

# The Research Files Episode 53: Building a school reading culture

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*Hello and thank you for downloading this podcast from Teacher magazine. I'm Rebecca Vukovic.*

*A supportive school reading culture is one where there is availability, opportunity, encouragement and support for reading. But how do schools actually go about building this kind of culture in their own contexts? To answer this question, Senior Lecturer at Edith Cowan University Dr Margaret Merga went straight to the source – teacher librarians – to gain their valuable insights into the factors that enable and constrain the development of a whole school reading culture. The results from this research were published in the [Australian Journal of Education](#) in a paper titled, Building a school reading culture: Teacher librarians' perceptions of enabling and constraining factors. In today's episode, I sit down with Margaret to talk more about her study and its findings, including the role that school leadership plays in the development and maintenance of a school reading culture.*

**Rebecca Vukovic: Dr Margaret Merga, thanks for joining *Teacher magazine*.**

Margaret Merga: Thanks for having me.

**RV: We're here today to talk about your research that explored how to build a school reading culture from the perspectives of teacher librarians. To kick things off, what were your aims for this study?**

MM: Well in relation to this paper, we really wanted to know what teacher librarians felt about how schools can effectively build a really positive reading culture. So, we know from previous research that perhaps schools don't necessarily focus on reading engagement and there's more that can be done in order to improve levels of reading engagement in schools. And we know, that where reading engagement is strong, literacy skill levels are more likely to be promoted in that context. So we're really interested in getting teacher librarians' perspectives, because they can be uniquely situated within the school, often within the library, and therefore able to really know what's going on around reading in their schools.

**RV: Yeah so tell us a little bit more about the study itself. So who was involved, where was it conducted and when did it take place?**

MM: Sure. So basically we had 30 participants across 30 schools in Western Australia and they're not all located in the metropolitan area. We travelled far and wide in order to make sure that we could get a nice sample that was representative of quite diverse geographic contexts, even within the constraint of the West Australian state. And we conducted it in the beginning of 2018, I think it was March to June, and since then a number of findings have been published across a range of journal articles and a recent book.

**RV: So what were some of the questions that you were seeking to explore in this study?**

MM: Well in relation to this specific paper we were particularly interested in teacher librarians' perceptions of schools' reading culture. What were the characteristics of a school that promoted a strong reading culture? And, what was the role of the school leadership in promoting the reading culture within a school?

**RV: So, I want to run through each of the findings to come from this research and allow you to delve into them in greater detail. The first one is budget and resourcing allocation. In what ways is budget and resourcing allocation viewed as an investment in school reading culture?**

MM: Well, clearly for young people to read, whether they're in the primary or a secondary school context, they

need to have opportunity. So they need to have access to current and interesting books that appeal to their own unique interests. They need to have time to go and read in a space that's conducive to reading. And where a library is adequately furnished and given comfortable spaces in which to read, obviously where there's opportunity to read, reading is more likely to occur. So where schools are investing in ensuring that they have adequate resources to provide the space, but also the materials, to be conducive to reading, that can have a positive effect in building a reading culture.

**RV: And the next finding I'd like to talk about was the importance of having school leaders who read. Why was this important?**

MM: Well firstly there's the obvious – that modelling aspect. We know that the leaders' attitudes and what they do conveys really important ideas about valuing, not just to the staff, but also the students and also more broadly, beyond the school into the community. And so where the principal is a strong advocate of reading, in some cases as I mentioned in the paper, they're sending home newsletters around the importance of parents reading to their students at home, they're really acting as an advocate for reading beyond the school context, so both within a school and also beyond it. And so they're providing that modelling.

But also, where the keen interest in reading is there, and where there's a strong understanding of the association between reading and benefits for literacy, we find leaders may be perhaps better equipped to advocate for positive behaviours and attitudes towards reading within the school context. And also perhaps there might be a link between that resourcing commitment and obviously leaders' own attitudes towards the reading.

**RV: So the next one was active reading advocacy and involvement, and I know you've just spoken about that a little bit now. But, why is it important that leaders are supportive, active and visible advocates of reading within the school?**

MM: Well firstly, in order for reading to have even a space within a school beyond the requirements for testing or immediate learning – where we're building inner notion of a lifelong reader, where we're encouraging our young people to identify and have behaviours of a lifelong reader – we need to be placing it as a priority. So that active reading advocacy and involvement from leadership is really important because obviously our schools are very, very busy spaces.

There are a lot of competing demands in a school context and for reading engagement to really rise to the surface as a priority, it needs to be able to compete. And, we need to be able to have explicit understanding of the benefits and the importance of fostering reading engagement within our schools.

**RV: And let's chat now about the characteristics of a reading culture. The study outlined four characteristics and I'd like to run through these as well. So the first one was 'collaborative work towards establishing a reading culture'. Could you tell me more about that one?**

MM: Absolutely. And we know from our Australian Curriculum that literacy is positioned as a whole school priority. So it's supposed to be a General Capability enacted across all of our disciplinary areas. However, whether or not it is in reality embraced as a whole school approach is another question.

So what we really want is to have schools where the fostering of a reading culture is seen as something of importance beyond the library, beyond the English classroom, where all of the staff and the leadership are really focused on promoting that kind of a culture. And even beyond the school – bringing in parents, engaging parents and guardians in also promoting within a home context.

**RV: The next characteristic is 'staff who read'.**

MM: Well as with the leadership, acting as a model, where we have staff reading, again, that can have a really powerful influence on students. Because we know from the previous research that looks at children reading in the home that not all of them are exposed to positive reading models in the home. That's just the way it is and we've got students from diverse backgrounds, with parents with diverse struggles and that's the reality.

So, rather than become kind of preoccupied with what's happening there – although it is obviously important to equip parents to be strong models in the home – it's also really important that we think about what we can do at a school level, because we need to have staff showing that reading is something you can choose to do for the purposes of enjoyment. It's something you can choose to do to improve your vocabulary. It's something that can be an activity that, when done regularly, can offer pleasure. Because, if we don't see reading as something that can be done for the purposes of both pleasure and improvement, then you're not necessarily

going to be able to encourage young people who are not already engaged in the practice to become [active] readers.

**RV: And this leads well into the next one which is 'parental support for reading'.**

MM: Yeah absolutely and this is where teacher librarians often play an important role in really fostering that relationship between the school and the home. We know from previous research that parents don't always understand the importance of continuing to encourage their children to continue reading at home beyond the early years, particularly once their children have learned how to read independently.

There's a concept called '[expired expectations](#)' that I've explored in previous work, published in the *Australian Journal of Education*, where we have a misconception that once young people have learned how to read, that we no longer need to encourage them. And so, that's actually something that's enacted both in the school and home context – that once we've learned how to read, we start just reading for learning and we don't necessarily emphasise the importance of reading for pleasure and that regular reading practice. So we need to show parents that, yes, it is important that we continue to encourage our children to read beyond the early years and that we really make clear the benefit but also the enjoyment of that practice.

**RV: And the final one is 'silent reading'. What difference does silent reading make?**

MM: Well, silent reading is strongly associated with benefit for literacy skill acquisition. And that's kind of obvious, where we know we have opportunity to read, we have the opportunity to build our reading skills. But it's really hard to continue to promote the practice of silent reading in schools where there are all the aforementioned competing demands. So we need to really prioritise the provision of opportunity, because we know from some previous research that, for some students, silent reading opportunities in school are the only free reading opportunities they have. They may not necessarily have homes that are conducive to reading, they may not necessarily have homes that are rich in books, they may have multiple jobs, they may have competing demands.

So, where we can provide that opportunity for deep and sustained reading in a school context, not only are we providing students opportunity to be exposed to vocabulary, to build their reading comprehension, we're also communicating to young people that it's something that's valuable enough to give valuable time up from the curriculum to devote to the practice.

**RV: So, for teachers or teacher librarians listening to this podcast, who are keen to develop and enhance their school reading culture, where do you suggest they start?**

MM: Well the first thing that ideally can be done is the engagement of leadership support. If you don't already have your leadership onside, make them understand the importance that they can wield in their position as a leader in the school through acting as a model and advocate for reading, for being present. So for example, one of the teacher librarians in the study described a previous leadership that came in to the class and read to the first grade students during Book Week and the impression that this made on young people about the importance of reading. So it's really important to get the leadership on side.

Also where possible to secure resourcing and promote silent reading within a school will lead to beneficial effects in terms of building a culture that is supportive of reading engagement. But also that engagement of staff support more broadly ... in all cases it may not be possible to garner the support of school leadership, but if you can at least get the staff reading and being active reading models and promoting reading engagement within their classrooms, that's going to be a strong positive step towards establishing a reading culture at school.

And again, as I mentioned previously, actively engaging that home support will obviously be of value.

But it's really, really important that this be positioned as a whole school responsibility, moving towards a whole school culture of reading engagement.

**RV: Fantastic. Well Dr Margaret Merga, thanks for sharing your work and your insights with *Teacher magazine*.**

MM: My pleasure. Thank you.

*Thanks for listening to this episode from Teacher magazine. If you're keen for more, there's a link to the Australian Journal of Education [research paper](#) in the transcript for this podcast, which you'll find on the*

Teacher magazine website. Make sure you also check out more of Margaret's work – she's the author of more than 50 peer-reviewed journal articles and she recently published a book titled [Reading engagement for tweens and teens: What would make them read more?](#)

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