



Opening statement from School Libraries group of the Library Association of Ireland (LAI SLG) response to the invitation of the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to attend a Committee meeting for a round table discussion on
“Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education”.

(September 2022)

The School Libraries Group of the Library Association of Ireland would like to thank the Committee for inviting us to this discussion.

As outlined in our original submission to this Committee, we believe that school libraries run by qualified school librarians have an integral role to play in providing mental health supports to students. School libraries can foster creativity, flexibility and resilience and can be safeguarded as the communal sanctuary in a school where students from all year groups can meet in a social context for a wide range of co- and extra-curricular activities – providing students with access to a valuable, creative, interior world. Having access to these resources can be a major support in reducing stress and anxiety levels.

School libraries can provide books and resources to support young people’s mental and emotional wellbeing. Read Your Mind is an initiative which brings together an invaluable collection of 113 books on a range of mental health related topics – all evaluated and recommended by Jigsaw clinicians. Topics covered include anger, anxiety, autism, bullying, social media, and much more. The JCSP Library Project has made the full collection available in all 30 JCSP Library Project schools with access being open to the whole school community. The collection is also more widely available in eBook format via the JCSP Digital Library service.

In 2018 PISA reported that just 9% of 15-year-olds were able to tell the difference between fact and opinion. This is a major concern, as misinformation and disinformation can affect young people’s mental health by creating anxiety, fear, depression or stress. School librarians are qualified to teach students research and information literacy skills – essential skills for all students.

A significant part of a school librarian’s role is to promote reading for pleasure and literacy engagement. According to the National Literacy Trust (2018), young people who are most engaged in literacy have better mental wellbeing than their peers. Reading for pleasure can help students relax, sleep better, reduce anxiety and improve empathy.

The role of the school librarian is far deeper than managing a space, teaching the latest technologies, and checking out books. The 2019 My World Survey found that the presence of ‘one good adult’ in the lives of 12-18-year-olds was the most powerful predictor of good mental health. School librarians are trusted and represent safety. Safety for students who are struggling. Safety for LGBTQI+ students. Safety for students with troubled backgrounds, or

those having a hard time at school. School libraries offer extra supports to foster and develop student wellbeing by liaising with stakeholders such as Narrative 4 Empathy Education, the Amber Flag initiative, Belong To Youth Services, Places of Sanctuary, etc. All JCSP librarians are already trained as Narrative 4 facilitators.

But school libraries are not just places of safety – they are aspiration and inspiration spaces too. Every time a trusted adult hands a book to a young person, what they’re actually saying is: “Look at the world and all the things you might do in it.” Our librarians encourage students to think, talk, read and write about the things that matter to them and let them know that their dreams should not be limited by their limited experiences. We aim to provide our students with experiences that help them to turn their dreams to aspirations and ultimately to reality.

In addition to supporting student achievement, school libraries provide respite and refuge from the many challenges that many students face in their daily lives – both within and outside of school. To support health and wellbeing, young people require access to a flexible space for reflection and conversation where the stock reflects the health and wellbeing needs of the school community and where learning and creativity are encouraged in a nurturing environment.

We recommend the immediate set up of a School Library Advisory Group with a view to developing a School Library Strategy for Ireland. This group should be cross-sectoral – with representatives from the worlds of library, education, creative arts, literature, social justice, youth mental health, etc. This has already been recommended by this Committee – but unfortunately your recommendation has not yet been acted on.

Government needs to fulfil it’s 2005 commitment to further expand the JCSP Library Project. Expansion has been on hold since 2008 – which is shocking. In its reports on Leaving Certificate Reform and Supports for Displaced Students, this Committee has recommended the expansion of the JCSP Digital Library service to all schools. Not only has this not happened but it is likely that the current level of service will be significantly reduced next year due to the retraction of the promised increase in funding for 2022. The planned review of the JCSP Programme has been in place for almost 10 years now and has been repeatedly used as the reason (including at the recent meeting of this Committee with the Minister for Education) for not even considering recommended developments of the JCSP Library Project services – either physical or digital. We believe that development proposals (both ours and yours) should be reviewed on their merits – and not continue to be ignored on this technicality as has been the case for many years now.

I will finish with some words from our students:

September 2022 - Some responses from students on what their school library means to them:

"I like our school library because I can go there after school or during English class and just sit, read and relax and it takes my mind off things and makes me feel less stressed"

"I saw they had an LGBTQ+ book area and felt included"

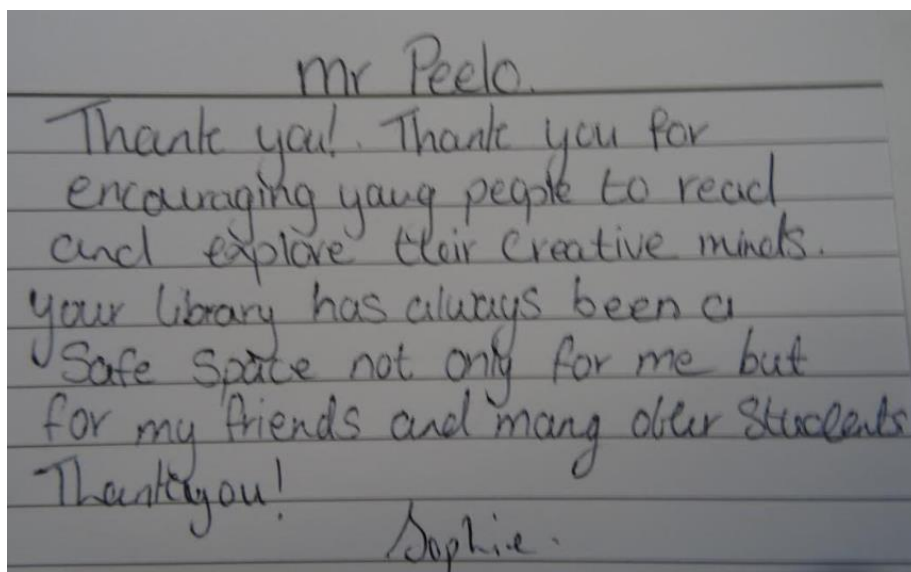
"It lets you relax in the school and calms you down"

"I like reading because it brings me into a world of imagination"

"I enjoy the quiet time and the peace"

"The library is the best thing that ever happened to the school. If we didn't have a library, it would be like the school was dead inside".

June 2022 - Note left on school librarian's desk by departing Leaving Certificate student:



I wish to thank the Committee for listening to my statement and I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

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