The Junior School library at St Aidan’s Anglican Girls School in Brisbane is now five years old and was planned and built with Building the Education Revolution funds, as were many school libraries at the time. Unlike many other schools the teaching staff of the Junior School and myself, as the teacher librarian, were heavily involved in the planning process; an incredibly rewarding experience which has resulted in a library space that functions effectively for our school community that follows what Groundwater-Smith (2004) describes as an ‘alive, holistic, balanced, timeless, appropriate space’ for learning (p. 4).

In maximising the language and literacy learning that would occur in our library space, we took into consideration both the needs of the learners, as well as the needs of the educators and the entire school community. Our students needed a balance of spaces from expansive, active and social to small, intimate and quiet. Social learning spaces were needed for small groups of students to discuss and debate, Readers’ Cup competitions, Mother Daughter Book Club meetings and ESL students to read aloud in a group context. Conversely, students also appreciate our small reading nooks and quiet, reflective spaces, created with flexible furniture arrangements and thought as to the shelving layout. The main area of the library is open plan but we are able to ‘close it in’ as needed to create smaller spaces with stacking walls and curtained areas.

In 33 Educational Design Principles for Schools and Community Learning Centers, Lackney (2015) talks of creating ‘alcoves for learning’ which are centrally located and close to resources. For us, this brought to mind cozy, intimate learning spaces and we have tried to create such spaces. Many of our teachers fondly remembered individual, ‘walled’ library desks from their own school days, which made them feel they could work away in their own little private space. These went ‘out of fashion’ as education embraced group work however, there are still moments in a school day when being ‘alone’ can be beneficial for students – to have space to think, create and wonder. We have created ‘booths’ reminiscent of milk bar booths where students can work alone or in small groups. They are close to the fiction area of the library and often students choose a book and make themselves comfortable in a booth for study or for recreational reading.

The fiction shelving also forms a square and we have placed seating inside this square space so that students have somewhere to sit and peruse the blurbs of books. Often a learning support student uses this seating with one of the teacher librarians or learning support aides to look at a selection of books and choose one appropriate for their needs.

Our picture fiction space for younger students is easily accessible with forward facing book boxes so that students can browse and make decisions on their book choices based on the cover. We talk at length with early years students about making book choices. Can you see any characters on the front cover that look interesting? Do you like the colours on the front cover? Can you guess where the story might be set? At the beach? In a forest? This space in the library can be closed in by gauzy curtains which hang from the ceiling. This creates a cosy reading area for teacher led readings of books and is also used as a storytelling space. There is tiered seating which can be used as a space for an audience, with student storytellers out the front. The small mushroom stools make excellent props for storytelling and can be turned upside down to reveal an astro turf surface that can become a small storytelling stage for Lego characters or puppets and soft toys.

In keeping with the storytelling theme, we have a puppet theatre which is stocked with all manner of puppets, as well as several books and photocopied puppet plays. This space is used by classroom teachers and by students at lunch, who will often create plays which continue over several days and lunchtimes and are much enjoyed by the student audience!
Our ‘Think Tank’ space was created in response to a need for a large space for extension English or learning support students to spread out their books and language resources with a teacher. This space is utilised each and every school day and with the addition this year of Storystarter Lego, this space has come into its own. The Storystarter Lego requires a large work surface for multiple students to work at. We are able to leave our Lego stories set up for several days at a time in this space, allowing stories to continue and evolve as students add to each scene.

The needs of the teachers who work in this space were kept always in mind during the design process. Lackney (2015) talks about the needs for teachers to be regarded as professionals and not only to provide spaces for them which respect this professionalism but also their need for a private space. The technological, spatial and social needs of staff were considered in planning this library space and as a result the space is well used by staff and visiting specialists, such as our weekly speech pathologist. There are a number of breakout spaces which can be booked and used for one-on-one language work with students and for meetings with parents or specialists. We also have a large workspace which is used for displays of classroom reader resources and textbooks from visiting booksellers and publishers.

In today’s learning spaces teachers are sharing the physical and online space with ICTs, thus the physical space must allow room for teachers to effectively incorporate ICTs into their practice. In maximising the literacy opportunities for our students we have incorporated e-readers into our library collection as well as Nintendo DS games/books which can be borrowed and taken home by students. We also have a bank of iPads which are loaded with many literacy related apps. Our library space is ‘technology infused’ (Freeman, 2007, p. 371) but still design-friendly, rather than looking like a computer workshop stuffed full of technological hardware.

Our ‘MakerSpace’ shelves are stocked with all manner of robotic and electronic equipment which is used daily in our language and literacy lessons. Word processing changed the way we teach the writing, editing and publishing process. New technologies, which many of us carry in our pockets, have the ability to turn today’s learners into storytellers, journalists, music composers, radio producers and animators. We use the technology in our library to enhance our students’ literacy opportunities and expand the potential audience they are writing for through publishing work online (with parental permission) and on our school intranet.

Our final ‘library’ spaces are our outdoor reading areas and chess board which can be seen in the photographs below. These areas are much utilised when the weather permits for recreational reading, writing and storytelling.

Our Junior School library is a dynamic and ever evolving space, which we consider to be meeting the many requirements of a modern learning environment that promotes and supports a range of pedagogies including delivering, applying, communicating and creating. Our library offers flexibility and access to the varied resources to support a technologically robust community and one which at all times promotes language and literacy learning.

References


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