



School Library Association

ROUNDTABLE 2022

***How can school libraries
significantly contribute to the
national commitment to educate,
empower and level up our
communities?***

The write up

[#SLALevelUp](#)

SLA champion school libraries at the House of Commons...

As part of the celebrations for the SLA's 85th anniversary, Justin Tomlinson MP hosted a roundtable on the ways that school libraries can be a part of the solution to the issues we are facing today.

On Monday 11th July, the SLA team headed to London to talk all things school libraries. Hosted by Justin Tomlinson, MP for Swindon North, the title of the event was *"How can school libraries significantly contribute to the national commitment to educate, empower and level up our communities?"* and we were delighted to host brilliant speakers: Teresa Cremin, Professor of Literacy Education at the Open University; Julian McDougall, Professor of Media and Education at Bournemouth University; Jonathan Douglas, Chief Executive of the National Literacy Trust; Ros Harding, School Librarian of the Year 2019/2020 as well as our very own CEO, Alison Tarrant.

"A vision which doesn't include school libraries is no vision at all."

The event started with Alison Tarrant introducing the afternoon, and sharing her thoughts on the state of school libraries at the moment. She shared some stories from her time as a school librarian, stressing why leaders need to recognise them as a fundamental part of every child's education.

"We need to raise our aspirations for school libraries... our children deserve beautiful reading experiences and books which are tackling the topics of the day." She went on to say: "We want to develop a new reality for school libraries, where respect and understanding flow between school library staff and policy makers... the vision for the future should include school libraries."



Following on from Alison was Professor Teresa Cremin, who highlighted that:

“The right to read freely and for enjoyment is the right of every child.”

Teresa demonstrated the immense benefits that stem from Reading For Pleasure, and also announced that the Open University was working with the SLA and Bounce Together to delve further into the relationship that reading and wellbeing have on each other. More information about this will be released in due course.

“It’s critical that children’s fiction should be diverse and reflect the multiple realities that children experience every day.”

Moving on from reading to processing, Professor of Media and Education and SLA Patron, Julian McDougall, then spoke about how, if we’re serious about levelling up, we need to think about media and information literacy.

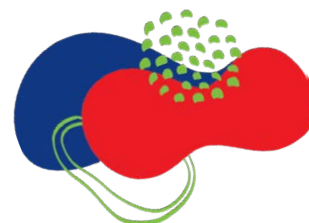
He shared how school libraries are crucial spaces to the development of Information Literacy and the levelling up agenda.



“School libraries are rich third spaces for media and information literacy education.”



He also announced a new research project in the works to further explore the concept of how school libraries support resilience and wellbeing as pupils navigate digital spaces between the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice, the SLA and TESIS.



Next up, and agreeing with Julian on the role of information literacy in levelling up, and with Teresa on the importance of reading for pleasure, came Chief Executive of the National Literacy Trust, Jonathan Douglas.

“The challenge with levelling up is that it’s not located in the individual, but in the structures and policies surrounding the individual.”

Speaking about school libraries from the perspective of employment chances and opportunities he said: “The school library is the strongest space for the exercise of agency within the school environment... The simple room with the books is not enough... school libraries need librarians.”

He particularly focused on the ability for librarians to connect across students, business and the community to build skills and opportunity.

“Libraries offer students the chance to learn for themselves, in a safe environment.”

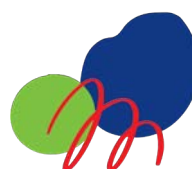
And last, but by no means least, we were thrilled to hear from spectacular school librarian Ros Harding, who shared her own experiences of how school libraries educate and empower, as well as the experience of being a judge for the SLA’s School Librarian of the Year Award.

“The library is a space where students can fail without fear.”



A bold statement, but one which gained nods of agreement from the school librarians in attendance.

She continued: “In every school I visit, the library is seen as a safe space and the librarian as someone students can talk to.”



That brought the formal talks to a close, and the floor opened to questions.

Responding to a question of whether school library books should be exclusively replaced with eBooks, our CEO Alison Tarrant highlighted the problems with this approach:

“It’s about consistently providing a range of resources so that you can support every pupil. The pandemic illustrated multiple barriers digital reading faces – WiFi or data, devices, content etc. But e-books do play an important role in reading for today’s children. It’s not just about ‘the right book, at the right time, for the right child – it needs to be in the right format too.”

She went on to highlight the difficulties school libraries can face in supplying e-books, including a lack of support and investment opportunity from senior leaders, and the difficulty some face in understanding the licensing terms.

There was further discussion and comment, and attendees were encouraged to fill out pledge cards stating how they’d act on what they’d heard over the course of the day.



The day came to a close with one attendee stating:

“Thank you for providing this, it’s allowed us to do a deep dive into library provision, what it looks like now and what it could contribute to our schools. We’ve got some thinking to do.”



Alison’s speech is included here, for your interest. You can read further notes on each speech, or the full text where available, and download your pledge card via our blog. Scan the QR code or visit the link below.

← Scan to read!

<https://bit.ly/3Pt3bxK>

Opening speech from SLA CEO, Alison Tarrant...

Those of us who have been lucky enough to work in a school library will know the deep and profound range of impacts that comes from a school library; today is about acknowledging those and building on them to create more rounded solutions to the problems around education, empowerment and levelling up.

We are fortunate to be joined by some amazing speakers in order to fill out some of the details about how school libraries can support some of the biggest issues we are talking about as a society today. I will hand over to the first of them shortly, but some reflection first, about the state of school libraries today.

There are many stories I could share from my time working as a school librarian which illustrate why school libraries are special:

- **Megan**, who thanked me for never giving up on her as a reluctant reader, because finding the reader within her changed her school experience
- **Bradley**, who used to do his homework in the library – there wasn't much space at home – and then would come back for a high five or consolation when he got his marks back
- **Emily**, a girl with particular educational needs who used to come to the library to write her story of superheroes
- A group of passionate children led by **Rachel**, who wanted the world to be better, and came to the library to meet, plan and take action – writing letters or creating posters

I've worked with children who love learning, hate reading and everything in between. A school library isn't a standalone entity – it works within the same context as the rest of the school. And yet, unlike many parts of the education system, which are being squeezed to get every last drop of worth out of them, school libraries today are underutilized, undermined and unsupported.

Of course, there are schools which are supporting their school libraries, but the vast majority of schools today are either unclear on what a school library can achieve and how they can contribute to the overall aims of the school, or are unable to implement one. A school library which is used primarily because it looks good as a backdrop for interviews or in the prospectus is not a fully functioning school library. It may provide some of the benefits, but when things we are facing the multitude of challenges, why would we settle for less than can be delivered?

In my experience, part of this is due to the innate division which is built into the education system in this country: the teaching versus support staff divide.

School library staff who have been trying to create a meaningful library development plan have been told they're not allowed the outline of the school development plan. Others who've been told they're not allowed to stand for election as the staff representative on the governing body. Staff not invited to staff parties, or forced to sit through two days' worth of irrelevant training on inset days. Staff left unsupported when trying to manage behaviour across groups of users with differing needs, and undermined in front of children.

The role of support staff in this country's education system needs to be looked at urgently.

I was dismayed to see yet another report of a vision for education released a few weeks ago which made no mention of support staff at all. The teaching assistants, catering and site teams, nurses, councilors, lab technicians, and many other workers all exist to get every single school through the day. School library staff are just one of the unseen and widely unrespected groups that schools rely on. The system will not run without them; their contribution is real and vital for pupil, and a vision which doesn't include them is no vision at all.

But the problems school libraries face today go deeper than that. There is a lack of vision, an untapping of potential and a resounding complacency, if not ignorance, when it comes to the role of school libraries.

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Like the stories of pupils at the beginning, there are also stories which illustrate the challenges school libraries face:

- **The art teacher**, who thought I was sailing a boat across the channel when I told him I'd completed my chartership
- **A maths colleague**, who asked me 'how long are you going to do this for?' and was astounded when I told him it was a career I'd chosen, so for as long as I could...
- **Meetings with my line manager**, where nothing was expected, and there was little understanding of how to develop me for my career, and no clear career path

Not mine, but a recent story which has stayed with me is one of a school librarian who during COVID moved (as many did) to providing a small choice of reading on a trolley and delivering it straight to classrooms. This person told me of a time when she was delivering services in the height of COVID and was called a 'trolley dolly' by her Headteacher in front of a class. There was no existing relationship to excuse that behaviour, and under those circumstances – when someone has reworked their entire delivery system to provide a service – it seems to clearly illustrate a lack of respect.

I have a huge amount of respect for teachers and headteachers; I think we can all agree they've gone through monumental times, and pushed themselves to the limit, but to treat colleagues with such dismissal speaks to some of the issues school libraries are facing.

Sometimes in a cupboard, sometimes used for detentions, sometimes closed to pupils all together, school libraries aren't being maximized. There seems to be a case of leaders looking down at school libraries and their staff but this situation is costing children opportunity and adding to the serious issues facing our education system – workload for teachers being just one of them. The reasons for this underutilization are vast, and for another day, but today we are tackling just one of them – the lack of vision that some school leaders have for their school libraries.

The SLA and Softlink survey has highlighted a lack of investment in digital services, but it has also highlighted a lack of support from senior leaders and governors. This flows through to budgetary issues, which then prevent investment in services and resources. Could it be that far from being 'anti-technology' – a stereotype often thrown at school libraries – it's the case that they are prevented from investing and trialing new technology? Even in COVID some school librarians were prevented from purchasing e-book systems, and some schools turned them down when offered them for free – why? They'd furloughed their library staff, so had no one to run or promote the system. This is a clear example of how school libraries, and their staff, are not being made the most of, and the cost this passes onto pupils.

I cannot fathom why any school would prevent library staff attending free training if the library has sufficient cover, and nor can I understand why collaborative teaching would be prevented. I can only put this down to a lack of understanding.

It is hard not to argue that school libraries are somehow seen as lesser, when, in a world where we collect the minutiae of information about schools no data about school libraries is collected, and indeed we were informed it would be 'a waste of tax-payers' money' to do so. We live in a country which has the potential to have a first rate education system – there's absolutely no reason why not – let's raise our aspirations for school libraries from having a bin for unwanted books at the front of the school.

Our children deserve beautiful reading experiences; reading spaces which entice and materials which make them feel special; which open worlds of knowledge and imagination in whatever format is the best one for them. They deserve books which are tackling the topics of the day, not those from 5-10 years ago. All school library staff have stories of dreaded donations – mine is 6 house moving boxes of donations – when I opened them they were step by step guides to ballroom dancing from the 1950s. You cannot rely on donations to provide a fully functional school library, and you cannot teach the best lessons with poor resources. A well-resourced curriculum has engaging content with relevant and timely resources, and books which bring the content to life. Teachers cannot deliver the best lessons without appropriate resourcing.

Let's create an education system which isn't reliant on teachers going to charity shops at the weekend, or on school library staff trekking through car boot sales to top up their stock. Let's create an environment where all school leaders know they can access support with reading material – we need to put an end to the wasteful spending on resources which aren't appropriate. Someone contacted me to share a story of a senior leader who'd spent £10k on reading materials without any support – much of it were bestselling young adult books; this was for a primary school.

We have to be able to do better.

We will hear from brilliant speakers over the next hour – all highlighting a different element that school libraries can support: from empowerment to employment, from increasing literacy to improving wellbeing. These are different strands which will be threaded together differently for each school, dependent on context, cohort and capacity, but which can all come from school libraries.

We will not reach this reality overnight, but in a year which sees the School Library Association celebrate our 85th year – and a history of working with the Department for Education and supporting change within the educational landscape (the introduction of the National Curriculum for example) this is the time to start. We need to discuss openly the challenge, and look with new eyes for the solutions. The educational landscape has changed significantly since school libraries were made statutory in 1944, and new thoughts, conversations and solutions will be needed.

We need to examine the potential within groups of schools for specialist support – the concept of Trust Librarians who support a few schools across the group – or sharing expertise across knowledge areas – specialist research librarians to support students, their teachers and the co-ordinators.

There is much talk of schools working more widely with the community, and this is an area where school library staff can contribute. Working in a non-classroom space, the library is unthreatening and not being a teacher means that many pupils and families have slightly different relationships with the school library staff. The ability to work across schools, public libraries and other community groups is one which many school library staff

already carry out – book groups for families, working with the public library, theatre or community groups to provide experiences and reading role models. There could be a clear benefit to schools from this work.

One area we're not exploring in any depth today is the role of the school library in supporting inquiry learning – or learning through curiosity. This is an area which is gaining momentum (despite the ongoing skills versus knowledge debate which utterly misses the point in my opinion) and yet I've not seen an educator realise the support which already exists for teachers. School library staff across the world have long been developing models, and in the UK one has been developed to support the six stages of inquiry learning; there are mapped skills for area and year group. Inquiry learning isn't a 'Go and find out about' exercise – for real learning to take place there is a framework; in the same way that a lesson isn't just an extended powerpoint.

FOSIL has been developed by a school librarian but is based on the concept of co-teaching – bringing two experts together to deliver the best learning experience possible – a teacher and a school librarian. There is no argument that learning is important; knowledge is important, but this doesn't mean it can't be engaging, driven by the individual and developing curiosity, instead of crushing it.

SLA President, Richard Gerver, attended the SLA Weekend Course at the beginning of last month. While he enjoyed meeting members and listening to speakers, his take away was the level of desperation that many delegates felt. The education system is casting around looking for new solutions, and there's a unacknowledged wealth of support from people who aren't allowed to contribute and are made to feel like outsiders within their own sector.

We want to develop a new reality for school libraries, based on teachers and support staff working together to benefit all pupils. A reality where respect and understanding flow between both parties and policy makers. School librarians no more spend time 'reading books and shushing' than teachers 'leave early and have long uninterrupted holidays'.

This is a reality where children are supported to be curious learners, who go on a never ending reading journey, feel empowered to develop and express

their own opinion, who contribute to democracy and live in a fulfilling manner.

But we cannot wait for this reality to arrive; the pupils in schools currently cannot wait. The School Library Association will continue to support all schools at all stages of their school library journey, and welcome new people to the sector. We provide support, training and advice too all who need it because we share a joint purpose: to provide the best education we can to every child in school, this year, and for years to come.

We will continue to celebrate and champion schools who are providing examples of how to maximise their school library, and all those school library staff who do what they can despite of the obstacles in their way. But we cannot make our vision a reality without the support of senior leaders in schools, teachers, policy makers, our partners and others invested in education.

In your packs you'll find a copy of our journal, and a card to say what you've learnt and how you're going to help school libraries. I urge you to listen to our speakers today, think beyond the barriers we're used to and help us provide the educational experience our children deserve. We know the solutions won't come easily; but a vision of education for the future should include school libraries; there is a range of areas they can support, and any new drawing of the education system cannot afford to shy away from the challenges at hand, or make the most of the opportunities which are being provided.

Thank you!

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