

Pay equity for New Zealand school librarians and library assistants

By *Miriam Tuohy and Sasha Eastwood*

Snapshot

Tuohy and Eastwood describe the journey of the New Zealand Librarians and Library Assistants' Pay Equity claims that have led to fairer rates of remuneration and a better understanding of the skills and expertise required of school library staff.

In 2020, amendments to New Zealand's Equal Pay Act 1972 were passed into law. These amendments enacted recommendations made by the Public Service Commission Joint Working Group on Pay Equity and provided a clear process for making pay equity claims. The Public Service Commission describes pay equity this way: 'Pay equity is about women and men receiving the same pay for doing jobs that are different, but of equal value (that is, jobs that require similar degrees of skills, responsibility and effort.' (Public Service Commission et al., 2020).

According to OECD data, New Zealand's gender pay gap in 2021 was 6.7% (Fifty Years of the Equal Pay Act 1972 - New Zealand Parliament, 2022). This is lower than the figure for Australia which the OECD calculates as 15.3%. The school sector here is dominated by female staff. In New Zealand schools, as elsewhere, support staff roles are most often filled by women. NZEI Te Riu Roa (the union for principals, teachers, support staff and specialist staff in New Zealand schools) has now successfully raised and settled several support staff pay equity claims with the Ministry of Education. These settlements cover:

- teacher aides
- administration staff
- kaiārahi i te reo — support staff who work alongside teachers supporting the Māori language (te reo Māori), and Māori customary practices and principles (tikanga)
- science technicians
- school librarians and library assistants.

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The librarians and library assistants' pay equity claim

In November 2020, NZEI Te Riu Roa ('NZEI TRR') raised a pay equity claim with the Ministry of Education ('the Ministry'), on behalf of school library staff in state and state-integrated schools.

The claim rested on 3 points:

- 'The consistently female-dominated workforce.
- The characterisation of school library work as women's work.
- Occupational segregation and the feminisation of library work.'

(NZEI Te Riu Roa - Pay Equity for Librarians | Mana Taurite, n.d.)

Although the Equal Pay Act sets out a clear process for making a pay equity claim, there are many steps involved, and a lengthy period needed to work through them.

In January 2021, the Ministry agreed that the librarians and library assistants' claim was arguable. At that time, other pay equity claims with the Ministry were in progress, so the school librarians and library assistants' pay equity claim joined the queue. By October of that year, the terms of reference were agreed, and the investigative stage of the claim process began.

Prior to any support staff pay equity claims, School Library Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (SLANZA) National Executive were already aware how crucial pay equity was for members, and of the need to be well prepared for a future claim.

Several SLANZA members, who were also NZEI TRR members, joined the investigative phase as members of the interviewing team. Along with NZEI TRR staff and members of the Ministry's pay equity team, they conducted interviews with school library staff and their supervisors. Interview transcripts were then analysed to produce thirteen general areas of responsibility (Ministry of Education Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga & NZEI Te Riu Roa, 2023, p. 50). The general areas of responsibility ('the GARs') were reviewed and finalised following feedback and further interviews with library staff.



Figure 1: School librarian and library assistants' general areas of responsibility

Once the GARs were ready, comparator roles were selected. The comparator roles were all public sector roles. Some had to be male dominated (including fishery officers, parking compliance officers, cadastral surveyors, corrections officers and customs officers). Others didn't need to be male dominated, as long they had already had a successful pay equity claim, so these included teacher aides, and school administration support staff.

The original set of questions were used again to interview workers in the comparator roles. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment holds all the interview data, and this can be used in any future pay equity claims.

NZEI TRR and the Ministry of Education used the GARs and the interview data to produce their evidence report. The report was published, and sex-based discrimination confirmed, on 23 November 2022.

Almost immediately, NZEI TRR, the Ministry and NZSTA entered the settlement negotiation process. Three members of the NZEI TRR team were also SLANZA members, who brought their expertise to the negotiations, along with the weighty responsibility of representing all school library staff. The approach used in negotiations was 'interest-based bargaining', which starts with a statement – in this case, the agreed aim of the settlement. All parties came to the table focused on achieving the same goal and committed to working collaboratively through a range of solutions. From SLANZA's point of view, the experience was on the whole extremely positive and empowering.

From these negotiations, the terms of the settlement were drafted, and shared with all the affected workforce for consultation. Voting opened on 3 February 2023 and the terms of the settlement were agreed by a large majority. The agreement was ratified on 22 February 2023 and signed on 6 March 2023, with an effective date of 23 November 2022 (Ministry of Education Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga, 2023).

Improved pay rates

For most library staff working in New Zealand schools, their employment is covered by the terms of the Support Staff in Schools' Collective Agreement ('the SSSCA') between the Ministry of Education, NZEI Te Riu Roa, and E Tū (another trade union, covering workers in a range of occupations and industries) (Support Staff in Schools' Collective Agreement, 2023). Far fewer school library staff have an individual employment agreement.

Data from our 2022 national survey of school libraries found that most responding school library staff were employed on Grade C of the SSSCA (National Library of New Zealand Aotearoa Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, 2023). Hourly rates in this pay grade range from \$23.69 (just above New Zealand's current 'living wage' of \$23.65) to \$26.30 per hour. When teacher aide and administration staff pay equity claims were settled, those staff received significant increases in their pay rates. So, for many library staff, their pay fell well below that of their support staff colleagues. From the same 2022 survey, 66% of library staff respondents said their pay was

inappropriate considering their role and responsibilities; only 20% of respondents felt their pay was appropriate.

The pay equity settlement will see hourly rates rise considerably for school library staff. This change applies to union members and non-union members, those covered by the SSSCA and library staff with individual employment agreements. As an example, the range of hourly rates for staff currently in Grade C will rise to \$28.08-\$33.68 per hour (up from \$23.69-\$26.30 as above). Extra allowances for relevant tertiary qualifications are unchanged — these will still be applied above the new hourly rates.

By the end of August this year, school library staff will receive a settlement payment backdated to 23 November 2022. This settlement payment is funded directly by the New Zealand Treasury. Once the settlement is implemented, schools' operational funding grant from the Ministry of Education will increase automatically (based on 2022 payroll data) to cover the new pay rates.

Clearer roles and responsibilities

The settlement agreement introduces a major change to how school librarian and library assistant roles are defined and described — the Work Matrix Table ('the work matrix').

The work matrix defines 4 grades, with increasing levels of autonomy from Grade A through Grade D. For each grade, the work matrix helps to clarify:

- accountability and levels of autonomy
- supervisory or management requirements
- levels of necessary skills and knowledge
- the type of problem solving required
- interpersonal and communication skills needed.

The work matrix and the general areas of responsibility combine to provide a very detailed description of all the work that school library staff do. In the past, much of this work, plus the levels of accountability and responsibilities that school library staff have, were not always evident to those outside the school library. As one respondent to the 2022 survey of New Zealand school libraries put it, 'Skills needed in a modern library are not well understood by teaching staff and management. We don't just put books away.'

One important principle of the settlement is that a 'pull up' policy applies. This means that librarians and library assistants don't have to do every activity listed in a particular grade in the work matrix to be positioned in that grade – it is enough to perform just one of the requirements regularly, to be placed in that grade.

Further benefits from the settlement

The pay equity settlement provides a lump-sum parental payment equivalent to 6 weeks' pay, for staff who take primary carer leave after 6 March 2023, return to work before or at the end of that period, and work for a further 6 months.

The terms of the settlement also include 'Additional workforce matters' — agreement that future consideration will be given to three key issues for school library staff. These are:

- that the current review of the funding model that applies to teacher aides be extended to consider other para-professional roles in schools, including library staff
- that research underway about current practice and use of teacher aides be extended to include the use of library staff in schools and kura
- that the working group considering career pathways and professional learning and development for administration staff, also considers librarians and library assistants' needs.

Next steps for school leaders and library staff

To be ready for implementation, library staff and school management need to:

- review and update library job descriptions, to ensure they are up-to-date and an accurate reflection of the role and responsibilities
- check up-to-date job descriptions against the work matrix and determine the correct grade and position for the role.

During a recent webinar for schools about implementing payroll changes for library staff, NZSTA Senior Advisor Carla Palmer reminded viewers that 'Job descriptions are living documents, and that means it's not a document that you just roll over without taking a look at it and considering whether or not the needs of the school, the requirements for the role have changed' (New Zealand School Trustees Association [NZSTA], 2023).

No further action is needed if the employee is already on the correct grade for their role. However, if the job requires re-grading, school staff will need to work through a re-grading process. The Ministry of Education will provide guidance about this during the year — the deadline for re-grading applications is 1 December 2023.

Looking forward

Settlement of the pay equity claim is an enormously positive outcome for school librarians and library assistants throughout New Zealand.

Significant improvements in remuneration correct an historic undervaluing of school library work. Library staff pay will soon be commensurate with the expertise required to do the job. The increases will once again put librarians and library assistants' pay on an even footing with their support staff colleagues.

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The process of investigating and settling this claim has been beneficial in other ways, too. The Ministry of Education, and other sector stakeholders, have a better understanding of the skills and expertise required of school library staff.

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The process has also raised awareness of the important role that school libraries and school library staff play in supporting teaching and learning, and student wellbeing. As schools work through the next steps towards implementation, this will raise visibility within the school of the value of the library and the staff who work there.

Maynard Scott, National Employment Relations Advisor for NZSTA, says 'It's great to see them get the recognition that they so rightly deserve. We also firmly believe that the provisions in the settlement are going to address other issues for schools and kura such as improving recruitment and retention. The impact that this settlement will have on the people employed in these roles is great, we know the impact they have on kaiako, teachers, schools, and our communities — the value they provide to them' (New Zealand School Trustees Association [NZSTA], 2023).

The evidence report and the work matrix can be additional resources used to advocate for the development of the school library sector, and for school librarianship as a viable career path. In the months ahead, SLANZA and the National Library will support schools and library staff in various ways.

SLANZA will ensure members have the most up-to-date information and guidance, and know how to access help, for example, by encouraging members to join NZEI Te Riu Roa and contact them for assistance.

The National Library's support for schools, including website content, includes guidance about leading and managing a school library (National Library of New Zealand Aotearoa Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, n.d.). This guidance and related resources such as job descriptions will be reviewed and refreshed over the next few months.

We are grateful to all those people who helped bring the Librarians and Library Assistants' Pay Equity Claim to fruition. Now we look forward to seeing that hard work and dedication make a real difference for our school library colleagues and their communities around the country.

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Miriam Tuohy joined the National Library of New Zealand's Services to Schools as School Library Development Senior Specialist in 2016. Her involvement in the New Zealand education system spans early childhood education, primary and secondary school, and tertiary libraries. Miriam is a life member of the School Library Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (SLANZA), serving on the National Executive from 2010-2016 including a year as President in 2015-16. As part of her current role, Miriam has contributed to the publication of Services to Schools framework for school library development, the 2018, 2019 and 2021 reports of the nationwide surveys of New Zealand school libraries. She is also involved in developing and delivering professional development for school library staff and teachers and is a regular contributor to the National Library of New Zealand's Libraries & Learning blog.

Sasha Eastwood is the current president of the School Library Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (2021-23). She has been the Librarian and Resource Manager at Manchester Street School in Feilding, Manawatū since 2009, becoming a SLANZA member and joining SLANZA's Central region committee at the same time. Since 2018 Sasha has represented the Central region on SLANZA's National Executive and she enjoys being an active member of such a dedicated and passionate group of school librarians, advocating and supporting the sector. During her time on National Executive, Sasha has been part of the School Libraries Transform campaign marketing team, and project lead for the New Zealand Libraries Partnership Programme-funded 'A Bit Sus' programme with Tohatoha Aotearoa Commons (formerly Creative Commons Aotearoa New Zealand).