

Ethnographic Study Found School Library is a Safe Refuge of Solitude for French Urban Middle School Students

Joining, I. (2023). The school library: An important place for adolescents' well-being. An ethnographic experience in a French middle school. *Journal of Library Administration*, 63(6), 777-796. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2023.2240192>

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To understand the role of school libraries in middle school students' well-being.

Design – Ethnographic study consisting of overt participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a written questionnaire.

Setting – An urban middle school in northern France between November 2017 and April 2018.

Subjects – Students from 10 to 15 years of age and selected school personnel.

Methods – Students from three randomly selected classes were invited to complete the questionnaire, and quantifiable responses were summarized using descriptive statistics. Other materials collected during the five-month study period, including the researcher's field journal, interview transcripts, and

qualitative questionnaire responses, were analyzed using grounded theory-informed open, axial, and selective coding to discern students' perception of the library.

Main Results – The majority of the 95 students who completed the questionnaire viewed the library as a safe place associated with positive school experiences. However, these favorable impressions gradually decreased as students progressed in their studies, with senior (fourth-year) respondents reporting the lowest positive-to-negative experience ratio, at 1.1 to 1. Thematic clusters that emerged from coding of the rest of study materials further supported these findings, showing that students perceived the library to be both (a) a physical shelter from harsh winter elements during recess or lunch, and (b) a psychological refuge for solitude and peace from negative peer interactions. Nonetheless, (c) limited and unreliable library hours and (d) restrictive rules concerning noise and space access appeared to erode these positive associations over time. Senior students also expressed (e) the desire for more library or general school spaces dedicated to group work.

Conclusion – Findings from this ethnographic study highlighted different ways library space contributed to students' sense of well-being. The study also uncovered some shortcomings in space management that contributed to students' declining library use and positive perception over the course of middle school. The researcher recommended extending library hours and expanding the diversity of library activities to ensure the space would serve as a welcoming environment not only for students seeking solitude, but also for those desiring more peer collaborations and social connections.

Commentary

Heightened public interest in book banning and other censorship challenges faced by many U.S. libraries in recent years have renewed researchers' attention to the importance of access to library materials, but there is comparably less focus on the impact of the library as a space. This study brings a unique perspective to library science literature and provides a valuable addition to existing ethnographic research concerning the relationship between libraries and students (Foster, 2013) by highlighting the role of library spaces in middle school students' well-being. The researcher's commendable five-month effort to embed in the school is also a rarity amongst studies in similar settings.

An evaluation using the Critical Review Form (Letts et al., 2007) and supplemented by the EBL Critical Appraisal Checklist (Glynn, 2006) confirmed that the overall study design is sound. The purpose of the research and the literature review were clear and relevant and provided a compelling case for the study. The rationale for selecting the theoretical framework and the ethnographic design was logical, and the researcher described the steps taken to meet the required legal and institutional ethical precautions, data security measures, and privacy requirements for conducting research in a school setting. Copies of the interview protocol and participant questionnaire were provided in the article appendix.

Despite these favorable assessments of most study elements, there are a few factors that affect the study's dependability. Firstly, the researcher did not address their own positionality nor mention efforts, such as the use of bracketing, to mitigate bias. Details of the coding process were also limited. Secondly, the omission of second-year students as questionnaire participants was a missed opportunity, particularly since there was a noticeable drop between first- and third-year respondents' perception of the library as a refuge (from 41% to 4%) and positive-to-negative library experience ratios (from 8 to 2.9). Inputs from second-year participants would shed light on the change in students' attitude towards the library. Finally, students were asked to express their experiences with different spaces on a map of the entire school, yet their perceptions of the library relative to other school spaces were not discussed in the results.

Because of these limitations, it may be advisable to treat the study findings with some reservation, in particular the relative importance of the library to students' well-being compared to other school spaces over the course of middle school. Nonetheless, this article is a timely reminder for librarians and administrators to critically examine the purpose and necessity of library use guidelines and policies to ensure that school libraries remain accessible, safe, and collaborative environments that meet the diverse needs of students throughout their education journey.

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