Reading Spaces

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This paper will explore briefly what research tells us about library design and, more specifically, the design of reading spaces for the provision of pleasure reading in school libraries. Acoustics, lighting and temperature levels, amongst other factors, all have an impact upon the learning experience that takes place in any school space. How we approach the creation of library reading spaces will be discussed with a particular focus on student views and opinions. Furniture, layout, colour, display and ambience will all be considered in light of how they affect comfort and learning opportunities. A number of illustrative examples of school library reading spaces and the views of students will be shared with the audience during the formal presentation.

Reading Spaces, Design, Reading

The Place of Reading Spaces

There has been a great deal of discussion surrounding the development of school library learning environments. Much of the recent literature and the research results indicate the need for more open flexible learning spaces, which can respond to the needs of the individual learner, and the links between well designed spaces and student achievement (Hill, 2002; Harbutt, 2006;Lackney, 2003; Nair & Fielding, 2005). Shibsted sees the school library's role in this century as 'a place for collaboration, performance, creativity, interactivity and exploration' (2005, p. 26). The impact of Information Communication Technologies (ICT), changing workplaces, the recognition of different learning styles and greater autonomy in learning have all influenced current thinking about education and have been taken up by those rewriting curriculum documentation to reflect current needs. How have reading spaces been positioned in this time of change?

Initially, when various technologies were moved into school libraries, some institutions reduced the size of their pleasure reading spaces (La Marca, 2003). As time has gone on and ICT have been better understood and better utilised throughout the whole school environment, the nature of reading spaces has been rethought. There are clear links between learning and student achievement and pleasure reading (La Marca, 2004). This and the enjoyment students find in reading for pleasure are important reasons to spend time and effort on creating an effective reading space in a school library. This paper aims to identify the factors that impact upon the planning and creation of a school library reading space.

Library Policy

Like the school mission or vision statement, school library documentation must reflect the principles that underpin the operation of the particular school. This means that the library mission statement, all policy documents, all submissions and any future design or refurbishment project briefs must be based upon the school's structure and guiding principles. This may include education authority directives, blueprints and priorities, the school's vision statements and relevant current research documents. All of this information must be reflected in the documentation that supports the library's operation and all future planning. Once written, these statements or policies must also be widely distributed and ratified by the school's administrative structure. Such articulation ensures a basis for sound decision making and clear library goals and objectives during any design consultation process or even a small redecoration.

Planning Informed by Policy

Davidson said 'physical space reflects educational philosophy. Educators who reorient physical space to support essential learning agree: set clear pedagogical and social goals before you organise space' (2001, p.1). Having a mission statement in place, a statement owned by the library staff and the school community that clearly states the aims and objectives of the school library, is a powerful base for any future library development. When a change, no matter how small, is being considered for the library space or the use of the library space, the proposal should be evaluated against the policy and mission statements. Such informed policy planning avoids adhoc development of library spaces.

Recent research into the way we create reading environments supports this view. In discussing the provision of an area for pleasure reading one teacher-librarian said: 'We don't have that nice little lounge room bit – we can't put it in and the bit we have is disappearing as we put in more computers' (La Marca, 2003). Why? Further investigation found that the area had changed because they did not plan for it or have the research justification in place to back up its existence.

Aidan Chambers, in his book entitled *The Reading Environment,* highlighted the 'value' given to an activity by giving it a designated space (1991, p. 30). We should value what we see as our core roles and ensure that the library floor plan supports those core roles through proper documentation. This means that if we value reading as an activity to be fostered and promoted by the library and the wider school community, we must ensure that an appropriate space is part of the overall library plan.

Elements of reading space design

There are a number of elements that should be taken into account when designing any part of the library and reading spaces are no exception. This discussion will consider the following factors:

- Ambience
  - Attitude
- Access and ownership

- Flexibility
- Individuality / Creativity

- Physical concerns
    - Furniture
    - Light
    - Colour
    - Acoustics
    - Temperature
    - Display

- The role of the student and the school community

Ambience

Ambience is many things. Firstly, it is the 'feeling' created by the physical environment; the result of conscious thought being directed to how best to use the architecture, how to utilise furniture, lighting, colour, display materials, signage and various forms of decoration. (La Marca & Macintyre, 2006, p. 59) The ambience that each teacher-librarian creates will be different, depending on each particular school, and the physical attributes of the library.

Haycock, in his overview of recent research, found that 'the physical ambience of the school library is a relevant factor in terms of the library program's overall impact on student achievement and literacy. In 'outstanding' schools, library facilities were consistently welcoming and included informal areas for free voluntary reading and browsing' (Haycock, 2003, p. 30). Doll (1992, p. 227) suggests that the correct ambience within a space contributes towards the students' sense of ownership of the space, an important factor in how welcome students feel and their sense of connection to the space.

Secondly, ambience refers to the feeling created by the personnel who work within the library environment and, in this particular case, those that work within the reading area or spaces within the library. Research has found that attitude, the way the teacher-librarian perceives the students and interacts with them, is one of the central factors in facilitating the creation of an effective reading environment – 'Positive teacher-librarians, who are interested in creating a welcoming reading environment within their libraries, display an appreciation of their students as reading individuals and an interest in sharing reading experiences with them' (La Marca, 2005)

Access and Ownership

Elliott Burns (2003), in her article 'Space, place, design and the school library,' discusses how spaces are socially constructed. Burns poses these questions: who designs spaces? And what or who informs the design? She sees connections between power structures and social structures and design. Boyce (2003) agrees, seeing any library space as the result of a 'personal agenda' (p. 23). This poses interesting questions in relation to access and equity which must be considered when entering the process of any design or layout changes. In relation to reading spaces we must consider whether how the space is situated, how it is

accessed from outside the library and from other areas, and how students feel about using the space affect the access that all students have to the space.

Lackney stated that 'structured reading areas have shown to significantly increase literature use by students' (2003, p. 12). Within any given space we must also consider how it is being used. How readers create a sense of ownership of their own space in a way that makes them feel welcome and comfortable. Research by Doll has found that 'there is some evidence to indicate that children also seek to define and defend a territory for themselves…Privacy can be provided by using carrels, bookcases, shelves, and portable panels as screening…60% of students interviewed (Ahrentsen et. Al.) said they preferred such space when they needed to concentrate' (Doll, 1992, p. 226). If we consider this an important aspect of library design, we need also consider the necessity of creating smaller spaces within larger areas, establishing welcoming and homelike elements that encourage the student to feel comfortable and valued.

Doll found that 'students appreciate a library media center where professionals and staff welcome them and allow them 'ownership' privileges' (Doll, 1992, p 227). There is evidence to suggest that if children feel comfortable in a familiar space, there are positive academic benefits, including an increased ability to concentrate on learning tasks. This must also correlate to the activity of reading for pleasure.

Flexibility

Davidson said 'flexibility puts control in the hands of the educator' (2001, p. 3). There is truth in this statement. Ensuring that spaces are physically constructed in a way that enables the community to respond to change more easily is the cornerstone of flexibility. Freeman, in what he terms 'laboratories that learn', describes well-planned libraries as 'spaces easily reconfigured in response to new technologies and pedagogies' (Freeman, 2005, p. 2). As changes in educational philosophy and student needs become apparent, the physical space can be modified accordingly. In readings spaces this flexibility allows the area to change regularly to keep it constantly inviting and interesting.

Flexible spaces are everywhere in the literature on design. Hackett says 'A library needs architectural authority to sell the idea that learning is culture's hot zone. It has to offer retreats for solitary study and forums for active engagement' (Hackett, 2004, p. 1). How this relates to a library reading space is something that requires serious consideration. Some public libraries are looking towards the marketing strategies of large chain bookstores to understand how they can successfully convey their various messages. Perhaps school libraries need to consider similar ideas when constructing flexible responsive spaces to facilitate reading and other activities that take place within their walls.

Individuality / Creativity

This paper must discuss the creation of reading space in generalities, as it is impossible to engage effectively with the wide variety of possibilities, questions and issues that any one group of teacher-librarians may have about how to create a relevant, functional space for their library. Within this discussion, though, we must not lose sight of the importance of creatively engaging with how to bring individuality to a particular space. This is particularly relevant when creating reading spaces and storytelling areas for the junior end

of schooling. Some teacher-librarians choose to work with a focus, idea or mascot that is close to the heart of their school, using characters, colors or themes that have a particular relevance to their local area.

To come up with inspiration you can survey your students for creative ideas. Perhaps you may choose to let the art department run wild, invite in local artists or release your own inner imagination. Any of these options, handled with care and a clear assessment of the needs and ideals, should result in a reading space that is responsive and inviting to the community it serves.

The factors being discussed in this paper - color, furniture, light, ambience etc - all play a part in the creation of a reading space but the creative element that we bring to the mix, sometimes with the help of others, is the icing on the cake.

Physical concerns

Furniture

Fielding found that 'a wonderful characteristic of learning is that we learn when we feel secure and cozy, and also when we feel challenged' (Fielding, 2006, p. 1). This is a factor that must be considered seriously when choosing furniture. Too often in the school environment we respond to financial or practical needs that ignore our very human need to feel 'cosy and secure'. Davidson agreed, stating that comfortable seating, quiet corners and private niches are necessary elements of any good design that supports learning (Davidson, 2001, p. 3).

The easiest non-structural change to alter the feel of any room is through the use of colour or furniture. Morgan suggests that 'the way in which furniture and joinery is positioned in a room is also a useful tool for creating ambience within the space. Placing furniture in an unordered or informal way helps to create a sense of welcome and creativity in group learning areas' (Morgan, 2007, p. 37).

Overwhelmingly, comfortable seats are the most mentioned furniture option in relation to creating a warm, welcoming library space. In 2003 research into creating positive reading environments, the student respondents' most requested addition to the library space to improve ambience and comfort was the inclusion of attractive, relaxed seating (La Marca, 2003). This finding is borne out in the recent book *The language of school design: Design patterns for 21st century schools* (2005), where Nair and Fielding claim 'on those rare occasions where students are given an opportunity to comment on the quality of their learning environment one answer always seems to make the cut – "give us more soft seating"' (p. 57).

In his list of *33 principles of educational design,* Lackney (2003) indicated a number of principles that correlate with the view that an effective school library space must respond to the need for flexibility to support learning. One of the most interesting being design principle seven which states 'consider home a template for school'(Lackney, 2003, p. 7). This principle is particularly important in relation to reading spaces since when we read, comfort is a key factor in how we respond to the activity. One student, when questioned in research on the reading environment about seating in the reading area said 'I think libraries should have armchairs because that's what they have at home' (La Marca, 2003, p. 143). With this

and Lackney's views in mind perhaps we should consider how and where we read in our homes and design library reading spaces accordingly?

The following list compiled by Manning and La Marca (2007) could be considered when making decisions about furniture choices:

- Consider first impressions/entrance ways
- Flexibility
- Shelves on wheels
- Wireless technology
- Allowances in shelving seating etc. for growth and change
- Technical considerations
- Cabling
- Colour
- How different elements will define the space
- Functionality
- Child size
- Comfort
- Aesthetically pleasing
- Appealing furniture creates enthusiasm
- Sturdiness
- Ergonomics
- When furnishing a particular area consider the whole

(Manning & La Marca, 2007, p. 16)!

And don't forget to be creative and whimsical at times that are appropriate. Imaginative approaches to problems are to be encouraged. A recent example of being a little whimsical or perhaps innovative and brave is the 'feet table' utilised at a Melbourne suburban secondary college. After having to constantly ask students to remove their feet from various objects when reading, the library staff decided to invite rather than discourage the process. They cut the legs shorter on a coffee table and renamed it the 'feet table'. Students are allowed to put their feet up and read and everyone is much happier. A creative, relaxed response to an issue that had been causing division – now the reading space is even more conducive to relaxed pleasurable reading!

Light

Design literature suggests that we should seriously consider the use of lighting as effectively as possible. Within the possibilities of task, ambient, decorative or access lighting, most commentators stress the importance of maximising task-orientated lighting and the use of natural light. Lackney's design principle 28 is 'maximise natural and full spectrum lighting' (2003, p. 20). This principle was reinforced by the research review undertaken by Kenn Fisher for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, in which he found that 'It is generally accepted that good lighting, both natural and artificial, can contribute to the aesthetic and psychological character of a learning space. Studies confirm that, for fifth and sixth grade students, appropriately designed and well-maintained lighting improves students' achievement scores' (Fisher, 2001, p. 3).

Considering a student-centred approach to learning and acknowledging the range of individual learning styles that we must engage with in the library environment, Randall Fielding suggests that 'we all learn differently and at different times. We need a variety of lighting levels and qualities and colours of light' (Fielding, 2006, p. 3). He also says that 'lighting should vary to reflect the character of each space.' (Fielding, 2006, p. 3) The fact is that within one library environment there are inevitably a number of different learning/activity areas that demand different and varied lighting levels. Active areas, quiet reading areas and work spaces all have different lighting needs. A reading space has particular needs in relation to light - students need subdued, calming lighting to reflect a quiet activity but they also require good quality spot lighting in specific areas, to provide good reading light. Balancing both of these needs is a challenge that takes considered thought, particularly when natural lighting, and the normal changes in its intensity across the day, is taken into account.

Fielding suggests we consider brighter illumination in the centre of a room where active work is taking place with softer lighting for a quiet reading room. Light, like furniture or colour, can be used effectively to denote activity, divide spaces and modify behaviour.

Colour

Colour is a very complex area. Engelbrecht (2003) noted its impact on mood, and physical reactions and recognised that age and life experiences play a part in how we interpret different colours. Myerberg critically said 'colour is not decoration; it is a teaching tool, an alphabet of light' (2002, p. 1). He is describing something elusive; perhaps he is arguing that colour can contribute to the teaching process by creating an ambience or atmosphere which is conducive to learning. Hennah (2007) said 'innovative use of colour can energise, soften, warm or enrich your library' (p. 62).

Commentators point towards the need for all educators, not just those in libraries, to be more adventurous and creative with colour. We definitely need to broaden the spectrum of the colours that we are prepared to consider using everything from what Hackett (2004, p. 1) calls the 'luscious and lulling baby blue' to the red and yellow of the famous commercial 'golden' arches. Fielding said 'All colours have a place for learners of all ages, when used thoughtfully. A good application depends on the cultural and climatic context, available resources and lighting'(Fielding, 2006, p. 5).

Fisher found that 'Although no quantitative measures have been identified in the published research, colour is believed to influence student attitudes, behaviours and learning, particularly student attention span and sense of time' (2001, p. 4).

A variety of services are available, both from commercial sources and on the internet, for example www.mycolor.com.au, which allow users to create a variety of paint schemes online. It is worth taking advantage of these opportunities and consulting experts as colour can be a powerful design element if wisely used.

Morgan (2007) found that 'colour trends come and go and trying to keep up with the latest vogue interiors can be an expensive exercise. Paint is relatively cheap and is easily changed to give a school library space a new feel or face lift without having to invest in costly new floor coverings, furniture and lighting' (p. 40). Relevant advice for anyone

revamping or redesigning a reading space as cheap and easy statements are often the most many can hope for. This aside, there is no doubt that colour can make a huge difference relatively easily to every aspect of a space.

Acoustics

Fisher, in his work on design features and how they affect learning, noted the impact of acoustics on student behaviour and learning outcomes (Fisher, 2001, p. 4). Acoustics is often a neglected area, its importance not being realised until buildings are finished and it is often too late to redesign areas to improve the acoustics. Teacher-librarians must consider noise levels within a building, as well as the noise that leaks in from areas beyond when choosing where to situate a reading space. Calm and quiet are essential for relaxed reading and if noise can be minimised this is to everyone's advantage.

Even once a space is situated with no option for moving it changes can be made to minimise noise levels. Morgan reminds us that 'acoustic ceiling tiles, carpet, fabric wall covering and furnishings, and even shelving make a difference to the sound levels within a space' (Morgan, 2007, p. 38). Whether we have doors open or closed and he window covering we employ can also impact upon the way sound works in a space. They do this by absorbing sound within the space.

Temperature

The Commonwealth report *Building better outcomes: The impact of school infrastructure on student outcomes and behaviour*, found that there is an 'overwhelming weight of evidence supporting a relationship between the thermal environment and academic achievement and student behaviour' (Fisher, 2001, p. 4). The report suggests that temperatures in excess of 25 degrees centigrade (approx 77 degrees Fahrenheit) have detrimental physiological effects which result in decreased mental efficiency, work outputs and performance. Findings such as this require us to look carefully at the temperatures we offer in the reading space. Though Fisher's findings focus on the detrimental effect of high temperatures, there is no doubt that very low temperatures can also cause difficulty – it is very hard to read comfortably in an area that is too cold. Find a pleasant median is essential if the community is to be encouraged to use the space enthusiastically all year round.

Display

Anecdotal evidence and research both indicate strong benefits for displaying student work. It contributes positively to their sense of wellbeing and feeling of ownership and belonging. Chambers said displays 'deeply influence the mental set of people who see them' (1991, p. 23). He argues that good book stock (an important element not covered in this paper) plus good display, or the lack thereof, are an indicator of the value placed on reading and books (1991, p. 28). Research in this area (La Marca, 2003) found that students liked to see their own work displayed as they found it encouraging. There was also a suggestion that seeing their own work on display contributed towards their sense of ownership of the space. Morgan notes that 'constantly changing display walls created by students create a feeling of ownership and pride and encourage students to take part in creating their learning environment' (Morgan, 2007, p. 38).

Research (La Marca, 2003) also found that students wanted input into the types of general displays that decorated the reading area. Students commented on the gap between what well-meaning teacher-librarians thought would interest the students and what they would have chosen for themselves if offered the opportunity. The research respondents indicated that though teacher-librarians chose what they thought were teen friendly posters to decorate the walls in fact they were way off the mark. No doubt there are many other examples of well meaning choices that fail to invite the student body as expected. This reinforces the importance of seeking student opinion.

Hennah (2007) encourages us to consider how marketing gurus have constructed displays in shops that attract and engage customers. Various public libraries and designers have taken these views on board including the Princeton Public Library in New Jersey (USA) and the Opening the Book library design company in the UK, school libraries have been slower to follow. Hennah sees transference of the principles of retail design to how we use display in a library environment as user friendly and appealing. Outward facing display, quality materials, clean lines and planning are elements that Hennah suggests teacher-librarians must embrace.

The role of the student and the school community

To contribute to the students' sense of ownership of any space within the library environment it would be wise to invite student involvement in any re-design or refurbishment. To encourage their support and involvement one could:

- Survey students about their needs
- Seek their input on colour and textures
- Observe student usage of spaces and regular movement patterns to inform change
- Create a sub-committee that includes students to inform the design process

It is important that we involve school communities in any design or redesign of library facilities to allow us to achieve outcomes that suit the clientele and to increase their sense of ownership of the results. This input, though, must be based on sound educational principles and research that has been established and ratified through the appropriate channels.

Conclusion

Research of various kinds supports the need for teacher-librarians and school communities to plan carefully any change to a library's design in light of best possible practice. All learning environments should be based on sound pedagogical and social considerations. There are many sensible reasons for this view and it can be argued that school libraries, and all of their component parts, offer a value for money investment. Schibsted, in discussing the Robin Hood project to create new or updated school libraries in disadvantaged primary schools in New York, reported that 'by investing in only five percent of school's real estate (the library)(the project) has an impact on 100 percent of the students' (Schibsted,

2005, p. 26). If we want to have an impact on learning and take pleasure reading seriously, quality reading spaces that provide an environment conducive to the task are essential.

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Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.