



National Institute of Education associate professor Loh Chin Ee with Queensway Secondary School students. Prof Loh was one of the researchers who worked with schools such as Queensway on improving the design of their school libraries, to attract more students and make these spaces a more central part of the school experience. ST PHOTO: EUGENE TAN

# Bye bye, dusty bookshelves: Reimagining the school library

To attract more students and make the library a more inviting space, schools across Singapore are breathing new life into their library designs and book collections

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Step into Queensway Secondary School's library, and one is greeted by a colourful display of its latest manga titles and graphic novels.

Over at Cedar Girls' Secondary, new life has been breathed into its library through an amphitheatre flanked by curved lit bookshelves – a way to soften the look of the space and make it more inviting.

These schools are among a growing number that are revamping their decades-old libraries and overhauling their book selections in a bid to attract more students and make these spaces a more central part of the school experience.

This is timely, given a decline in adolescent reading habits.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, released in May, found that while Primary 4 pupils here were confident in their reading abilities, fewer of them enjoyed reading.

The proportion of those who reported enjoying it a lot fell to 51 per cent in 2021, the lowest in a decade.

A team of local researchers wants to combat this trend, starting with improving the design of school libraries.

The project's co-principal investigators include National Institute of Education (NIE) associate professor and deputy head of research for the English language and literature academic group Loh Chin Ee and Dr Elizabeth Pang, principal specialist in English Language from the Ministry of Education's (MOE) Curriculum Planning and Development Division.

Since 2019, they have worked with three schools – Queensway Secondary, Cedar Girls' Secondary and Yusof Ishak Secondary – to revamp their libraries.

After the revamps, the researchers spent 15 days over a year in each of the three schools to closely monitor and record students' behaviour – to see if they were browsing or reading more, and how they made use of spaces.

school libraries, said Dr Pang.

To date, more than 15 secondary schools have redesigned their libraries, with the help of MOE, NIE and the National Library Board (NLB). These include Assumption Pathway School, Hwa Chong Institution and St Patrick's School.

At the same time, Ms Heng Huey Bin, principal librarian (children & teens) in NLB's programmes and services, said it has been working with MOE through a pilot programme since 2018 to refresh school libraries.

Three schools – Bedok South Secondary, Meridian Secondary and Methodist Girls' School (Secondary) – were involved.

"The schools shared that their students have been enjoying the refreshed libraries, and have seen significant increases in visitorship and borrowing rates," she said.

The NLB has since developed a framework comprising reference materials like a student questionnaire and a focus group discussion guide for schools interested in redoing their libraries, to find out more about their students' interests and needs.

It has shared the framework with more than 20 schools, including primary schools.

Ms Heng said NLB also works with MOE schools to encourage students to access its collection of e-books and audiobooks using its eRead digital displays – interactive touchscreens offering curated recommendations for students.

Prof Loh said the next step is to help schools with their book collections, both fiction and non-fiction titles. "If you have the right books, quality books that are of interest to them, students do read."

Ms Heng recommends dividing the library into zones to target varied interests, as students have different levels of reading interests and abilities.

For example, a makerspace could cater to students doing science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics projects.

Prof Loh said the library could support mental well-being, with students using it as a quiet space to rest and relax, apart from reading.

Said Dr Pang: "We're now seeing the library as a space really to support student development, not just the academics."

"It's about cultivating dispositions that will take them beyond school... to want to learn, to be curious and want to find out more," she said.

The insights gained from this project will be used to enhance MOE's updated guidelines for

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Left: Queensway Secondary School has chosen to bring in comics and manga to get students started on reading. ST PHOTOS: EUGENE TAN

Below: The school library reopened in October 2022 with new features and more non-standard furniture like cushions.

## Queensway Secondary uses manga to draw students

Some people might not consider comics and manga as "real" reading material, but Queensway Secondary School has chosen to bring in some of its students who are reluctant to read.

It even puts them on display in its library's latest highlights section – one of its key features after the library reopened in October 2022.

Mr Makoto Kawaguchi, the school's library coordinator, said the idea was to get books that were atypical of school libraries and in line with students' interests, so as to get them started on reading.

"We try to find balance between genre fiction and series and other types of books like classics we want them to read."

The school also brings in books based on young adult bestseller

lists, recommendations from the National Library Board (NLB), students, graduates and teachers.

Its book collection is now refreshed a few times a year instead of once at the year end previously. The students' favourite genres are science fiction and fantasy.

Other new features include a performance area to draw students in for other purposes like film screenings or poetry workshops, a digital display by NLB for students to borrow or browse e-books, cafe-like booths for studying or consultations, and more non-standard furniture like swings and cushions in a reading zone to soften the library's look.

Mr Kawaguchi said: "It's an open space to curl up with a good book. You could sit on a swing or on the floor."



To make it a more inviting space, the school opted for a half glass wall that could allow for more natural sunlight and attract more students to enter. An Instagram account was also started to share book highlights.

Secondary 4 student Lauren Victoria Lim, 15, remembers the old school library's dusty bookshelves. "Two shelves in, you'd be sneezing. It was quite dark because there were many walls."

She usually goes to the school library during recess to browse and read books.

## Much thought put into book display at Cedar Girls'

Left: Cedar Girls' revamped school library features an amphitheatre and curved shelves with lighting as suggested by a designer. ST PHOTOS: KUA CHEE SIONG



Library coordinator Gemma Pereira, library committee head Ong Chin Meng and students Jayakumar Madhusri and Gudipally Hasini Reddy.

Students at Cedar Girls' Secondary School used to say its library books were old and lacked variety.

Not any more. After a revamp, the library reopened in January 2022 with a refreshed collection of about 10,700 books. Old books acquired as early as in the 1980s were removed, and newer ones were bought.

More lifestyle magazines and fiction books were added, along with an amphitheatre and curved feature shelves with lighting as suggested by a designer. A wider variety of non-fiction books were also brought in, based on recommendations from different subject teachers.

A lot of thought has been put in-

to displaying the books – from more obvious signage of book categories to having lower shelves and making use of books with attractive covers.

Sitting on some shelves are iPads with book trailers to entice students to delve further into certain titles. Five Kindles are also available for loan for students to access e-books.

Mr Ong Chin Meng, the school's head of the library committee, said the project started in 2019 with the intention of wanting to make better use of a study space within the library.

The idea grew and turned into a design thinking project by three students, who took on the task of

doing research and surveying their schoolmates on what they looked for in a school library.

The team, which has since graduated, also visited local and international school libraries.

Ms Gemma Pereira, the school's library coordinator, said the Covid-19 years allowed for a reset. "It made us rethink the function of a library. It's not just a space for studying and borrowing books; it's for discussion, performance, student engagement to improve learning."

The library had nearly 19,000 books in 2018, but, despite there being fewer books now, loan rates have increased, from about 2,100 in 2018 to 3,180 in 2022. The

school's figures also show that more unique students are borrowing books, and more book titles are being borrowed.

Since end-2021, Cedar Girls' has appointed library ambassadors in every class, who organise publicity and outreach programmes like monthly book events based on themes.

Secondary 3 student Jayakumar Madhusri, 14, prefers her school library to public libraries as she is more comfortable talking to friends or schoolmates.

"I like the wide selection of books here and I come here every day to randomly browse or talk to the librarian with my friends. "I use the Kindle for very popular books with long queues, but most of the time I prefer physical books – it feels nice to hold books and they smell good."

**Amelia Teng**

## Decluttering sparks joy at Bedok South Secondary



Bedok South Secondary students Lam Jun Yang and Natasha Ilaria with teachers Isaacs Dichen Grace (left) and Joanne Lee at the school library, which is now a brighter and more inviting space after renovation. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

In the past few years, Bedok South Secondary School has hosted other schools keen to find out how it had renovated its library, which reopened in February 2019.

Its library is now a brighter and more inviting space, with fewer books so students are not overwhelmed by cluttered shelves.

"The old library was quite dark because shelves used to line the walls... We replaced the metal shelves with white ones that are now placed in the middle, so that sunlight can come in," said Ms Joanne Lee, the school's library coordinator.

There are zones for different activities, from reading and studying to doing projects and having workshops. A multi-purpose area hosts talks, poetry reading, skit present-

tations and movie screenings.

The library now has a collection of 8,900 books, down from 12,000 previously.

Fiction books are categorised according to colour-coded genres like science fiction, fantasy and friendship, with the most popular sections located farther into the library to draw students in.

During the Covid-19 years, the library had visitor restrictions and limited activities, said Ms Isaacs Dichen Grace, head of department for English language and literature. To overcome this, teachers organised "book buffets" – trolleys filled with books taken down to classrooms for students to browse and borrow on the spot.

The library's yearly loan rates grew from about 1,130 books in

2018 to 1,750 in 2021. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, the number went above 2,000.

As a whole-school effort, the library committee partners other subject departments in its monthly thematic displays and reading programme.

For instance, it worked with science teachers to identify books and other online resources like videos and articles related to Earth Day in April.

Secondary 4 student Natasha Ilaria, 16, goes to the library to study and borrow additional book resources for subjects like nutritional food science.

One of her favourite books is Eleanor & Park, a young adult novel that was recommended by her teacher in Secondary 2. "At first, I liked the book cover, but beyond that I could identify with the characters' struggles with different situations like changing schools."

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