



**Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian
schools**

By the Australian Parliament House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Education and Training

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A Submission

from

Kerry Neary, Cert T, B Sc, GradDip TL, B Ed
Retired Teacher Librarian
Children's Literature Consultant

To: Secretary, Australian Parliament House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training

Summary:

All four terms of reference have been briefly addressed.

To inquire into and report on the role, adequacy and resourcing of school libraries and teacher librarians in Australia's public and private schools. Specifically, the committee should focus on:

- the impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities;
- the future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy;
- the factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians;
- the role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians; and
- the impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians.

Recommendations

No specific recommendations are listed; there will be more than enough of those from longer submissions. In brief there should be:

- National consensus on the role of the school library in curriculum delivery based on international research findings of best practice
- Ongoing funding for school library development and training of qualified Teacher Librarians and for the professional development of school principals to keep them up to date in these best practices.
- Staffing of school libraries qualified professionals trained both to collaborate with teachers on quality learning programs and to shape the collection to the curriculum so that it has a range of print,

audiovisual and electronic resources that provide equal learning opportunities to all students.

The impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities

Background

When funding of school library services through the Commonwealth School Library Grants ceased, school library budgets began to decrease as states on their own could not maintain the level of funding.

The Commonwealth funding also supported post-graduate training programs for Teacher Librarians. This support decreased and ultimately disappeared and the course offering decreased accordingly.

The School Based Management (**SBM**) model was introduced by the states during the 1990s. This was done as an economical imperative rather than through educational wisdom. There is virtually no research evidence to support the model as giving improvement in educational outcomes.

The current situation

As devolution to SBM increased, funding support for school libraries diminished and support for the role of Teacher Librarians diminished. In all instances this has been a budgetary consideration, not an educational one.

The policy of devolving SBM to principals has been based on the fallacious principle that principals know what is best for their school communities. That is patently unsound as no single individual can be so well-versed in educational philosophy. In some cases this burdens principals with too much responsibility; in others it gives them too much power. There is a huge

range in the decisions made by principals with regard to deploying their TLs and incorporating the library in curriculum programs. They can't all be 'best for the school community'; many, if not most, bear little relation to best practice.

In those systems where devolution to SBM was more complete, the consequences on school libraries and Teacher Librarians have had more impact, to the extent that school libraries – if they exist and have not been contracted to classroom libraries – are being managed by untrained school support staff or even volunteers. This is laudable but unfair to the students of the school.

A side effect

In some systems where a policy does exist, it is not being articulated to or enforced on principals. Thus, many principals are interpreting this 'policy' conveniently and at times illegally with respect to industrial agreements.

Departments are not providing principals with professional development best practice inclusion of library programs in curriculum delivery; they do not even appear to be providing professional development in a departmental 'vision' for school libraries in curriculum delivery.

What this comes down to is that not all students are getting the best chances at learning.

And now ...

Today, many of those 40 year-old structures built by the Commonwealth School Library Grants scheme are being refurbished, upgraded, even replaced through the Building an Educational Revolution program, a worthy and exciting investment. But its returns will be diminished because it has

overlooked the most critical ingredient – qualified Teacher Librarians working in curriculum delivery to ensure improved learning outcomes for students. Policies simply for the improvement of library infrastructure and buildings ignore the issues of ensuring professional staff:

- to organise and maintain the physical and virtual spaces of the library
- to provide access to a range of sufficient resources that cater for different reading levels, curriculum areas and learning styles
- to develop curriculum with teachers which integrates a range of resources such as online, print and audio
- to provide access to quality virtual and hardcopy resources for curriculum programs
- to develop a reading culture as part of students' learning experiences.

Furthermore, despite the federal government's Quality Teacher reforms:

- o no PD for principals has focused on supporting school libraries or the development of excellent TLs to improve student academic achievement and literacy attainment
- o no federal program has examined staffing, training needs, or use of teacher librarians to improve student learning and literacy; neither has such a program been proposed
- o no summary of the international and national research on best practice in school libraries has been made available or supplied to school leaders or departmental officers to inform their decision-making.

Worth reading:

School libraries in Australia

<http://www.alia.org.au/publishing/alj/53.1/full.text/nimon.html>

The Australian School Libraries Research Project

<http://www.chs.ecu.edu.au/portals/ASLRP/publications.php>

The future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy

Over 60 studies have shown a direct improvement in student achievement when school libraries were well-stocked and staffed with a dual-trained education specialist Teacher-Librarian (TL). This is true for literacy and academic achievement.

It is ironic that in the time that policy decisions in Australia were causing downward trends in engaging libraries and TLs in the curriculum, especially in government schools, empirical research from USA, Canada, UK and Australia was showing that the exact opposite is required to gain the full potential from the educational (and for that matter, economic) investment in school libraries staffed with qualified Teacher Librarians.

A comprehensive summary of the research from 1993 to 2008 and its findings is contained in the Scholastic Research Foundation paper ***School libraries work! Updated 2008*** (see ***Worthwhile reading*** below for the link). Specific studies produced specific findings but the broad outcome of them all was that *'an abundance of evidence strongly supports the connection between student achievement and the presence of school libraries with qualified [Teacher Librarians (TLs)]. When [TLs] work with teachers to support learning opportunities with books, computer resources, and more, students learn more, get better grades, and score higher on standardized test scores than their peers in schools without school libraries.'* (Summary from the above report; I have substituted 'TL' for the American term 'School Library Media Specialist'.)

The question must be asked, does herein lie at least part of the answer to Australia's relatively poor performance in international testing (PISA)?

TLs realise this potential when their dual qualifications in teaching and information science are acknowledged and engaged in curriculum delivery. Teacher Librarians have teaching qualifications plus experience in the classroom, as well as a postgraduate qualification that is an entry level into the profession of Information Science (Librarianship).

As trained teachers they are able to:

- communicate and design curriculum programs with teachers which incorporate a range of resource formats
- fulfil the duty of care requirements as stated in Education Acts.

As information specialists, TLs:

- provide access quality learning resources (both electronic and hardcopy) which support curriculum and student learning outcomes
- design programs which train students in the effective, efficient and appropriate use of learning resources.

The potential of qualified Teacher Librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes through well-supported school libraries stems from these qualities:

- They are teachers, trained to work with students to develop in particular, information literacy, language literacy, reading appreciation and learning technology literacy.
- They collaborate with teachers to plan, instruct, and evaluate student learning; and with students to prepare for those activities.

- They are trained in resource based learning to locate and match resources which support instruction programs.
- They have a special affinity with literature. They enjoy sharing great books with students and teachers. They have special training to help entice students into the reading culture and in selecting books that are readership appropriate. They have ideas on incorporating great books into a variety of curriculum topics.
- They are learning technology literate. They work with students and teachers in the discriminate use of learning technology in all forms and format.
- They innovate in program planning and technology usage, open to new ideas often garnered from a network of colleagues. They are flexible.
- They have a cross-curriculum perspective on learning. This facilitates the transfer of common curriculum elements across key learning areas, with the focus turning on how to learn.
- They are trained to organise and to be organised. A TL is a manager, working with specifically skilled staff to sure the school library runs effectively and efficiently.
- They are focused on life-long learning, both personally and in their pedagogical principles.
- They are focused on the philosophy that together, we learn from each other.

For the sake of Australian students this potential must be realised.

Worth reading:

School libraries work! Updated 2008

http://www2.scholastic.com/content/collateral_resources/pdf/s/slw3_2008.pdf

The factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians

In 2003, Michelle Lonsdale set out to uncover trends in attitudes towards school library staffing, in her research for ASLA/ALIA under the auspices of the ACER. In section 4.2 of her report ***Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement: a Review of the Research***, she concluded:

Anecdotal evidence and information gained from several State-based surveys, however, indicate:

- a general shortage of teacher librarians (and other specialist teachers);
- the practice of schools using librarians rather than teacher librarians, or having staff with no library or teaching qualifications at all;
- teacher librarians being used in classrooms as subject teachers to fill gaps in staffing;
- an ageing profession, with retirees not being replaced by sufficient numbers of graduates; and
- added responsibilities for teacher librarians in terms of technology maintenance and student use of technology.

In addition, devolution of financial management to schools means that funding for school libraries relies on the resource allocation priorities established by the school community, which might or might not place a high priority on the need for a well-staffed library system.

Recent research through the ***Australian School Libraries Research Project*** has revealed some troubling trends, with alarming deficits between

government schools and independent schools to school library investment. For example, while 50% of schools must function with an annual budget of under \$10 000, 50% of government schools have an annual budget of less than \$5 000. Professionally trained TLs are employed in 85% of independent schools (excluding independent Christian schools, which tend to employ library technicians or school support officers to manage their libraries); in contrast, only 65% of government schools employ professionally trained TLs, many of whom are appointed as full time TLs but taken from the Library to perform non-library related duties.

School libraries are in a demoralised state – unless it happens to be in a wealthy private school. Teachers are naturally reluctant to commit to a change in career pathway which they see as going nowhere and having little support. Attitudes towards and treatment of TLs in schools is at worst unprofessional, often inconsiderate. Their role is undervalued and the person is often treated that way. No wonder there is reluctance amongst dedicated and so-inclined educators to place themselves in this situation!

With fewer candidates for training, the number of TL courses offered around the nation has dropped dramatically. As numbers of candidates drop, funding for courses becomes more limited. There are fewer qualified people to fill vacancies. Without central departmental support, principals turn to other ways of 'managing' the problem. There is no common vision. They make inconsistent decisions often based on economic imperatives rather than sound educational research. Qualified Teacher Librarians already in schools see their work as undervalued. Confusion reigns and so the spiral plummets.

For the sake of educational outcomes for our students, these trends must be reversed.

Worth reading:

Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement: a Review of the Research <http://www.asla.org.au/research/Australia-review.htm>

The role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians

The discussion leads directly from the previous reference point.

There is no doubt that governments have a responsibility to support the development of school libraries. The Federal Government should provide adequate funding to all schools for library development. The various state systems should, on the one hand, provide professional development for school administrators to keep them up-to-date with this kind of research; on the other, they should be using more flexible staffing formulae which would allow schools to utilise TLs more effectively in their role. It is up to school administrators to lobby for these changes. The Federal Government, through its Education Revolutions, must underwrite this. But first, all levels of educational policy making (government or otherwise) must **articulate their vision of quality library programs within schools so that all stakeholders know where they stand on supporting library programs in schools.**

School administrators should no longer be reducing funding for the library (particularly for book purchases), cutting the library budget further, deploying TLs to other roles in the school, not including a TL in the staffing formula, replacing TLs with an unqualified 'library manager' or moving libraries into cyberspace. Such decisions are 'worst practice'. Years of replicated and validated research shows that school libraries **do** make a difference to student achievement. Our students need 'best practice' actions to **improve** schools' returns from this authentic investment in children's learning.

Worth reading:

Strengthening Kids' Interest in Learning and Libraries (SKILLS) Act

http://www.all4ed.org/federal_policy/legislative_updates/SKILLS_Act

The impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians

The evidence is already there! When I was appointed to my first posting as a Teacher Librarian in 1984, I was already using 'computers in learning' (as it was called at the time). Most other areas in the school were just testing out 'computers in administration'. Teacher Librarians have always been at the forefront of implement learning technology, including electronic formats.

School libraries work! Updated 2008 points out that school libraries are much more than books. The report summarises:

SCHOOL LIBRARIES ARE TRUE PLACES OF OPPORTUNITY WHEN:

- All students can strive for and achieve success.
- Quality collections are provided, in print and online, that support the curriculum and address a variety of learning needs.
- Students can develop an [enjoyment] of reading and literature.
- Library media specialists help students explore the world around them through print and electronic media.
- Students can work individually or in small groups on research and collaborative projects.

There is a very important consideration to be made in adopting learning technology in a school library or throughout the school. **The adoption must**

be made from the viewpoint that students are novice-learners, not accomplished end-users.

In many schools today, the educational value of print resources (chiefly books) is underestimated by the decision makers. There are some who even see books, which nevertheless form the foundation of most school collections, as an out-dated information and communication technology; but 'the jury is still out on that', as they say. This view overlooks the teaching-learning significance of books. Knowledge is a construct; it does not exist without intervention. A model commonly used to represent the construction of knowledge is the *Data-Information-Knowledge* model (a Google search on these three words will show just how extensively this model is applied).

Books - that is, 'information' books - reflect the construction of knowledge (a linear sorting) in a way the Internet does not (a radial linking). The information guides of a book, particularly the discrete facts in the index, represent the *data*; these are organised under captions and sub-headings into *information* contexts; finally, main headings and chapters show one way we *know* that information set can be logically processed and compared with similar information. Searching the Internet involves the use of key words, which are in fact the organisers of information in the model above. Key words (which do not represent discrete facts but rather imply some prior knowledge of the context of the information being sought) are used to follow a trail of links in Internet searching with the objective of arriving at the right place ultimately. Students with a better sense of knowledge construction achieve more successful Internet searches because they have a better sense of what headings are relevant; their searches are less 'hit'-and-miss. 'This would explain why so many cybernauts get "shipwrecked" on the Net' (Monereo, Fuentes & Sánchez, 2000).

Sometimes we overlook the fact that students are **novice** learners in searching for information; and that it takes a long time to become 'expert' in

the skills and strategies involved. There is the temptation to think that the information found is the important 'outcome'. It isn't. In a return to the 'Process vs. Product' debate, **how** they get to it is the most important. Books are fundamental to teaching students the processes of knowledge construction and should be educationally valued in every school library collection.

So, the teaching of literacy in the context of curriculum delivery through library programs becomes the teaching of several literacies: information literacy (as above) along with information technology literacy (how to use digital gadgets) and learning technology literacy (how to use digital sources to locate information), as well as language literacy (how to construct and represent information) and the often overlooked social literacy (working collaboratively and cooperatively).

It is not as simple as it looks!

Worth reading:

School libraries: making a difference

http://www2.curriculum.edu.au/scis/connections/issue_69/school_libraries_making_a_difference_1.html

See also: Abstract at

<http://www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/abstracts,58.html?issueID=12031>

End of submission