

# Mother Tongue & World Literature: How Singapore Libraries Serve Their Young Multilingual Patrons

By Karys McEwen

As the recipient of the 2017 SLAV Research Fellowship, I was fortunate enough to travel to Singapore in April this year to visit twelve school and public libraries. This gave me the opportunity to investigate how Singaporean library staff are creating dynamic resource hubs for their multilingual youth. As a country with four national languages, as well as an impressive reputation for international education, my library visits, observations and interviews provided a wide array of ideas on how we could improve our services to LOTE (Languages Other Than English) and EAL (English as an Additional Language) students in Australia.

At Glen Eira College, a public co-ed school in inner Melbourne where I work as the Head of Library, there are several language-based programs on offer to students. These include LOTE classes in French, Japanese and Hebrew, French and Japanese Immersion streams, and an adjoining English Language Centre (ELC) for newly arrived and international secondary students. Many schools in Victoria have similar programs, and it would be reasonable to assume that every school provides services for a number of students from language backgrounds other than English. Like most other schools, we have an incredibly diverse cohort at Glen Eira College, including many EAL students. I recently requested a report on the languages spoken at home by our families, and the number came back as 44, with a myriad of languages from Bengali to Swedish.

With this in mind, school libraries need to consider how to support students from all language backgrounds. According to The EAL Handbook, librarians or resource coordinators in Victorian public schools should "provide a range of accessible resources for EAL learners at different stages of EAL

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development" as well as "provide access to a range of factual and fictional materials in students' home languages" (Department of Education and Training, 2018). This is a significant responsibility that could be improved by sharing ideas with some of our overseas colleagues, in the spirit of the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) call to "foster a sense of community among school librarians in all parts of the world" (IASL, 2018).

When I arrived in Singapore, my first stop was the **Australian International School (AIS)**. The sprawling campus is home to four libraries and the staff who hosted me were exceptionally welcoming. Senior Library Technician Lenny Essi recognises the importance of supporting all students no matter their language background. "Our students are from all over the world," she said. "We support instructions in different languages for students taking the mother tongue or LOTE classes." At AIS, some of these languages include Tamil, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, and Hindi.



*The World Languages collections at the Australian International School Central Library (left) & Junior Library.*

Head of Library Linda Twitchett explained that as an International Baccalaureate (IB) school, it is the expectation that AIS supports the concept of mother tongue and world literature collections. "Diverse collections support the IB principles of diversity and international mindedness," she said. "Mother tongue takes this further in the expectation that schools will support mother tongue instruction." This is something that is championed to a high level, with the AIS school website outlining that if a student wishes to study their mother tongue, and it is a language currently not being taught at AIS, then the school will seek a tutor of the highest calibre, in order for that student to be immersed in the language and culture of their origins (Australian International School, 2018).



*Some of the library staff from the Australian International School (left) & the World Languages collection at the Senior Library.*

There is certainly a celebration of language at the AIS libraries, with numerous displays and collections on offer to the students and staff. That said, Twitchett notes that it is always a challenge getting books in other languages. "Here in Singapore we take advantage of **Kinokuniya** for many of our world literature books, especially those most on offer such as Chinese, Korean and Malay," she said. "We also take advantage of parents and teachers who are visiting home or other countries to bring back books for our collection." This reliance on the generosity of families to assist in building the language collections seemed to be a common thread with the international schools that I visited in Singapore – an advantage to working in a community of frequent flyers and worldly travellers.

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The language books at AIS are catalogued first according to the language itself, then the Dewey Decimal Classification, and finally into fiction/non-fiction. In the Senior Library, colourful spine labels denote each different language, with high interest books on display. In the Central Library (middle years), language

books are stored in tubs and racks on low shelving within the classroom space of the library. Bright posters and displays alert borrowers to the collection.

In the Junior Library, which has the largest number of different languages, the books are housed in multi-coloured magazine holders and labelled with each language. Everything from Afrikaans to Romanian is represented here. At AIS, they also have digital resources to complement the physical collections, such as **BrainPop** and a **Wheelers** consortia collection of eBooks, both of which support learners in languages other than English.





*The World Languages collection at the Australian International School Senior Library.*

Posters are the main way these language collections are promoted throughout the school. AIS also has numerous co-curricular activities and celebrations centred around languages, which include Chinese Drama, Kapa Haka Maori Cultural Group, International Cultural Experience (ICE Day) and Mother Tongue Week.

**UWC South East Asia** (East Campus) was my next library visit in Singapore. Their two libraries were multi-storeyed and gave an excellent first impression. Multiple copies of many of the books led to some intriguing innovations, including books presented on display stands with the copies stacked on the shelf behind, and coloured washi tape on the tops of signs to denote the year/month of purchasing. I spent several hours exploring all aspects of their striking spaces.

Teacher-librarian Barbara Reid said that a recent study of UWC students showed that grandparents of the school speak more than 67 different languages. It is clear why the languages collection, which is housed in a multicultural room, consumes an entire floor of the senior library. Many languages are accrued here, including more uncommon ones such as Finnish and Fijian, however Reid noted that Mandarin Chinese (taught language and the home language of many students) has the biggest representation.



*The UWC South East Asia Reading Room (left) & the World Languages collection at the Junior Library.*

In the junior library, the language collection also takes up a large amount of the floor space. This library includes a picturesque reading room with stairs leading to a reading window and a large display of cultural festivals from around the world, with numerous information books on this topic. It is clear that languages are something to be revered at UWC. Even the library staff office has a global feel, cheekily named the 'First Class Lounge'.

UWC relies on the help of parent volunteers for translating language books, and this was a common thread with each school I visited. Reid also seeks input from students and their parents when building the language collections. "We encourage EAL students and their families to donate books or to purchase books for our collection (which we refund them for)," she said. When relaying this call-out to their community, they are careful to communicate that any donations or purchases must fit their collection management policy.

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*The World Languages collection at the UWC South East Asia Senior Library (left) & the Singapore Lit collection which includes the Third Culture Kids collection.*

Aside from the books in languages other than English, another section of the library that was impactful was the 'Singapore Lit' collection as well as the shelves that were labelled "Third Culture Kids". Third Culture Kids (or TCKs) is a term coined by US sociologist Ruth Hill Useem in the 1950s, for children who spend their formative years in places that are not their parents' homeland (Mayberry, 2016). Globalisation has made TCKs more common, and in international schools, these students are plentiful. It was exciting to see the notion of global nomads acknowledged and celebrated in literary form.

**This collaboration between classroom and library staff is key.**

Like AIS, UWC have a number of digital resources in other languages, including **Epic!**, **myON** and **PressReader**. Library staff were quick to point out that both digital and physical items in other languages are always most popular when promoted by the

language teachers themselves. This collaboration between classroom and library staff is key.

During my trip I also visited a number of other international schools throughout Singapore, including **Overseas Family School**, **Dulwich College** and the **Canadian International School (CIS)**. Each were impressive in their own right and showed a commitment to supporting their multilingual patrons. CIS was one that particularly stood out as being forward-thinking in their approach to language collections.

Head of Library Lisa Miller estimated that there are 60 plus nationalities represented at her school. As in the other school libraries I visited, Miller relies on parent volunteers to translate books, and takes donations of items in the mother tongue languages. She also aims to keep the collection feeling fresh in order to encourage borrowing, which means the collections are reasonably small, with a focus on the 'Top Ten' books of the moment. She said that most language books are weeded after five years.





*The World Languages collection at the Canadian International School (left and right).*

Miller explained that she wanted to make sure the books were as easy to search as possible, and this is done chiefly through keeping the cataloguing records and spine labels simple and accessible. When cataloguing a Chinese resource for example, each title has the Chinese characters and English translation within the same line. World Language is given as a subject heading, and the spine label lists in order: Language, Collection, Dewey Decimal Classification. Library technicians at CIS use a number of sources for cross-referencing catalogued material, including the Chinese National Library. In terms of digital resources, CIS use **Epic!**, **Wawayaya** and **The Story Player** frequently, which supports their students in a number of languages including French, Mandarin and Spanish.

Promotion and festivities are essential to keeping the collection widely-used, and to the effect CIS hosts mother tongue readings by parents in their library, and also recently sent out a survey to their students asking if they felt their language was celebrated at school. The results led to discussion about how to improve the ways students are supported in learning languages.

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Although the international schools were remarkable in their scope, I was also grateful for the opportunity to visit a local Singaporean school during my stay. The Ministry of Education (MOE) is the primary implementer of the country's bilingualism policy, which requires students to study the English language and their respective mother tongues (Sim, 2016). Most recent changes in this policy include greater emphasis on interaction skills and oral literacy in MOE schools, as a way of enhancing student ability to connect with their cultural heritage and communicate with others using their mother tongue.



*The National Library of Singapore (left) & library@orchard – a public library in a large shopping centre that specialises in books on design & the arts.*

When I visited, the **Commonwealth Secondary School** (CWSS) had recently renovated their library to make it more conducive to pleasure reading. The new space is open and contemporary, with well-designed display units, a small amphitheatre area, discussion pods built into the bookshelves, a reading corner and glass-walled meeting rooms. At CWSS I was able to meet with Dr Chin Ee Loh, an assistant professor at the National Institute of Education (NIE) and principal investigator of the 'Building a Reading Culture: A Nationwide Study of Reading and School Libraries in Singapore Secondary Schools' study (NIE, 2018).

After the completion of the refurbishment at CWSS, Dr Loh contacted the school to be the baseline study. The modern space with new collections includes mother tongue books in the national languages of Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. Although the collections are reasonably small, the positive feedback from the CWSS students shows how "the selection and advertisement of books made the library seem interesting and unusual, catering to the needs of the students to access a wide variety of books." (Loh, Ellis, Paculdar & Wan, 2017).



*The recently refurbished library at Commonwealth Secondary School (left) & their display with stories from around the world.*

**CWSS takes cues from the retail sector with book displays that attract the attention of teenage readers . . .**

The library staff at CWSS are strong believers in the importance of reading for pleasure, not just achievement. In the language collections for example, the Tamil translation of Harry Potter is well-read, as well as the Mandarin language comics and series of short chapter books in Malay. Pop-up books and illustrated

versions of classics are popular with EAL students who can better engage with the text due to the tactile nature. CWSS takes cues from the retail sector with book displays that attract the attention of teenage readers, and at the entrance of the library sits a display of 'Stories From Around the World'. Like the other schools I visited, CWSS library staff make sure to take into account student and teacher requests, as well as suggestions from the National Library Board (NLB) when buying new resources.

The NLB is invested in schools in a way that isn't paralleled in our Australian context, but was certainly intriguing. As well as school libraries, I explored a number of public libraries under the NLB umbrella, including **Jurong Regional Library**, **Pasir Ris Public Library**, **library@orchard**, **library@esplanade** and the **National Library of Singapore** itself.

In Jurong I met with Associate Librarian Goh Jia Ying for a tour of the library, including Verging All Teens (V.A.T.), the first dedicated teen library service in Singapore. V.A.T. is a trial by the NLB to allow teenagers to design and manage a library space for themselves. The library services were planned and executed by teen volunteers and the environment is envisioned to inspire teens to live their dreams, express themselves and explore opportunities (NLB, 2018). Within this service, as well as the other library branches that I visited, there are numerous initiatives aimed at young people, some of them a direct collaboration with schools, or even going so far as to take public library books into schools for students to borrow.

The NLB also offers consultancy to schools and numerous free resources including **discoverReads** reading lists and reading interest profiles, reading journals, **Book Ninjas** (in collaboration with the Singapore Indian Development Association) and **Book Bugs**. Their aim is to raise readers, and with the most recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2016) showing that Singaporean children are among the best readers in the world, their efforts aren't going unnoticed.



The NLB youth programs are inclusive of speakers of languages other than English. Read! Singapore is a nationwide initiative that recommends selected reads, runs talks and workshops, and reaches out to the community to spread the joy of reading in all four official languages (NLB, 2018). The V.A.T. library, as well as the teen mezzanine at Pasir Ris Public library have distinct collections of comics and graphic novels in all languages and various genres. The free resources the NLB provides schools are often available in Mandarin, Tamil and Malay translations and Language Month is a recognition of the importance of diverse language through author talks, book displays, and drama and poetry performances. These events aim to foster confidence and pride among people who speak the mother tongue languages. The work that they do to celebrate diversity and cultural heritage is admirable.



*Pasir Ris Public Library (left) & the Tamil collection.*

Back on home soil, I have begun working on implementing some of the ideas taken from my Singapore library visits to improve the way my own library serves multilingual students. At Glen Eira College, the library has housed French books for several years, but a recent weed of this (mostly donated) collection and the addition of around 40 popular French titles, including many English translations, has kept the shelves looking fresh, and borrowing statistics steady. This year we have also purchased and sought donations for new Japanese and Hebrew collections.

After discovering that 44 different languages were spoken at home by our students, I created a separate languages reference collection with dictionaries in different formats covering nearly all spoken languages. These have been borrowed frequently, surpassing my expectations. The investment in this collection has shown returns; a student recently discovered the new Tagalog dictionary and phrasebook and took it home so she could improve her language skills in order to speak with her grandmother.

Throughout the process of developing these language collections, I have collaborated with LOTE and EAL staff, as well as teachers from our English Language Centre. This has been necessary for creating interesting collections that acclaim languages. Gemma Fisher, Leading Teacher at the ELC, encourages her students to read widely to develop their proficiency and knowledge of text types and purposes. "Engaging in an intensive language program, as well as facing the challenges of a new environment, culture and language, is difficult for all students so we hope that reading for fun can calm some of their stresses and help them to learn by exploring personal interests," she says. "Our students feel more connected to school and some say they feel very safe in the library. The manga books are very popular."

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In terms of cataloguing, my library technician colleague and I have sought help from language staff in translating cataloguing information, and together we created a proforma with a list of which details are required to make it a simple process. If need be, we will extend this call to students or families. We have also widened the cross-referencing search from SCIS and Trove, to include Monash University (Japanese) and the Bibliotheque Nationale de France.

I believe the next step will be considering small collections in languages spoken by a high number of our students, but not taught, such as Mandarin or Russian. Although we have a ClickView subscription with some content in languages other than English, I will continue to investigate other digital resources to support LOTE and EAL students. We will also keep working to tie the library collections and programs into school-wide cultural celebrations such as Cultural Diversity Week, Bastille Day, Chinese New Year, Diwali, NAIDOC Week, and Harmony Day, among others.

Language programs and their supporting library collections are integral in adhering to the Victorian Government's vision for "all Victorian learning and development settings to equip children and young people with the knowledge and

skills to participate in and contribute to our diverse society as active and informed citizens" (Department of Education and Training, 2018). One way that library staff can help support worldly, eager students is by sharing information about programs and materials throughout the international community (IASL, 2018). The ideas gained from my Singaporean library visits have real-world impact on the learning and wellbeing of the diverse students at my own school, and I am thrilled to share these with my SLAV colleagues and other school library staff across the country.

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