

Enhancing Student Engagement in the Middle and Secondary School Library : Developing a practical resource for Maltese school librarians

by

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Abstract

School libraries today are vibrant and dynamic learning hubs that foster literacy, creativity, collaboration, and student well-being. International studies have highlighted the impact of school libraries on academic achievement, particularly when staffed by qualified professionals. In Malta, the potential and role of school libraries remain mostly unexplored, with no quantitative studies on student engagement carried out.

A quantitative case study approach was carried out with 300 students in Years 7-10. This anonymous online questionnaire explored four main aspects: student perceptions of the librarian, the library space and resources, visiting habits, and student participation.

The findings indicated that younger students tend to be more frequent visitors. Students consistently found the librarian to be friendly and supportive, readily offering help. Physical books remain popular, with a desire for varied genres, manga and graphic novels, together with greater computer access. Students view the library as a safe, welcoming place, but have shown a desire for better design and more seating areas. Many students expressed a desire for more active participation in the library.

This dissertation investigates student engagement in a Maltese middle and secondary school library and how engagement can be enhanced. It contributes the first quantitative data on student library engagement in Malta and develops a practical toolkit for Maltese school librarians, helping to promote the school library and enhance student engagement through actionable knowledge.

Keywords: School libraries; Student engagement; Librarian role; Library resources; Library promotion; Educational toolkit

Dedication

To Fleur,

who supported me throughout my journey,
encouraged me constantly, listened tirelessly, and gave guidance freely.

I am truly grateful.

To my children, Cristina and Daniel,

who wished I could join in family game time more during my studies.

I hope I have also shown them the value and satisfaction of doing good work.

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To my father, Joseph,

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1. Introduction

“Whereas school libraries of days past might have been quiet study spaces, today they are vibrant learning spaces that often serve as the cornerstone of a school community.” (International Literacy Association, 2022, p. 7)

While school libraries in the past may have been seen mainly as book repositories or quiet areas for students to work and study, modern school libraries have rapidly evolved into vibrant learning hubs at the heart of the school community (International Literacy Association, 2022, p. 7; McClintock Miller & Bass, 2019). They contribute to academic achievement, literacy development, creativity, collaboration, and student well-being (International Literacy Association, 2022). International studies have found that well-resourced school libraries, with strong library programs and staffed by qualified professionals, are significantly associated with improved student academic achievement across subject areas, particularly for disadvantaged learners (Gretes, 2013; Kachel & Lance, 2013; Scholastic, 2016).

Despite such international recognition, the importance of school libraries is often ignored in some national contexts, particularly in the case of Malta. Senior school libraries are found in state, church, and independent schools, but few studies have been conducted to understand how students perceive and engage with them.

1.1 The changing role of school libraries

The role of school libraries has undergone significant changes in recent decades. Beyond the traditional role of providing print materials for both research and recreational reading, they now integrate technology, facilitate collaborative learning, and serve as inclusive spaces where students can develop information and digital literacy skills, as

well as critical thinking (Burrell et al., 2023; Herring, 2009). The professional school librarian is no longer merely a custodian of books to borrow, but is also an educator and a partner in curriculum design (Wake et al., 2022).

The extent to which these evolving roles are implemented varies significantly. While international research has consistently highlighted the impact of strong school library programmes, little is known about the Maltese context, where government policy has historically overlooked school libraries (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012; Ministry of Education Sport Youth Research and Innovation, 2023; Ministry of Education Youth and Employment, 2005).

1.2 The Maltese context

The Maltese educational structure presents unique challenges. At primary level, the absence of dedicated librarians often leaves book-related activities to class teachers, frequently without a dedicated library space. By contrast, middle and secondary schools typically host libraries with at least one teacher-librarian (Government of Malta & Malta Union of Teachers, 2024).

The role of the school librarian in Maltese middle and secondary schools is inconsistent. In state and church schools, librarians are usually teachers reassigned to the role of “teacher-librarian”, retaining a teaching role together with limited dedicated hours for library duties. Independent schools have greater flexibility, but investment in the library and librarian role varies depending on school priorities. At national level, there are no clear standards for school library design, planning, and staffing, and school libraries are rarely mentioned in official education strategies or legislation (Legislazzjoni Malta - Malta Libraries Act 2011, 2011; Departments of Education, 2022).

1.3 Research Problem

While international research has established strong links between school libraries and student engagement, there is an obvious gap in empirical evidence in Malta. Little or no statistical information has been published on how students in Maltese schools perceive or engage with their school libraries. There does not seem to have been any attempt to translate best practices into a practical guide designed specifically for local schools.

This lack of research is both a challenge and an opportunity. Without local data, Maltese librarians, library associations, and school leaders lack the insights needed to better advocate for school libraries or develop targeted strategies for student engagement. This lacuna allows the current study to make a pioneering contribution by providing the first quantitative investigation of student engagement in the Maltese middle and secondary school libraries, along with a toolkit for practical application by school librarians.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to explore student engagement in Maltese middle and secondary school libraries and to develop a practical, user-friendly toolkit to support school librarians in Malta in enhancing student engagement.

This is achieved through the following objectives:

1. To examine themes and patterns of student engagement across year groups within a Maltese middle and secondary school.
2. To explore students' perceptions of the librarian, library resources, and the school library environment.
3. To identify barriers and opportunities for student participation in the school library.

4. To connect findings with international best practice as discussed in the literature.
5. To design a practical, adaptable toolkit to support Maltese school librarians in promoting student engagement.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study hopes to be significant in several ways. Academically, it fills a clear gap in the literature by providing the first quantitative data on Maltese students' engagement with their school libraries. It develops a toolkit built on evidence-based research and international best practices, offering librarians in Maltese schools concrete and practical strategies for enhancing student engagement. Professionally, it highlights the importance of the role of the contemporary, professional school librarian, advocating for stronger recognition within schools and at national policy level. Finally, this study contributes to international research on student engagement, offering quantitative data and insights from a particular context.

1.6 Dissertation Structure

The dissertation is organised as follows:

Chapter 2: Literature Review – An overview of international research and the Maltese context about school libraries, with special reference to their role, resources, space, and student participation.

Chapter 3: Methodology – Outlines the research design, data collection, analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and limitations.

Chapter 4: Findings – Presents the findings of the student questionnaire, including quantitative data and themes that emerged from open-ended responses.

Chapter 5: Discussion – Interprets the findings in relation to the literature, identifying trends and implications, and presents strategies for improving student engagement.

Chapter 6: Toolkit – Presents salient points from the literature, together with insights from the research findings and practical considerations and examples, to be included in the web-based toolkit. Also presents the basic plan and design of the toolkit website.

Chapter 7: Conclusion – Summarises the findings, reflects on their significance, and presents ideas for future research.

2. Literature Review

Libraries have always been considered not only as a repository of human knowledge, but also as essential to learning. In the educational scenario, as far back as 1743, Benjamin Franklin “proposed the establishment of an academy that would be equipped with a library.” (Cole, 1959, p. 87)

As time went by, the importance of school libraries and their role in the education process was recognised further, to the point that, by the year 2000, 97 percent of students in U.S. public schools attended schools that were equipped with a school library (Michie & Holton, 2005, p. 17).

In 1999, the IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto stated: “The school library provides information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today’s information and knowledge-based society. The school library equips students with life-long learning skills and develops the imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens” (para. 1).

Certainly, the past couple of decades especially saw a rapid progression of technology and new ideas. While maintaining their core vision, school libraries have evolved to cater for new realities and services.

2.1 The role of modern school libraries

Herring (2009, p. 271) argues that school libraries have moved from a support role focused primarily on the provision of resources to a more central role in student learning, also including information literacy. As the Official College of Librarians and

Documentalists of Catalonia (2022) aptly points out, “A modern school library with resources (material, time, and staff) should be at the heart of the school.” School libraries today can serve as central points of learning, both through adequate space and resources, as well as by having professionally trained library staff.

School libraries with certified school librarians and quality school library programs lead to students’ higher academic success over various subject areas, as has been overwhelmingly shown in a compendium of research about the effectiveness of school libraries (Gretes, 2013; Scholastic, 2016). These studies also consistently show that this positive correlation especially impacts disadvantaged students. Kachel & Lance (2013) found that “students are more likely to succeed when they have library programs that are well staffed, well funded, technologically well equipped, well stocked and more accessible.” (p. 31)

2.2 The role of the Professional School Librarian

Evolving from traditional roles of collecting, preserving, and curating knowledge, modern school librarians now provide enhanced resource access while acting as teachers, facilitators, partners, and educational leaders. “School librarians (SLs) teach students how to select, evaluate, and use information in all formats, as well as support classroom teachers as an instructional partner in curriculum design” (Wake et al., 2022, p. 4). While school librarians have been at the forefront in teaching students how to find and use sources for research, the digital age has ushered in new needs for doing this on a much wider scale. Burrell et al. (2023) highlight the importance of school librarians in teaching “information literacy skills to K-12 students such as how to conduct research, access database information, be good consumers of information, how to problem-solve, and how to think critically.” (p. 15)

The ideal school librarian should be qualified in both library and information sciences and in education. Speaking of school librarians as ‘teacher librarians’: “A teacher librarian holds recognised teaching qualifications and qualifications in librarianship,” adding great value due to the powerful combination of knowledge and skills in both pedagogy and library and information management (Australian Library and Information Association, 2004, p. 1). If, added to this, the librarians have experience and qualifications in IT skills, they truly become a force to be reckoned with. Burress et al. (2023) recommend that school librarians have a master’s degree in library science, arguing that they “make the greatest impact when they are highly qualified” (pp. 14-15). A librarian’s professional growth should continue beyond the degrees obtained, making use of self-evaluation tools (Owen, 2012) and modelling lifelong learning by attending conferences and courses, and becoming a member of library associations (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, pp. 186–187).

School librarians “have a central role because they work with all the teachers, all the students, and all the curriculum, all the time” (Woolls, 2009, p. 545). The school librarian should work with staff and leadership to “support and enhance educational goals as outlined in the school's mission and curriculum” (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) & UNESCO, 2025, p. 2). Toor & Weisburg (2010) recommend that school librarians write a mission statement with clear objectives, identifying the purpose of the librarian and library within the school (p. 13), and also a vision defining what a librarian would wish to achieve in their ideal school library (p. 24). Both should be in line with the school’s overall ethos and objectives, while setting a clear direction for how the library and librarian can help achieve them.

It is essential that school management understands both the role and need for professional school librarians and how they fit into the curriculum, overall education plan, and direction the school is moving towards. “Failing to adequately understand the educative potential of our qualified teacher librarians can have a detrimental impact on our schools’ capacity to meet our students’ current and future literacy needs” (Merga, 2019, p. 14). In their study, Kachel & Lance (2013) found that the factor that most

impacted students positively was “the presence of a full-time certified librarian in the school library” (p. 31). The IFLA-UNESCO School Library Manifesto (2025) also recommends that the school librarian provides “services and activities during the whole school day and beyond” (p. 2).

To facilitate this and build bridges that connect with all stakeholders, the school librarian must also focus on building relationships. Peers will only work well with a colleague who is respectful and open to collaborating as an equal. Sometimes librarians in schools are asked to do jobs that may seem extraneous to the role. Weisburg & Toor (2015) note that accepting these tasks graciously can provide librarians with chances to show the diverse ways they can contribute and set the opportunity to build friendships and earn respect as a person who can be counted upon (p. 19). School librarians also often make it a point to attend Staff Educational Seminars and meetings, knowing that this is an opportunity to meet with school educators and help plan future programmes (Torres & Tagoe, 2022, p. 15).

One of the most important adult relationships that librarians can foster is with teachers and staff in their school or district. Classrooms are where students spend the majority of their days, and we rely on teachers to partner with us so we have access to those students.

(McClintock Miller & Bass, 2019, p. 29)

This relationship-building also succeeds outside of school. Knowing one’s peers on a more personal level and enjoying activities together outside the constraints of a purely collegial relationship builds a rapport and friendliness that greatly facilitates interactions during school hours.

Nowhere is this truer than in interactions between the librarian and the students. Students often remember how they were treated by the librarian more than the outcome of the interaction (Chelton, 1999, p. 109). As a service-oriented profession, librarianship is fundamentally centred on people rather than collections or technologies (Robertson, 2017, p. 25). A friendly, user-centred approach is essential to foster student library engagement. “Relationships are crucial components to mentoring all learners in

your school community, and they can make or break library programs. One of the keys to a successful library and literacy program has always been knowing one's students as readers" (McClintock Miller & Bass, 2019, p. 28). Weisburg & Toor (2015) also suggest that the librarian attends extra-curricular activities, where students reveal parts of their personalities that are not shown within the class or library environment, arguing that students notice which members of staff attend (p. 83). Almeida (2021) also argues the importance of "teenage buy-in", where students understand that the librarian sees them as "whole persons with a variety of passions", leading to a respectful relationship between the librarian and the students (p. 20).

2.3 The Library Space and Resources

Library design must reflect the school's educational vision to benefit the entire community (Sullivan, 2013, p. 8), serving as both a learning hub and a safe, welcoming, and inclusive space for students (International Literacy Association, 2022, p. 7). Reading areas need to be planned to be comfortable and welcoming, keeping in mind, however, that the library is not only a reading place.

The school library is an excellent area to be used by students for personal work and research. It should be large enough to accommodate groups of students, and can especially be used as a space for teachers with their classes. The school library is often used as a Learning Commons, where teaching and learning happen within a collaborative setting (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, p. 68). To this end, certain standards are put in place with regards to furniture plans, aisle width, space allocation, and seating capacity, such as being able to seat between 12% to 30% of the student population, or at least two classes (Erikson & Markuson, 2007, p. 25, 73). Other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, have implemented nationwide standards of school library buildings, calling them "learning resource centers", with clear divisions for "self-learning" and "collective learning" for group and cultural activities (Alomran, 2009, p. 471). What is important is that the space design and plan facilitate the user experience and make the library a

comfortable and welcoming space that creates a positive memory and association (Malczewski, 2014, pp. 36–37).

Another allocation could be the creation of “maker spaces”, tinkering areas where students can “build a correlation between hypothesis, research, creation, and demonstration” (Sullivan, 2013, p. 9).

Library Resources

One of the most important roles of school librarians is “encouraging young people to love reading and supporting them to build their literacy skills” (Merga, 2022, p. 34). To this end, a school library’s collection must not only be built to support the school’s curriculum, but also promote reading for pleasure. Actively selecting reading materials not only enhances literacy but also fosters a lifelong positive attitude towards reading.

A modern school library’s collection must reflect the realities of the world outside school. School librarians “ensure access to high-quality, diverse books for all students” (International Literacy Association, 2022, p. 2). The collection must be planned and developed with inclusivity in mind, with clear signage and catering for students of different genders, nationalities, sexual orientations, religious beliefs, abilities and disabilities, languages, and social status. This promotes equity, support, respect, and understanding outside the realities they might face once they walk outside the school doors.

Of course, thinking of the print collection in any library today is a very limiting exercise. While students might still prefer to engage with a physical book in their hands, one must not forget that today’s youth are digital natives. Collection development must include both print and digital media, to “meet the diverse needs of students’ academic and personal interests” (International Literacy Association, 2022, p. 2). An Online Public

Access Catalogue (OPAC) allows browsing of library resources from the comfort of one's home, but is even more effective when students can access it directly from the library on available computers. Electronic texts must be made available to those who might prefer to carry their reading material on a digital device. Another valuable resource that may resonate with a number of students is an audiobook collection. Audiobooks "promote vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension... because audiobooks remove the struggle to decode" (Grover & Hannegan, 2011, p. 10).

While books are a valuable resource, a modern school library must also consist of "materials that provide access to ideas, learning, and stories in nontraditional ways" (Donham & Sims, 2020, p. 132). Such digital resources comprise an essential part of maker spaces, together with video and audio capturing equipment and editing software, 3-D printers, and also more traditional crafting resources. While resources and tools must be chosen and implemented with the students' age in mind, older students and staff would greatly appreciate the opportunities and creative freedom offered by such tools, and undoubtedly help students engage in learning experiences not usually offered in the more traditional curriculum-based subject classes that comprise the usual school day. The school library and the quality of its resources will help it be "viewed as one of the main learning hubs, a fun place to be, and the heart of the school community." (McClintock Miller & Bass, 2019, p. 13)

Even though the school library must cater for the most part to the student population, it must also keep in mind the teaching staff and develop a collection that provides added value, both as teaching resources and staff and subject development. A collection development and management policy should be put in place, in collaboration with school management and teachers as subject experts, and in relation to students' needs (IFLA School Libraries Section Standing Committee, 2015, pp. 33–34). All parts of the collection must be built ethically, free from personal bias, and to proper standards, and their use must always adhere to copyright laws and regulations (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, p. 166, 171).

2.4 Visiting the Library

Before students are able to engage fully in their school library, the first step is to bring them inside the space. While several new students with a passion for books and reading would automatically gravitate towards the library, others may tend to stay away from the unknown entity of a new place.

A number of factors that contribute to students visiting the library have already been discussed above. Building and fostering relationships with the students outside the library helps them feel comfortable and confident that they will be welcomed by the librarian, even within the library space. If the librarian also teaches classes, especially information-related, the students enter the library as a matter of fact for their lessons. Working with and encouraging teachers to make more use of the library for their lessons also builds student familiarity with the space.

Liaising with other teachers to bring students in for one or more library orientation lessons, especially for a new cohort at the beginning of the year, ensures that every student will have visited the library, met the librarian, and been introduced to the basic areas of the library and how to find what they need, or how to ask for help. Library orientations “are often an essential, yet underutilized, approach to engagement” (Education Task, 2024, sec. 2). With the school librarian leading the orientation, the students gain a better understanding of the librarian’s competence and role in the library, while the collaboration with the teacher highlights the librarian’s position as an educator.

Teachers’ familiarity with the library and what it can offer could be a factor affecting their willingness or reluctance to bring students to the library for lessons. Offering the library to teachers as a quiet space to work in or correct, besides the opportunity to build better relationships between the teachers and the librarian, could also help build familiarity with the space and its resources and entice teachers to make more use of the library for

their lessons. When appropriate, the library could also be used to host events such as author visits, and even for staff workshops or sessions, raising the profile of the school library.

The importance of having a welcoming, comfortable, and inclusive library space has already been mentioned. For it to be truly a hub within the school, the library should also offer resources and opportunities that go beyond academics and provide a fun environment to be in. To attain this, school libraries often invest in board games and jigsaw puzzles, organise fun events such as Quiz Days, and make the library computers available even for games. The result of this positive association will mean that more students will actively seek to visit the library as one of their favourite places within the school.

Ideally, a large enough library space would also welcome several school clubs. These can range from the 'quieter' ones, such as reading clubs, to learning and game-based ones, such as chess clubs, to more group-focused ones, such as journalism clubs. These clubs not only present students with experiences and the opportunity to gain new skills, but also usually align with schools' mission to provide a more holistic education and further lifelong learning skills. This resonates with the mission of school library associations around the world, such as the Canadian School Libraries Association, whose mission is "to assist schools... to prepare students in Canada with skills and opportunities for learning today and into the future." (*About CSL – Canadian School Libraries*, para. 4).

The importance of marketing and promotion cannot be underestimated. To be successful in bringing students to the library by their own volition, their interest must be piqued, and they must be enticed to come take a look out of a desire to know more and see for themselves (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, p. 122). While the space, resources, and opportunities are important, they are useless if students do not even know they exist. The school library can make use of social media if this is allowed by the school, targeted both towards students and their parents as stakeholders in their children's education,

helping them feel more informed and connected (Robertson, 2017, p. 27). Promotion directed towards students, via notice boards and official digital channels, could guarantee a wider reach. School or library events, clubs, and new resources are often communicated via these platforms. Libraries also often utilise these platforms to promote books and author anniversaries.

Promotion and marketing can also be targeted towards other stakeholders in the school community. Used wisely, using internal channels can make teachers and leadership aware of what is happening in the library, raising the library profile and, ideally, presenting further opportunities for staff to use the space with their students.

2.5 Student Participation in the School Library

In most countries, school grades play a very big part in a student's educational experience. Grades, rewards, and consequences of failure can be powerful extrinsic motivators to students' learning and success, both positively and negatively. Self-Determination Theory mentions how curiosity or interests are intrinsic motivators that can foster initiative, creativity, and passions (Center for Self-Determination Theory, paras. 1-2). Outside of taught classes and academic work, the school library, in fact, may well be one of the few places within the school where students are allowed to engage in their interests for personal satisfaction.

To enhance deeper student engagement, the librarian must seek out ways to provide opportunities for students to be able to have a participative role in the school library. As previously mentioned, maker spaces in the library, outside of classroom contexts, allow students to direct their own learning and creativity in line with their own interests and passions. These hands-on stations could offer both physical and digital platforms for student projects (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, pp. 67–68).

A popular initiative in many libraries is providing space for library users to display their artwork. This offers both recognition for participants in sharing their creations and enriches the library space (L-Università ta' Malta, para. 3). Of course, this initiative can also be linked to classwork in collaboration with teachers of Art, or even in combination with teachers of Literature. This can also be extended to creating library resources such as displays and bookmarks, potentially even through competitions. This idea of partnering with other teachers could also include ideas such as students of Design exploring and creating floor plans for the library space, especially if a revamp of the library is on the cards.

A journalism club can find a natural habitat in the library. Whether coordinated by the librarian or other teachers, it can tap into and link to classroom and school events without being confined to them. Resources, both print and digital, are at hand if needed, as are the librarian's skills. Being so varied, a journal or newspaper offers something for everyone – those who prefer writing, researching, reporting, photography, videography, editing, and design. With several school librarians also acting as webmasters for the school website (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, p. 19), students can also get crucial experience in how websites work and build digital skills in publishing to the web, all while being direct participants in the promotion of the library and the school.

Some students love to be of help, and this can be leveraged in ways that both help the library and benefit students by building on their creativity and collaborative skills. Asking for student volunteers for tasks can be a pleasant and rewarding experience for both the students and the librarian. Giving responsibility for tasks or projects helps volunteers feel more committed (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, p. 153), especially when they are allowed to play on their strengths and interests in choosing their tasks.

Students can also be partners in the school library's collection development. While librarians often receive catalogues of new books to order, encouraging students to offer suggestions for books they like or wish for gives a better user-centric perception of what might be needed. This makes the library's collection more relevant (*Getting students*

involved in your school library, para. 2) and conveys the message that the students' voice is welcome and heard. Numerous books have movie or series tie-ins that are ardently watched and followed by students, so encouraging students to keep the librarian abreast of developments and launches is an easy but sure way of both building relationships and creating up-to-date promotion. Of course, suggestions for the library need not be limited merely to the collection.

Initiatives such as having students as library assistants can at times be more positive than the school librarian could have even imagined. While young primary-age students may not be able to learn more difficult skills and reasons behind numerous library processes and operations, their enthusiasm and natural willingness to help often lead to associating pleasurable moments with being in a library, and this is often sustained, especially in the middle school years. In the middle and secondary school, students are better equipped to truly be of help, in activities such as shelving and retrieval, but also in skills such as issuing and returning books at the circulation desk and doing tasks in cataloguing according to their level of knowledge and understanding. From the researcher's experience, students can shine in surprising ways when given trust and responsibilities in novel situations.

Twenty-two years after the School Library Manifesto, IFLA's updated document brilliantly brings together the mission of the modern school library:

The school library program and its qualified school library professionals focus on student development by providing equitable access for learning experiences and resources, through accessible, welcoming, inclusive learning spaces that enable all members of the school community to become engaged critical thinkers, effective readers, and responsible users, evaluators, and creators of information in multiple formats.

(IFLA School Libraries Section & IASL - International Association of School Librarianship, 2023, para. 2)

2.6 The Maltese Educational Context

The Maltese educational system is divided into four main stages: pre-primary (or kindergarten) for ages 3-5, primary (Years 1-6 for ages 5-11), middle and secondary (Years 7-11 for ages 11-16), and post-secondary / tertiary education. Compulsory education is between the ages of 5 and 16, in the primary, middle, and secondary levels from years 1 to 11.

In compulsory education, schools are categorized into state (56.7% of student population), church-run (29.7%), and private, independent institutions (13.6%) (National Statistics Office, Chart 3). State schools are completely government funded, and church schools are highly subsidised. Both state and church schools offer free education, and the government offers free transport to students from all school categories.

State schools are organised in colleges in feeder areas, with primary schools within the college scattered over several towns and villages, coming together into one centralised middle school (Years 7 & 8 for ages 11-13), and a separate centralised secondary school (Years 9-11 for ages 13-16) per college. The main distinction in the post-primary years is that while the range of subjects studied is broader in Years 7 and 8 (middle school), between Years 9 and 11 (secondary school), students choose and focus on particular subjects in preparation for national examinations at the end of Year 11, with which they can apply for post-secondary or tertiary education.

Many church and private independent schools house their primary sectors separately from the middle and secondary schools, though it may be the case that they are located in separate sections in the same building. The smaller cohorts in the church and independent schools usually mean that there is less or no physical or naming distinction between the middle and the secondary years within the school building.

School Libraries

At primary level, the main focus of book-related activities is usually improving reading and writing skills and fostering a love of books and reading. In many primary schools, this does not necessarily equate to having a library to achieve this purpose. It is often the case that teachers have a class 'library', where at regular intervals students are expected to borrow books to read, possibly with incentives and rewards for doing so, and in the control of the class teachers. If a separate room does exist and is labelled as a library, it is often a supplement to the class resources. Class teachers are expected to take their students to the library at particular weekly timetabled periods, and handle borrows and returns. Moreover, at primary level, state schools can house libraries that double as Branch public libraries (*Regional and Branch Libraries*, para. 2).

Middle and secondary schools have their own dedicated libraries catering to the staff and students. With smaller cohorts in the same building, church and independent schools usually have one library catering to the five middle and secondary years. With state middle and secondary schools separated within the college network, they each have libraries that cater solely to the staff and the larger student cohorts.

The church and private entities are responsible for designing and building their own schools. The Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools, set up by the Government of Malta, is responsible for the building, maintenance, and refurbishment of all state schools (Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools (Malta), para. 1). While the investment in these schools is a considerable one, an architect who works with the Foundation (Architect X., personal communication, 15th January 2024) confirmed that the Foundation does not work to any particular standards when planning and building libraries within the schools.

Middle and secondary school libraries play a unique role in the Maltese educational scenario. Students are exposed to more subjects, are old enough to gradually build

deeper skillsets, and are encouraged to take more responsibility over their educational choices and work, particularly once they choose the subjects they wish to specialise in. While still promoting a love of books and reading, the role of the school library at these levels expands to offering space for events, clubs, and group and individual work. The library's resources also reflect this role, with larger, better, and properly organised collections that include reference material for research. Students can be encouraged to have a more participative role within the library. Libraries at this level are usually run by librarians.

School Librarians

Teachers' wages in state and church schools are government-funded. While teachers in these two schools have duties in line with government standards, independent schools have more leeway in how their staff are chosen and the duties required of them.

Independent primary schools sometimes choose to employ a librarian. However, this is not a possibility within church and state schools, since there is no specific existing post for a primary school librarian.

At middle and secondary school level, independent schools are usually able to offer specific posts for librarians, part-time or full-time, in accordance with the school's priorities. In the case of state and church schools, the librarian is chosen "following an expression of interest open to teachers", with the chosen person acquiring the title of 'Teacher Librarian' (Government of Malta & Malta Union of Teachers, 2024, p. 38, section 15.4). Out of a maximum teaching load of 25 lessons a week, a teacher librarian is only assigned a maximum of 10 teaching lessons a week, with the rest being the provision of library services, possibly even in the primary sector (Government of Malta & Malta Union of Teachers, sections 15.4.2, 15.4.3).

The role of school librarians within these school contexts is varied. Under the new sectoral agreement, it is specified that the duties of school librarians in the state sector may include information literacy lessons (Government of Malta & Malta Union of Teachers, section 15.4.1). Textbooks in state schools are government-funded, and one of the remits of school librarians in these schools is the issue and returns of textbooks to all students within the school, very time-consuming tasks especially at the beginning and end of the scholastic year, and with the added issue of storage space in the library. In any case, school librarians in state and church schools have limited time in the library, potentially only the equivalent of 15 lessons a week, though there may be more than a single teacher-librarian in the role. Within independent schools, both the available time and the role of the school librarian vary according to the investment and vision of the school administration. While some school librarians do teach information literacy and library skills, it is not unheard of to be also assigned general office work duties.

Libraries in all state schools form part of the Malta Libraries umbrella. Malta Libraries buys resources, classifies and catalogues books, and distributes them to all state schools (Malta Libraries, Malta Libraries - Functions). Consequently, state school librarians are freed from these tasks. All resources are searchable via the Malta Libraries website in the Public Libraries section, and a Malta Libraries membership card is used by students and staff for borrowing books both in the state school libraries and in public libraries around the Maltese islands. A number of church schools have also chosen to join the Malta Libraries Information System (Malta Libraries, 2024, p. 80). School librarians in state schools continue the lending service even through the summer holidays.

Membership in Malta Libraries also means that users can download the free Libby app on mobile devices, and log in through their library membership card, with access to ebooks, audiobooks, and magazines (Malta Libraries, 2024, p. 36).

The Political Scenario

While the role of Malta Libraries has already been discussed, it seems very clear that the school library and its potentially important role in the educational process have been mostly ignored by successive Maltese governments and Education ministries.

As previously mentioned, no standards for planning and building school libraries exist. Both the Malta Libraries Act (Legizlazzjoni Malta - Malta Libraries Act 2011) and the Malta Education Act make no mention of school libraries at all (Departments of Education, 2022). In 2005, the government's vision document, 'For All Children to Succeed', mentioned that the Educational Services Directorate (ESD) would "support school networks in the promotion of school library services" (Ministry of Education Youth and Employment, 2005, sec. 2.6.4, ii c, p. 34). There was no further mention of school libraries or how this support was to be carried out. The 2012 document, 'A National Curriculum Framework For All', expands on intended learning outcomes, often specifying strategies for how they can be attained, but never once mentioning school libraries (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). It should be noted that the latest National Education Strategy 2024-2030 also discusses various visions and strategies in attaining a wide range of educational outcomes, without once mentioning school libraries (Ministry of Education Sport Youth Research and Innovation, 2023).

Associations

Becoming a member of library associations is a crucial step for librarians to remain current with regard to strategies, standards, and training. The Malta Library and Information Association (MaLIA) is active in its activities, events, training, and promotions (*Malta Library and Information Association (MaLIA)*, 2025). Another association that should be very relevant is the Malta School Library Association (MSLA).

Communication with the association is possible but hard, since they have a very limited online presence.

Local Courses

As previously mentioned, being a teacher is a requirement if one is to become a teacher-librarian in state and church schools. Independent schools are free to create their own criteria for suitable candidates. Besides online courses offered by foreign universities, interested candidates can choose to further their education in knowledge management and in library and information sciences through bachelor's and master's degrees offered by the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences at the University of Malta (L-Università ta' Malta, 2025). Many current teacher-librarians have, in the past, achieved a diploma in Library and Information Studies, but this course has been discontinued. Various short courses and sessions are also regularly organized by the Malta Library and Information Association (*Malta Library and Information Association (MaLIA)*, 2025).

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design, data collection method, and analytical procedures used to investigate student engagement in Maltese middle and secondary school libraries. It discusses the rationale behind the chosen methodology and context, ethical considerations, and limitations. The study adopts a quantitative approach, using the data to inform the development of a practical toolkit for Maltese school librarians seeking to enhance student engagement in their libraries.

3.2 Research Design and Rationale

A quantitative approach was selected to capture the breadth of student engagement within a school library. Quantitative data allows measurable insights into behaviours and trends (Goertzen, 2017, p. 12). The objectivity of quantitative research and reliability through larger sample sizes allow for the reproducibility of findings (Unimrkt, 2023, para. 12, 18).

The study was conducted within a single independent middle and secondary school in Malta, where the researcher is employed as a school librarian. The research intends to explore similarities and differences in student engagement in the school library by year group. This case study approach allowed for more context-specific exploration of engagement practices and challenges. The research was guided by a pragmatic paradigm, with direct application of findings into practice. This practical knowledge guided the development of a toolkit for other school librarians in Malta.

3.3 Research Context

The research was conducted in an independent school in Malta, serving 445 students across both middle and secondary school ages (Years 7-11, ages 11-16). All classes are located within the same school building, with the school library serving all students and staff. The school library has gradually become a central hub, attracting more students and supporting both recreational reading and activities and academic work.

The library is staffed by a single librarian, employed in this role since October 2022. In the scholastic year 2022-2023, the librarian was present only for a few hours, three times a week. The following scholastic year, 2023-2024, the librarian was present four days a week, with the addition of teaching 10 lessons a week to two science classes for the first two terms. In the last scholastic year, 2024-2025, the librarian was present daily throughout the whole school day, almost exclusively on library duties. As the school librarian, the researcher had direct access to students, facilitating data collection.

The library's resources are mainly print-based, with some games and other leisure activities having recently been added. Students mainly visit the library during breaktime, though some ask permission to visit during free lessons, when their teacher is absent. Student engagement has varied across the year groups, as well as during the librarian's employment period.

3.4 Participants and Sampling

A total of 300 students participated in the study, representing Year groups 7-10 (ages 11-15). Participants were selected through convenience sampling, since the researcher had access to almost the entire cohort through replacement lessons with the classes. Being

close to the entirety of the student cohorts, this sample was considered sufficient to identify trends and themes relevant to the study.

The timing of the study was a crucial consideration. The researcher wished to ensure that the participants experienced the maximum benefit of the library's use, promotion, and activities, with data collection happening at the end of the scholastic year during May and the beginning of June, just before exams.

Participation was voluntary, with both the students and their parents assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. The sample included a balanced mix of genders and abilities, allowing for a representative range of responses across the student population.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through a structured online questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire consisted mainly of closed-ended, multiple-choice questions, with one open-ended question, and explored four key areas:

- a) The librarian
- b) The library and resources
- c) Visiting the library
- d) Library participation

Students completed the questionnaire in the school's computer labs over a period of a few weeks when the librarian was replacing absent teachers. Responses were anonymous, and students were encouraged to answer openly and honestly.

The questionnaire was piloted with a small group of middle and secondary school students from other schools to ensure clarity and relevance, resulting in very minor adjustments to wording and clarity of choice options.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire was analysed through percentages and patterns, via visualisations and charts on Google Forms and Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data from the last, open-ended, question was analysed thematically to identify recurring themes and suggestions for improvement.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines set by the University of Malta and the school's senior leadership team. Approval was obtained from both the University of Malta's Faculty Research Ethics Committee and from the school.

Parents were informed of the study and its purpose, and assured that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Since the students were all minors and participation depended also on parental consent, a form was included in the information email sent to all parents to make it easy to opt out and withdraw consent if so desired.

During the sessions, the students were informed of the study's purpose and assured that participation was voluntary and anonymous, with their own consent needed for participation, which they could withdraw at any time before the questionnaire's responses were submitted. Students were assured that neither their choice to participate nor their responses would affect them negatively in any way. Even though the researcher remained in the same room, he took care to ensure that the students felt

comfortable and unpressured during data collection, making it a point to remain away from the students' workstations to avoid seeing responses.

No personal identifiers were collected, and data was available only on the researcher's personal password-protected devices.

3.8 Limitations

With data collection happening so late in the year, this automatically excluded the Year 11s, who finished their compulsory schooling in early April 2025. The limitation of being with the students during replacement lessons meant that some students with Individual Educational Programmes were not present for the study. Moreover, some small subject groups at Year 10 level did not happen to have a free lesson slot during the data collection period to be able to participate in the questionnaire. Students who were absent during the single replacement lesson taken by the study were unable to participate at a later date.

This research attempts to identify trends across student year groups, with a larger number of respondents being desired so as to produce better indicators. While convenience sampling ensured that a large percentage of the whole student cohort was presented the opportunity to participate in the questionnaire, students were also told that they were free not to participate, or stop at any time. In an attempt to ensure participation, the questionnaire was kept short, with most questions being single-choice options and a single, open-ended question at the end that could be skipped. This strategy seems to have had its desired outcome, with all, or almost all, present students participating and completing the questionnaire. However, a longer, more detailed questionnaire would have both given more insights into certain areas and also would have attempted to correlate some of the responses.

Even though the students were asked to answer honestly, some might have responded in ways they believed were expected. Bias towards, or against, the librarian might have influenced their responses to certain questions.

While the case study approach provided rich and interesting contextual insights, the findings can hardly be generalised to other Maltese schools. Few schools have full-time trained librarians, and even within independent schools, the roles of the librarians vary according to the schools' needs. However, the toolkit developed from this research is designed to be adaptable for use in other Maltese middle and secondary schools.

4. Results

4.1 General Information

Table 1 shows the breakdown of participants by year group and gender. The number of participants in Years 7-9 represents close to the totality of the student cohorts at those levels.

School Level	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Total
Year 7	36	39	7	82
Year 8	41	36	2	79
Year 9	39	32	6	77
Year 10	32	25	5	62
Total	148	132	20	300

Table 1: Breakdown of participants by year group and gender

In the introductory section of the questionnaire, students were asked about their visit frequency to the school library (Figure 1.1). The last question in this section asked students when they chose to visit the library (Figure 1.2). All questions in this section were required and allowed only one answer choice.

How often do you visit the school library?

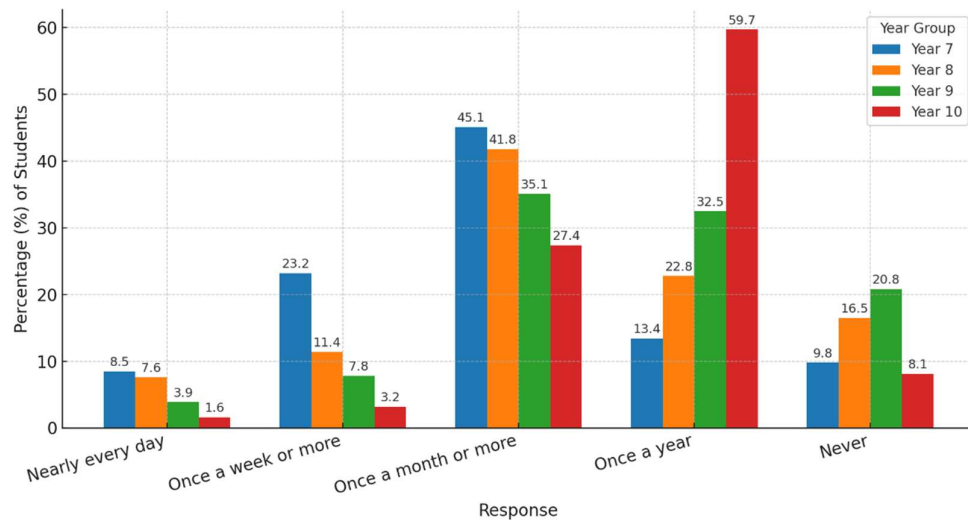


Figure 1.1: Visit frequency of students to the school library, by year group

When do you choose to visit the library?

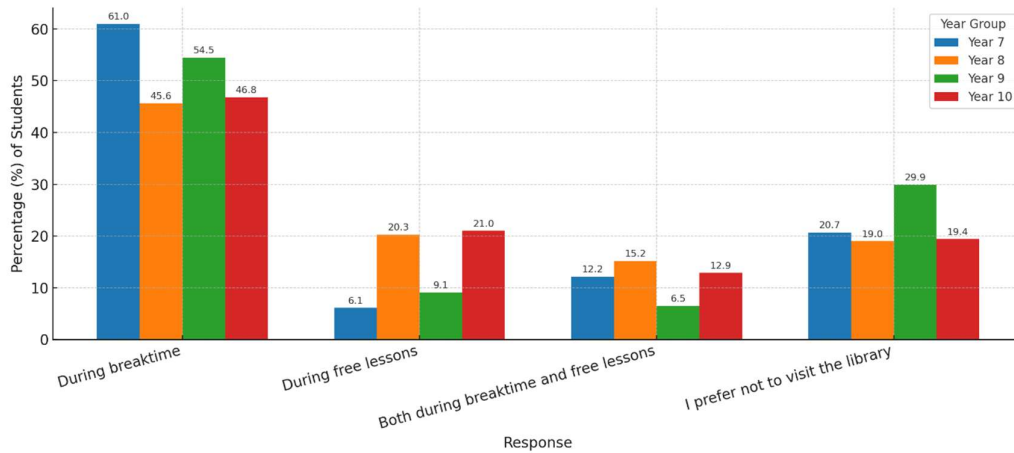


Figure 1.2: Choice of students' visiting time, by year group

4.2 The Librarian

The questions in this section pertained to the librarian, including students' perception of the librarian's friendliness (Figure 2.1) and whether students have spoken to the librarian (Figure 2.2). All four questions in this section were required and allowed only one answer choice.

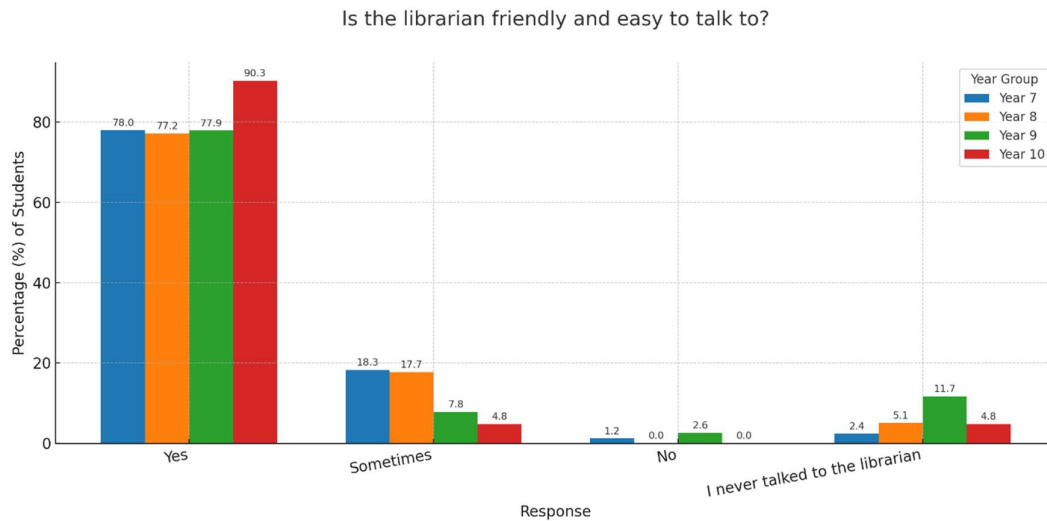


Figure 2.1: Students' perception of the friendliness of the librarian, by year group

Have you ever spent time talking or discussing with the librarian, even on things not necessarily related to books or the library?

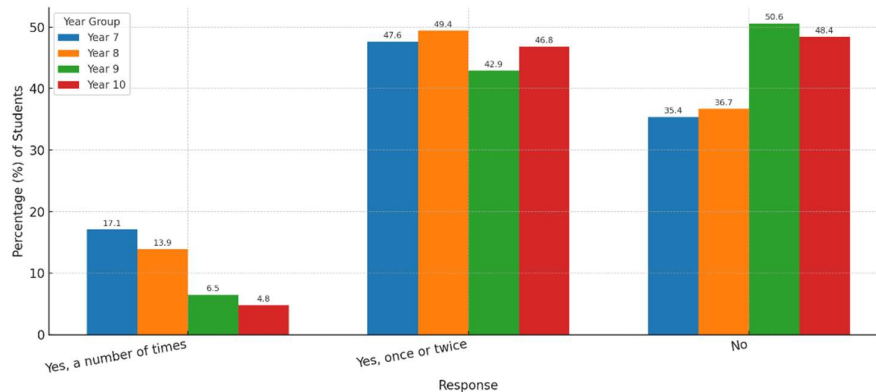


Figure 2.2: Students' conversations with the librarian on topics beyond books, by year group

Students were also asked whether the librarian ever helped them in their work, research, or studies, whether help was specifically asked for (Figure 2.3), and whether the librarian offered help even without being asked (Figure 2.4).

Have you ever asked the librarian for help in your work, research or studies?

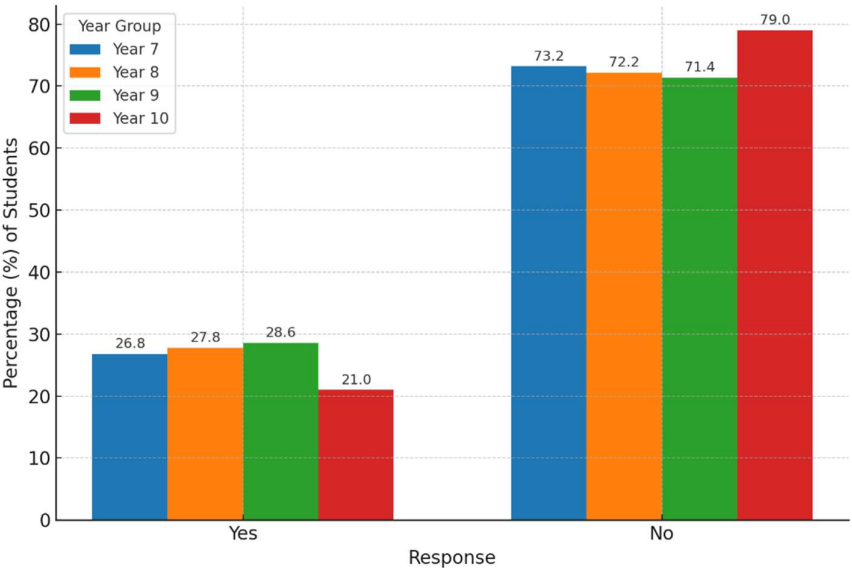


Figure 2.3: Students asking the librarian for help in their work, research, or studies, by year group

Has the librarian ever given you tips or helped you with your work, research or studies?

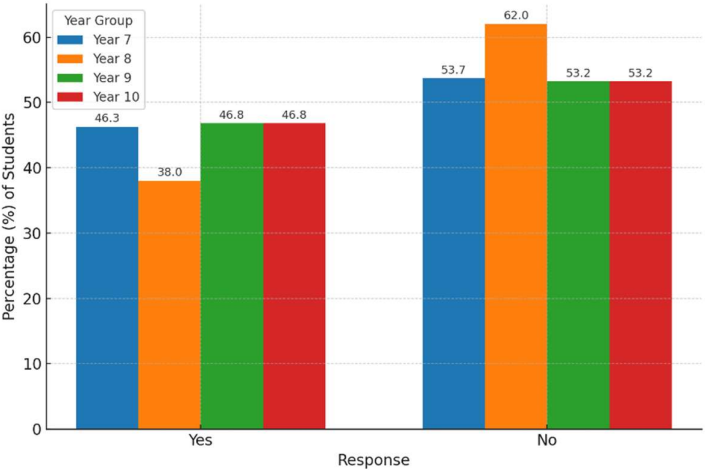


Figure 2.4: Students receiving tips or help from the librarian for their work, research or studies, by year group

4.3 The Library and Resources

The third part of the questionnaire dealt with the library and its resources, with particular focus on books. In the first three questions, students were asked whether they used the library just to read (Figure 3.1), whether they had ever borrowed books from the library (Figure 3.2), and how often they found books that interested them (Figure 3.3). These three questions were required and allowed only one answer choice.

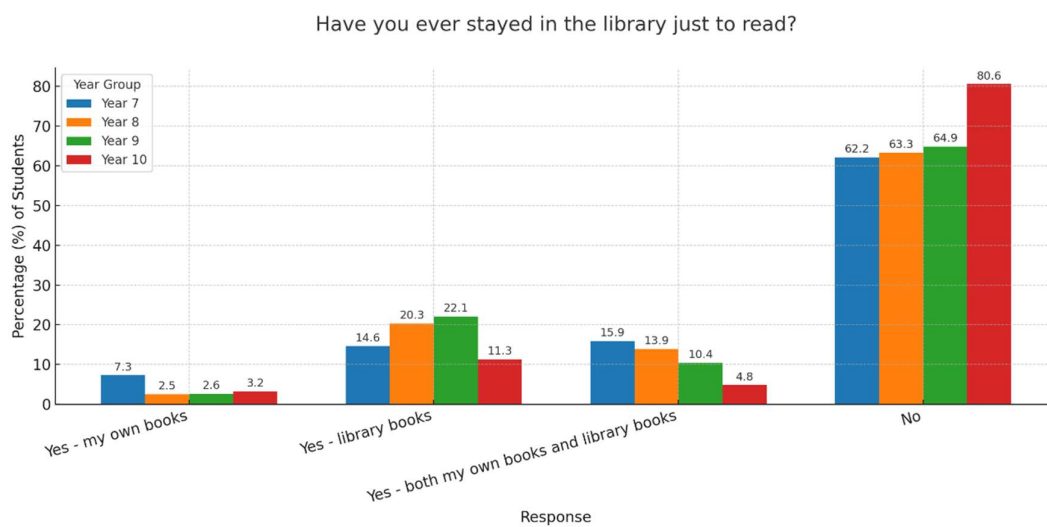


Figure 3.1: Students who stayed in the library just to read, by year group

Have you ever borrowed a book from the library?

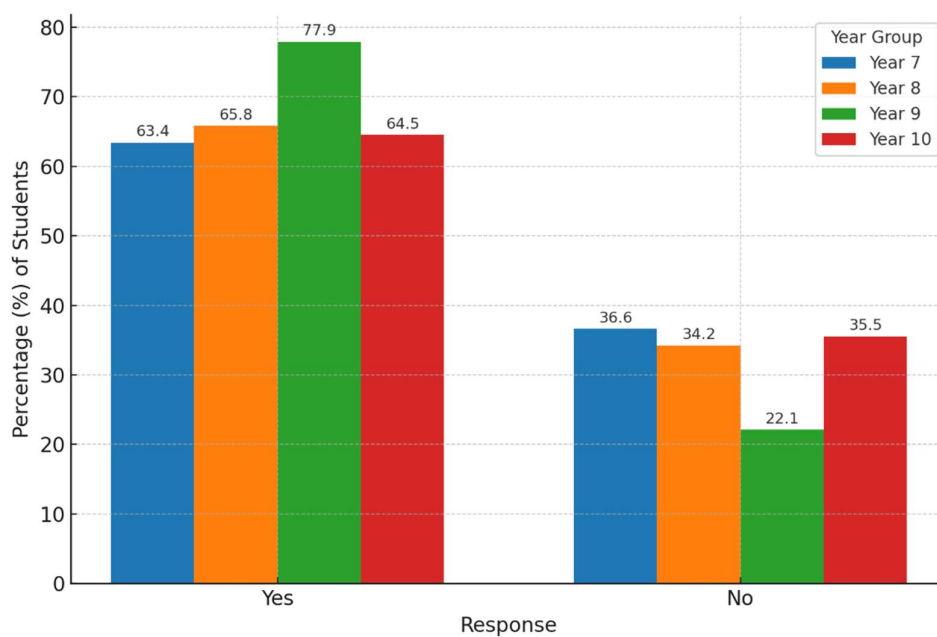


Figure 3.2: Students borrowing books from the library, by year group

If you wish to borrow or look for a book from the library, do you often find a book that interests you?

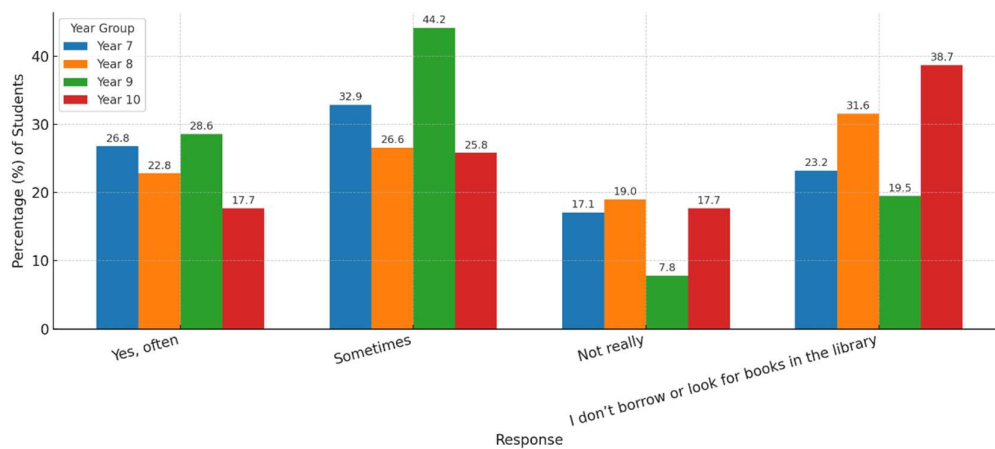


Figure 3.3: Students finding books of interest in the library, by year group

This section asked students about whether they know where to find books that interest them (Figure 3.4), library signage (Figure 3.5), and their perception of physical resources

that would help them in their work or research (Figure 3.6). These three questions were required and allowed only one answer choice.

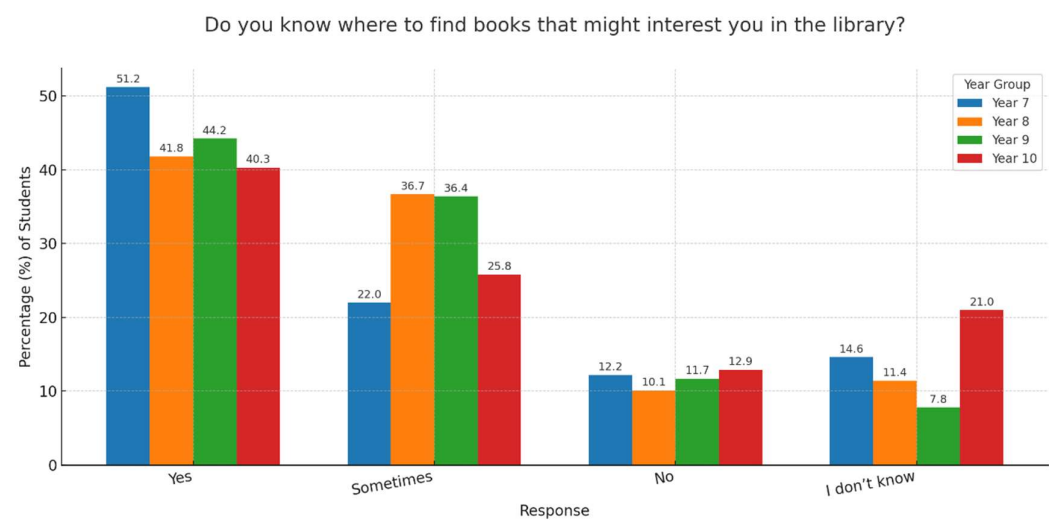


Figure 3.4: Students' knowledge of where to find books of interest in the library, by year group

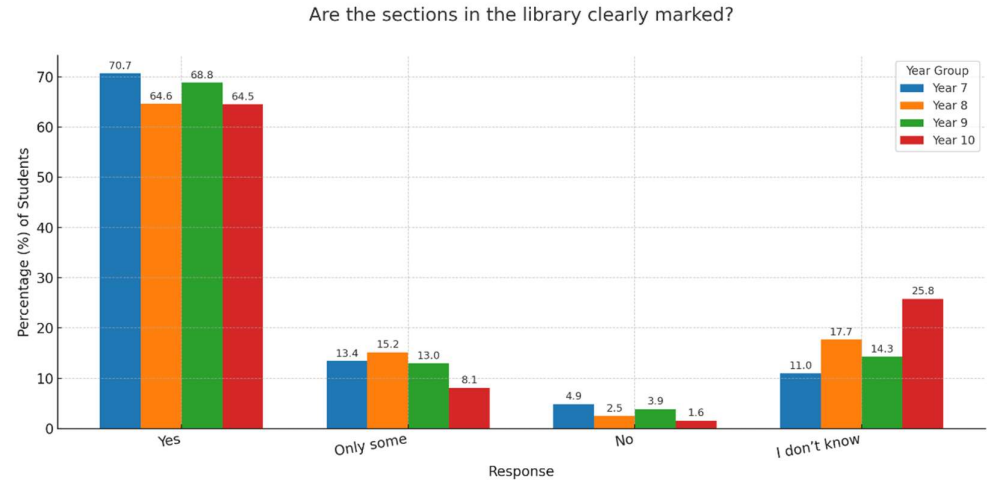


Figure 3.5: Students' views on whether library sections are clearly marked, by year group

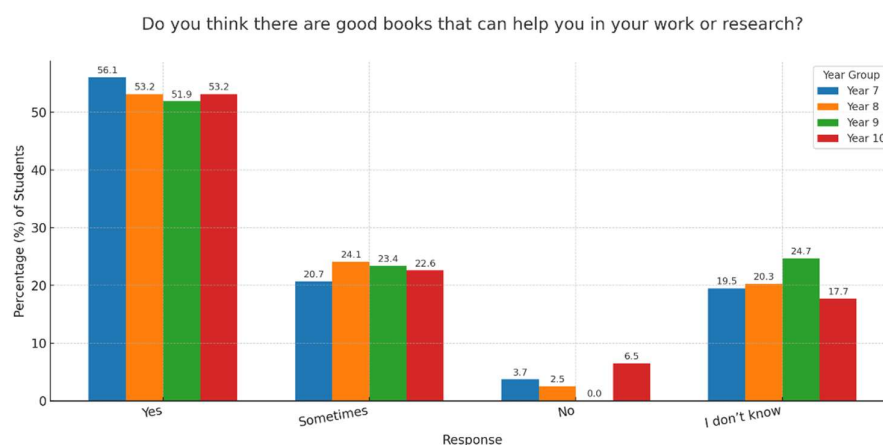


Figure 3.6: Students' views on whether there are good books in the library to help with work or research, by year group

The final question in this section explored students' wishes about what they would like to see in the library. Respondents were allowed to skip this question, as well as select multiple options. The last, 'Other', choice allowed students to provide suggestions through an open-ended response. The main selections are presented in Figure 3.7, while the 'Other' responses are shown in Table 2, grouped by general theme, and containing the number of student answers per year group. 287 respondents (95.7%) chose to answer this question.

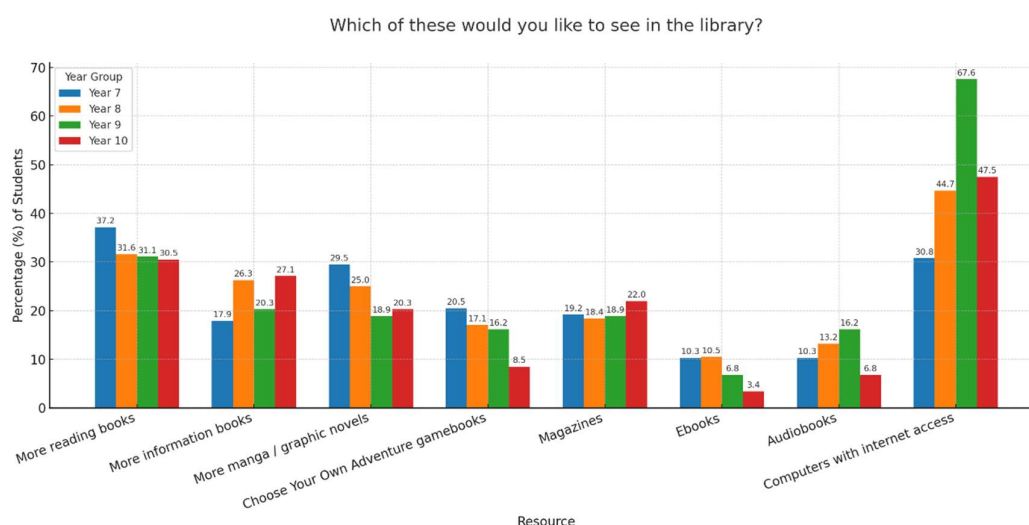


Figure 3.7: Resources students would like to see in the library (selected categories), by year group

Themes Extracted from the ‘Other’ response choice:

- **Board games & puzzles** (board games, Monopoly, chess, puzzles, fun games)
- **Sports & hobbies** (sports books, animal books, cars, cooking, fashion, Eurovision, Dungeons&Dragons, Rocket League)
- **Fiction genres** (fantasy, YA, romance, thrillers, horror, true crime, comics, specific authors like David Walliams, Freida McFadden)
- **Non-fiction / reference** (non-fiction, action non-fiction, facts, tech & computing)
- **School-related** (school magazines, yearbooks, ability to suggest books)
- **Miscellaneous** (inappropriate or joke responses)

Year Group	Board games & puzzles	Fiction genres	Sports & hobbies	Non-fiction / reference	School-related	Miscellaneous
Year 7	5	4	4	3	2	4
Year 8	4	4	5	1	1	2
Year 9	2	2	1	1	0	2
Year 10	0	3	2	0	0	2

Table 2: Themes from students’ other suggestions for the library, and the number of responses by year group

4.4 Visiting the Library

This section of the questionnaire explored the various ways and reasons that students may be brought or enticed into the library, apart from borrowing books or reading.

The first three questions are directly linked to other teachers taking the students to the library. The first two questions asked students whether their teacher ever took them to the library for an orientation visit (Figure 4.1), or for a whole class lesson held in the library (Figure 4.2). The third question mostly applied to individual students or small groups, whose teachers or Learning Support Educators (LSEs) might have taken to the library to do some work (Figure 4.3). These three questions were required and allowed only one answer choice.

Have any of your teachers ever brought you to the library for an orientation visit?

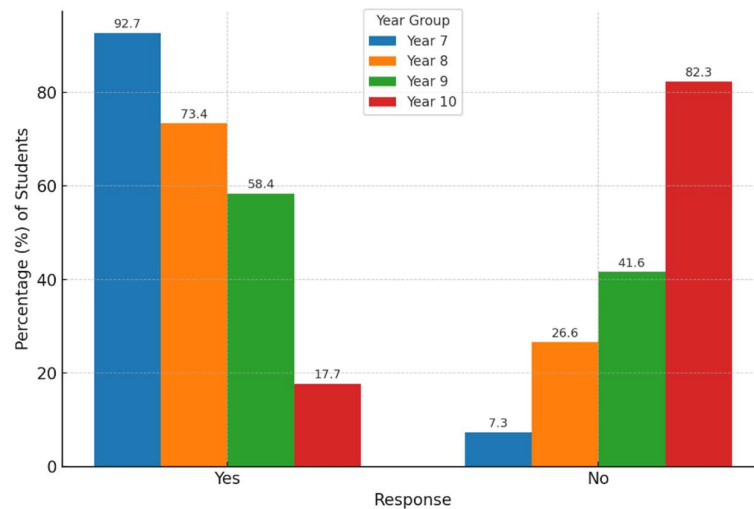


Figure 4.1: Students brought by their teachers to the library for an orientation visit, by year group

Have any of your teachers ever given their lesson in the library?

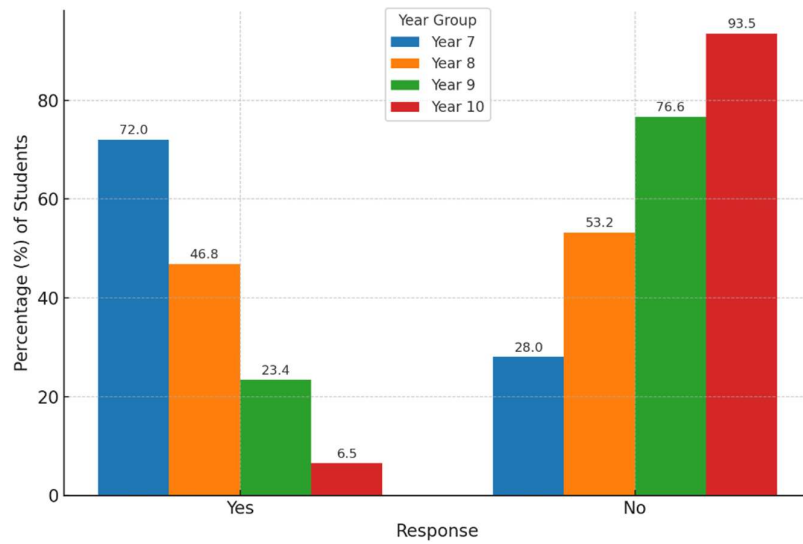


Figure 4.2: Students whose teachers have given lessons in the library, by year group

Have you ever visited the library with a teacher or LSE to do some work?

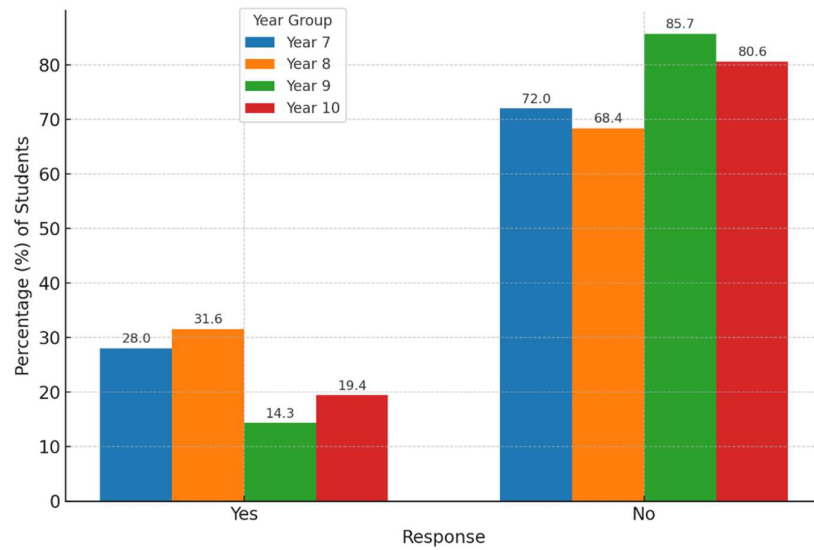


Figure 4.3: Students' visits to the library with a teacher or LSE for work, by year group

The fourth question explored the social context of visiting the library, showing a preference for individual vs. social visits. This question was required and allowed only one answer choice.

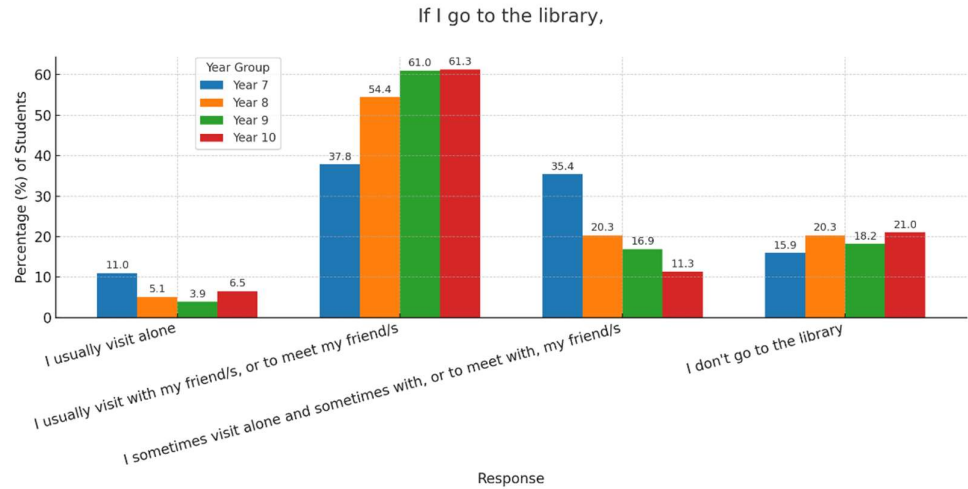


Figure 4.4: Students' visiting patterns in the library, by year group

The fifth question in this section asked students their reasons for going to the library, specifically when doing work. This question was not a required one, allowing students to skip it if they did not wish to respond or if the question did not apply to them. Multiple choice options were allowed. 252 respondents (84%) chose to answer this question.

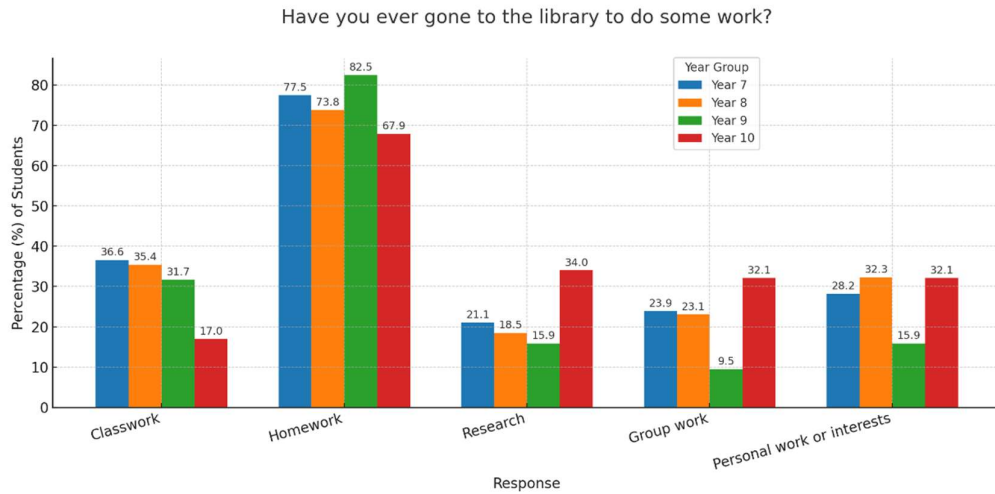


Figure 4.5: Students' reasons for going to the library to do work, by year group

The next two questions explored students' views related to available space in the library (Figure 4.6), as well as perceived noise levels (Figure 4.7). Both questions were required and allowed only one answer choice.

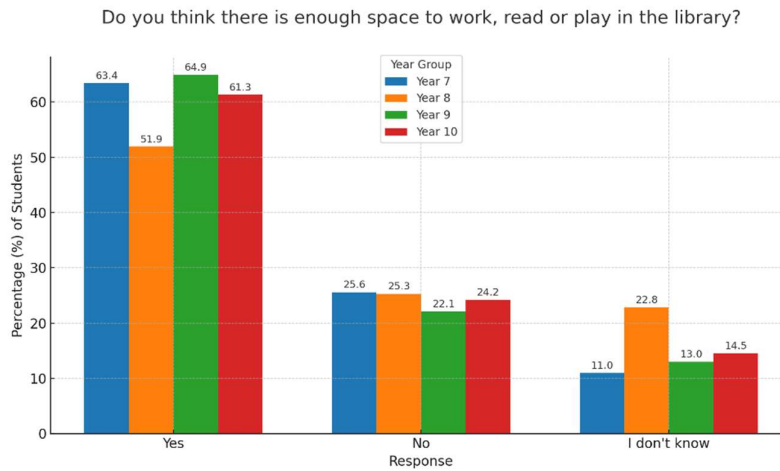


Figure 4.6: Students' views on available space in the library, by year group

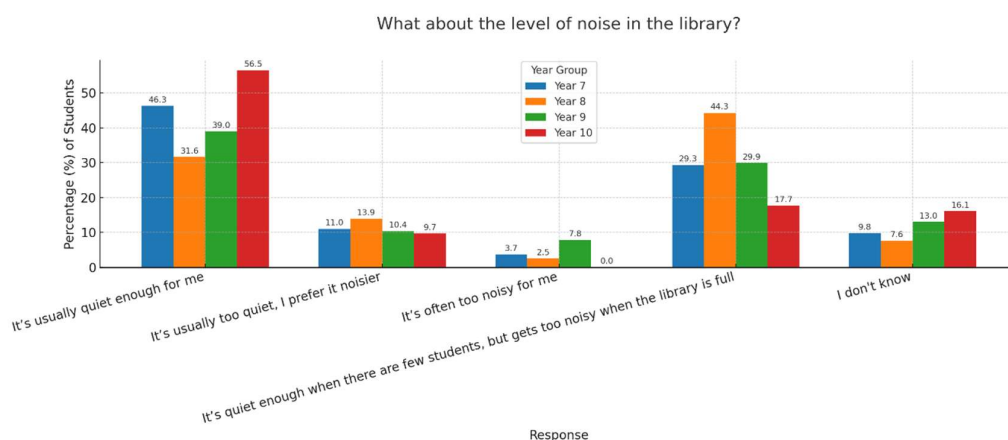


Figure 4.7: Students' perceptions of noise levels in the library, by year group

The following three questions explored whether and how students participated in library clubs (Figure 4.8), chess tournaments organised by the librarian (Figure 4.9), and various types of games available in the library (Figure 4.10). These questions were required. Questions 8 (Figure 4.8) and 9 (Figure 4.9) allowed only one answer choice, while question 10 (Figure 4.10) allowed multiple selections.

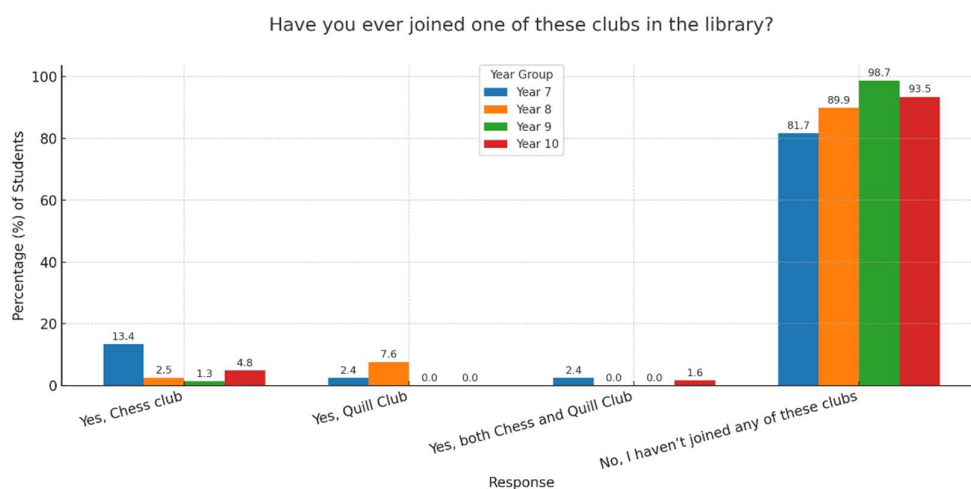


Figure 4.8: Students' participation in library clubs, by year group

Have you ever participated in a chess tournament organised by the librarian?

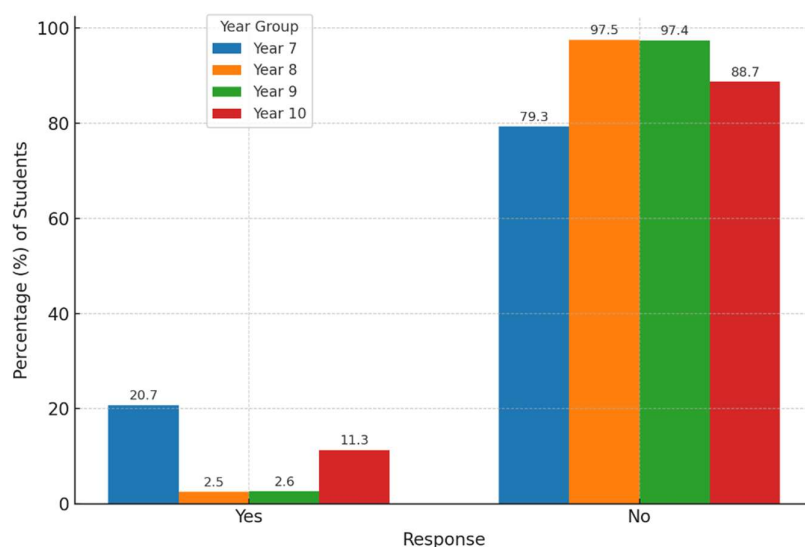


Figure 4.9: Students' participation in chess tournaments organised by the librarian, by year group

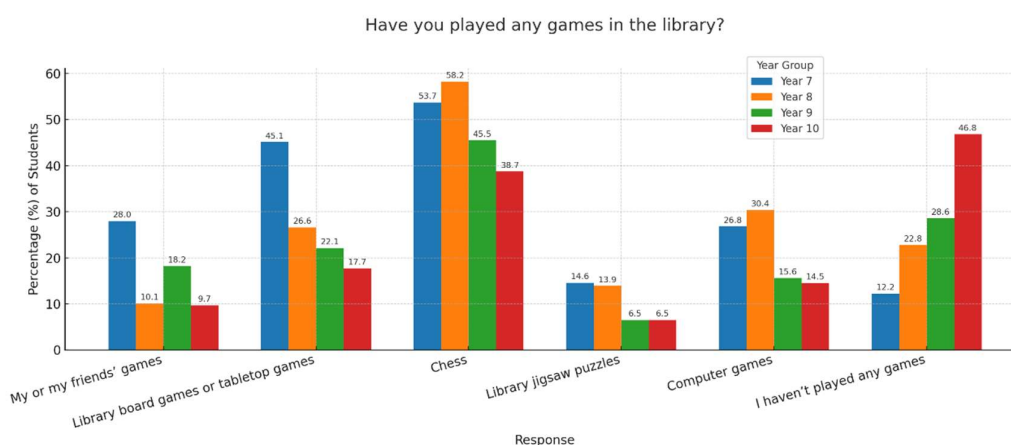


Figure 4.10: Students' participation in different types of games in the library, by year group

The next two questions were related to promotion by the librarian on the school's digital platform – Microsoft Teams. Students were asked about their frequency of checking Teams (Figure 4.11), and whether they saw any of the librarian's announcements on this platform (Figure 4.12). Both questions were required and allowed only one answer choice.

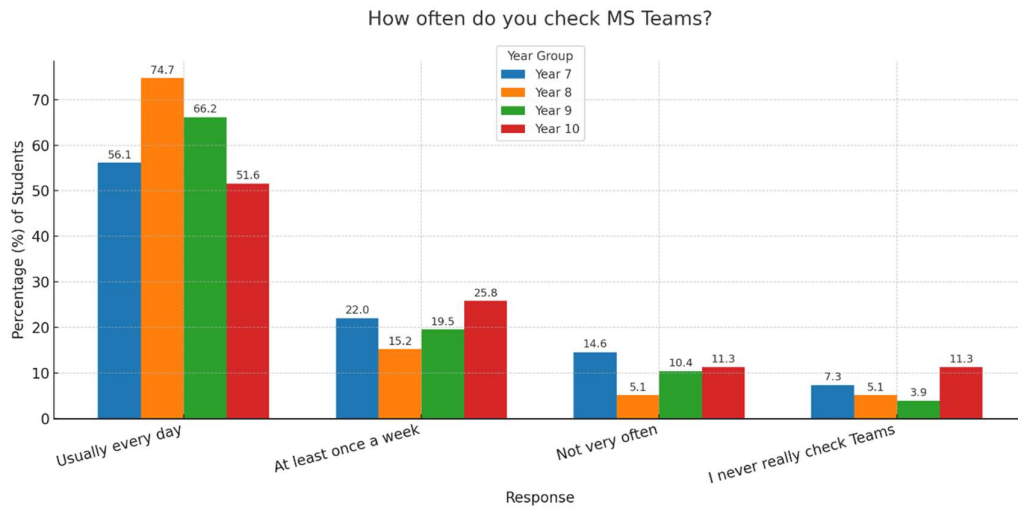


Figure 4.11: Students' frequency of checking Microsoft Teams, by year group

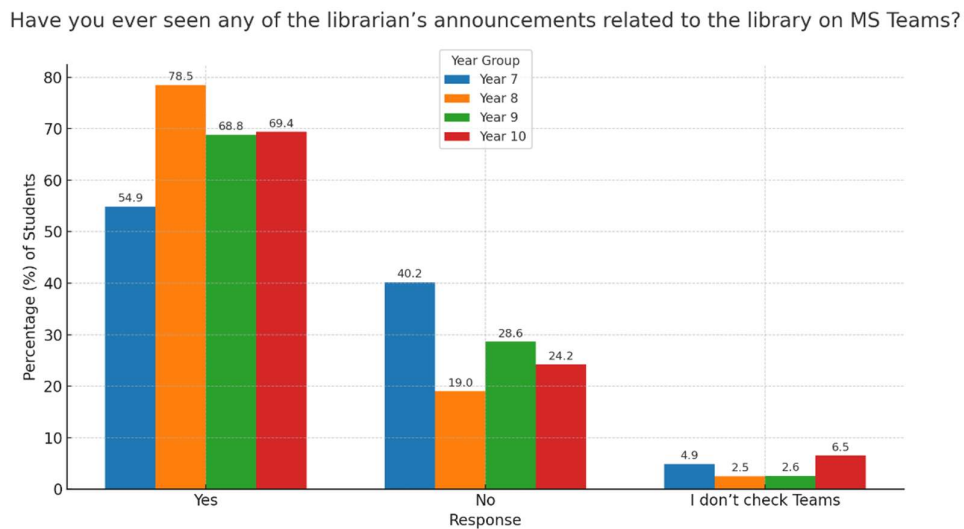


Figure 4.12: Students' awareness of librarian announcements on Microsoft Teams, by year group

Students were then asked two questions related to library promotion in and outside the library, through announcements on the library notice board outside the library (Figure 4.13) and featured books tables inside the library (Figure 4.14). Both answers were required. Question 13 (Figure 4.13) allowed only one answer choice. Question 14 (Figure

4.14) allowed multiple selections, including an ‘Other’ option, where respondents could add any other featured books tables that were not included in the given list of options.

Have you seen any of the librarian’s announcements or posters on the Library notice board?

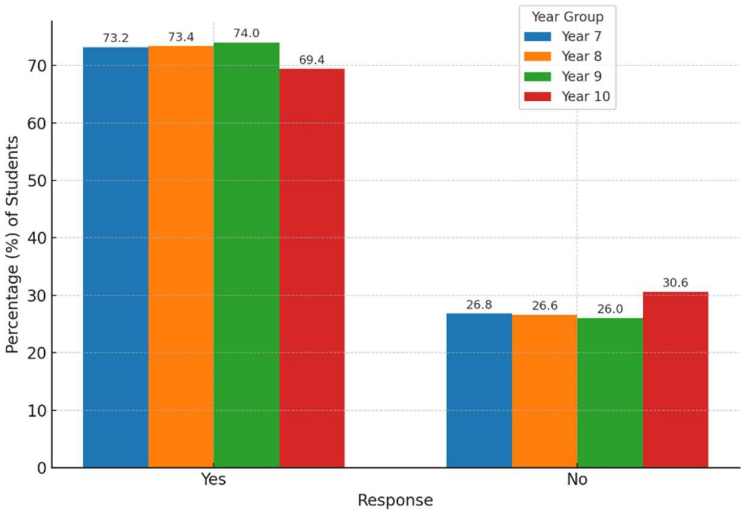


Figure 4.13: Students’ awareness of library notice board announcements, by year group

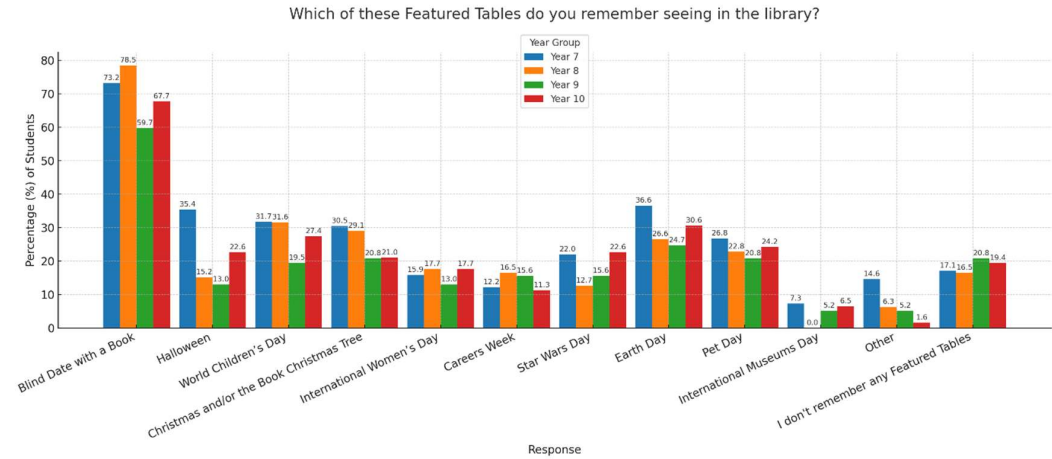


Figure 4.14: Students’ recall of library featured tables, by year group

In question 14 (Figure 4.14), responses in the 'Other' option (22 respondents) included the following themes:

- **Irrelevant** (blank responses / "Nothing" / "I don't visit the library")
- **Miscellaneous** (inappropriate or joke responses)
- **Chess** (related to the chess tournaments)
- **Already mentioned** (different names for the featured tables mentioned in the choices)
- **Another featured table** (Europe Day)
- **Other tables** (tables with weeded books for students to take)

The final two questions in this section were related to the laptops in the library, available for student use. In question 15 (Figure 4.15), students were asked if they had ever used the laptops, while question 16 (Figure 4.16) explored the ways the laptops were used. Question 15 (Figure 4.15) was required and allowed only one answer choice.

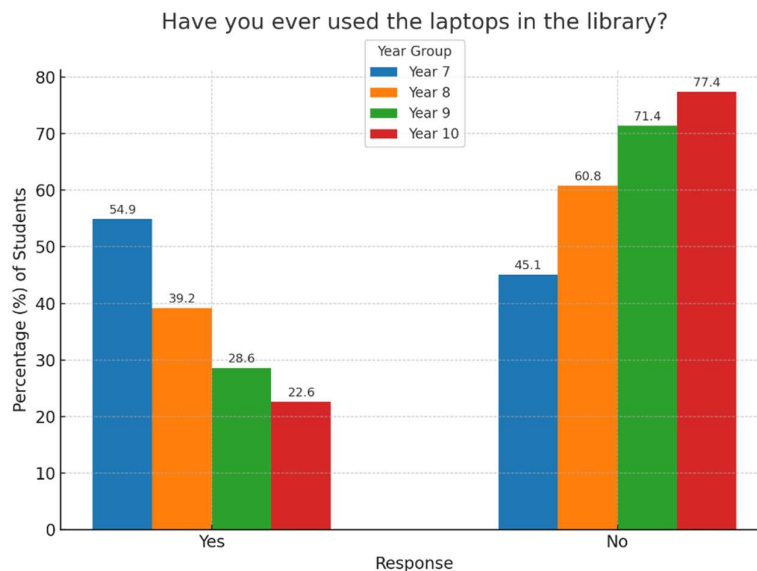


Figure 4.15: Students who used laptops in the library, by year group

Question 16 (Figure 4.16) was not a required one and allowed multiple selections, including an 'Other' option, where respondents could add answers that were not included in the given list of options. 144 respondents (48%) chose to answer this question.

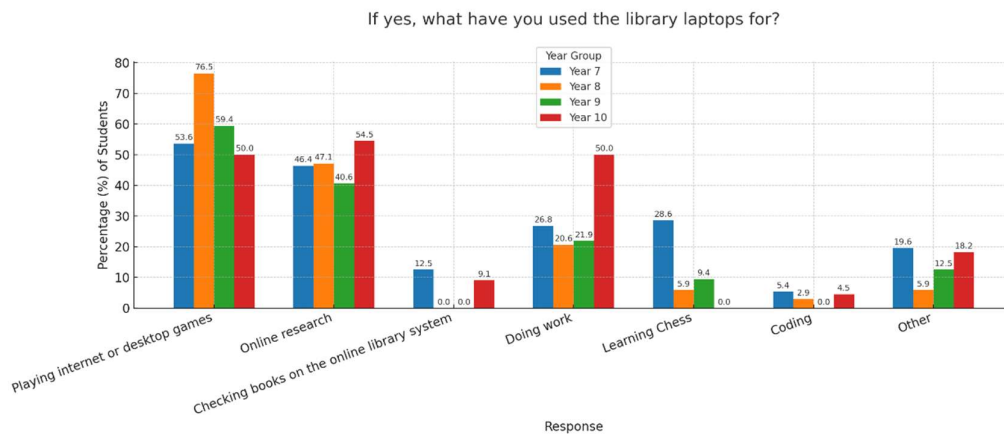


Figure 4.16: Students' use of library laptops for different purposes, by year group

Besides joke or inappropriate responses, the 'Other' answers included empty responses and statements that the respondents did not use the laptops. Relevant answers included: playing games with friends, checking football results, searching for "random" interests, looking at university courses and using AI/ChatGPT.

4.5 Library Participation

The fifth part of the questionnaire surveyed a greater depth of student engagement, exploring how students can make a direct contribution to the school library.

The first question (Figure 5.1) asked students about specific ways they might be interested in contributing, with a more open-ended 'other' option. This was not a required question, and 77 students (25.7%) chose not to answer. Among the remaining

223 students (74.3%) who answered, 13 students chose the 'Other' option. Besides a few inappropriate responses, 7 students gave answers that indicated that they were not interested or that there was nothing that interested them. The only valid 'Other' responses were two students mentioning computers, and one mentioning chess.

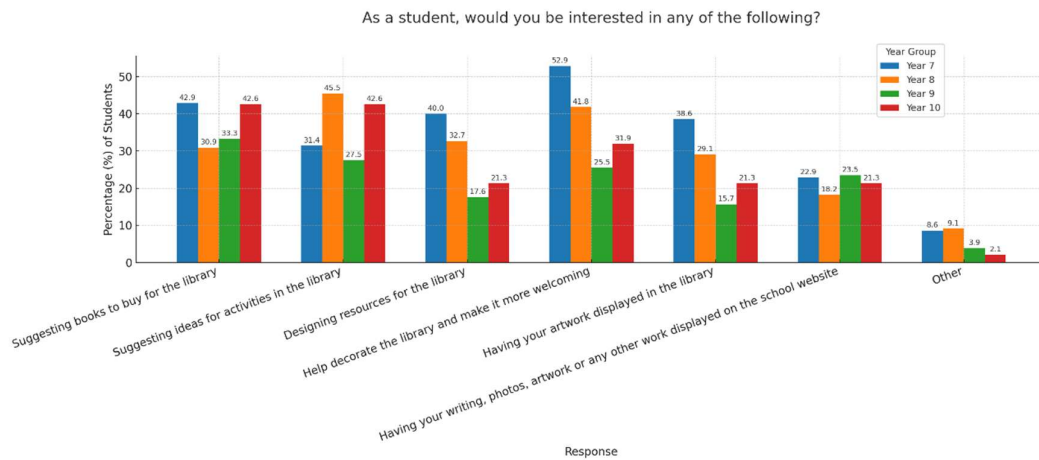


Figure 5.1: Students' interest in different forms of library participation, by year group

In the second question (Figure 5.2), students were asked whether they were ever library assistants in the school library. This question was required and allowed only one answer choice.

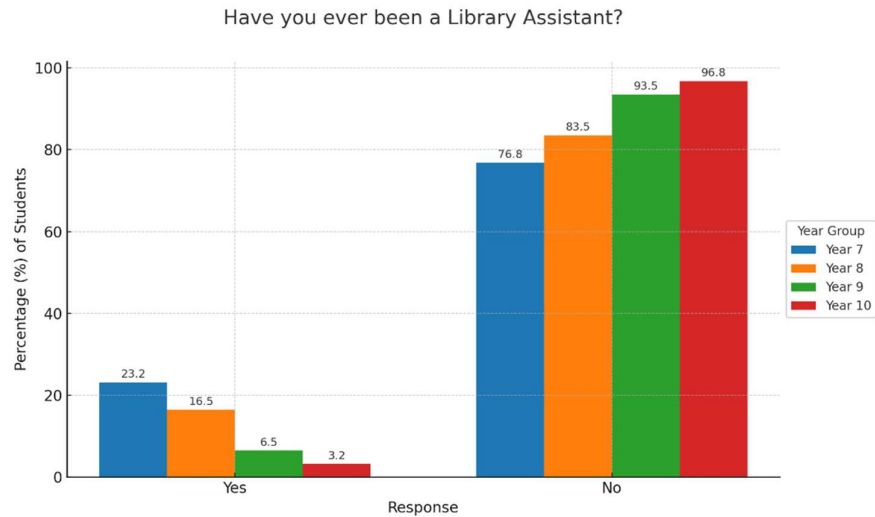


Figure 5.2: Students' experience as library assistants, by year group

The third question (Figure 5.3) was a follow-up to the previous one, with students who had been library assistants being asked about specific tasks they did or skills they learnt. This question was not a required one and allowed multiple selections. A total of 60 students (20%) chose to answer the question, with 240 students (80%) opting not to answer.

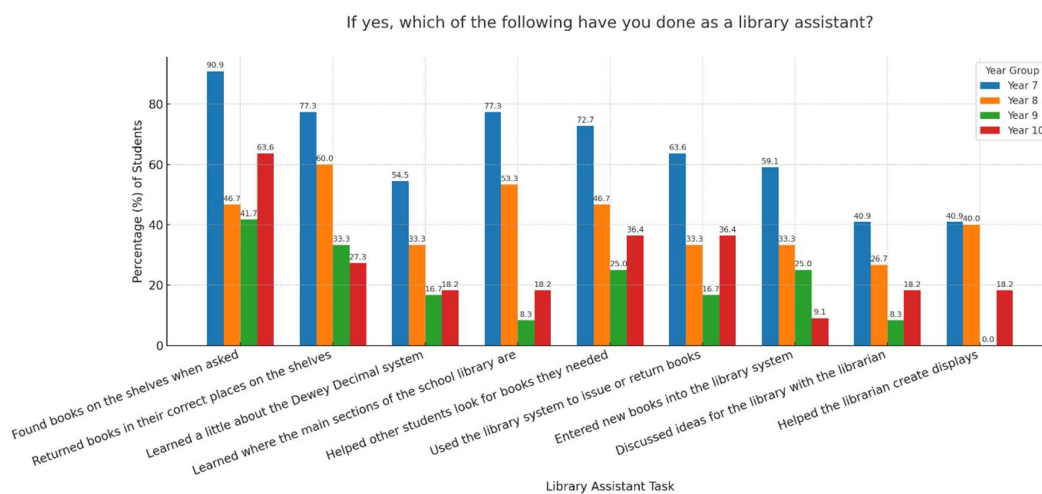


Figure 5.3: Tasks performed by students as library assistants, by year group

The final question of the survey was an open-ended question. Students were asked whether they had suggestions for improvement of the library. This was not a required question.

Year Group	Answered	Total Students	% Who Answered
Year 7	55	82	67.1%
Year 8	51	79	64.6%
Year 9	40	77	51.9%
Year 10	28	62	45.2%

Table 3: Students who answered the final open-ended question, by year group

Year Group	More books / manga / genres	More technology / computers	Better space / welcoming / lighting	Noise / behaviour	Nothing / no change	Other
Year 7	9 (16.4%)	1 (1.8%)	22 (40.0%)	5 (9.1%)	12 (21.8%)	15 (27.3%)
Year 8	12 (23.5%)	3 (5.9%)	19 (37.3%)	2 (3.9%)	13 (25.5%)	23 (45.1%)
Year 9	4 (10.0%)	6 (15.0%)	8 (20.0%)	0 (0%)	19 (47.5%)	8 (20.0%)
Year 10	6 (21.4%)	1 (3.6%)	9 (32.1%)	1 (3.6%)	11 (39.3%)	8 (28.6%)

Table 4: General themes of comments in the final open-ended question, by year group

Some other themes that were mentioned across the year groups (combined into the 'Other' column) were: having more organised library sections, more games, more activities and crafts/artwork. A few made specific positive comments about the librarian.

Representative Quotes by Theme

1. More books / manga / genres

- *"I think that the library should have more manga"*
- *"Books that teenagers actually read"*
- *"It should have more books that are actually interesting"*
- *"Newer/better-kept books"*
- *"It should be more open to different genres and topics"*

2. More technology / computers / internet

- *"More computers to use"*
- *"More laptops"*

3. Better space / furniture / welcoming

- *"More space to sit/work"*
- *"More desks and chairs"*
- *"Make it a bit more comfortable, modern and welcoming to students"*
- *"Better lighting, more colour to inspire imagination"*
- *"Make it a bit bigger"*
- *"I think the library should be in a bigger room"*
- *"The chairs could be more comfortable"; "Add sofas"; "Beanbags to read on"*

4. Noise / rules / behaviour

- *"It's very loud sometimes. Maybe if it's quieter more people will go"*
- *"It could be more quiet"*
- *"I think it more of a quiet place"*

5. Nothing / no change

- *"No, it's perfect"*
- *"I like the library as it is"*
- *"No, I think it's fine as it is"*
- *"I don't know"*

7. Other / miscellaneous

- *"Allowing people to display their art in the library"*
- *"Do more activities like decorating club to decorate bookmarks and do crafts"*
- *"An art corner where everyone could collaborate on something for the library"*
- *"Do a: Make A Book Challenge"*
- *"It could be more organised and less scattered"*
- *"I just wish that there are some more board games or card games"*
- *"There are a lot of activities in the library but there should be weekly"*
- *"I want to help design the library"*
- *"The librarian is super welcoming in and outside of the library and is always ready to help"*

5. Discussion

Following the presentation of results attained through the questionnaire, this chapter will seek to explore the extent to which the research, presented in the literature review, compares to students' experiences of engagement in the middle and secondary school library in this study.

Being a very context-specific study, the findings need to be understood against the background of practical circumstances which could impact the results obtained. Strategies for the improvement of student engagement will be presented.

5.1 General Visiting Trends and Context

Figure 1.1 (How often do you visit the school library?) indicates that the younger the cohort in the middle/secondary school, the more likely they are to visit the library, and to be regular visitors. This higher visit frequency among younger students suggests that early secondary years (middle school level) present a critical window for establishing positive library engagement habits.

While this downward trend in visits as students age may suggest a potential 'engagement gap' in upper secondary years, understanding the underlying factors can help give context to these results. It has previously been stated that the library needs to be inclusive and accessible, and benefit the school and students (Sullivan, 2013). In practical terms, this goes beyond aisle and door width, ramps and elevators. The researcher has long noted from experience that the position of the library within the school building also has an impact on which year groups visit most. The library is situated next to the Year 7 and 8 break area, making it a normal occurrence for students from these groups to visit often, even for just a few minutes' respite from the heat or cold outside. On the

other hand, the other year groups' (9 – 10) break area is situated further away, with students having to ask for specific permission to visit the library, even during breaks. This could create an extra obstacle to their visiting the library. Thus, the school library seems to be more accessible to the lower years than the older ones, which could explain the increase in use by the lower year groups. The position of the library within the school should be central and equally accessible to all students. If this is not the case, then provisions must be made to ensure equitable access.

The results (Figure 1.1) show that, while regular or intermittent visits drop as the students grow older, most students still visit at least once a year. Weisburg & Toor (2015) noted that school librarians are sometimes assigned tasks that do not fall within the remit of library duties. In this particular case, one of the librarian's duties is of a yearly administrative nature, with students visiting the library for this task, resulting in a spike in results, especially from the Year 10 students. Even though it may seem to be an extra task that takes away from time for library duties, this provides an opportunity for the librarian to interact, even if minimally, with the majority of the students in the school.

All students in the school had been told that the library was open for use during breaktimes, and the results (Figure 1.2: When do you choose to visit the library?) show that the majority of students who visit choose to do so at that time. Other students may prefer to make full use of outdoor time during breaks. On rainy days, when students are not allowed outside during breaktime, the library sees a surge in popularity, since some students prefer to visit rather than remain in their classroom. This seems to be reflected in the results as shown in Figure 1.2.

Both the IFLA-UNESCO School Library Manifesto (2025) and Kachel & Lance (2013) have mentioned the importance of having a full-time librarian in the school. The librarian's hours in the library have only been extended in the last scholastic year, allowing for the library's use during free lessons, which previously was not a possibility. Consequently, several students, and the teachers replacing absent staff during these lessons, were not

aware that the library could be used even in these replacement periods. This can be seen in the low numbers of students who visit the library during free lessons (Figure 1.2). Potentially, more students would visit the library if the opening hours and availability were more readily known and accessible. One solution to increase awareness would be to have clear opening hours on the library door or nearby notice board. Students can also be made aware through official communication channels. Staff could be told during morning meetings or during staff seminars, especially if the librarian and school leadership team discuss and create an official policy for library usage.

5.2 The Librarian

Both Chelton (1999) and Robertson (2017) have mentioned the importance of interacting positively with students. In a school, interactions go beyond the strict confines of the library walls. The overwhelming majority of students surveyed (Figure 2.1) stated that the librarian is friendly and easy to talk to. While patterns of library use have been different across the various cohorts, potentially the students' perception of the librarian has meant that more students visited the library than if they had a negative impression.

This may also be reflected in the responses to the question asking whether they ever spent time talking or discussing with the librarian (Figure 2.2), even on things not necessarily related to books or the library. Between 40 and 50 percent of students across all four levels answered that they did so once or twice. McClintock Miller & Bass (2019) and Almeida (2021) have spoken about the power of knowing students as whole persons, leading to a more respectful relationship. The librarian attends numerous extracurricular activities when possible, including volunteering at school live-ins and even a school trip abroad. In line with what Weisburg & Toor (2015) wrote, students interacted differently and more freely with the librarian outside the school environment. The librarian noted that this carried on beyond the trip or activity, with some students visiting the library more regularly, or even for the first time, for a casual greeting or chat

with the librarian. The librarian joined the Year 7 and 8 cohorts on the trip abroad, the consequence of which seems to be indicated in the larger percentages of frequent interactions with these two year groups (Figure 2.2).

In line with the Australian Library and Information Association's recommendations (2004), the current librarian holds teaching qualifications and is working towards qualifications in librarianship. When asked whether they have ever asked the librarian for help in their work, research, or studies, around a quarter of respondents replied that they did (Figure 2.3). Being also a teacher, the librarian is proactive in offering help, even if not directly asked. This is reflected in the number of respondents who received help in their work, research, or studies from the librarian, being much higher than those who specifically asked for help, consistently around 46 percent in three cohorts, and a little less in one (Figure 2.4).

Students' consistently positive perceptions of the librarian as friendly and supportive is significant, confirming that an approachable demeanour fosters a comfortable environment for student assistance and engagement. Every positive interaction reinforces the librarian's status as one who genuinely cares about the students. Even if help, such as a specific resource, could not be provided, the librarian's efforts to genuinely be of service and not dismiss students' queries are always an opportunity to build mutual respect.

Merga (2019) has highlighted how essential it is that school management understands the educative potential of school librarians, including them in the overall education strategy. Wake et al. (2022) and Burrell et al. (2023) have highlighted the importance of the school librarian in teaching information literacy, research skills, problem-solving, and critical thinking. The librarian's duties do not at the moment include a teaching role, and students might thus not be aware of the ways the librarian can contribute. Librarians in Maltese church and state schools will possibly have different experiences, being primarily teachers first. To raise awareness, librarians can set meetings with the school

leadership teams to discuss and promote the various ways the librarian can contribute to the school's education plan. Torres & Tagoe (2022) and McClintock Miller & Bass (2019) have underlined the importance of building relationships with educators and helping plan educational programmes. This can also include helping out with research resources and coordinating certain lessons, especially if the library is used for the lesson. As both an educator and information professional, the more aware staff and students are about the librarian's potential, the better the contribution the librarian can make.

5.3 The Library and Resources

The questions in this section explored the library's book resources, which are exclusively print-based.

While over a third of students in lower year groups use the library for leisure reading, a sharp divergence appears in Year 10, where 80 percent report that they never stay just to read (Figure 3.1). This significant drop-off suggests that as students approach the end of their secondary education, their engagement with the library shifts from recreational reading to more functional and academic purposes.

When asked whether they have ever borrowed a book from the school library, nearly two thirds of students in the Year 7, 8, and 10 cohorts answered that they did, together with nearly 80 percent of Year 9 students (Figure 3.2). Year 9 students reported the highest satisfaction in finding interesting books, whereas Year 10 students showed the lowest levels of discovery (Figure 3.3). The importance of promoting reading for pleasure (Merga, 2022) and having diverse, high-quality books for everyone (International Literacy Association, 2022) has already been discussed. The librarian must thus make sure that the library's resources cater to everybody's interests equally.

Students were then asked whether they knew where to find books of interest (Figure 3.4) and whether the library sections were clearly marked (Figure 3.5). While roughly two thirds of students felt library sections were clearly marked, a trend emerged where confidence in navigating the library decreased slightly as students progressed into higher year groups. This suggests that older students may require more sophisticated navigation tools to find more specialised research materials, whether by better or more detailed signage, library maps, personal support, or investing in an Online Public Access Catalogue.

Students were then asked whether they think there are good books that can help them specifically in their work or research (Figure 3.6). While close to 20 percent stated that they did not know, more than half the students answered that there were, with a further 20 to 24 percent of students saying that they do find good books that help sometimes. Very few students said they did not find good books to help them in their work or research, with no students at all answering negatively in the Year 9 cohort (Figure 3.6). It seems that most students still find value in physical books, even for work or research. Providing better means to find and access these books will probably help students make full use of them.

Since collection development must take into consideration students' diverse needs and interests (International Literacy Association, 2022), the last question in this section asked students what they would like to see more of in the library (Figure 3.7). Of all the book options, the favourite choice showed a preference for more reading books, especially among the youngest students, while the older students showed a preference for more information books. Manga and graphic novels, and Choose Your Own Adventure gamebooks were also preferred more by the lower year groups, while there was a marginal greater interest in magazines among the Year 10 cohort. There was less interest in non-print resources, with some interest in audiobooks, and less interest in ebooks. There was, however, a marked higher interest in having more computers with internet access, particularly among the Year 9 students, although in the case of the Year 7 students, it was less than their preference for more reading books (Figure 3.7).

The low interest in ebooks and audiobooks is notable and of significant importance when budgeting for resources. The importance of audiobooks was already mentioned by Grover & Hannegan (2011), especially for students who might find reading more difficult. Although a school library must cater to students' diverse needs (International Literacy Association, 2022), libraries with a limited budget often find difficulties in doing so. Rather than individually invest in ebook and audiobook subscriptions, it may be more profitable for the students if the school library were to promote the free and extensive service offered by Malta Libraries through the Libby app. Liaising and collaborating with Malta Libraries potentially also offers the students the opportunity to make better use of the public libraries around the Maltese islands. This mostly applies to independent schools, since all state schools and many church schools form part of Malta Libraries, with access to its resources.

In this question, students were also given the choice to suggest their own answers. These responses were themed and presented in Table 2. The younger Year groups (7 and 8) offered more suggestions than the older students, with board games and puzzles, particular fiction genres and non-fiction, particularly related to sports and hobbies, being the most suggested.

This last question (Figure 3.7) is of particular significance in understanding each cohort's resource preference, in order to build a more diverse collection that appeals to all students and interests, enhancing the idea that the library is a great place to be (McClintock Miller & Bass, 2019).

5.4 Visiting the Library

Library orientations are an essential strategy for introducing students to the library (Education Task, 2024). Figure 4.1 shows the percentage of students who have been

taken by a teacher for a library orientation visit. Over 90 percent of Year 7 students replied that they had the orientation visit, with Year 8 and Year 9 students showing a progressive decrease. Over 80 percent of Year 10 students replied that they never had a library orientation visit.

The current cohort at the school has had different experiences with the librarian, influencing the responses obtained as shown in Figure 4.1. From the first scholastic year employed, in 2022, the librarian and a teacher of English coordinated to bring the Year 7 classes for a library orientation visit. The current Year 10 students missed this experience when they were in Year 7, accounting for the majority of 'No' answers. The small number of Year 10 students who had a library orientation could be a small group who attended during a free lesson.

Being an independent school hosting several foreign students, it is sometimes the case that students leave the country or transfer schools. New students to the school after Year 7, who never had a library orientation visit, could account for the drop in students' experience of a library visit across increasing age groups (Figure 4.1). It is a good practice for school librarians to schedule library visits for new students in collaboration with other teachers. This helps not only introduce the students to the library space and the librarian, but also helps them navigate the library for books and resources they might need or enjoy.

Figure 4.2 shows the number of students whose teachers gave their lessons in the library. The number falls drastically the older the cohort, with 72 percent of Year 7 students having had lessons in the library, compared to less than 7 percent of Year 10 students. It seems that the teachers of the younger cohorts are more likely to use the library for their lessons.

Students were also asked whether they ever visited the library with a teacher or Learning Support Educator (LSE) to do some work (Figure 4.3). While few teachers conduct their

class lessons in the library, some teachers and LSEs do visit with individual or small groups of students for support work. While fewer students have made use of the library for this purpose, the results are slightly more consistent, with the tendency being a greater use by educators of the younger cohorts.

Merga (2019) mentions how important it is that the school understands the contributive potential of the librarians. School librarians have a central role (Woolls, 2009), supporting and enhancing the school's educational goals (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) & UNESCO, 2025). School librarians need to work with the School Leadership Team and educators to help plan educational programmes (Torres & Tagoe, 2022), and building relationships with teaching staff helps provide more access to the students (McClintock Miller & Bass, 2019). Within a school, regular meetings and evaluations with the School Leadership Team can help set the stage for a deeper educational involvement by school librarians, while offering help and attending subject meetings allows for closer and more specific collaboration with teaching staff. This may lead to a higher rate of use of the library by educators.

The fourth question explored the visiting patterns in the library (Figure 4.4). The youngest cohort showed an equal preference for visiting with friends, or both with friends and alone, as compared to the 11 percent who visited the library exclusively alone. The older the year groups, the greater the preference for social visits, with 61 percent of Year 9 and 10 students who visited the library exclusively with friends (Figure 4.4). This result can help focus on more targeted resources, library games, and activities. Both individual and group games and activities might be suitable for the youngest cohort, while the elder cohorts might be better served with games and activities that promote group participation and collaboration.

Question 5 explored students' reasons for using the library when doing work (Figure 4.5). Most students (68 to 82 percent) indicated they do homework in the library. Results showed that the Year 10 students did more research and group work in the library than

the others. With a deeper educational involvement by the librarian as mentioned above, the library could be promoted and used more both for group work and research, especially in collaboration with educators. Librarians must ensure that adequate resources are available and that furniture can be moved around to create collaborative areas when needed.

While most students (52 percent of Year 8 and over 61 percent of other cohorts) deem the space sufficient for work, reading, or play (Figure 4.6), the researcher aligns with the 25 percent who find it inadequate. While Malta does not have standards when it comes to school library planning, it is good practice to research and look to other countries and their standards, whether it is for general space use, such as having clear divisions for different types of activities (Alomran, 2009), or the more collaborative setting of Learning Commons (Weisburg & Toor, 2015), as well as specific standards for furniture, seating capacity and space allocation as mentioned by Erikson & Markuson (2007). While librarians are usually employed in schools that are already built and operating, there might be the opportunity of being in position to influence decisions if the school or library is renovated.

When asked about perceived noise levels in the library, results varied across the year groups, with only 32 percent of Year 8 students feeling it was usually quiet enough, compared to the 57 percent of Year 10 students (Figure 4.7). The Year 10 students seem to have a higher tolerance for noise levels, with no students at all in Year 10 saying that the library was often too noisy. Year 8 students were the cohort who most indicated that the library gets too noisy when it is full. The higher noise tolerance of the Year 10 students might be related to their more social visits to the library (Figure 4.4) and their higher preference for using the library for group work when compared to other cohorts (Figure 4.5). The modern school library has evolved beyond being a silent space for individual work to a collaborative space (Weisburg & Toor, 2015), that may include planned spaces for group activities (Alomran, 2009). Modern school librarians must be able to allow a higher level of working noise in the library, while teaching and expecting groups to show respect to other patrons by limiting their noise volume.

Students were asked about participation in library clubs, specifically the Chess Club and Quill Club (for a school newsletter), which were introduced this year. The majority of students – 82 percent of Year 7 students and up to 99 percent of Year 9 students – indicated that they never joined these clubs (Figure 4.8). There was a slightly better participation rate in the chess tournaments, notably by 20 percent of Year 7 students (Figure 4.9). Their limited uptake is due to a few factors, notably that these clubs were introduced by the librarian for the first time midway through the scholastic year. These types of clubs provide students with skills and opportunities (*About CSL – Canadian School Libraries*) that they may not find easily outside school. Librarians can create and promote these types of clubs, or provide space and resources for them, especially if in collaboration with other members of staff.

When asked about what games they played in the library, all cohorts showed a marked preference for chess (Figure 4.10). The Year 7 students were the cohort who played the most games, especially games brought from home, library board and tabletop games. Participation in games seems to decline the older the cohort, although this may correspond to the cohorts' frequency of visits to the library (Figure 1.1). Promoting the library as a fun place to be (McClintock Miller & Bass, 2019) is a strategy that could attract more students to the library. Noting the differences in preferences for game types may allow for better resources that target different year groups and enhance engagement.

The school's official digital platform for communicating with students is Microsoft Teams. Students were first asked about their frequency of checking Teams, with nearly 75 percent of the Year 8 cohort checking Teams usually every day, compared to just over 50 percent of Year 10 students (Figure 4.11). To entice students into the library, the librarian regularly uses Microsoft Teams for promotional posts related to the library and events, attempting to pique students' interest and encourage them to visit the library to see for themselves (Weisburg & Toor, 2015). When asked whether they have seen the librarian's announcements related to the library on Teams, the answers ranged from 55 percent of Year 7 students to over 78 percent of Year 8 students stating that they saw the announcements (Figure 4.12). The pattern of students' awareness of the librarian's

announcements on Microsoft Teams in Year 7, 8, and 9 coincided with the higher frequency of checking Teams (Figure 4.11), with a slight percentage increase in each. The Year 10 students seemed to be more aware of the announcements when compared to their frequency of checking Teams. Being the official digital platform for school administration and teachers to communicate with the students, the school must remind students of their responsibility to check Teams regularly.

Besides Microsoft Teams, the librarian also uses a notice board outside the library for announcements and events. 70 to 74 percent of students answered that they have seen announcements or posters on this notice board (Figure 4.13). Using both digital and physical means concurrently ensures that announcements and promotions will be seen by the largest number of students possible.

Regular promotion is carried out by the librarian in the form of Featured Tables, many times linked to international, national, and school anniversaries and events. Students were asked whether they remembered seeing these Featured Tables in the library (Figure 4.14). These promotions were remembered in varying degrees, although by far the most remembered was the 'Blind Date with a Book' event, commemorating the time around Valentine's Day on the 14th February. Between 60 and 79 percent of students remembered this event, where students borrow wrapped books knowing only their main genres, sparking their curiosity and igniting their imagination, often introducing them to books they would probably never have chosen. The librarian has noticed its popularity even by the greater number of students borrowing these wrapped books on the days of the event, which can explain the greater number of students who remembered this event and its Featured Table (Figure 4.14).

In the final two questions in this section, students were asked about their use of the library laptops. Most of the Year 8, 9, and 10 students had never used these laptops, with fewer students using them as the students got older (Figure 4.15). The Year 7 cohort was the only one where more than half the students answered that they had used the

laptops. The reasons for using the laptops also differed. Most students – from 50 percent of Year 10 students to nearly 77 percent of Year 8 students – showed a preference for using the laptops to play games (Figure 4.16). All students also reported using the laptops for online research, and the Year 10 students also showed a preference for using them for doing work, especially when compared to the other cohorts. Computers serve as vital tools for both general use and specialised research during library-based lessons.

5.5 Library Participation

The high voluntary response rate of 75 percent regarding library participation is a strong indicator of student interest. In line with Self-Determination Theory (Center for Self-Determination Theory), the data reveals that, while interest in helping is high, the nature of that interest evolves in line with their varied interests and passions as intrinsic motivators.

Results varied widely across the year groups, with some cohorts showing a preference for some areas while others preferred to help out in different ways (Figure 5.1). The younger cohorts often preferred the creative aspect, choosing designing resources, helping in decorating the library, and having their artwork displayed more than the Year 9 and 10 students. The Year 9 cohort was the one that, with a couple of exceptions, showed the least interest in all the options. It was interesting to note that Year 10 students' responses were among the highest in both suggesting ideas for activities and suggesting books to buy for the library. Even though they visited the library least (Figure 1.1) and were the cohort that least found books that interested them (Figure 3.3), the Year 10 students were consistently among the highest numbers of students who chose to help out by suggesting books to buy for the library or suggesting ideas for activities (Figure 5.1). This implies that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to student volunteering may be less effective than year-specific roles.

With these insights, a librarian might choose to focus engagement strategies by targeting different student groups in different ways. While being open to suggestions from every student is always ideal, and could include having suggestion boxes close to or inside the library, inviting students to help decorate the library, or design resources could be targeted mainly to the younger cohorts. The librarian could also liaise with teachers of Design and Art as an inter-curricular activity.

In the second question in this section, students were asked if they had ever been a library assistant. The vast majority of students replied they had never been (Figure 5.2). The younger cohorts were the ones who said they had been most, with the Year 7 cohort outperforming the Year 8 students. The librarian started this initiative during the last two scholastic years (2023-2025). With the younger cohorts regularly visiting the library the most (Figure 1.1), possibly due to the library's proximity to the Year 7 and 8 break area, it seems that this increases the likelihood of the younger students choosing to be library assistants.

Students who had been library assistants were then asked which tasks they had performed during their time helping out. Since there were very few students who had been library assistants, only 20 percent (60 students) replied to this question. Generally, the younger cohorts were those who performed the tasks in greater numbers, with the Year 7 students outperforming every other cohort in all areas (Figure 5.3). This is likely because some students tend to drop out after a while, with the youngest being the most likely to remain until the end of the scholastic year. The longer their experience as library assistants, the more likely it is that they would have done all the tasks mentioned, especially those that required further training, such as the use of the Library Management System.

While few students may choose to be library assistants, students who choose to help out in this way show a deeper engagement in the school library. Since the youngest cohort seems to be those who engage most in this way, it seems that the librarian would need

to spend valuable time every year training new students. For this to be meaningful, librarians must realise that their role in the school is also an educational one. Training students does take time, but library assistants learn new skills and build confidence due to their responsibilities in carrying out the various tasks and interacting with peers. With the school librarian giving the students meaningful responsibilities, treating them as valued partners, and complimenting their achievements, a relationship of mutual respect is built between the librarian and the students. This relationship carries on throughout the time the students spend at school. In the case of Maltese state schools, this is as short as two years for middle schools and three years for secondary schools, while in church and independent schools it is for the whole five-year period. Potentially, some students could also choose to study librarianship in the future.

The final question of the survey was an open-ended question, asking students whether they had suggestions for the library. The number of responses decreased the older the students got, with over two-thirds of Year 7 students answering compared to less than half of Year 10 students (Table 3). Most responses concerned the library space, with comments and suggestions for making it more welcoming and colourful, with better lighting and more space to sit and work (Table 4). Numerous suggestions were made for more interesting books of different genres and more manga, while a few asked for more computers and better noise control. Many students stated that there was nothing to improve or change. Some of the other responses included points already expanded upon, such as displaying art in the library, more games, and proposals to help out in designing and creating something for the library.

The higher engagement levels in Year 7 compared to Year 10 students possibly reflect a broader transition in student priorities. The youngest cohort appears most eager to help shape their library environment, whereas the decline in participation among Year 10 students possibly points to increased academic pressures and a shift towards more independent study habits. This suggests that a greater focus on research support and practical help is a better engagement strategy for older students.

6. The Toolkit

The toolkit for Maltese school librarians is based on three main pillars:

- Knowledge
- Resources
- Practical examples

The toolkit is web-based, easily accessible from any browser, whether on desktop or mobile devices. It attempts to combine theoretical concepts with insights from this research, as well as links, tools, and examples for librarians to implement in their libraries and duties, should they so desire.

While a large part of this toolkit can be used by librarians worldwide, it has particular relevance to the Maltese context. Numerous events, links, and learning opportunities are specific to Malta, as well as strategies that take into consideration the Maltese educational system and the three distinct types of schools in Malta.

The website aims to be a living resource, regularly updated to reflect current events. The created Calendar can easily be imported into Google Calendar so that users can easily follow and plan for upcoming events. It is also a long-standing tradition for librarians to collaborate, so the website will include a contact form to enable visitors to comment, put forward suggestions, and share resources and practices.

The next few sections will bring together salient points from the literature review, practical considerations, and relevant links and examples, as well as any related insights from the results and discussion chapters. These will form the basis of numerous areas of the website toolkit.

6.1 The role of the Professional School Librarian

Salient points for toolkit from literature review regarding school librarians:

- Qualifications in both library and information sciences (master's degree recommended) and education
- Commitment to furthering one's expertise through self-evaluation, lifelong learning and membership in library associations
- Involvement of the school librarian in the school's educational plan
- School librarians teaching information literacy and library skills, with potential for further teaching areas
- School librarians should create a mission statement and a vision for the library, in line with the school's objectives and direction
- Importance for school management to understand and appreciate the role of professional school librarians
- Graciously accepting extraneous jobs can help build respect and friendships, and highlight the many ways the librarian can contribute
- A full-time professional librarian makes the greatest impact
- School librarians as teachers: teaching information literacy, conducting research, accessing and consuming information, problem solving, critical thinking
- Working with teachers as instructional partners
- Building relationships with teachers and staff inside and outside school
- Building relationships with students inside and outside school

Practical Considerations and Examples:

- School librarians can join the Malta Library and Information Association (MaLIA) and the Malta School Library Association (MSLA)
- Virginia, USA – Davis Middle School: The librarian is also the school webmaster, and collaborates with both administration and teachers to update the library and school websites (Terrell, 2011, p. 20)

- Preparing reports for school administration that include data, statistics, and visuals, helping them understand and appreciate the librarian's role within the school (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, pp. 111–112)
- Virginia, USA – Davis Middle School: The librarian teaches how to use appropriate sources, and also teaches a workshop on plagiarism (Terrell, 2011, p. 21)
- A way of building collegiality is by discussing and organising author visits in collaboration with teaching staff (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, p. 101)
- Helping the students one-on-one in the library can help build trust and respect when done with patience and understanding as a guide. This can have positive repercussions when teaching the students as a class (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, pp. 84–85)
- Creating connections with a smile and striving to remember students' names is a way of building relationships (Weisburg & Toor, 2015, p. 76)
- New York City, USA – K-12 Independent school: The librarian invested time and effort to be present for students in activities outside school hours, building relationships and creating a culture where students were allowed to be their “authentic self” (Almeida, 2021, p. 19)
- The current researcher: Volunteering in extra-curricular activities such as live-ins and even trips abroad, to build relationships with the students and other volunteer staff outside the confines of the school building, where students are freer to be themselves.

Insights from Results:

- A full-time librarian ensures that the library is open at least for the entire duration of the school day, allowing use by students and teachers with groups or classes.
- Have opening hours clearly marked on the library door or notice board, as well as announcements on official school platforms such as Microsoft Teams.
- The librarian should take any opportunity to interact with students, even during assigned tasks not necessarily related to the library.
- Librarians can build relationships with students by being friendly and easy to talk to, and being open to giving time to talk and discuss with students, even on things not

necessarily related to subjects, books and the library. Librarians can get to know different aspects of their students in this way.

- Attending or volunteering for extracurricular events helps build different and deeper relationships with the students, enabling them to interact more freely with the librarian.
- Building these relationships often leads to more frequent visits by students to the library, even if only for a casual greeting or chat.
- Students may not always be aware of how the librarian can be of help. Some students will ask for help, but the librarian should be proactive and offer help.
- Librarians can set meetings with the school leadership team to discuss and promote the various ways the librarian can contribute to the school's education plan.
- In collaboration with the school leadership team, librarians can present library policies aimed at students and educators during staff meetings. This serves to highlight the ways the librarian and the library can contribute to the education programmes.

6.2 The Library Space and Resources

Salient points for toolkit from literature review regarding the library and resources:

- The library needs to be welcoming, and an inclusive and safe space
- Libraries promote reading for pleasure, fostering a positive attitude towards reading
- Consult standards with regards to space allocation and furniture plans
- School libraries are used by teachers for their lessons, and by students for individual and group work
- The collection must be a high-quality and inclusive one
- An Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) allows searching the collection both in the library and from home
- Besides print, the school library should also provide access to a digital and audiobook collection

- A collection development policy put in place in collaboration with management and teachers to cater for students' needs
- Maker spaces and their varied resources help students engage in learning experiences

Practical Considerations and Examples:

- IFLA Guidelines for making libraries accessible for people with disabilities (Winkelstein et al., 2024)
- Dyslexia-friendly books as part of the library collection
- Use of the Libby app for free ebooks, e-magazines and audiobooks through Malta Libraries membership

Insights from Results:

- Students still like to read physical books. The librarian must ensure that each year group finds books that interest them, since they have different needs.
- The librarian must ensure that the sections of the library are clearly marked, including the use of detailed signage and library maps.
- Students believe there are good books that can help them in their work or research. Librarians need to invest in good resources that cater to every year group, and ensure that students know they are available and where to find them.
- All students showed a preference for having more reading books.
- Younger students showed the most interest in reading books, manga and graphic novels, and Choose Your Own Adventure books. Older students showed the most interest in information books and magazines.
- Many students show a great interest in having computers with internet access available.
- There was a lower interest in ebooks and audiobooks. Rather than independent schools investing individually in subscriptions, it may be more profitable to liaise and collaborate with Malta Libraries and promote the Libby app for digital resources.

- Students showed their wishes by suggesting more board games and puzzles, particular fiction genres, and non-fiction books particularly related to sports and hobbies. Use of a suggestion box in the library could ensure that the librarian is always aware of the students' current needs and interests.

6.3 Visiting the Library

Salient points from literature review for toolkit regarding visiting the library:

- Library orientation visits organized together with teachers
- Use of the library as a space for lessons
- Offering the library to teachers for their work builds familiarity with the space and its potential use for lessons
- The library can host events, workshops, or seminars
- The library is a fun place to be, with games, puzzles, and fun events
- The library can be used for a variety of clubs within the school
- The library is used for both individual and group work
- Marketing and promotion towards the students, but also towards staff and school leadership

Practical Considerations and Examples:

- A librarian uses video tutorials and a QR code tour of the school library during their orientation visit, and ensures that she leaves enough time for students to check out books (Rendina, 2021)
- A librarian 'flips' the orientation by using video tutorials that remain available on the library computers, reducing the need for students to remember all the details and also catering to students who were away on the day (Brooks Kirkland, 2018)
- Big Walnut Middle School in Sunbury, Ohio: The library was also converted into a makerspace, with the librarian collaborating with class teachers so that students could visit the library during lessons to work on projects (Gonzalez, 2016)

- Lord Tweedsmuir Secondary School Library, Canada: Students from all cohorts visit the library to play board games to celebrate International Games Month @ Your Library (X, 2024)
- St. Paul's School in Queensland, Australia: The secondary school library hosts different clubs and activities every day of the week, some of which include: Innovators and Inventors Club, Sewing and Textile Club, and Dungeons and Dragons Club (Dearnaley, 2024)
- Bourke High School, Bourke, Australia: The librarian prepares a school library guide at the beginning of each scholastic year, and also a welcome bag for staff (McGuigan, personal communication, 2025)

Insights from Results:

- Besides learning how to navigate the school library, orientation visits may result in more students visiting the library on their own.
- Teachers of younger cohorts seem to be more likely to use the library for lessons. Librarians can promote the library and collaborate with teachers and Learning Support Educators to have more lessons in the library, or use the library for small groups.
- The youngest cohorts are more likely to visit the library both alone and with friends, but there is a greater tendency for social visits by the older cohorts, who prefer to visit the library with friends. The librarian can provide individual and group games and activities to better target and provide for all cohorts.
- Older cohorts are more likely to use the library for research and group work than the younger cohorts. The librarian must ensure that adequate resources are available and that furniture can be moved around to create collaborative areas when needed.
- Students seem to have a higher tolerance level for noise, especially with the older cohorts. If separate rooms for quiet and noisy collaborative areas are not possible, the librarian needs to be able to strike a balance to accommodate suitable environments for both quiet and collaborative work and use.
- Whether alone or in collaboration with other staff, the library can be used for various clubs, especially during breaktimes.

- Board and tabletop games are popular and promote the library as a fun place to be. Chess was the most popular preference among all student cohorts who participated in the research.
- The librarian can make use of digital student platforms (Microsoft Teams in the majority of Maltese schools) for announcements and promotion.
- Announcements and events can also be promoted on the library notice board. Especially if this is in a central place, students often see the promotions.
- Librarians can create featured tables linked to international, national, and school anniversaries and events. 'Blind Date with a Book' was the most popular and remembered event.
- Computers or laptops are important additions to the library. Most students prefer to use them for games, although they are also important for work or online research, and for consulting the library's Online Public Access Catalogue.

6.4 Student Participation in the School Library

Salient points from literature review for toolkit regarding student participation in the school library:

- The school library allows students to engage in their interests for personal satisfaction, fostering initiative and creativity
- Maker spaces can offer both physical and digital resources for students' projects
- The library space can be used to display students' artwork
- Collaborating with teachers of various subjects to create art and resources for the library
- Journalism club allows students with various skills to participate in creating a product for the school
- Working with students to develop digital skills and experience in publishing their work on a website
- Giving responsibility to volunteers for tasks, especially when they are allowed to choose the tasks according to their interests

- Students as partners in the school library's collection development
- Inviting students to be library assistants gives them new experiences and skills

Practical Considerations and Examples:

- Using student-made video clips as part of the school library orientation (Terrell, 2011, p. 21)
- Students' art in the library: Art Connect (L-Università ta' Malta)
- Bourke High School, Bourke, Australia: The library runs a reading brag wall, encouraging students and staff to share information about what they are reading (McGuigan, personal communication, 2025)
- The researcher set up the Quill Club, intended for students to collaborate, even with EkoSkola and Young Reporters for the Environment initiatives, to produce a journal or newsletter for the school that would be disseminated also on the school website and school Facebook page.

Insights from Results:

- Most students consider helping out in some way in the library
- The younger cohorts were more interested in the creative aspect, such as designing resources, helping to decorate the library, and having their artwork displayed. The elder cohorts were more interested in suggesting ideas for activities and books to buy.
- The librarian could liaise with teachers, especially those of Design and Art, as an inter-curricular activity to enable students to contribute to the library design.
- Suggestion boxes close to or inside the library can provide easy opportunities for students to contribute suggestions.
- Being a library assistant was quite popular with several students, especially those in Year 7, who are also the cohort that tends to drop out least.
- It takes time to train a new group of students every year. If the librarian treats the students as valued partners, it is beneficial both to the librarian and the students. Students learn skills and responsibilities that can serve them well even in their future.

All information found in sections 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4 is included in the 'Knowledge Base' pages on the website.

6.5 The Web Toolkit

For the toolkit to be viewed by others, it has to be easily and quickly available. A website was chosen as the ideal platform for the toolkit. This allows all aspects to be properly organised, easy to access, and also allows feedback from viewers in order to be constantly updated and improved.

The domain 'ilibrary.mt' was purchased from the Network Information Centre (*NIC (Malta)*). The URL 'ilibrary.mt' was chosen because it is short, easy to remember, is immediately indicative of what type of website it is, and the leading letter 'i' creates the idea of a personal touch, even by librarians visiting the website.

The website is hosted on HostGator, a website hosting platform (*HostGator - Shared Website Hosting*). WordPress was chosen as the preferred Content Management System (CMS), allowing users to create and manage websites (*WordPress*). The Avada theme (*Avada*) was installed in WordPress, allowing the researcher to use a powerful and flexible platform to create the various areas of the website.

Website: <https://ilibrary.mt/>

Concurrently, a Facebook page was created with the same name. Facebook is the most popular social media site in Malta, used by over 79% of local social media users (Statcounter, 2025). Facebook allows both quick and easy creation of posts to be shared publicly, and also allows sharing of external posts to the platform. Moreover, pages from the website can be shared to Facebook or Messenger with the click of a button.

WordPress and Avada both allow embedding a Facebook page within the website. This creates two-way traffic between the website and Facebook, allowing for a greater public reach. For branding purposes, the generic Facebook page was renamed to ilibrary.mt.

Facebook page for ilibrary.mt: <https://www.facebook.com/ilibrary.mt>

6.6 Website Structure and Design

The following Figures depict the design choices and general structure of various areas of the website.

Header

The header was created and set for all pages and posts in the website. The header is a simple photo in the Home Page, while in all the other pages and posts, it contains the name of the page or post over a simple picture background. The Title Box also contains Breadcrumbs: links that allow the user to retrace their steps in the website.

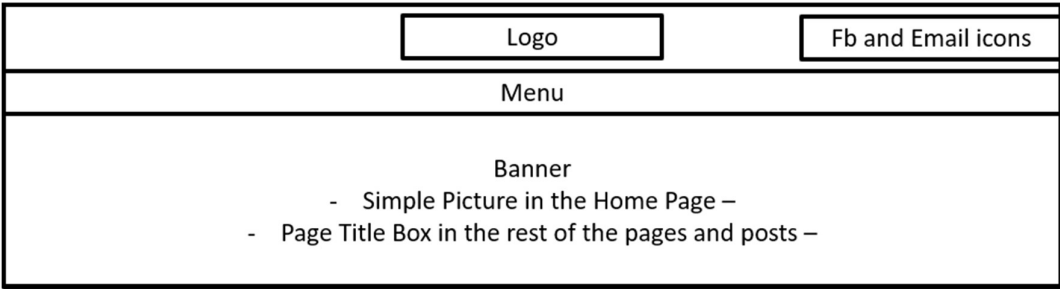


Figure 6.1: Header design on ilibrary.mt website

Home Page

The Home page is designed to gather some information from all relevant areas of the website into one page, for easy visual references by the user while scrolling. Each section is linked to the relevant page on the website.

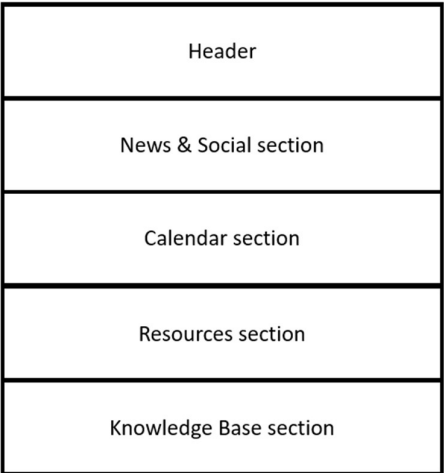


Figure 6.2: Design of the Home Page on ilibrary website

About Page

This page gives some information about the researcher, the project, and the toolkit.

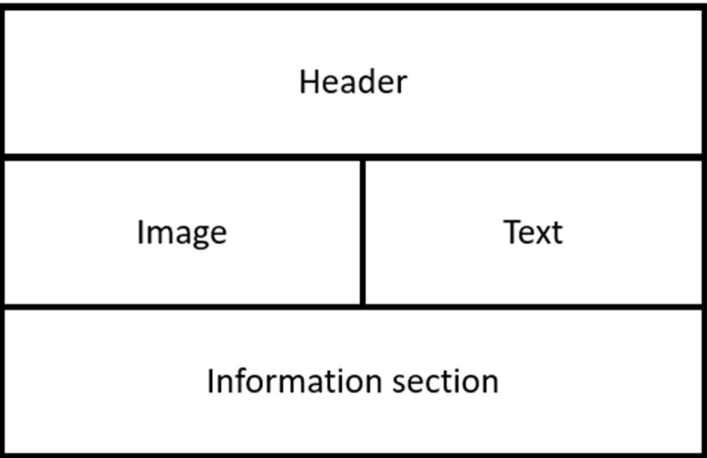


Figure 6.3: Design of the About Page on ilibrary website

News & Social

This page presents news, events, and courses, as well as links to the Maltese library associations. A Facebook widget is also embedded into the website. This allows visitors to see posts that may not be included in the website, and provides an added link encouraging visitors to interact with the Facebook page, and possibly like and follow it.

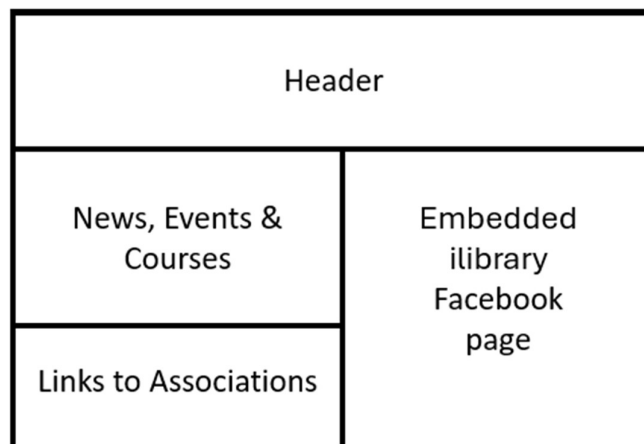


Figure 6.4: Design of the News & Social Page on ilibrary website

Calendar (Landing Page)

The Calendar landing page first shows an interactive calendar showing all anniversaries and events as visitors scroll through. This calendar was created using the Teamup app. It also allows the calendar to be embedded and accessed via mobile app, giving users the possibility of viewing the calendar on their own mobile device.

The section underneath the interactive calendar is a series of Content Boxes highlighting the current month's events. Each box links to the specific event or anniversary page.

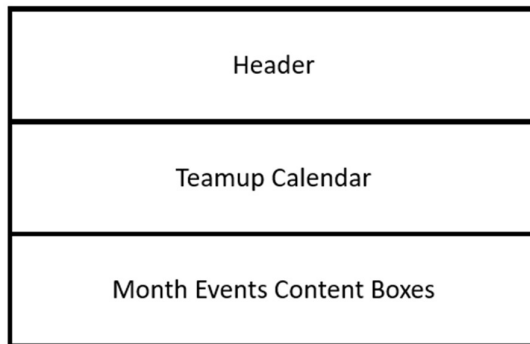


Figure 6.5: Design of the Calendar landing page on ilibrary website

Calendar (Specific Event)

Each event page attempts to give an informative overview of the event, as well as links for further reading. If available, YouTube videos may also be embedded. Information and photos by the researcher, related to the event, may also be included.

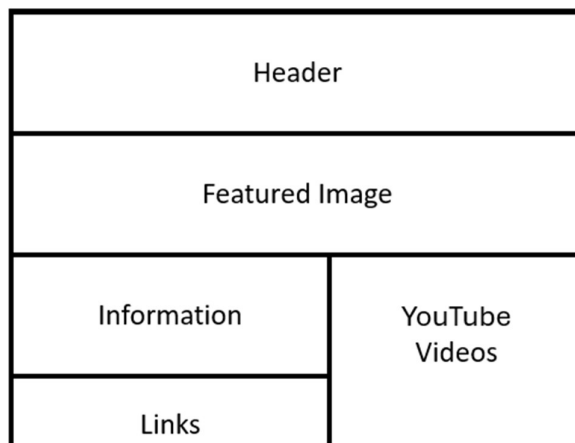


Figure 6.6: Design of a Calendar event page on ilibrary website

Resources

The Resources page contains information, tips, images, and files that can be freely downloaded and used.

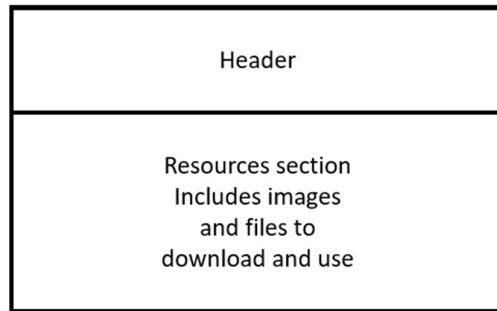


Figure 6.7: Design of the Resources Page on ilibrary website

Knowledge Base (Landing Page)

The Knowledge Base landing page presents a short overview and links to the information pages of each of the major sections of this research.

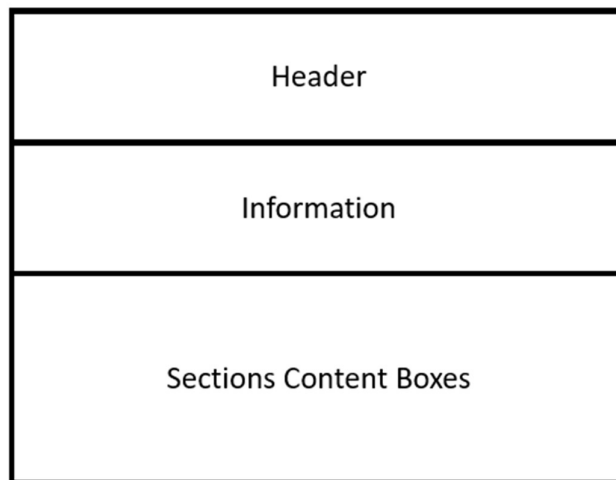


Figure 6.8: Design of the Knowledge Base Landing Page on ilibrary website

Knowledge Base (Sub Page)

Each of the four subpages in the Knowledge Base section gathers the salient points from the literature review, the practical considerations and examples, and the insights from the results. These are presented in sections in short, easy-to-read tidbits of information.

The design choice made by the researcher was not to present chunks of information, but rather rotating boxes that show the short information only when the visitor hovers on them. This produces a clean but interesting setup that entices the visitor to explore further. The bottom section contains ideas for further action.



Figure 6.9: Design of the Knowledge Base Sub Page on ilibrary website

Contact

The Contact page contains email information and a simple contact form to allow visitors to ask for information or send feedback.

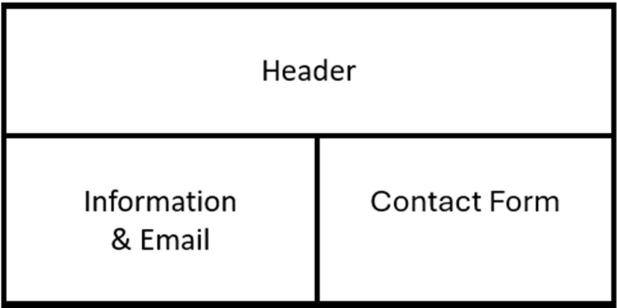


Figure 6.10: Design of the Contact Page on ilibrary website

7. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the role of the school librarian and school libraries vis-à-vis student engagement. Empirical evidence was sought in a Maltese middle and secondary school, seeking to identify key trends in perceptions of the librarian, library use, resources, and student involvement. The results were then discussed in comparison to international research. The literature and findings were used to create a practical web-based toolkit for Maltese school librarians.

7.1 Key Findings

Younger cohorts tend to visit the school library more regularly. However, the library's location within the school may be an important factor in determining which cohorts visit most, due to accessibility.

The school librarian is key to increasing student engagement. A full-time, professional, qualified librarian who is a partner in the school's educational plan ensures a higher level of participation from both students and educators. Students valued the librarian's friendliness, approachability, and support, and the librarian's commitment to building relationships with both students and staff is a factor that enhances engagement.

Physical books are still widely valued by all cohorts, but a greater variety of genres, including manga, graphic novels, and magazines, ensures that the library offers resources of interest to all age groups. There was a lower interest in e-books and audiobooks, but a marked desire by all cohorts to have more computers for use in the library for research, work, and games.

The findings highlighted the way the students felt about the school library. Common themes indicated that the students preferred a larger, well-lit, colourful, and vibrant library, with soft furnishings that allowed for a more comfortable space. Students seemed generally more tolerant of noise levels, especially in the elder cohorts, since the library was also a social place for collaborative work and games.

Students showed their interest in participating more deeply in the school library's activities. The younger cohorts' preferences leaned towards physical help and creative involvement in creating resources and decorating the library, including the display of students' artwork. The eldest students gravitated towards offering suggestions for improvement and resource development. Some of the younger students were actively involved as library assistants, while other students participated in events such as chess tournaments.

The findings also showed that there was not enough awareness of the library services. The librarian's promotions of the library, through featured tables, events, and announcements on both the library notice board and official school channels, were seen by most students. However, additional strategies via different channels would ensure a greater awareness and engagement.

7.2 Linking to the Literature

The findings of this study closely align with existing literature on student engagement in the school library. Merga (2019, 2022) highlighted both the educative potential of school librarians and their role in promoting reading for pleasure, while McClintock Miller & Bass (2019) and Almeida (2021) stressed the importance of librarian-student relationships. These aspects were strongly validated in the students' responses, as they appreciated the friendliness and support of the librarian. While other literature stresses the contributive importance of school librarians (Australian Library and Information

Association, 2004; International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) & UNESCO, 2025), librarians in Maltese schools tend to remain underutilised and underappreciated.

The results also confirm Weisburg & Toor's (2015) findings that marketing and promotion are critical for student awareness of the library's events and services, although they did not always translate into significantly greater levels of student engagement. Weisburg & Toor (2015) also highlighted the importance of students' deeper participative roles in the school library. This was strongly corroborated in the research findings, which also provided more nuanced indications of student involvement preferences according to age.

7.3 Contributions of the Study

This dissertation provides the first quantitative insights into student engagement in a Maltese middle and secondary school library.

While the findings are very context-specific, they highlight the realities of Maltese school librarians, including the varying roles in different school settings, and the significant lack of prominence in government laws and policies.

This study concludes with the creation of a toolkit for Maltese school librarians, linking international research and local findings into a single platform, offering various insights, practical strategies, and tools for enhancing student engagement in their school library.

Together, these ensure that this study is not only an academic exercise, but is a resource that has real-world practical applications for school librarians in Malta.

7.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

For school librarians:

Foster positive relations with students and staff; expand collections to include diverse genres and manga; promote resources more actively, utilising physical and digital platforms, and with varied displays linked to school and international events; and provide opportunities for students to participate in deeper and more meaningful ways that resonate with their interests.

For school leadership:

Understand the educational value and contribution of the school librarian; recognise the importance of the school library as a central learning and social hub; support school librarians and ensure that they are a meaningful partner in achieving the school's educational mission and vision.

For policy makers:

Recognise the importance of professional school librarians and school libraries in the national education strategies; fully integrate school librarians in educational visions and plans, to be key players and partners in supporting holistic student development; establish standards for school librarians and school libraries, including design, space, and resources.

7.5 Future Research

While this study has provided valuable insights into school library use and student engagement, further research is needed to extend these findings. Comparative studies across more Maltese schools, including state, church, and other independent schools, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of school libraries in Malta. It would be interesting to explore whether the college system and libraries in the separate middle and secondary schools in the state-run system would have similar or varied experiences when compared to the realities of church and independent schools. Qualitative interviews with students, educators, and parents would complement the quantitative data by delving deeper into individual experiences. Finally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into the success of strategies in an evolving scenario.

To validate the practical efficacy of the developed web toolkit, a pilot study involving Maltese school librarians in middle and secondary school settings (state, church and independent) is recommended. This evaluation could utilise a Likert-scale feedback mechanism to assess the toolkit's ease of use, the relevance of its 'Knowledge Base' and 'Calendar' content, and the adaptability of its resources to different school contexts. Such research could also employ a mixed-methods approach, using librarian feedback as well as student engagement surveys. Assessing the toolkit through longitudinal studies would provide valuable data on its long-term impact on library engagement. Such structured feedback would ensure that the resource remains a living, evolving tool that meets the needs of school librarians.

7.6 Conclusion

If we truly believe in school libraries and their role within the school as part of the students' educational experience, we cannot ignore the aspect of student engagement. This dissertation has shown that libraries in Maltese schools have the potential to be

vibrant, creative, and participatory learning hubs. Students are eager to engage more deeply, both as readers and as creative and helpful collaborators. Through relationship building, respectful collaboration with students and staff, and practical strategies, school librarians can ensure that the libraries not only remain relevant but also become truly the heart of the school. Student engagement becomes not only about promoting books, but also about empowering students with confidence and skills that they carry throughout their lives.

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Appendix A: Authorisation Letter from St. Michael Foundation



ST. MICHAEL FOUNDATION
FOR EDUCATION

14th March 2025

Mr Ivan Mifsud Bons
Riva
47 Triq San Publiju
Rabat RBT 1473

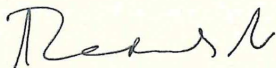
Dear Mr Mifsud Bons

Following your request, St Michael Foundation grants you permission to conduct your research titled *Enhancing Student Engagement in the Middle and Secondary School Library – Developing a Practical Resource for Maltese School Librarians*.

We acknowledge that the research involves an anonymous online questionnaire for students in the senior school and that participation is entirely voluntary, with an opt-out option available for parents. We trust that all data collection and storage will comply with GDPR and the Malta Data Protection Act 2018, as outlined in your information letter.

Should you require any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely



ANNEMARIE CARABOT
Principal

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Appendix B: Information Letter and Opt-Out Form for Parents & Students

The research

I am Ivan Mifsud Bons, the school librarian at St Michael Foundation, senior school. I am currently reading for a master's degree in library and information sciences. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting research to explore how students at our school engage with the school library.

Dissertation title

Enhancing Student Engagement in the Middle and Secondary School Library

- Developing a practical resource for Maltese school librarians

What is the purpose of the research?

The research aims to expand on the factors that increase the involvement and engagement by middle and secondary students in the school library. Asking for students' input allows me to gauge the effectiveness of the activities and initiatives carried out in the school library during these past few years. The final product will be the creation of a website that will serve as a practical resource for school librarians, focusing mainly on the Maltese context.

What would taking part involve?

I would like to invite your child to complete an online questionnaire. This anonymous questionnaire explores how, when and why the students at St Michael Foundation visit the school library, and how I, as the librarian, interact with them in various ways. This questionnaire will be in English and should take approximately 5 - 7 minutes to complete.

Are there any disadvantages or risks in participating in this research?

There are no disadvantages or risks in participating in this research.

What are the benefits of participating in this research?

The answers given by the students in the questionnaire will help me gauge the effectiveness of the activities and initiatives carried out in the school library. This will help me both improve and build upon the services in our library, and share trends identified in the research with other librarians. The finished product will be a website that will provide resources for other Middle and Secondary School librarians, especially those in Malta.

Does my child have to participate?

No. Participation in this research is voluntary and choosing not to participate will not affect you or your child in any way.

If you prefer that your child does not participate, please fill out the attached opt-out form and return it to the school by _____. If the opt-out form is not received by this date, your child's participation will be automatically considered for this study.

Even if you give your consent, students are required to give their consent when answering the questionnaire, by selecting an option in the questionnaire's information page where they agree to participate in this research.

Students can also choose to withdraw at any stage during the questionnaire, before clicking 'submit', without giving a reason and without any penalty.

What happens if I choose to opt out of the research?

As a legal guardian, you have every right to choose that your child does not participate in the research.

If you choose to opt out, kindly fill in the Opt-Out Form below and send it to the school. This will ensure that your child will not be asked to participate in the filling out of the questionnaire. Neither you nor your child will be negatively affected in any way.

Will any personal data be collected, and for what reason?

The only personal data that will be collected through this questionnaire is the student's Year group and, should they prefer to indicate it, the student's gender.

This data will allow me to understand whether, or how much, these factors influence the students' involvement in the school library, and in what way.

Is the questionnaire anonymous and confidential?

The questionnaire is entirely anonymous and confidential. No identifiable information about students will be collected, and only my tutor and I will have access to this data.

The software chosen for this questionnaire is Google Forms, which guarantees high security and data protection requirements, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Malta Data Protection Act 2018. Google Forms will also be set to NOT collect identifiable data such as email addresses.

What will happen to the data collected?

Opt-out forms will be stored under lock and key at school while the questionnaires are taking place. They will be used only to ensure that students whose parents sent the opt-out form do not participate in the questionnaire. Once the answering of the questionnaire is over, the forms will be relocated to my private residence and kept under lock and key. Once the scope of the research is complete, all forms will be immediately destroyed.

Data collected from the online questionnaire will be securely stored on a password-protected account. All data will be kept only for the duration of this research, up to a maximum of three years, and then destroyed.

Any data will only be shared with my dissertation supervisor.

Results from the questionnaires will be discussed and published in my dissertation, while general statistics and trends from this questionnaire will also be available on the finished website.

Contact details

If you have further questions or concerns, or would like to know more about the research, please feel free to contact us:

Researcher: Ivan Mifsud Bons

Tel: (School telephone number)

Email: ivan@ilibrary.mt

Supervisor: Prof. William Zammit – Department of Library Information & Archive Sciences

Email:

Thank you for your help and your time.

Kind regards

Ivan Mifsud Bons

St Michael Foundation Librarian

Opt-Out Form

To be completed and sent only if you **do NOT** wish your child to participate in this research.

Deadline for opt-out form:

I confirm that I have read the information about the research, how my child will be involved and how data will be collected, stored and used. I would NOT like my child to participate in this research.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I confirm that I am the parent or legal guardian of the child.

I understand that, should I have further questions, I can contact the researcher or supervisor using the contact details in the information sheets.

Student Name: _____

Class: _____

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Student Questionnaire

Dissertation questionnaire (for students to answer)

The following questionnaire will be answered online through Google Forms. Projected: May 2025

(Welcome page)

Enhancing Student Engagement in the Middle and Secondary School Library

- Developing a practical resource for Maltese school librarians

By Ivan Mifsud Bons

As the school librarian at St Michael Foundation, senior school, I am conducting research to explore how students at our school engage with the school library.

This questionnaire explores how, when and why you visit the library, and how the librarian interacts with you in various ways.

General answers from this questionnaire will be discussed and published in my Master's dissertation in Library and Information Sciences, with the above title.

This will help me both improve and build upon the services in our library, and also build a website that will provide resources for other Middle and Secondary School librarians, especially those in Malta.

All replies are anonymous, and you will only be asked for very few personal details that will help me understand if there are any differences in how each year group and gender use the library.

Your answers will only be used for the purpose of this research. All data will be kept only for the duration of this research, up to a maximum of three years, and then destroyed.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you may stop at any time.

This questionnaire should take approximately 5 - 7 minutes to complete.

Thank you for your help and your time.

☐ I agree to participate in this research

School Level: ☐ Year 7 ☐ Year 8 ☐ Year 9 ☐ Year 10

Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say

All the following questions are specifically related to the School Library at St Michael Foundation senior school.

All the questions about the librarian relate specifically to the current librarian, Mr. Ivan.

How often do you visit the school library?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Once a year
- ☐ Once a month or more
- ☐ Once a week or more
- ☐ Nearly every day

When do you choose to visit the library?

- ☐ During breaktime
- ☐ During free lessons
- ☐ Both during breaktime and free lessons
- ☐ I prefer not to visit the library

Part 1: The librarian

Is the librarian friendly and easy to talk to?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I never talked to the librarian

Have you ever spent time talking or discussing with the librarian, even on things not necessarily related to books or the library?

- ☐ Yes, a number of times
- ☐ Yes, once or twice
- ☐ No

Have you ever asked the librarian for help in your work, research or studies?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Has the librarian ever given you tips or helped you with your work, research or studies?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

2. The library and resources:

Have you ever stayed in the library just to read?

- ☐ Yes - my own books
- ☐ Yes - library books
- ☐ Yes – both my own books and library books
- ☐ No

Have you ever borrowed a book from the library?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If you wish to borrow a book from the library, do you often find a book that interests you?

- ☐ Yes, often
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Not really
- ☐ I don't borrow books

Are the sections in the library clearly marked?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Only some
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Do you know where to find books that might interest you in the library?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Do you think there are good books that can help you in your work or research?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

Which of these would you like to see in the library? (Select any that apply)

- ☐ More reading books
- ☐ More information books
- ☐ More manga / graphic novels
- ☐ Magazines
- ☐ Ebooks
- ☐ Audiobooks
- ☐ Computers with internet access
- ☐ Other - *(Please specify)*: _____

3. Visiting the library:

Has your teacher brought you to the library for an orientation visit, where the librarian explains about the school library and where to find books?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Has your teacher ever given their lesson in the library?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Have you ever visited the library with a teacher or LSE to do some work?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If I come to the library,

- ☐ I usually visit alone
- ☐ I usually visit with my friend/s, or to meet my friend/s
- ☐ I sometimes visit alone and sometimes with, or to meet with, my friend/s.

Have you ever come to the library to do some work? (select any that apply)

- ☐ Classwork
- ☐ Homework
- ☐ Research
- ☐ Group work
- ☐ Personal work or interests

Do you think there is enough space to work, read or play in the library?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

What about the level of noise in the library?

- ☐ It's usually quiet enough for me
- ☐ It's usually too quiet, I prefer it noisier
- ☐ It's often too noisy for me
- ☐ It's quiet enough when there are few students, but gets too noisy when the library is full.

Have you ever joined one of these clubs in the library?

- ☐ Yes, Chess club
- ☐ Yes, Quill Club
- ☐ Yes, both Chess and Quill Club
- ☐ No, I haven't joined any of these clubs

Have you ever participated in a chess tournament organised by the librarian?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Have you played any games in the library? (Choose any that apply)

- ☐ My or my friends' games
- ☐ Library board games
- ☐ Chess
- ☐ Library jigsaw puzzles
- ☐ Computer games
- ☐ I haven't played any games

How often do you check MS Teams?

- ☐ Usually every day
- ☐ At least once a week
- ☐ Not very often
- ☐ I never really check Teams

Have you seen any of the librarian's announcements related to the library on MS Teams?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't check Teams

Have you seen any of the librarian's announcements or posters on the Library notice board?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Which of these Featured Tables do you remember seeing in the library? (Select any that apply)

- ☐ Halloween
- ☐ World Children's Day
- ☐ Christmas and/or the Book Christmas Tree
- ☐ Blind Date with a Book
- ☐ International Women's Day
- ☐ Careers Week
- ☐ Star Wars Day
- ☐ International Museums Day
- ☐ Pet Day
- ☐ Other Featured Books

Have you ever used the laptops in the library?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, what have you used the library laptops for? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Playing internet or desktop games
- ☐ Online research
- ☐ Checking books on the online library system
- ☐ Doing work
- ☐ Coding

4. Library participation:

As a student, would you be interested in any of the following? (select any that apply)

- ☐ Suggesting books to buy for the library
- ☐ Suggesting ideas for activities in the library
- ☐ Designing resources for the library (eg. bookmarks)
- ☐ Help decorate the library and make it more welcoming
- ☐ Having your artwork displayed in the library
- ☐ Having your writing, photos, artwork or any other work displayed on the school website
- ☐ Other - *(Please specify)*: _____

Have you ever been a Library Assistant?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, which of the following have you done as a library assistant? (Select any that apply)

- ☐ Found books on the shelves when asked
- ☐ Returned books in their correct places on the shelves
- ☐ Learned a little about the Dewey Decimal system
- ☐ Learned where the main sections of the school library are
- ☐ Helped students look for books they needed
- ☐ Used the library system to issue or return books
- ☐ Entered new books into the library system
- ☐ Discussed ideas for the library with the librarian
- ☐ Helped the librarian create displays

As a student, do you have any suggestions on how the library can be improved?

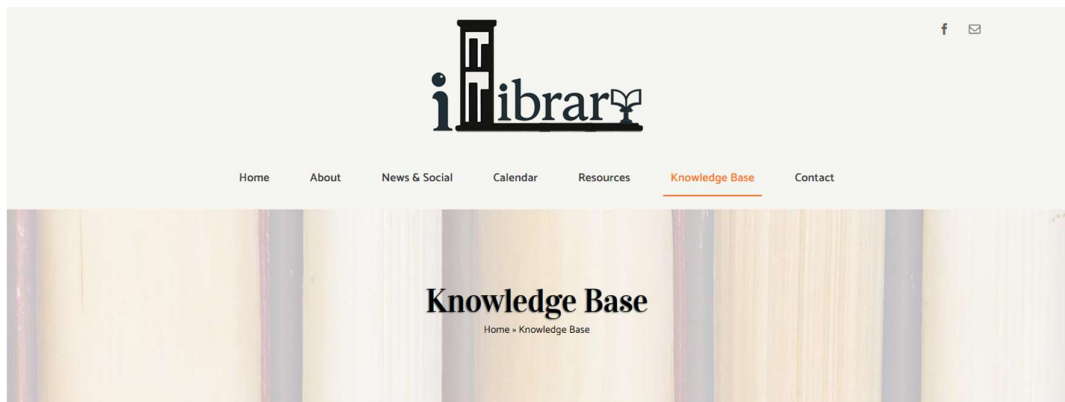
Appendix D: Web Toolkit Screenshots

Header

Home Page Header



Other Pages Header



Home Page

Welcome

Welcome to the iLibrary website.

This web toolkit for Maltese school librarians takes existing literature, insights from my research and practical examples and considerations and presents them on this platform as a package for school librarians to consider. While most issues apply to all school libraries, some are specific to Malta, with a few even affecting different types of schools on the islands in different ways.

The **Knowledge Base** pages give an overview of the items in the paragraph above. The **News & Social** page highlights a few upcoming course and events, and invites you to like and follow the **Library Facebook page** for more dynamic updates. The **Resources** page presents some files freely available for use. The **Calendar** pages show annual events and anniversaries, allowing school librarians to create displays and Featured Tables commemorating them should they wish to do so.

You can read more on the About iLibrary page.

Calendar

The iLibrary Calendar shows author anniversaries and events that libraries can use to create featured tables or related events at school, even in collaboration with other teachers or as whole school-based activities. The Calendar can also be linked to personal Google calendars.

Visit the [Calendar Page](#) for a more complete list of events and links

[illegible]

News & Social

Courses

Some courses, starting October 2025, that can be of interest to librarians.

-  Master of Arts in Library and Information Sciences - University of Malta
-
-  Award in Foundations of Artificial Intelligence: Fundamentals and Applications for Educators

The screenshot shows a Facebook post from the page 'library.mt', which has 11 followers. The post is titled 'Short course in librarianship in Malta, January, Central Public Library - Malta'. It features a circular graphic with a blue and yellow design. The text of the post reads: 'Short course in librarianship in Malta, January, Central Public Library - Malta'. Below the text, it says 'Malta Library and Information Association' and '20th January - November 20'. At the bottom of the post, there are buttons for 'Like', 'Comment', and 'Share'. The post is dated 'about a week ago' and has the status 'Yes. Perfectly readable.' below it.

Resources

Several resources are available for use.

[Click here to visit the Resources page.](#)

Knowledge Base

The diagram consists of four red circles arranged in a square, each containing a white icon and text. The circles are interconnected by a network of lines. The top-left circle shows a librarian reading a book. The top-right circle shows a library building. The bottom-left circle shows two students, one holding a book. The bottom-right circle shows a student reading a book. Each circle has a title and a description of its role.

- The School Librarian**
A professional librarian committed to lifelong learning.
Working with school leadership, staff and students.
- The School Library**
A welcoming, inclusive and safe space.
Promotes reading for pleasure and has a high-quality, inclusive collection.
- Visiting the Library**
A welcoming, inclusive and safe space.
Promotes reading for pleasure and has a high-quality, inclusive collection.
- Student Participation**
Students engage according to their interests.
Collaboration to create resources and artwork.
Invites all of the...

About Page



AI generated image of a dragon sleeping on books in a library

A WEB TOOLKIT FOR MALTESE SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

At the tender age of 49, I will be graduating with a master's degree in Library and Information Sciences from the University of Malta.

After 14 years of teaching, and another 8 years of building websites while being a stay-at-home dad, I finally found the dream job that I somehow never realised I wanted.

Voracious book reader: check ✓

Have a personal library of over 3,000 books: check ✓

Studied 4 optional credits in librarianship in my bachelor's degree: check ✓

It FINALLY dawned on me that I would love being a librarian. Go figure!

As a school librarian for these past three years in an independent senior school in Malta, I have been responsible for revamping the school library and what it offers. I am fascinated by the concept of **enhancing student engagement in the middle and secondary school library**, and made it the topic of my dissertation.

My research involved a questionnaire set to 300 students from Year 7 to Year 10 (11/12 to 14/15 years old), asking them about their experiences with the librarian, the school library and their engagement.

This web toolkit for Maltese school librarians takes existing literature, insights from my research and practical examples and considerations and presents them on this platform as a package for school librarians to consider. While most issues apply to all school libraries, some are specific to Malta, with a few even affecting different types of schools on the islands in different ways.

The **Knowledge Base** pages give an overview of the items in the paragraph above. The **News & Social** page highlights a few upcoming course and events, and invites you to like and follow the **iLibrary Facebook page** for more dynamic updates. The **Resources** page presents some files freely available for use. The **Calendar** pages show annual events and anniversaries, allowing school librarians to create displays and Featured Tables commemorating them should they wish to do so.

I am always happy to receive feedback, and would love it if other school librarians, in Malta or abroad, could also share their practices and experiences.

Happy librariansing!

Ivan Mifsud Bons - Malta

News & Social Page

Courses

Some courses, starting October 2025, that can be of interest to librarians.

 **Master of Arts in Library and Information Sciences -
University of Malta**

 **Award in Foundations of Artificial Intelligence:
Fundamentals and Applications for Educators**

**Malta Library and
Information Association
(MaLIA)**

Click here to visit the MaLIA Facebook page

Email: info@malia-malta.org.mt

**Malta School Library
Association**

Email: malta.sla@gmail.com

Mr. Joseph Boffa, MSLA Secretary – Email:
bofo13@outlook.com

Like & Follow
iLibrary.mt on Facebook



iLibrary.mt
11 followers

Follow Page

Share



iLibrary.mt
on Tuesday



Short course in librarianship in Malta.
January, Central Public Library - Malta



Malta Library and Information Association
(MaLIA)
794 followers · November 30



Like



Comment



Share



iLibrary.mt
about a week ago



Yes. Perfectly relate.

Or visit the library, you can borrow them
for free 🤗




library.mt - Calendar for Maltese School Librarians

< January 2025 >

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
30	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Today

January 2025 ▾

Month ▾

Calendars ▾

- A calendar for Maltese Cal.

Filter ▾

About Library Calendar

A quick reference calendar to annual events and anniversaries, both Maltese and international, intended mostly for Maltese school librarians.

Feel free to let me know any missing events and anniversaries. The aim is to have as comprehensive a calendar as possible.

To access this calendar on your phone, install the [Timeline App](#). You can also add this calendar to your Google Calendar via app.

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
30 Dec 2024	31	Jan 1 Celebrate New Year / New Year's Day	2	3 Ascension - 2025	4 World Water Day	5
6	7	8 Malta's Independence Day	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18 International Day of the Girl Child	19
20	21	22	23 International Day of the Girl Scout or Girl Guide	24	25	26
27 International Women's Day	28 Christmas Eve	29	30	31	Feb 1	2

[@ Malta](#) Powered by [Timeline](#)

Adding Library Calendar to your Google Calendar

Click the Event link to visit the Event page, or click the Title to visit the Month Events page.

October Calendar

Some relevant dates in October:

- 1st - World Bullying Prevention Day (and Months)
- Sat, Oct 4, 2025 - Fri, Oct 10, 2025 - World Space Week
- 8th - R. L. Stein's birthday
- 10th - World Mental Health Day
- 16th - International Dictionary Day / Noah Webster's birthday
- 18th - Jun Dm Karm / Dun Karm Day
- October 20 - 26, 2025 - Open Access Week
- 31st - Halloween

November Calendar

Some relevant dates in November:

- 1st month - International Games Month
- 1st month - Dinosaur
- 8th - Bram Stoker's birthday
- 10th - International STEM Day
- 16th - Neil Gaiman's Birthday
- 11th - Remembrance Day
- 23rd - Doctor Who Day

December Calendar

Some relevant dates in December:

- 3rd - International Day of Persons with Disabilities
- 16th - Jane Austen's Birthday
- 18th - International Migrants Day
- 21st - Winter
- 25th - Christmas Day
- 25th - Pun Day / Alphabet Day (No I Day!)
- 31st - New Year's Eve

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Calendar – Month Page

January Calendar

Home » Calendar » January Calendar



World Religion Day – 3rd Sunday in January

Some other relevant dates in January:

- 1st – New Year's Day
- 9th – Severus Snape's birthday (Harry Potter series)
- 29th (2025) – Chinese New Year



01st January – World Day of Peace



03rd January – Anniversary: JRR Tolkien – Born 1892



04th January – World Braille Day



19th January – Anniversary: Edgar Allan Poe – Born 1809



24th January – International Day of Education



27th January – International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Calendar – Specific Event Page



Anniversary of J. R. R. (John Ronald Reuel) Tolkien

J.R.R. Tolkien was an English academic and author, best known for his fantasy novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which chronicle the history and peoples of his created world, Middle-earth. A professor of English language, Tolkien was a philologist with expertise in Old and Middle English, which profoundly influenced his mythological legendarium. His writing, which also includes the *Silmarillion* and other works, was deeply rooted in his Catholic faith, a love for ancient myths, and the profound experiences of World War I.



[Read more about J. R. R. Tolkien on Wikipedia](#)



[Read more about J. R. R. Tolkien on The Tolkien Society website](#)

Video: JRR Tolkien on how WWI inspired *The Lord of the Rings* | BBC Global

[Via BBC Global YouTube page](#)



Video: J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of Worlds

[Via Biographies YouTube page](#)



Featured image: *The Lord of the Rings*, by Prajwal via Pexels

JRR Tolkien: Public Domain photo found on Wikimedia Commons

Books: *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, by Rana S via Pexels

Resources Page

All Resources on this page are free to download, use, and edit.

Visit the Copyright page for more information.

Jigsaw Puzzles

Jigsaw puzzles are a great investment in the school library.

From experience, the 1,000-piece puzzles usually take too long to complete, and students often get frustrated enough to disengage. The 500-piece puzzles are usually the best choice for the Middle and Secondary schools. The first puzzle bought for our library (picture below) took two weeks to complete.

Tip: The student to put in the last piece of the puzzle can choose the next jigsaw puzzle to solve.



School Library Announcements Banner for Microsoft Teams

Our school uses Microsoft Teams for communication with the students.

I created this banner for use in Teams announcements. The dragon image was AI-generated. The elongated black background ensures that titles are easily visible.

The image is sized to fit the background when creating announcements on Teams.



Student Library Assistants Notice

This was printed and placed on the library notice board to encourage students to become library assistants.

The original file is a Publisher file that could not be uploaded onto this website. Feel free to email me for it should you wish to use it.



Student Library Assistants Notice

PDF File

Dewey Decimal Classification Charts

These charts were printed and placed on the outside of the shelf sections.

The original file is a Publisher file that could not be uploaded onto this website. Feel free to email me for it should you wish to use it.



Dewey Decimal Classification Charts

PDF File

Student Library Assistants Checklist of training and tasks

While few students may choose to be library assistants, students who choose to help out in this way show a deeper engagement in the school library.

Training students requires time, but it allows library assistants to develop new skills and gain confidence through their responsibilities and

Weeding Policy for the School Library

This was our library's first Weeding Policy.

The proposal was made by the librarian, and the details discussed with the Senior Leadership Team.

The initial content was AI generated according to precise prompts, then edited to fully adhere to agreed details.

Knowledge Base – Landing Page

Below are points, insights and examples taken from literature and findings from my research.

They are not meant to be exhaustive. Most can be used in all school libraries, but some are more relevant to Malta. Some might not be possible due to external constraints. Use them as you see fit.

*"Think of this... as a cookbook. You never use all the recipes.
Choose those ideas that interest you the most, and begin implementing your plan for success."*

(Toor & Weisburg, 2010)

I am always open to feedback and suggestions. Let us share our knowledge, expertise and practices as librarians.



All information is divided into the following four main sections:



The School Librarian

A professional librarian committed to lifelong learning.

Working with school leadership, staff and students. Building relationships and being of service.

[View more information about the school librarian here](#)



The School Library

A welcoming, inclusive and safe space.

Promotes reading for pleasure and has a high-quality, inclusive collection.

Used by students to work, read and play, and by teachers for their lessons.

[View more information about the school library here](#)



Visiting the Library

A welcoming, inclusive and safe space.

Promotes reading for pleasure and has a high-quality, inclusive collection.

Used by students to work, read and play, and by teachers for their lessons.

[View more information about visiting the school library here](#)



Student Participation

Students engage according to their interests.

Collaboration to create resources and artwork. Hosting of clubs.

Student assistant librarians helping in the library.

[View more information about student participation in the school library here](#)

Knowledge Base – Sub Page

Visiting the Library

Salient Points

Lessons

Events

Work

Fun

Clubs

Computers

Insights from Findings

Lessons

Group Usage

Noise

Orientation Visits

Visiting Patterns

Fun Place

Action

Resources & Collaboration

Digital Promotion

Notice Board

Orientation Visits

Teachers' Work

Marketing & Promotion

Games & Activities

Staff Use

Noise Levels

Featured Tables

Practical Considerations and Examples

A library uses video interviews and a QR code tour of the school library during both orientation week, and ensures that the library is open for students to check out books.
Brentford, 2020

St. Paul's School in Queensland, Australia
This library was converted into a library.

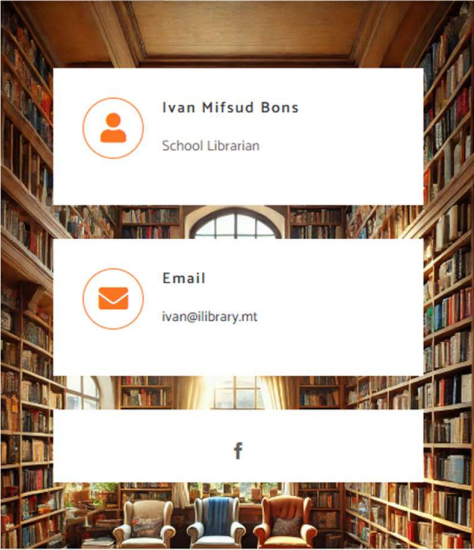
Lord Trenchard Secondary School Library, Canada
Students from all over the library to play board games to celebrate International Games Month @ New Library.
St. Paul's

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Contact Page

Contact Us

Home » Contact Us



**Ivan Mifsud Bons**
School Librarian

**Email**
ivan@iilibrary.mt



GET IN TOUCH

Please fill in required information.

Your name *

Email *

Subject *

Your message *

SEND MESSAGE

We always try to reply as soon as possible.

Additional CSS – to override default styling

```
12  /* Additional CSS added by Ivan Mifsud Bons to override defaults */
13  ▼ /*****
14
15  /* Limits the height of featured images in posts to 400px height maximum */
16  ▼ .flexslider .slides img {
17      max-height: 400px !important;
18      max-width: 1000px !important;
19      width: auto !important;
20      margin: 0 auto;
21  }
22
23  /* Limits the height of featured images in Blog grid to 300px height maximum */
24  ▼ .ilibraryBlogGrid .flexslider .slides img {
25      max-height: 250px !important;
26  }
27
28  /* Comapcts the Blog Grid in the Calendar Home Page */
29  /* Removes white background around each Content Box title, */
30  /* reduces the font-size and also the space between the items */
31
32  ▼ .ilibraryCalendarHomeGrid .fusion-post-grid {
33      padding-top: 5px !important;
34      padding-bottom: 5px !important;
35  }
36
37  ▼ .ilibraryCalendarHomeGrid .post-content {
38      margin-bottom: 0px !important;
39  }
40
41  ▼ .ilibraryCalendarHomeGrid h3 {
42      font-size: 18px !important;
43  }
44
45  ▼ .ilibraryCalendarHomeGrid .fusion-posts-container {
46      margin-top: 0px !important;
47  }
48
49  ▼ .ilibraryCalendarHomeText p {
50      margin-bottom: 5px !important;
51  }
52
53  /* Makes the links in the Flip Boxes in the Knowledge Base pages */
54  /* to turn white on the orange background on hover, rather than turn orange. */
55  /* Also add a bold effect on hover */
56  ▼ /*****
57  ▼ .fusion-flip-box a:hover {
58      color: white !important;
59      font-weight: bold;
60  }
61
62  /* Removes the arrow from the Read More in the Content Boxes in the Knowledge Base page */
63  ▼ .knowledgeContentBoxes .content-box-column .fusion-read-more:after {
64      display: none !important;
65  }
66
67  /* Pushes the Page Title Box and page content behind the dropdown menus */
68  ▼ .pageTitleArea, .post-content {
69      z-index: 1 !important;
70  }
```