
The High School Library as a Safe Space for Student Wellbeing

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Introduction and Context

Post-pandemic, schools are seeking ways to support wellbeing, from adding counselors to implementing Social Emotional Learning to hiring Wellness Directors (Peetz, 2022). My exploratory and action research aimed to shed light on how one secondary school library could impact student wellbeing.

As part of its 2025 strategic plan, Hong Kong International School (HKIS) is creating a “Culture of Health and Well-Being.” For context, HKIS is an independent school whose high school serves 757 students with one librarian and 1.5 library assistants. The horseshoe-shaped library seats approximately 45 students on each side. The Quiet Zone side is for individual study, while the Project Zone has sofas, tables, and two collaboration rooms for group work.

Research Question

To what extent does the high school library facilitate wellbeing by serving as a safe space for students?

Literature Review

Willis, Hughes & Bland introduced the concept of Australian school libraries as places of safety and comfort in 2019. Wittmann and Fisher-Allison introduced the concept of the elementary library as a refuge for neurodiverse and marginalized students in 2020. Finally, Dr. Margaret K. Merga, wrote several articles and included the topic in her 2022 book *School Libraries Supporting Literacy and Wellbeing*. However, the body of literature is small, and much of it is focused on Australian schools.

Methodology

My process included an exploratory phase using an anonymous student survey in February 2023. Results were analyzed using thematic coding. In phase two, I beta-tested prototypes in spring 2023 and fall 2023, analyzed them via quantitative, observational, and focus group (n=18) measures in January 2024. Focus groups responded anonymously on sticky notes placed on two whiteboards and then discussed. These notes were transcribed using the Post-It note app and coded thematically.

Findings

Phase 1 Survey

Three hundred one students took the survey (40%). The majority were either “avid fans” (36.2%) who use the library nearly every day, or “frequent users” (31.2%) who come once a week. “Average users” (16.3%) come once a month, and “rare users” (16.3%) come twice a semester or less. **Overall, 67% of students visit at least once a week.** As such, the library is positioned to play an important role in student wellbeing.

Considering schools as relational places, Butler et al. define a “safe space” as “a space where students feel comfortable and secure” (2017). Merga then applied this specifically to

school libraries (2020). **When asked if our library is a safe space, 93% of students said yes and 7% said no.**

When asked what factors contribute to making the library a safe space, students appreciated:

- purposeful academic environment
- positive atmosphere
- physical comfort
- quiet
- solitude
- sense of community
- wide range of resources for learning about diverse topics
- privacy
- personal space
- versatility of spaces and student choice

When asked what makes the library NOT feel like a safe space, respondents mentioned:

- noise
- overcrowding
- exposure, particularly where seen through hallway windows
- strictness

Phase 2: Prototypes and focus groups

Survey comments stimulated prototypes for beta testing:

- *Cuddle Buddies.* A half dozen stuffed animals were placed around the library. Students were observed seeking the plushies, lying on them, hugging them, and holding them in their laps as they worked. “I remember the little plushies that were at the library and that they were very fun to play with,” wrote one focus group member.
- *Fidget toys.* To relieve stress and support neurodivergent students, acupressure rings, rotating plastic shapes, and spiky sensory rubber shapes were offered. “I really like the idea of fidgets and I plan to book some soon,” wrote one focus group member. In the first two months, students checked out the toys 54 times.

- *Capacity system.* To control overcrowding, passes (one per seat) were placed at the entrance. Students took one upon entry and returned it upon leaving, which prevented the library from going over capacity. Though students could rearrange chairs, they were required to take a seat instead of standing or sitting on the floor. This spread out students and discouraged roughhousing. One focus group member wrote, “The library has a good system for overcrowding with cards,” though another requested a capacity increase. No one mentioned noise as an issue. Deemed a success, this system remains in place.
- *Self check-out station.* Self-checkout offers a way to borrow items about mental health issues without embarrassment. As one student wrote: “I feel like a lot of people feel ashamed they are borrowing certain books including those relating to mental health. I feel like an easy fix is increasing awareness about the self-checkout.” Though not possible to determine if more books on stigmatized topics were borrowed using self-checkout, statistics show that this station was frequently used. Between April 15, 2023 to April 15, 2024, self-checkouts accounted for nearly one in five circulations. This means that 21% of the time, students choose to perform the transaction themselves, giving them privacy.

Implications and Conclusions

The library is popular, with 67% of students visiting at least weekly. As such, it is positioned to play a role in students’ wellbeing. A majority (93%) said the library is a safe space, with the top two reasons relating to quiet and solitude. Seventy-three percent like the quiet, and 82% like sitting by themselves without feeling alone. The physical layout with separated quiet and collaborative sides is appreciated. Though several spaces elsewhere in the school allow for collaborative work, no other space offers individual silent study, making the library prized as a safe space.

A few things made the library not feel like a safe space. Students complained that the library is “rowdy,” “noisy,” and “overcrowded” in the Project Zone. They also lamented that it’s hard to find a seat at peak times. Clearly, the popularity of the library causes some of its own

problems. The capacity system works to mitigate issues, but results in turning students away. Students say they'd appreciate extended hours, more collaboration rooms, and more seating.

Monitoring is another way to keep the atmosphere safe. However, students have conflicting opinions about how this makes them feel. In answer to the question "Is there anything else that makes the library feel like a safe space?" four students simply typed the librarian's name. One focus group student said, "The librarians do a really good job at keeping it quiet." However, when asked what makes the library NOT feel like a safe space," one student noted "I think that sometimes the librarians are overly strict" and another wrote, "Librarian constantly checking on people." This raises the delicate and important aspect of library staff demeanor as a component that can both make the library feel safe (when perceived as helpful, welcoming, or protective) or unsafe (when perceived as overly strict). Knowing this, the library staff have focused on drawing students' attention to their impact on other students around them when making behavior corrections. The hope is that this type of monitoring will both preserve the atmosphere, and also make students who are being corrected understand that the rules are for the greater good.

The library's reputation as a safe space is clearly one of its strengths. Surveying, beta testing, and collecting student feedback systematically will ensure that the library will remain a vital team player in the school ecosystem in supporting student wellbeing.

References

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Biography

Marie H. Slaby is a librarian and AP Research teacher interested in social and emotional learning, inclusion, identity formation, and generative AI.