

The role of leadership in the *Ongoing Importance of School Libraries*



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The way in which school libraries operate has changed significantly in the last two decades. School library professionals and leaders have experienced a momentous shift in both the services and resources they offer as well as the space they occupy, and the evolution continues.

While challenging at times, the truly inspiring thing is how well school libraries and library leaders have adapted. Across the globe, school library professionals and advocates have identified new opportunities for sharing, innovated access to resources, delivered digital programs, repurposed their spaces and proven, once and for all, the ongoing importance of school libraries at all levels of education.

Numerous articles and research reports support the educational value of a well-resourced school library. Softlink has conducted School Library Surveys in Australia since 2010, with the first survey

providing a response to the Australian Federal Government's 'Inquiry into school libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australian schools'. Softlink has continued to survey schools annually, more recently extending the scope to include New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

The surveys provide a critical reference point for understanding changes, impacts and trends over time. Open comments fields provide an opportunity for respondents to share ideas, reflections, insights and challenges, presenting a diverse, ground up perspective into the workings of a 21st century school library.

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Softlink has produced multiple feature documents which share and mobilise this voice. A new feature document, *The Ongoing Importance of School Libraries* is now available that shares respondent comments on the topic of *the changing school library landscape*. The comments are drawn from four surveys, including the 2015 and 2016 Australia and New Zealand School Library Surveys and the 2015 and 2016 Softlink United Kingdom School Library Surveys.

This article includes a selection of these comments and considers the role of the school library professional through an adaptive and agile leadership lens. Theoretical introductions are included as a focal point for better understanding the role of school library professionals as adaptive and agile leaders.

School library professionals as adaptive leaders

Adaptive leadership has been described as:

... a practical leadership framework that helps individuals and organisations adapt and thrive in challenging environments. It is being able, both individually and collectively, to take on the gradual but meaningful process of change. It is about diagnosing the essential from the expendable and bringing about a real challenge to the status quo (Cambridge Leadership Associates, n.d.).

The theory, or framework, was developed from over 30 years of research, primarily by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky. In a

1998 article (HBR), Heifetz and Laurie state that global changes in societies, customers, technology and other factors are forcing organisations to clarify their values, develop new strategies, and learn new ways of operating.

The Adaptive Leadership framework distinguishes between *adaptive challenges* and *technical challenges* — where more immediate solutions can be found, provided you have access to the right expertise (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009).

Heifetz (2011) also provides a seven-point framework for identifying adaptive challenge environments. They use descriptors such as 'the solution requires operating in a different way', 'the problem and solution require learning', and 'the solution requires shifting the responsibility to the people who are actually affected'.

It's pretty safe to say that school libraries and library professionals have, and are, facing both adaptive and technical challenges as they work to improve their services and thrive in a dynamic and changing information and educational environment.

In her article, *The importance of school libraries in the Google Age* (2016), Kay Oddone describes how one of the key challenges for school library staff is to convince the principal that teacher librarians are much more than 'the keeper of books' and that the role is constantly changing.

In increasingly complex educational environments, school principals and leaders themselves are facing change and responding to opportunities and challenges, both adaptive and technological.

OECD (2013) describe 'enhancing skills to meet the demands of the rapidly changing economy' as one of the key challenges for educators today. *The Education Policy Outlook: Australia* (2013) report states that the key to raising achievement in Australian schools is developing the conditions for school leaders and teachers to succeed.

Equally, school library professionals need the right conditions to succeed and in an adaptive challenge environment, the best approach to leadership is distributive (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009).

More than just understanding how the role of the school library and teacher librarian is changing, it is important for principals and school leaders to recognise the value school library professionals offer them in the form of leadership through adaptive change.

The following quotes, drawn from Softlink's *The Ongoing Importance of School Libraries* feature document, demonstrate and reflect on some of the ways in which school library professionals globally are approaching adaptive challenges and taking up the mantle as adaptive leaders.

This is an exciting time to be in libraries. Change is constant and a challenge to many, but there are so many opportunities to make new types of resources available to our users. Who knows what we will be doing in ten years' time? That is both exciting and a little scary, but I say, 'Bring it on'. AU 2015

Dedicated librarians have evolved in a relatively short period of time to acquire sophisticated computer skills, which allow

them to promote and teach good research skills and information literacy to others. Yes, anyone can do a Google search and find some results. The skill is in assimilating, synthesising, analysing, understanding and comparing these results, as well as knowing where else to look. This is what a qualified and experienced librarian can do well. UK 2016

We are encouraging use of online databases and teaching digital literacy. It is very exciting to have so much information available and a challenge to find targeted information suitable for every level. NZ 2016

Last year we surveyed staff around the areas of Information Literacy and Digital Citizenship. This year we have used this data to develop recommendations and programs around these two areas. AU 2016

I have implemented a catch-up literacy programme to raise reading and spelling levels. UK 2015

I have made my own week by week literacy skills programme for every year level. It includes achievement objectives and learning intentions and follows a logical pattern for learning about the library and how to use it, how to search for books etc. NZ 2016

I have been developing and implementing Information and Digital Literacy programs over the last two years. I run these for students in Years 8 and 10 during fortnightly classes. AU 2016

I see an increase in mobile learning and different formats for disseminating information. School libraries must adapt to become multimedia resource centres. UK 2016

Makerspaces are an example of the range of services a library can offer and the kind

of place a school library can be — a place of investigation, excitement, discovery and entertainment. NZ 2015

School library professionals as agile leaders

Leadership agility has been described as the ability to dynamically sense and respond to changes in organisational environment with actions that are focused, fast and flexible (Horney *et al.*, 2010).

Hall (2016) states that behaviours which focus on agility are vital in today's Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity (VUCA) world, specifically in knowledge-intensive organisations where people and processes face the daily challenges of a rapidly changing global landscape.

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In their article, *Developing agile leaders*, Joiner and Joseph (2007) describe managers or leaders as moving through five distinct levels as they master the art of agile leadership:

1. expert;
2. achiever;
3. catalyst;
4. co-creator; and
5. synergist

Reaching a new level represents an improved ability to respond effectively to change and complexity with synergist leaders shaping or amplifying the dynamics of a particular situation to bring about mutually beneficial results.

Through their actions, innovations, motivation and reflections, it is clear that today's school library professional is moving beyond the 'expert' or 'achiever' stages of management and becoming 'catalysts', 'co-creators' and 'synergists' within the broader school environment.

The following responses, also drawn from *The Ongoing Importance of School Libraries* feature document, illustrate how school library professionals globally have developed their agility and encouraged mutual benefits for the whole school.

One of my key roles is working closely with the Director of Literacy (English HOD) to develop Wide Reading lists, and Literature Circle programs. AU 2016

School librarians are as creative and proactive in promoting their work as ever, but our increasing use of social media is leading to new partnerships and projects that highlight the impact we can have on teaching and learning. I see the future as one of greater resource sharing and partnerships beyond our traditional school ones. UK 2015

Things have changed so much and the whole concept of libraries has changed. This library has become a relaxed and comfortable place to work and a meeting place for students. NZ 2015

I am happy with my role. The balance between teaching and learning, leadership,

curriculum involvement, management, literature promotion and services is just right. **AU 2016**

Libraries are based upon building up knowledge bases, resource collections, and of course relationships over a period of time. **UK 2015**

Libraries are more crucial now than ever before and we need to ensure we are communicating this at every opportunity and to anyone who will listen. We must also be prepared to re-think how we operate in our environments to align with the new modern learning environments in schools. **NZ 2015**



The Ongoing Importance of School Libraries

The Ongoing Importance of School Libraries feature document shares respondent comments from four surveys, including the 2015 and 2016 Australia and New Zealand School Library Surveys and the 2015 and 2016 Softlink United Kingdom School Library Surveys.

Comments are structured into five themes: Being a 21st century library professional, Navigating the digital landscape, Promoting engagement, Collaboration and literacy skills, and Trends and opportunities.

While the feedback is anonymous, country and year attribution is applied.

The Ongoing Importance of School Libraries feature document is available from the [Softlink website](#) Resources page.

The 2017 Softlink Australian and New Zealand School Library Survey

The 2017 Softlink Australian and New Zealand School Library Survey was launched in mid-August. Responses close on Monday 11 September 2017. We encourage all school library staff to participate and have their voice heard. Access to the survey is available through the [Softlink website](#), Events page.

Leading today and tomorrow

In many ways, the contemporary school library is as it has always been — a centre for learning, research and student well-being run by dedicated, skilled and enthusiastic staff. What has changed dramatically is the way in which services are provided, the environment they are delivered in and the stakeholder agility required.

School library professionals are adapting, innovating, experimenting and collaborating more than ever and they are doing so with agility and enthusiasm. While the last two decades haven't been without their challenges, it is their skills as adaptive and agile leaders that has seen school library professionals navigate obstacles and turn challenges into opportunities which improve educational outcomes.

It is very important to emphasise the leadership aspect of the Teacher Librarian role; it's something which is undertaken naturally by Teacher Librarians, but is little recognised, and essential for the library to play a central and transformative role in changing school contexts. Kay Oddone, library educator, PhD candidate



Softlink

About Softlink

Softlink has been providing school library software for over 30 years offering solutions to meet the changing needs of schools globally.

Softlink is proud to support school libraries through the annual school library survey, conducted in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The survey provides findings on school library funding, staffing, evolving roles, delivery of digital resources, and visions for the future.

Users of Softlink's flagship School Library Management System, **Oliver v5** benefit from regular new feature updates which are developed in direct response to feedback and insights gained from our active user community.

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