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School Libraries, Engagement, Inclusion, and Well-Being: An Ecological Perspective on Equitable and Sustainable Learning Environments

M. Elisabetta Cigognini [1*], Andrea Nardi [2] and Francesca Pestellini [3,]

[1] INDIRE – National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research, Florence, Italy; e.cigognini@indire.it; a.nardi@indire.it; f.pestellini@indire.it
* Correspondence: e.cigognini@indire.it ;

Abstract: Contemporary social, cultural and digital complexity calls on schools to design environments that sustain engagement, belonging, well-being and equitable participation. Adopting an ecological perspective, this study interprets the school library as a learning, cultural and community hub and explores which of its features are perceived as supporting cognitive engagement, agency, social and co-regulated participation, and the systemic conditions that make them sustainable. It presents a theory-driven secondary analysis of a national mapping conducted within the INDIRE *Avanguardie Biblioeducative* project with the Biblòh! Network, involving 1,100 principals and 4,474 teachers from schools with a library. The findings reveal a gap between the strategic value widely attributed to the library and its still uneven integration into everyday teaching. Teachers most strongly endorsed its contribution to a shared social environment for reading, followed by well-being, reading enjoyment, motivation and learning outcomes, and this endorsement was higher among teachers who used the library more often. Training is associated with more frequent educational use, and participation in educational-innovation networks with more active and differentiated methodologies that may open opportunities for student agency. The library thus appears as a relational infrastructure for engagement – and plausibility, for belonging -, whose potential is still largely to be realised.

Keywords: School libraries; Student engagement; Educational inclusion; Student agency; School well-being.

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1. Introduction

The social, cultural and digital complexity that runs through contemporary education systems calls on schools to rethink not only their tools and methodologies, but the very conditions that make equitable, inclusive and participatory learning possible. From an ecological perspective (Bateson, 1972; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the school can be understood as a complex educational ecosystem, shaped by social, organisational, cultural and political interactions, in which curriculum, assessment, spaces, times, technologies, relationships and teachers' professionalism jointly contribute to the quality of the educational experience. Within this framework, equity, inclusion, well-being and sustainability are not separate goals, but interdependent qualities of the school and criteria through which its functioning can be read. Existing gaps make this question urgent.

At the international level, PISA 2025 records the steepest decline in reading, with scores down by 28 points across OECD countries between 2015 and 2025 and one in five 15-year-olds now a low performer in science, mathematics and reading; the OECD notes that digitalisation, longer screen time and falling rates of reading for enjoyment have coincided with weaker literacy outcomes (OECD, 2026). In the European Union, 31.3% of 15-year-olds underachieve in reading (target: below 15%) and only 4.8% are top performers (target: at least 12%), while disadvantaged students are about four times more likely than advantaged ones to underachieve in science (European Commission, 2026). In Italy, the same divides appear in reading practices: the share of readers rises from 43% in low-income families to 72% in the most affluent ones, and 37% of children and young people aged 0–19 live in homes with no more than 25 books (ISTAT, 2026); 30.9% of Italian municipalities lack any book-related infrastructure, whether bookshops, public or school libraries (Caramis & Federici, 2024). About six students in ten have access to a school library, yet only 55.4% of those with access report actually using it (ISTAT, 2026). A profound transformation of attention practices adds to these gaps. The issue, therefore, does not concern only access to texts, but the quality and continuity of participation: the question shifts from having a library to the ways in which it is inhabited.

1.1. Engagement as a situated and ecological construct

Engagement is understood here as a situated educational process rather than an individual trait. Research has long recognised its multidimensional nature, distinguishing behavioural, emotional and cognitive components (Fredricks et al., 2004), to which an agentic dimension has been added, through which learners contribute actively to the flow of instruction, express preferences, ask questions and orient their own learning pathway (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Adopting this perspective means recognising that engagement does not arise within an isolated individual, but emerges from the interactions among learners, practices, resources, relationships and educational cultures. It is a quality of the educational experience that depends on the affordances of the environment, that is, on the concrete opportunities it offers to make choices, participate, negotiate meanings and recognise oneself as part of a learning community (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2014). Within this framework, agency also takes on a relational and ecological meaning: it is not a capacity possessed once and for all, but something exercised in relation to resources, professional mediations, spaces, times and organisational arrangements (Priestley et al., 2015). Social cognitive theory offers a foundation for this view: agency results from the reciprocal interplay of personal factors, behaviour and environment, and is exercised not only individually but also through proxy and collective agency (Bandura, 2001, 2006). The social dimension is constitutive of it, since self-regulation is intertwined with forms of co-regulation and socially shared regulation in collaborative settings (Hadwin et al., 2018). A decisive design implication follows: if engagement is a property of the relationship between learners and their environment, the environment can, and should, be designed.

1.2. Equity, inclusion and well-being as structural qualities of the environment

Educational equity requires plural pathways to knowledge and diversified instructional mediations, capable of recognising differences in profiles, languages, interests, abilities and trajectories. This is the premise of differentiated instruction, understood as a pedagogical and organisational culture that keeps learning goals common while varying contents, processes and products (Tomlinson, 2017; Cigognini & Nardi, 2026), and of Design for All, which assumes human variability as the starting point for designing environments, times and materials (Cigognini, 2025). From this perspective, grounded in the principle of the educability of each student (Grange, 2018), inclusion is not a set of compensatory measures addressed to some students, but a structural quality of the learning environment, concerning all students and each of them. Well-being and social-affective learning are, in turn, rooted in relationships, recognition, belonging, self-efficacy and personal and collective agency (Bandura, 1997). A sense of belonging to school is consistently associated with motivation, persistence and psychological well-being (Allen et al., 2018). The school library, in particular, can support well-being by offering safe and welcoming spaces for concentration, respite, emotional self-regulation and informal interaction (Loh & Binny, 2025), especially for students who experience marginalisation or struggle to find a recognised place within the school community: a space of protection, recognition and participation (Merga, 2025), in which reading and cultural experience acquire personal and social value. Well-being and belonging should therefore be read in a circular relationship with engagement, of which they are at once condition and outcome. Within the perspective of this circular connection, the present contribution explores the relationship between the school library, understood as a pedagogical device for authentic inclusion (Cigognini et al., 2026), and its potential to support the participatory dimension of learning and the realisation of learners' agency.

1.3. The school library as a learning, cultural and community hub

Within the INDIRE project *Avanguardie Biblioeducative*, the school library is conceptualised as a learning, cultural and community hub: an interconnected framework capturing its curricular and pedagogical functions, its role in cultural participation and its capacity to connect the school with families, institutions and the local community (Nardi, 2026). As a learning hub, it supports reading, inquiry, collaboration and multiple literacies, including media and information literacy; as a cultural hub, it widens equitable access to cultural, informational and digital resources; as a community hub, it builds relationships between the school, public libraries, associations and local communities. This vision is consistent with the renewed IFLA–UNESCO School Library Manifesto (IFLA & UNESCO, 2025), which places the library at the centre of an educational strategy addressed to the whole school community. The three functions do not describe separate domains, but thresholds that progressively widen the field of students' agency: from learning to cultural participation, up to the relationship with the community and the territory (Pestellini et al., 2026).

Within this ecological framework, the library can be read through four interconnected dimensions of engagement (Table 1): cognitive engagement, supported by resource plurality, inquiry, problem solving and the critical processing of information; agency, understood as the opportunity to choose texts, themes,

resources, methods and products; social, relational and co-regulated participation, expressed through cooperative activities, peer learning, shared reading and cultural co-production; and systemic conditions, which make engagement, inclusion and equity sustainable over time through curricular integration, stable resources, professional competences, collegial planning and networks.

Table 1. Interpretative framework: four interconnected dimensions of the school library as an engaging learning environment.

Dimension	Library affordances	Expected educational quality
Cognitive engagement	Resource plurality; inquiry; problem solving; project-based learning; media and information literacy	Deep processing; critical thinking
Agency	Choice of texts, themes, resources, methods and products	Autonomy; self-regulation; ownership of learning
Social, relational and co-regulated participation	Cooperative and peer learning; shared reading; cultural co-production	Belonging; co-regulation; well-being
Systemic conditions	Curricular integration; stable resources; professional competences; collegial planning; networks	Sustainability and equity over time

The contribution addresses three research questions: (RQ1) how consolidated – in the reports of principals and teachers – are the structural, pedagogical, relational and organisational features of the school library that correspond to each of the four configurations of engagement; (RQ2) whether the frequency of educational use is associated with a stronger recognition of the library's relational contribution and of its role for well-being; (RQ3) whether professional development and participation in networks are associated with more frequent educational use and with the adoption of active and differentiated methodologies.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research design

The study is situated within *Avanguardie Biblioeducative*, a research project launched by INDIRE in 2024 in collaboration with Biblòh!, the National Network of Innovative School Libraries, and connected to the INDIRE Observatory on Reading Practices at School. The project investigates the school library as a learning environment and the organisational, professional and relational conditions supporting its educational potential, within a mixed-methods design articulated in exploratory, observational and evaluative phases (Creswell, 2014). The present contribution offers a theoretically informed secondary analysis of the 2025 national mapping of Italian school libraries. The survey data are those of the 2025 national mapping, also analysed in other contributions of the same project (Nardi, 2026; Pestellini et al., 2026; Cigognini et al., 2026); the interpretive framework and the mapping of indicators onto the four configurations of engagement are specific to the present study. Selected findings from a subsequent survey of 474 school

principals, focused specifically on the community-hub dimension, are also considered as complementary contextual evidence (Pestellini et al., 2026). The two surveys were analysed separately. The contribution's specific focus lies in interpreting existing survey indicators through an ecological perspective on engagement, agency, social participation and the systemic conditions supporting equitable and sustainable learning environments (Table 1).

2.2 Participants

The survey collected 1,396 responses from school principals and 5,422 from teachers, covering 99% of Italian provinces. The analysis focuses on the 1,100 principals and 4,474 teachers working in schools that reported the presence of a library. Among principals, 63% led comprehensive institutes (istituti comprensivi) and 25% upper secondary schools. Teachers were mainly teachers of Italian (31%), primary school teachers (22%) and support teachers (13%); 51% had more than twenty years of service, and 30.5% acted as library leads. Within the principals' subsample (n = 1,100), schools belonging to INDIRE educational-innovation networks (*Avanguardie Educative* and *Piccole Scuole*) accounted for 22% (n = 238), while 24% (n = 269) belonged to one or more school-library networks. Network membership was not mutually exclusive. Participants were reached through INDIRE networks, school-library networks and reading-promotion programmes. The study therefore relied on a non-probability purposive sampling strategy: the findings offer a broad exploratory mapping of the national landscape, but cannot be regarded as statistically representative of the Italian school system, and are likely to over-represent schools already sensitive to library-based innovation.

2.3 Instruments

Data were collected between March and May 2025 through two parallel online questionnaires, one for principals and one for teachers, so as to integrate organisational and pedagogical perspectives on the same phenomenon. The instruments, comprising approximately 70 closed-ended items with spaces for open answers, were developed by the INDIRE research group with the Biblòh! Network, internally reviewed and pre-tested with school-library lead teachers. They addressed four areas: organisational and infrastructural conditions; analogue and digital resources and services; educational practices and pedagogical uses of the library; and strategic integration within the school and in wider professional networks. Teachers were also asked about the development of students' competences and about the library's perceived contribution to learning, motivation, well-being, inclusion, self-esteem and reading enjoyment. The frequency of practices was rated on a five-point scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always): "regular use" combines *often* and *always*, while "at least occasional use" also includes *sometimes*. The library's perceived contribution to learning outcomes, motivation and self-esteem, school well-being and climate, reading enjoyment and attitudes towards reading, and the creation of a social environment for reading was rated on a five-point scale (1 = not at all; 5 = completely), with ratings of 4 or 5 treated as positive.

2.4 Data analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive and comparative procedures, examining frequency distributions and associations with educational use, professional development and network participation. Comparisons between network members and non-members were conducted separately for school-library networks and educational-innovation networks, since membership of the two network types was not mutually exclusive. Binary indicators were coded as 0/1, while ordinal variables were assigned progressive numerical scores. Responses for which network membership could not be established were excluded from the relevant comparisons. Depending on the level of measurement, Welch's independent-samples t-tests and chi-square tests were employed. Where appropriate, effect sizes were expressed as Cohen's d, calculated as the difference between group means divided by the pooled standard deviation (Cohen, 1988). These analyses were exploratory and bivariate: given a non-probability sample, the nesting of teachers within schools and the overlap between the two network types, *p*-values are descriptive indices, interpretation rests mainly on effect sizes, and the associations identified do not support causal inference. The four configurations of the framework operated as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969), orienting the reading of the data without predetermining its meaning. Survey indicators were mapped onto the four configurations as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Mapping of survey indicators onto the four configurations of engagement.

Configuration	**Survey indicators (teachers and principals)**
Cognitive engagement	Educational uses related to reading, research projects, online information retrieval, digital resources and media production; critical-reflective, creative, research and information-management competences; media and digital competences; media and information literacy initiatives
Agency	Indirect indicators of opportunities for student choice and initiative: differentiated instruction, inquiry-based, problem-based and case-based learning, debate, Writing and Reading Workshop, storytelling, media production and other active methodologies involving student participation and knowledge creation.
Social, relational and co-regulated participation	Perceived contribution to a social environment for reading, school well-being and climate, reading enjoyment, motivation and self-esteem; cooperative learning; collaborative and communicative competences.
Systemic conditions	Centrality in the school's vision and strategic documents; budget; dedicated staff; frequency of use and lesson planning; professional development; resources for students with special educational needs

	(SEN); network participation; opening hours and territorial partnerships.

Consistently with the framework, engagement is not measured here through behavioural metrics or tracking data, but interpreted through the professional judgement of those who inhabit the school. This is a limitation, and at the same time a deliberate choice, coherent with the situated and relational understanding of engagement adopted in this study. Because the questionnaires did not directly measure students' engagement, belonging, emotional regulation, well-being or educational equity, these dimensions are interpretative lenses applied to staff perceptions rather than observed outcomes. The mapping of indicators onto the four configurations is interpretive: it rests on single items, without scales, reliability estimates or factorial analyses, so that the configurations operate as heuristic categories rather than as empirically tested dimensions. All indicators are self-reported and the design is cross-sectional.

3. Results

The national mapping reveals a gap between the strategic value attributed to the school library and its integration into everyday teaching. Among principals, 79% considered the library important within the school's vision and mission (48% *very* and 31% *completely*), and 53% regarded it as a key element of strategic documents such as the three-year educational plan, the school curriculum and the inclusion plan. Among teachers, 64% rated it as very important or essential to their teaching. Its use with students, however, was considerably less established: only 13% of teachers reported library activities several times a week and a further 31% once a week, while 24% regularly planned lessons incorporating library resources, 42% did so occasionally and 34% rarely or never. The results are organised according to the four configurations, following a progression from what the library offers, to what students can choose, to whom they learn with, and to the conditions that make all this sustainable. The recognition of the library's relational contribution and its association with frequency of use (RQ2) are examined in section 3.3, while the associations with professional development and networks (RQ3) are reported in sections 3.2 and 3.4

3.1. Cognitive engagement: resources, inquiry and information processing

Reading for pleasure was by far the most established educational use of the library, reported by 77% of teachers, whereas research projects (17%), online research (15%), the use of digital resources (8%) and media production (4%) were considerably less common. Among the competences, critical-reflective thinking (33%) and creative thinking (32%) were those most frequently reported as systematically developed in the cognitive domain. Research and information-management competences (14%), media and digital competences (12%), technology-supported learning (11%) and inquiry-based learning (10%) were addressed far less consistently. Media and information literacy, central to the learning-hub model, emerged as the least consolidated dimension: 50% of principals reported no specific initiative, and only 11% reported structured programmes.

Cognitive engagement is therefore present, but remains concentrated on reading, while its more critical and epistemic forms – selecting, evaluating and re-elaborating information – are still a minority practice.

3.2 Agency: innovative methodologies as conditions for choice and participation

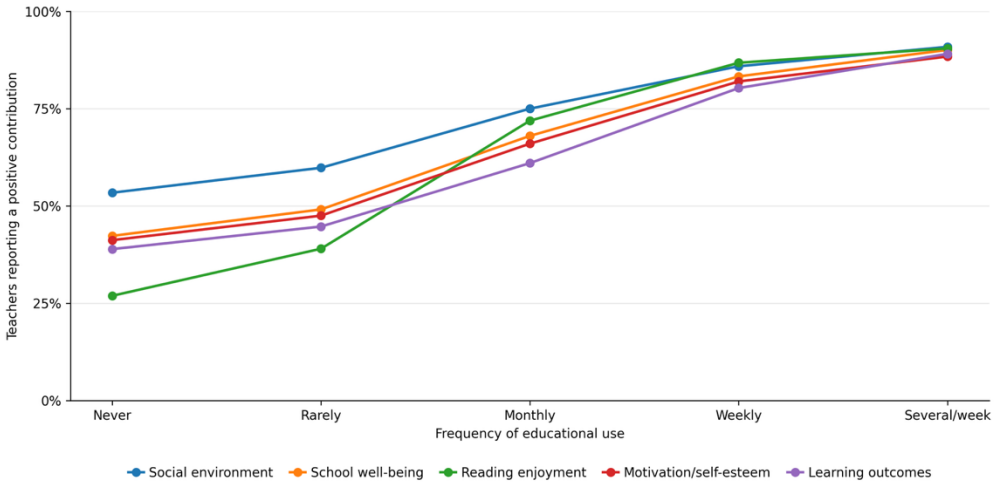
The survey does not directly measure students' agency. It can, however, be read indirectly through the methodologies that teachers activate in and through the library, since active and innovative approaches share a common pedagogical feature: they shift students from receiving content to making choices, formulating questions, negotiating meanings and producing knowledge. Differentiated instruction opens choice over contents, processes and products of learning (Tomlinson, 2017); debate gives voice to students' positions and to the argumentative confrontation among peers; inquiry, case- and problem-based learning entrust students with the formulation of questions and the search for solutions; storytelling, Writing and Reading Workshop and media production turn them from readers into authors. In this sense, each of these methodologies configures the library as an environment in which agency, understood as a relational and ecological quality of the educational experience rather than an individual trait (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Priestley et al., 2015), becomes concretely practicable. Considering at least occasional use, teachers reported read-aloud (63%), differentiated instruction (39%), digital storytelling (33%), debate, Writing and Reading Workshop and flipped classroom (26%), STEAM activities (24%), and media education and information literacy (23%). These practices outline a library already crossed by active, laboratory-based and inclusive methodologies, opening different ways into knowledge. Their regular use, however, remains limited – 30% for read-aloud, 11% for differentiated instruction, 9% for digital storytelling and 8% for the Writing and Reading Workshop – indicating that the conditions for student agency are widely present but not yet systematically embedded in everyday teaching. Network participation was associated with a broader use of active and innovative methodologies. Teachers in schools belonging to educational-innovation networks reported higher levels of case-based learning ($d = 0.44$), problem-based learning ($d = 0.37$), technology-supported learning ($d = 0.35$), game-based learning ($d = 0.31$), inquiry-based learning ($d = 0.27$), project-based learning ($d = 0.24$) and differentiated instruction ($d = 0.32$), with $p < .001$ across these indicators; all small to moderate in size by conventional benchmarks (Cohen, 1988). The differences suggest an association between participation in innovation networks and the adoption of methodologies that may create opportunities for student choice, inquiry and initiative. Professional exchange and collaborative reflection within such networks offer a possible interpretative framework (Mughini, 2020), although the cross-sectional design does not establish a causal relationship. These findings concern pedagogical opportunities for agency, rather than students' actual exercise of it.

3.3 Social, relational and co-regulated participation

Among the dimensions of perceived contribution, the creation of a social environment for reading received the strongest recognition, reported by 76% of teachers. It was followed by the library's contribution to school well-being and

climate (70%), reading enjoyment and attitudes towards reading (69%), motivation and self-esteem (68%) and learning outcomes (65%). Collaborative (33%) and communicative competences (31%) were reported as systematically developed at similar rates. Across all five dimensions, positive perceptions were more frequent among teachers reporting greater educational use of the library (Figure 1). These patterns suggest an association between regular educational use and stronger recognition of the library's social, affective and educational contribution. They do not, however, establish that more frequent use causes these perceived benefits, nor do they represent independent measures of students' learning or well-being[1].

Figure 1. Teachers' perceived positive contribution of the school library across five educational and relational dimensions, by frequency of educational use (n = 4,474). Percentages represent positive responses within each frequency group.
Note. Positive responses correspond to ratings of 4 or 5 on a five-point scale (1 = not at all; 5 = completely). Percentages were calculated within each frequency-of-use group.



3.4 Systemic conditions: integration, resources, professional development and networks

The conditions that could make these configurations durable are only partly in place. A dedicated library budget was available in 50.6% of schools, and in 64% the library relied mainly on a teacher responsible for it. The presence of dedicated staff and of a specific budget increased with the centrality attributed to the library in the school's vision and mission ($p < .001$). Resources for inclusion were a critical point: 60% of principals considered resources for students with SEN insufficient, while 59% of teachers considered resources for students with SEN inadequate or only slightly adequate and 54% expressed the same assessment of digital resources. Only 34.3% of teachers reported using inclusive digital tools. Teachers in schools participating in INDIRE educational-innovation networks reported more frequent use of these tools (45.5% versus 29.7%; $\chi^2 = 106.02$, $p < .001$). The adequacy of resources for students with SEN was also rated more positively in schools

[1] Frequency of use and perceived contribution were reported by the same teachers in the same questionnaire, so that shared-method variance and reverse causation – teachers who already value the library using it more cannot be excluded.

participating in Avanguardie Educative (Welch's t = 11.56, p < .001). These associations do not establish causal relationships. Professional development emerged as a salient correlate of educational use. Around six teachers in ten reported no specific training in library resources or their pedagogical use, and only 6–7% received regular training; yet frequent educational use was reported by approximately 53–54% of teachers without training, 73 -75% of those with occasional training and over 80% of those with regular training (p < .001). The community-hub dimension was also uneven: in a subsequent survey of 474 school principals, 60.8% of libraries did not open beyond school hours and only 14.6% guaranteed regular extended opening, while territorial collaborations remained concentrated mainly on reading promotion (Pestellini et al., 2026). Network participation was associated with two complementary patterns of organisational and pedagogical development (Table 3).

Table 3. Standardised differences (Cohen's *d*) between networked and non-networked schools, by network type (teachers; $p < .0001$). d = standardised mean difference (pooled SD) on 0/1 or ordinal scores; for binary indicators it depends on the prevalence of the practice and should be read alongside group percentages.

Network type	Practices and services	*d*
Educational-innovation networks (*Avanguardie Educative, Piccole Scuole*)	Digital and social annotation; situated learning episodes (EAS)	0.48
	Case-based learning	0.44
	Pedagogical use of media and information literacy	0.41
	Digital storytelling; problem-based learning	0.37
	Media and digital competences	0.36
	Differentiated instruction	0.32
School-library networks	Digital lending	0.85
	Online catalogue	0.70
	Training on resources and tools	0.55
	Structured media and information literacy programmes	0.43

4. Discussion

The findings are discussed in relation to the ecological framework adopted in this study and the existing literature on school libraries, student engagement, agency, inclusion and well-being. Particular attention is given to the organisational, pedagogical and relational conditions that may support the development of school libraries as equitable and sustainable learning environments, while acknowledging the exploratory nature of the analysis and the limitations of self-reported data.

4.1. Engagement as a shared culture of reading

The strongest recognition concerns not an individual outcome but a relational one – the creation of a social environment for reading (76%), followed by the contribution to well-being and school climate (70%) – although all five dimensions were recognised by 65–76% of teachers and the differences among them are modest. This is compatible with a reading of engagement as a social and relational process rather than the sum of individual encounters with texts. In line with the agentic and social extensions of the construct (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Hadwin et al., 2018), the library appears as a place where reading becomes a shared practice, and where belonging and recognition can emerge from participation in a common culture (Allen et al., 2018; Loh & Binny, 2025; Merga, 2025). This reading can be further grounded in the sources of self-efficacy identified by Bandura (1997), which a shared reading environment appears to bring together: mastery experiences, in reading, choosing and producing; vicarious experiences, in seeing peers read, discuss and create; verbal persuasion, in the recognition offered by teachers and classmates; and positive emotional states, in a safe and welcoming space. The perceived contribution to motivation and self-esteem does not measure self-efficacy, but it is consistent with the processes through which beliefs of efficacy are built in social and relational contexts. The consistent gradient in positive perceptions across frequency-of-use groups does not demonstrate causal effects; reverse causation and shared-method variance cannot be ruled out, since teachers who value the library may use it more often and both measures come from the same respondents; rather, it indicates that more regular educational use of the library is associated with stronger professional recognition of its contribution to reading, engagement and well-being.

4.2. The library as an ecology of attention and equity

An interpretative reading, which the data cannot verify, concerns the relationship between the library and attention, understood in the ecological perspective as a quality of the environment rather than an individual capacity. In a media ecosystem marked by fragmentation, where screen time largely exceeds reading time (Associazione Italiana Editori, 2025) and long-form reading declines (Baron & Mangen, 2021), the library offers extended times, silence, sustained reading and a space withdrawn from notification and rapid consumption: conditions that research associates with concentration, respite and emotional self-regulation (Loh & Binny, 2025).

The library can thus be configured as an ecology of attention, a plural and validating threshold for its care. It is plural because it admits different ways of attending (silent reading, read-aloud, making, discussing, digital production); validating because each is recognised as legitimate rather than as deficit, by adults and peers alike (Bandura, 1997). Plurality and validation are thus conditions of equity, which requires plural pathways to knowledge rather than a single norm of participation. Within an empowering and orienting view of teaching, care of attention is not an end in itself, but the threshold that may make students' talents and potential – one's own and those of others – visible and cultivable, and the other thresholds of the hub more crossable, sustaining authentic participation over time. The present data offer only indirect traces: the social environment of reading is the

most recognised contribution, whereas methodologies opening choice and production remain occasional (sections 3.2 and 3.3). A hypothesis for future research, through observation and students' voices.

4.3. Who may remain outside

These possibilities, however, coexist with resources for students with SEN judged insufficient by 60% of principals, with a limited use of inclusive digital tools (34%) and, at national level, with an actual use that concerns little more than half of the students who have access to a school library (ISTAT, 2026). Engagement may thus be unevenly distributed precisely where it would be most needed – in the contexts where access to books, technologies and cultural opportunities outside school is weakest – a hypothesis that the present data cannot test. Equity is not guaranteed by the presence of the library, but by the real possibility that each student finds a place in it. This calls for an inclusive design of spaces, resources and mediations grounded in Design for All and differentiated instruction (Cigognini, 2025; Tomlinson, 2017), in which variability is the starting point of design rather than an exception to be compensated.

4.4. From symbolic legitimacy to curricular integration

The gap between the strategic value attributed to the library and its integration into teaching represents the main critical node. The library is recognised as important by 79% of principals and 64% of teachers, but only 24% of teachers regularly plan lessons with its resources; half of the principals reported no specific media and information literacy initiatives; and the methodologies that most directly open to student agency, such as differentiated instruction, are practised at least occasionally by 39% of teachers but regularly by only 11%. If the library is to function as a learning hub, as envisaged by the IFLA–UNESCO Manifesto (IFLA & UNESCO, 2025), these practices cannot remain episodic: they require an alignment between learning goals, activities and assessment, and a responsibility shared among library leads, teachers and class councils. The same applies to the community dimension, which still rests largely on episodic partnerships rather than on integrated services, extended opening and joint professional development (Pestellini et al., in 2026).

4.5. Meso-level conditions: professional development and networks

The complementary patterns of the two types of networks are, in our view, among the most promising findings. School-library networks were associated with more developed digital services, resources, professional development opportunities and institutional recognition, while educational-innovation networks showed stronger associations with active methodologies potentially supporting student agency. The associations with school-library networks were larger (d = 0.43–0.85) than those with innovation networks (d = 0.24–0.48); since membership of the two network types overlaps and the comparisons were bivariate, their complementarity should be read as descriptive, and a model including both memberships would be

needed to estimate their independent associations. Read through an ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), networks operate at the meso level, where the conditions for teachers' agency and school change are negotiated (Priestley et al., 2015; Mughini, 2020). The marked association between professional development and frequency of use may be read in relation to teachers' professional self-efficacy in the pedagogical use of the library, while networks may provide contexts for collective teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Goddard et al., 2000). Teachers' professionalism may therefore be one of the conditions on which the others depend – a hypothesis consistent with, but not tested by, the present data, which did not measure these constructs or students' agency. Bringing together structural and pedagogical dimensions may therefore be a decisive lever for policies aiming to make the library an ordinary, rather than exceptional, component of an equitable school.

4.6. Limitations and future directions

The survey documents principals' and teachers' perceptions and does not allow causal inferences. The non-probability sample, reached through networks already engaged in reading promotion and innovation, limits generalisability and may amplify favourable perceptions; the cross-sectional design does not capture change over time. Engagement, belonging, emotional regulation, well-being and equity were not measured directly, and agency in particular was read indirectly through the methodologies that make it possible. Validation will require studies centred on students' experiences and voices, combining direct measures, observations of library activities, phenomenological and participatory approaches, and longitudinal data. The methodological challenge will be to capture students' engagement without reducing it to a metric, so as to respect the situated and relational nature of the construct assumed in this study.

5. Conclusions

The ecological perspective adopted in this study positions the school library as a material, relational and conceptual infrastructure for engagement. Its value is widely recognised but only partly enacted (RQ1): teachers recognise most its social and affective dimension, more strongly the more they use it (RQ2), while inquiry and methodologies that open choice to students remain occasional. Within this framework, engagement does not emerge from the space or the collections per se, but from the relationships, choices and forms of co-regulation that the library makes possible, and from the alignment among curriculum, physical and digital environments, educational mediation, professional collaboration and organisational governance. Training and networks are associated with more frequent use and broader methodologies (RQ3), without implying causation. The question shifts from having a library to the ways in which it is inhabited: if variability is the ordinary condition of classrooms, the library becomes inclusive when texts, times, spaces and mediations are designed for it from the start. Two priorities follow. The first is to move the library from symbolic legitimacy to curricular design: only 24% of teachers regularly plan lessons with its resources, and 60% of principals judge resources for students with special educational needs insufficient. The second is to sustain teachers' professional learning as a shared, networked practice: frequent use rises

from 53–54% among untrained teachers to over 80% among the regularly trained, while only 6–7% are regularly trained. This invites a shift of gaze – from the place of reading to the culture of participation it sustains. Investing in professional development, curricular integration and networks may mean investing in the conditions through which the library can become an ecosystem of participation, in which access to knowledge, information and media literacy, agency, relationships, belonging and shared responsibility are inseparable dimensions of educational quality, for all students and for each of them.

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