

Making space in the library: Considerations for design and furniture choices to support student wellbeing

By *Chin Ee Loh*

Snapshot

Chin Ee Loh, Associate Professor and Deputy Head (Research) at the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education of the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, explores the ways the library space can support reading, student wellbeing and learning.

Internationally, there is growing recognition of the importance of learning environments as a third teacher to facilitate student learning and wellbeing. Students are more motivated to learn and more engaged in schooling in a space that they feel comfortable in (Cleveland, 2016). In a study of seven schools in Queensland, Australia, Willis et al. (2019) asked students for their perspectives of their ideal school library. They found that the feeling of spaciousness as well as opportunities for choice and control were linked to students' sense of wellbeing. Indeed, the school library has a unique place in school as one of the few informal spaces where students can exercise their agency in choosing their preferred activities, within the possibilities offered by the library. Moreover, in the humid tropical Singapore from where I write, the air-conditioned space also provides relief from the heat.

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The concept of behaviour settings

I was first introduced to the concept of behaviour settings by Associate Professor Ben Cleveland from the Learning Environments Applied Research Network (LEARN) at the University of Melbourne when he shared at our [project roundtable](#) about the potential of the behaviour settings concept for thinking about school library spaces. Essentially, behaviour settings explain how 'units of environment' (Barker, 1968) within a space influence human behaviour by providing cues to shape social behaviour. This is because space is a social product, where every day spatial practices shape and are shaped by human behaviours within the space (Lefebvre, 1991). Thus, a round dinner table in the dining room signals conversation whereas walking into a grand cathedral tends to prompt silence and whispers rather than loud conversation.

The design of space thus mediates the impression and use of a space and thoughtful design can shape the kinds of possibilities for social interaction and routines within that space. In our [Design Patterns report](#) from an earlier study of reading and school libraries, I explain how different zoning, layout and furniture choice can support the library functions of reading, studying, collaboration, research and 'doing' or experiential learning. In this Reflection and

Actions piece, I zoom in on three key principles about library space and furniture drawn from my current *Designing School Libraries of the Future* (LOTF) study.

1. Nudge students into reading bookshelves and comfortable seating

Since encouraging reading is a fundamental goal of the school library, the books in the library must be interesting, visible and accessible to the students (Loh et al., 2017). What this means in

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terms of library design is making sure that books take centre stage. At one LOTF school, the school leaders and teachers decided that they would need shelf space for at least 15,000 books and worked with the architect to anchor the school library design with the bookshelves. Figure 1 shows how books capture the attention of the students when they walk into the library space.

There's also a New Arrivals fictional books display when you first enter the library so I can just look at the books there and be like "Wow!" (Smiley, 14-years-old) (pseudonyms are used for all student names)

Figure 1. Bookshelves take centre stage.



Another spatial feature to encourage engaged reading in the school library is to ensure there are soft furnishings that will entice students to sit down and read. At another LOTF school, placing the armchairs facing away from each other (Figure 2) ensured that students would more likely read rather than chat with each other when occupying the seats. From our field observations and time-lapse images, reading is indeed the dominant behaviour in this designated section of the library, as intended by the school leaders and teachers.

(Note: We use school leaders and teachers because, unfortunately, Singapore school libraries are not typically staffed by qualified teacher-librarians. Rather, a teacher acts as a library coordinator and is supported with a library assistant. In some schools, a committee is set up to oversee the school library. However, the school leaders and teachers, with the support of the Singapore Ministry of Education, persevere to create the best school library possible, within their means.)

I usually came with my friends to read. We normally choose chairs at this corner. There are three chairs together. I really liked those chairs because the cushions are so comfortable. This is my favourite spot. I like to sit there and just relax and read. (Caroline, 14-years-old)

I like the school library because it's comfortable, has a lot more reading material than before and it's easier to find the books I want. Mother Tongue is in one section and history is in one section... I like to sit in one of those rocking chairs that hang from the ceiling to read. (Liam, 15-years-old)

Figure 2. Comfortable furniture placed near books nudge students into reading during their spare time.



2. Provide choice for studying, collaboration and relaxation

Students appreciate having choice to manage their own learning and view the school library as a calming environment for them to rest. During a focus group discussion, Prabu (quote below) explains how the natural light and organisation of the redesigned library at his school contributes to a sense of space and quiet. The varied seating arrangements, with comfortable armchairs for reading, discussion pods, high tables that look out to the football field and different table options that facilitate both quiet and group work were deliberately integrated into the design of the library by the school leaders and teachers.

The library is very well-developed. There's more sunlight, natural light coming in. And the place makes you feel that it's very nice. I like the surroundings. The way they put the tables here where you can get privacy. If you want you can sit outside there and see the windows. Let's say you're doing your laptop work, you can sit there and do it. Then, if you have a group discussion, you can sit there (discussion pods). Then if you want to just read a book, they have comfy chairs where you can sit on it and read. (Prabu, 14-years-old)

Other students also shared about how they appreciated the overall quietness of the library and the liberty to study, relax when stressed or just be with friends.

I use the library to study and relax. I come probably once a week. It's a quiet place and there's an aircon. You can relax and if you are stressed, you can walk around the library. (Marcus, 13-years-old)

When I come, it's usually because I want a quiet place to do my work or to study, I want to take my time to cool off when I'm really stressed. Hanging out with my friends, just like some quiet time. (Rita, 15-years-old)

The presence of individual study spaces and collaborative furniture signals to students that the library is both a place for quiet study and more noisy collaborative work. Since greater self-directedness and collaboration are required for [21st century competencies](#), the library as learning hub should ensure that different options are available for students' learning choice.

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Figure 3 shows the multiple options provided for students in one section of a school library. Discussion booths, high seating, round tables and study carrels are some of the possible ways to provide options for students. Adolescents like to have their own private space and the study booths in Figure 3 illustrate how the school has cleverly managed to balance the school's needs for visibility and students' needs for privacy by using slates instead of solid walls to demarcate the space between the booths. In addition, the slates also served as a design feature, contributing to the feeling of airiness in the library.

Figure 3. Multiple options for studying, collaboration and learning.



3. Consider versatility with multipurpose furniture

While there has been much emphasis on the use of flexibility in the dialogue around innovative learning environments in schools (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2020), I prefer to utilise the metaphor of versatility to consider organisation of space and choice of furniture, only because flexibility sometimes tend to be associated with mobile furniture. Although it is certainly important to ensure that furniture is lightweight and easy to move, the concept of versatility highlights that the more crucial factor is that the space can be adapted to many functions or activities.

Creating a versatile space where adaptation is easy is sometimes dependent on flexible furniture but that is not always a must. Figure 3 and 4 provides two different ways to achieve versatility through the creation of a multipurpose space for library activities. In Figure 3, the stage is a fixed stage but all furniture beside the stage can be easily moved to create a larger space for activities. The stage itself is tiered to allow student usage of the space when not required for activities. Lightweight and mobile furniture allows for space reconfiguration.

The amphitheatre in Figure 4 offers another alternative. The tiered seats and stage area are fixed in place but have been designed to allow students to utilise the space for their own purposes. When planning the school library, the school leaders took this dual usage into account and integrated power sockets into the tiered seating. A projector is fixed in the ceiling and can be easily paired with a mobile screen for a lesson or talk. The choice to frame the space with books provides another opportunity to make visible new book recommendations in line with the school's focus on regional studies in the ASEAN region. In this case, versatile usage is inbuilt into the fixed design, and other mobile features are used to support the more formal usage of space.

Figure 4. A versatile space. Students use the amphitheatre for relaxing, reading and doing their work when it is not in use as a stage or class activity area.



Our observations confirm the utility and attractiveness of such a space, with students using it as a space to read, to chat or even to do quick spurts of work in between lessons. Teachers enjoy

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having a non-classroom-like space to utilise in the library and have shared that it encourages out-of-the-box thinking about design of more experiential lessons. As Ms Lorraine explains in the quote below, the library space creates an informal space for student exploration, thus supporting their out-of-class learning.

For the school's Literature Festival, we've always had some classroom activities that we build towards the festival. We've done Spoken Word in the stage in school hall before but the [library] space has made a difference. There's less of a formality to the situation; it's a good performance space in that it's safe. It can be a draft. What matters about that space is that it's not high stress performance space we're just trying, and there's room to try. I think that is very powerful... (Ms Lorraine, English Language and Literature Teacher)

In the same library, we have observed teachers using an adjoining conference room as a seminar room and getting students to break out into the larger library space for small group discussions.

Concluding thoughts

To conclude, space matters when it comes to school libraries. Sullivan (2015) points out in her book, *High Impact Library Spaces*, that the 'grammar of [your] design needs to capture in space and decor the learning styles of the students coming into the library' (p. 99). A future-ready library should support student needs for reading, learning and wellbeing. It is worth putting time and thought into space organisation, furniture and the myriad little details to ensure that our school libraries are welcoming, attractive and meets the needs of our students.

References

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Read more about school library design in the following Synergy Articles:

Whisken, A. (2019). Successful Library Design Attitudes. *Synergy*, 14(1). Retrieved from <https://slav.vic.edu.au/index.php/Synergy/article/view/v141201611>

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