rather than extrapolating from Australian and US research based on different professional standards. Further research is needed to explore differences in professional standards for school librarians, teacher librarians and school library media specialists in the UK, the US and Australia, ideally extending the inquiry to other nations such as Canada. It would also be pertinent to investigate how such job descriptions are generated, and which stakeholders shape what is privileged and included in such documents.

While this article suggests that UK school librarians may be expected to make a significant contribution to students' literacy learning, more needs to be learned about the nature of their role, and how each facet of the role may contribute to student literacy learning and reading engagement. There appears to be considerable variation in the level of literacy-related expertise required of the role. More research is needed to determine if school librarians are adequately trained to meet the educative requirements of the role, particularly in relation to implementation of literacy interventions for struggling literacy learners, to ensure that school librarian preparation programmes and credential/qualification policies align with the enacted role. Future research could also look more closely at the aforementioned noted differences with both geographic and school contexts within the UK itself.

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