

A Systematic Literature Review on the Role of School Librarians in Promoting Health Literacy

Nurul Asyiqin Mazlan, Haslinda Husaini*, Muhammad Fazli Baharuddin

Faculty of Information Science, Universiti Teknologi MARA Puncak Perdana, MALAYSIA

Corresponding author's e-mail address: haslinda3145@uitm.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

Health literacy is increasingly recognized as essential for student well-being. This study reviews 25 articles published between 2015 and 2023, sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, and ResearchGate, to explore the evolving role of school librarians in health literacy initiatives.

Findings reveal that school librarians are well-positioned to support health literacy through their expertise in information access and education. They actively collaborate with professionals and organizations to implement diverse health literacy programs tailored to student needs. The review highlights the importance of evaluating and enhancing health resources in school libraries to better support students, particularly those struggling with health literacy.

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to unlock the potential of school librarians in advancing students' health literacy. As health literacy research expands rapidly (Paasche-Orlow et al., 2010), the role of school librarians in supporting this domain has gained increasing attention. This review investigates how school librarians contribute to health literacy initiatives, with a focus on their impact on children and adolescents. Using literature sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, and ResearchGate, we analyzed 25 articles published between 2015 and 2023. The findings highlight emerging trends that position school librarians as key players in promoting health literacy through collaboration with educators, healthcare professionals, and community organizations.

Health literacy defined by the US Department of Health and Human Services (2000) as the ability to access, understand, and use health information to make informed decisions, is essential for navigating

today's complex healthcare environment. While its importance is increasingly acknowledged in education and healthcare, inconsistencies in its conceptualization present challenges in measurement and implementation. School librarians, with their expertise in information access, organization, and instruction, are uniquely equipped to bridge this gap. Their efforts align with broader educational goals to empower students with the knowledge and skills necessary for lifelong well-being. Advocacy for health literacy is in line with the traditional mission of librarianship to improve users' ability to obtain and use reliable information (Arndt, 2016). Health education programmes that foster informed decision-making, motivation, and healthy behaviours can significantly influence students' quality of life and long-term well-being (Marks, 2012b).

By integrating health literacy into school programmes and leveraging librarians' expertise, schools can foster a generation of informed, health-literate individuals. This study ultimately calls for a comprehensive assessment of health literacy resources and services provided by school libraries. Such an evaluation is crucial to ensure these services meet the evolving needs of students and effectively contribute to improved health outcomes. The review underscores the transformative potential of school librarians as advocates, educators, and facilitators in the health literacy landscape. The following are the objectives of this research:

1. To identify the components of the framework for user communities' health-related programmes and activities for school libraries
2. To develop an index of programmes and activities pertaining to health literacy for use in school libraries.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Malaysia faces a significant health literacy issue due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other social and political issues. Many Malaysians are unwilling to accept responsibility for their health problems, leading to a low health literacy rate. Public libraries in Malaysia have attempted to provide health-related programs, but their efforts have been limited and superficial. To improve health literacy, libraries should establish health-related projects and school resource centers should develop healthy lifestyle habits and increase awareness. School libraries must respond to this situational need by providing programs that increase the community's health literacy level. This study aims to close knowledge gaps and improve health literacy among Malaysians (Luo, 2018).

Impact of Library Services and Traditional Library Services on Mental Health and General Well-Being

The growth of mental health and wellbeing services in libraries, which is summarized in these overviews, may have been caused by a variety of factors. These factors are briefly discussed below. Since the beginning of the 2010s, there have been indications of a rise in worries regarding the mental health of students, which has been evidenced by an increase in demand for health services that are relevant to the issue. It is likely that this is due less to a drop in the stigma that is associated with reporting challenges with mental health and more to a worsening of the underlying condition. This is something that needs to be investigated. More information can be gleaned from Rourke (2020), whose analysis of the websites of North American (mostly Canadian) libraries revealed the following categories of action: stress-relieving activities for students, redesigning physical spaces, lending equipment like bikes or pedometers, and collaborating to provide wellness information. More information can be gleaned from Rourke (2020). She came to the conclusion that health was only casually included in library planning and was discussed more frequently on social media than on library websites, indicating that the former had a more informal and less official tone. She makes a really interesting remark about the lack of ties to institutional wellness departments, which suggests that there is a lack of integration into broader programmes.

Limitations of School Resource Centre Health-Related Initiative Programmes

To assert that a student is pleased with the education they are receiving, it is necessary for them to have the opportunity to take part in extracurricular activities at their school, to believe that the education they are receiving is worthwhile, and to receive emotional and social support from their instructors whenever things get difficult. This is in line with the guidelines that the WHO has made for the promotion of health in schools. There is a correlation between one's level of wellbeing and stress, as well as one's sense of self-efficacy, the support one receives from peers and instructors, and the learning environment. It has been established that when schools adhere to the rules, there is an increase in learning and a reinforcement of healthy behaviours. Another factor that can influence how much their children enjoy going to school is their parents' attitude towards education.

Student's Well-being

Husaini, Shuhidan, Daud, and Priyanto (2022) emphasize the importance of health literacy for university students' well-being, which involves their ability to access, understand, and use information to make informed health decisions. Academic libraries are pivotal in enhancing health literacy by offering resources on mental health, stress management, and coping strategies. LTL (Library Therapeutic Landscape) initiatives help to raise awareness of mental health issues, reduce stigma, and foster open discussions about well-being. Libraries can provide self-help materials, literature on coping strategies, and counselling services, thereby improving health literacy by supplying actionable information and empowering students to take an active role in managing their mental health. Integrating therapeutic elements within libraries fosters a holistic learning environment that emphasizes well-being and acknowledges the connection between mental and overall health. These initiatives equip students with the tools, resources, and spaces needed to make informed decisions about their mental health.

METHODOLOGY

In order to determine what aspects of this topic are most significant, this research will first undertake experimental intelligence-gathering searches of the existing literature and then conduct a thorough literature review. For the purpose of assisting in the formulation of the research question, a procedure for conducting a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, as well as criteria for inclusion and exclusion for search methodologies and search strategies, were created. Our scope evaluation included a number of processes as well. These procedures involved, among other things, choosing a literature review, a research topic, search strategies, and report drafting. The specifics of the situation are as follows:

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The following criteria were used to identify studies for use in this review:

1. Study scope
2. Date of Publication
3. Language

Inclusion criteria

All papers were required to have relevance to health literacy research in order to be considered. In addition, the work needed to have been released between January 2015 and May 2023, within the specified publication timeframe. Articles that were either too general, too specific, or not written in English weren't considered for this study. Table 1 displays the in-depth discussion:

Table 1: Details of discussion

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Study Scope	Paper that focuses on Health Literacy	Papers outside the scope of the research questions and duplicated study areas.
Date of Publication	Paper published from January 2015 until May 2023	Papers published before January 2015 fall into an out-of-date period.
Language	All papers that are published must be in the English language.	Omit any papers that have not been published in the English language

Formulation of the Research Question

The purpose of this study is to identify the roles of school librarians in health literacy for children and adolescents. Based on what we know from the literature analysis so far, it is clear that this study needs to investigate how health literacy affects students' well-being. The PICO framework was used to formulate the research questions for this study. The purpose of PICO is to assist authors in developing pertinent research questions for reviews. The three pillars that support the PICO framework are the notions of population or problem, interest, and context. In light of these ideas, the writers of the paper have concentrated on examining three key aspects. These include the librarian (population), the limitation (problem), the health literacy programme (interest), and the context of the school resource centre. Based on these considerations, the authors are able to formulate the following primary research question: In what ways might a child or teen benefit from the school librarian's expertise in health literacy?

Search Terms

Systematic literature searches were conducted in the following databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Library and Information Sciences Abstracts (ProQuest), Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts (EBSCOhost), and Emerald Insight, covering the time periods of database inception to January 2015. For all database searches, an English language limit was applied if available.

The identification, screening, and eligibility stages are the three primary steps in the systematic searching strategy process. The search terms we employ in the literature review help us focus on the most relevant and useful results. Identification involves looking for synonyms, equivalent phrases, and other forms of the primary terminology used in the study, such as "Health Literacy," "School Librarian," and "Child and Adolescent.

The authors enhanced the current keywords and constructed a complete search string (based on Boolean operators, phrase searching, truncation, wildcards, and field code operations) for the two most important databases, Scopus and Web of Science. These two databases can potentially be leading databases in a systematic literature review due to their advanced searching capabilities, comprehensiveness (indexing more than 5000 publishers), quality control of the articles, and multidisciplinary focus, including environmental management studies.

For example, a comprehensive literature review of journal papers on the Role of the school librarian in Health Literacy for children and adolescents or students was searched using the Boolean OR and AND operators to integrate the primary keyword and synonyms for each keyword. Going more into details, the string "dig* health lit*" was used to assemble relevant contributions, with the asterisk (*) being used to

account for any potential variations of digital health literacy-related concepts. The search string was run for "Title, abstract, and keywords" in Scopus, for "Topic" in WoS. The search terms used for health literacy were health literacy, OR 'health literate' OR 'medical literacy'.

FINDINGS

Study Selection

The process flow chart for item selection in this review consists of 203 outcomes, with an additional 4 articles identified after an investigation into the authors. After removing duplicate articles, 126 articles were assessed for eligibility. Only 25 individuals out of the entire sample population met the criteria to be eligible for inclusion. The studies can be categorized into five domains of health literacy: general health literacy, health literacy programmes, media and e-health literacy, and oral health literacy.

The initial step in the flowchart was the identification process, where data was obtained from various databases. The researchers conducted a literature review using keywords such as "Health Literacy," "School Librarian," "Resources centre," "Students," and "Literature Review." After screening 35 studies, a total of 28 were retained for comprehensive evaluation. The selected data from these 28 studies were then retrieved, resulting in 25 studies chosen.

The systematic methodology used ensured a comprehensive and reliable selection of studies for this research endeavour. The publications reviewed are presented in Table 1, with one mixed-methods study, four qualitative studies, and the remaining investigations using quantitative study designs. The majority of articles were released after 2010. Most studies were conducted in the Klang Valley, specifically in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur ($n=12$) and Peninsular Malaysia ($n=27$). Two papers used data from multi-country collaborative studies to compare Malaysia's findings on health literacy to those of other nations.

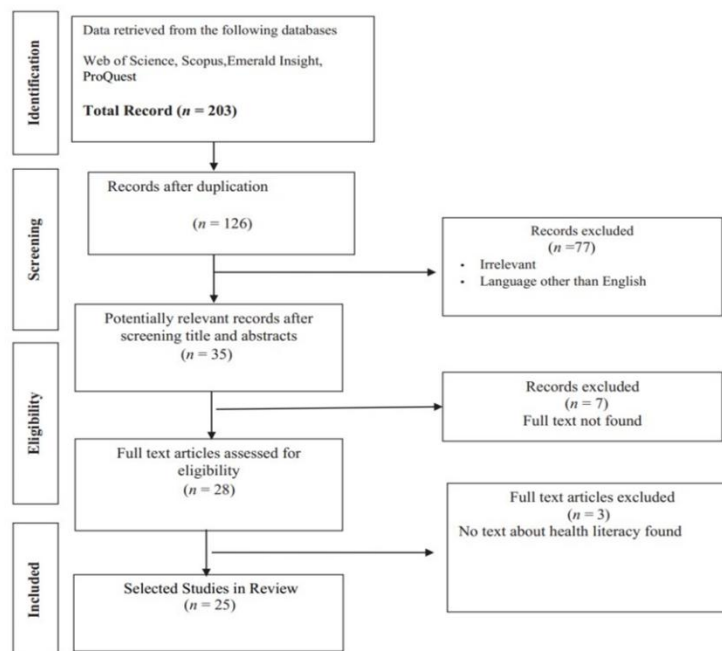


Figure 1: Flowchart of Study Selection

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Based on the studies (Klem et al., 2019), the field of health literacy and its connection to librarians have been explored in articles as early as 1957. However, there has been a significant increase in the number of articles published annually in the field since the 1990s. This suggests that researchers have been examining literature related to health literacy and librarianship for almost sixty years. Despite the passage of time, the general focus and content of these articles have remained consistent. Moreover, it seems that librarians and other information professionals were quick to recognise the importance of this emerging concept and its impact on the communities they served, leading them to publish articles reflecting their interest in the subject.

Promoting Health Literacy

According to the reviewed studies, librarians play a crucial role in enhancing communication resources to effectively serve their users. This involvement can encompass initiating research initiatives that bring about systemic transformations (Tester et al., 2019). In addition, librarians are actively engaged in advocating for and conducting research pertaining to health literacy. Studies (Ozan, 2020) suggest various approaches employed by librarians to promote health literacy, such as delivering presentations, developing online learning modules, and offering continuing education classes.

Several reviewed studies indicate that promoting health literacy from an early age is an essential strategy to mitigate the burden of diseases and address health disparities (Guo et al., 2020). Specifically, the authors emphasise the significance of school-based programmes as crucial platforms for improving adolescent health literacy. Guo et al. (2020) found a positive correlation between adolescent health literacy and various health outcomes. This study (Fairbrother et al., 2016) highlights the importance of health education as a key component of promoting child health. Furthermore, this perspective aligns with broader perspectives in child health policy and research, where children are typically regarded as recipients of health-promoting interventions.

Peralta & Rowling (2017) emphasise the importance of health promotion and disease prevention efforts, emphasising that fostering health literacy among students can lead to healthier adults. Addressing health disparities during childhood and adolescence is vital for the effective implementation of numerous public health initiatives, including the recent prioritisation of mental health, injury prevention, and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Kostenius and Bergmark (2016) suggests promoting health literacy should extend beyond healthcare settings, with schools being a viable venue for such efforts. Furthermore, it is essential to address the often-overlooked dimensions of existential health to enhance children's health and well-being throughout their childhood and as part of lifelong learning.

Collaboration

NASH et al. (2021) advocate for collaboration between librarians and teaching staff to create a comprehensive Health Literacy action plan for schools. This plan operates on two levels: firstly, it involves assessing and enhancing the Health Literacy responsiveness of the entire school environment, including signage, communication, access, and navigation. Secondly, it entails developing and implementing age-appropriate Health Literacy learning activities aligned with the curriculum to actively engage students in their health education.

Furthermore, researchers highlighted the importance of involving teachers and school librarians in learning and collaborating with health experts as a means to address existing limitations in assessing adolescent health literacy (L. R. Peralta & Rowling, 2017). Several studies emphasised the significance of collaborating with community organisations in library initiatives aimed at promoting health literacy,

particularly when targeting hard-to-reach populations. Therefore, an essential aspect of collaborative projects is ensuring the support and engagement of the specific population being targeted (Barr-Walker, 2016).

In addition, it has been emphasised in studies that librarians should engage in collaborative efforts with different departments within their organisations to enhance the significance of health literacy (Leonard et al., 2021). Researchers (Zhu et al., 2016) further asserted that establishing collaborations and partnerships is crucial to ensuring that healthcare providers (including faculty, students, and staff) and consumers across the state have convenient access to top-quality health information, resources, and expertise.

LIMITATION

In the course of carrying out this research, it is essential to recognise the existence of certain limits, as it is unusual for a piece of research to be fully free of such limitations. Despite completing a thorough search of the literature using four reliable databases, it's possible that some crucial research relevant to the subject of the investigation may have been unintentionally overlooked. Additionally, there are several limitations to this systematic literature review's inclusion criteria, particularly its emphasis on only including English-language papers. Furthermore, the review paper's restrictive focus is restricted to works published between 2015 and 2023 and only takes empirical studies into account. As a result, the findings of this study shed light on the scant number of studies that are currently available in the particular field being discussed.

To ensure that the primary research questions remained the central focus during the evaluation of the selected articles' content, a systematic data extraction process was implemented. This approach facilitated dependable comparisons, correlations, and conclusive inferences. However, owing to the diverse styles, subject matters, and emphases found in the individual papers included in the data extraction, explicit evaluations were not always feasible. In such cases, the assessment relied on the researchers' interpretation of the methods employed by each study and the corresponding results, all in relation to the research questions addressed in the review.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTION

This systematic literature review demonstrates that school librarians play a vital role in advancing health literacy among children and adolescents. Their expertise in information management, critical evaluation, and educational support positions them as key contributors to student health and well-being. As health challenges continue to evolve, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of health misinformation, schools must recognise and strengthen the role of libraries as essential hubs for health information and education. Despite growing awareness of health literacy's importance, there is still a lack of structured implementation in many educational settings, indicating a need for stronger policy support and integration into curricula.

To address these gaps, educators are encouraged to integrate health literacy across subjects and involve school librarians in lesson planning and curriculum design. Collaborative teaching models can empower students to think critically about health information while using library resources for research-based, student-led projects. For policymakers, it is essential to mandate the inclusion of health literacy in national education standards and to allocate specific funding for school libraries to support this goal. Providing librarians with ongoing professional development and training in health-related content will enhance their ability to deliver impactful programmes. Additionally, the development of national frameworks that recognise the school library's contribution to student health outcomes is recommended.

School librarians themselves should take the initiative by collaborating with health professionals, educators, and community organisations to design age-appropriate health literacy activities and campaigns. They should focus on curating inclusive and culturally relevant materials, promoting digital and media literacy, and creating outreach programmes such as reading clubs and workshops centred on health topics. By embracing these roles, school librarians can become proactive agents of change in improving students' ability to access, understand, and apply health information. Empowering students with these skills not only supports their immediate well-being but also lays the foundation for healthier, more informed communities in the future.

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