

As we begin, so shall we goⁱ

By Darryl Toerien

Marshall McLuhan wrote that “there is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening” (2008, p. 25). This does not mean that undesirable things will not happen anyway simply because we have thought long and hard about them - it may be too little and/or too late - but that they do not happen *inevitably* because we have given them *no thought*. Greta Thunberg provides a powerful example of this, because whatever else one may think and/or feel about her, she is forcing contemplation of what is happening to the climate on a hitherto unprecedented scale. Now whether this is enough and/or in time to change what happens remains to be seen, but it has to have made a catastrophic future somewhat less inevitable.

School libraries are facing a similarly catastrophic futureⁱⁱ, and we do not have a Greta Thunberg to galvanise us into thoughtful and coherent action.

While I am no Greta Thunberg, I have been thinking about school libraries since 2001 after moving to England to teach in a school with an enviable library that was, nevertheless, peripheral to learning and teaching. These are my thoughts on the uncertain future of school libraries:

- Unless every school library is secure, no school library is secure.
- Except for schools offering one or more of the International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes, because the IB's *Programme standards and practices* (2019) requires that "the school maintains a functioning and active library consisting of adequate combinations of people, places, collections and services that aid and extend learning and teaching" (p. 8).
 - While this does leave some margin for error in determining what constitutes an adequate combination of people, it does at least commit every school offering an IB programme to an adequately staffed library.
 - The *Programme standards and practices* goes on to define a teacher as "anyone directly responsible for learning and teaching in the school community" and leaves it to the school to decide whether this includes librarians (p. 27), which opens a door for the kind of librarian who is prepared to walk through it.
 - It is highly significant in this regard that the *Programme standards and practices* takes its definition of a school library from the IB's *Ideal libraries: a guide for schools* (2018, p. 2).
 - *Ideal libraries* goes on to develop this definition, in that "the library and the librarian can be thought of as an interdependent system or a library/ian" (p. 2).
 - Further, "the library/ian supports all learners' and teachers' progress towards becoming better inquirers, consumers and creators of information, which requires a solid vision, good planning and consistent collaboration, and clear communication of how inquiry in particular is promoted in the school community, and how the library/ian fits into it" (p. 2).
 - Further, because "libraries are where most forms of inquiry, not just academic ones, begin...the librarian is responsible for energizing and maintaining the inquiry process, and so, ideally, the librarian is trained in many ways of creating conditions for inquiry within and beyond the classroom" (p. 9).
- This view of the school library/ian is consistent with the [IFLA School Library Guidelines](#) (2015), written by the IFLA School Libraries Section Standing Committee with contributions from the International Association of School Librarianship Executive Board.
 - “Because the role of school libraries is to facilitate teaching and learning, the services and activities of school libraries need to be under the direction of professional staff with the same level of education and preparation as classroom teachers" (p. 7).
 - Further, "the operational aspects of school libraries are best handled by trained clerical and technical support staff in order to ensure that school librarians have the time needed for the professional roles of instruction, management, collaboration, and leadership" (pp. 7-8).

- These statements are underscored by "more than 50 years of international research [that] indicates that school librarians require formal education in school librarianship and classroom teaching in order to develop the professional expertise required for the complex roles of instruction, reading and literacy development, school library management, collaboration with teaching staff, and engagement with the educational community" (p. 8).
- However, "all guidelines represent a compromise between what we aspire to achieve and what we can reasonably expect to achieve" (p. 7).
- It is a matter, then, of the utmost importance and urgency that we clearly establish what we need to aspire to achieve and then work backwards from there.
- Blanche Wools - "grande dame of [US] school librarianship" - [sums it up well](#), I think, when she says that school libraries must essentially be academic libraries because the only difference between students leaving school and entering university is the length of their holiday.
- Now while it is true that not all of our students will go to university, it is also true that progressive and systematic development of our students as actual independent learners will equip them well for life outside of school at whatever point they leave school.
- Viewed from this perspective, school libraries are integral to learning and teaching, and "well-trained and highly motivated staff, in sufficient numbers according to the size of the school and its unique needs" (p. 25) indispensable.
- We need, then, to figure out exactly what this means *and* what it will require of us to get there, which demands of us that we look beyond ourselves and our time to those who must follow in our footsteps.
- This in itself will not prevent a catastrophic future for school libraries – we may have left it too late – but it will make a catastrophic future somewhat less inevitable.

*I base this claim on personal experience of 4 school libraries, and my perspective from the National Committee of the School Libraries Group (SLG) of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), the Board of the School Library Association (SLA) and the Section Standing Committee for School Libraries of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). I am also the originator of FOSIL and the [FOSIL Group](#), through which I have made contact with colleagues with far greater experience and far broader perspectives still.

Bibliography

International Baccalaureate Organization. (2018). *Ideal libraries: a guide for schools*. Cardiff: International Baccalaureate Organization.

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McLuhan, M., Fiore, Q., & Agel, J. (2008). *The medium is the message*. London: Penguin Books.

ⁱ Also Marshall McLuhan (pp. 46-47) – see Bibliography.

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