



Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

Submission prepared by **Margaret Cooper**, teacher-librarian at **Shellharbour Public School** in NSW.

I am a teacher librarian with post-graduate qualifications who has been teaching in a school library situation for almost 20 years. I am also in my sixth year as president of the **Illawarra School Libraries Association** situated on the south coast of NSW. My submission reflects experiences in my role as a teacher librarian in two public primary schools and the knowledge I have gained about our profession as president of our association.

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

Federal Government

- In primary schools the *Building the Education Revolution* programs are providing new libraries in schools but not necessarily trained teacher librarians or providing extra time for existing teacher librarians in schools. All Primary schools should be allocated extra time for their teacher librarians. A new library is only a building without a qualified teacher librarian to run it.
- The *National Partnerships Agreement* staffing trials in NSW has given principals the power to decide whether their school's allocation of a teacher librarian is necessary. The current case at Loftus Primary School involves the appointment of a clerical assistant to run the library instead of a qualified teacher librarian.
- In high schools the laptop rollout is having a huge impact on the way students can access information and a huge potential to improve technology and information skills. A trained teacher librarian is the best person in the school to teach students how to maximize their use of these computers in researching topics.

NSW State Government

- The NSW Department of Education and Training is providing *Connected Classroom* resources to each school. This program allows schools to use videoconference facilities. Some libraries are benefitting from this, but some are not. Each school is able to choose where this videoconferencing hardware will be located. As a result, not all libraries have interactive whiteboards – and they should be in every primary school library if we are to remain at the forefront of technology use in schools.
- Teacher librarians that do have access to an interactive whiteboard have had an opportunity to incorporate a new learning tool that increases student engagement and leads to improved learning outcomes.
- NSW has a policy for schools that overarches all teaching in our schools entitled *Quality Teaching*. Teachers are collaborating to produce units of work incorporating *Quality Teaching* elements and teacher librarians are able to assist with resourcing their units and collaborating in the teaching of aspects of these units.
- Teacher librarians have to be self-motivated to keep up with the constant changes in technology. Often they are the first users of new technology in schools. Teachers that hesitate will be left behind and will be unable to teach information skills in an optimum fashion. At Shellharbour, the library was the first place in the school to install an interactive whiteboard. The principal, teachers and parents were so impressed with the potential of this teaching tool, that the Parents and Citizens body has a goal to install an interactive whiteboard in every classroom.

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

Literacy

- In a primary school classroom the focus is on the mechanics of reading. Children are being taught how to decode and comprehend. Their choice of reading materials is highly structured and is determined by their “reading level”. Teacher librarians play an important role in supporting reading programs, by assisting teachers to choose the right resources, which are age appropriate, current, and at a level, that the children can read. A library technician does not have the training or skills to do this.
- In a primary school, the teacher librarian places a heavy emphasis on reading for pleasure in addition to reading for information. With younger children the emphasis is more heavily weighted towards reading for pleasure. Many teacher librarians encourage children in their schools to participate in schemes such as the *Premier’s Reading Challenge*, *MS Readathon* or *KOALA* (Kids Own Australian Literature Awards) to widen their reading experiences and put their reading skills into practice. At our school children participate in the *Premier’s Reading Challenge*. Feedback from parents, teachers and children is positive as children attempt books that they would not normally choose and are thus improving their reading skills through wide reading. To achieve a high level of participation I have had to spend a lot of time and effort identifying books in our collection, classifying and labelling books for the reading challenge to make selection an easier task for children.
- Another initiative I have developed at our school is the use of Book Groups to extend keen readers. I started with a small group of twelve children. I now have three groups of eight children. These children are enjoying the experience of an adult-style “Book Club”. I am able to select books that I know will challenge children and provide material for discussion on a personal and social level.
- With older children, teacher librarians still encourage reading for pleasure but put more emphasis on teaching children how to read for information from a variety of resources that includes digital, print and visual. I have found that the interactive whiteboard has become an essential tool in demonstrating different research skills for each of these resource types.
- The teacher librarian’s classroom teaching experience and knowledge of the curriculum enables them to be able to supply and suggest books to match student and teacher needs, thus providing the best possible resources for the teaching of literacy and other class programs.
- Teacher librarians are aware of all the newest resources and digital learning tools that complement teaching and learning programs. Teacher librarians are often the first teacher in their school to use new technology and demonstrate to classroom teachers through collaboration how the technology can assist classroom teacher’s learning needs. I have done this with my use of the interactive whiteboard.
- Teacher librarians could make greater contributions if they had more time to do this. Many teacher librarians have to provide Relief from Face-to-Face teaching time for classroom teachers and do not have the opportunity to collaborate with teachers in their library lessons.
- Some teacher librarians are finding their allocation of teaching hours as determined by the current formula in NSW, are insufficient to contribute to the learning needs of the school as much as they could. The formula needs to be reviewed. In my school, my

commitment to four hours a week (which is almost a whole day) relief from face-to-face allocation means my timetable is so tight that I cannot adequately cater for all classes in our school.

3. The factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians

The teacher librarian position in a school is a unique posting. The position is a highly complex one requiring a teacher who has dual qualifications – firstly in classroom teaching in order to gain knowledge of the curriculum and secondly teacher librarianship qualifications to learn how to manage and resource a library for the benefit of all school community members.

The teacher librarian manages and maintains the collection, budget, library staff and whole school teaching resources. In my school the collection includes teacher reference, readers, fiction and nonfiction books, equipment, digital resources (including websites), computer software and audiovisual resources. The collection has to be continually monitored for currency, relevance and bias. In addition, I supervise students before school and at lunch times which allows the whole school community unlimited access to the library all day. Untrained staff cannot provide a library service to students. Non-teaching staff are not permitted to supervise students so the appointment of non-teaching staff to school libraries will restrict student access which will impact on learning.

Recruitment:

- The majority of teacher librarians in NSW are people who have chosen the role because they have a personal passion for this area of responsibility. They are people who have a love of learning and literature and who are attracted to the role because of the diversity within that role. I was a casual teacher when I applied to do my post-graduate qualifications at Edith Cowan University in Perth. I had always had an interest in this field and hoped that by completing the course it would improve my chances of gaining employment in a school. I was very lucky to acquire a casual position at a local school on completion of my course. After doing the job for a few years I was able to attain permanent status in the NSW teaching service. Teachers who currently show an interest in the role of teacher librarianship and undertake post-graduate study in the hope that they will be able to be appointed as a teacher librarian have no guarantee that they will gain an appointment as a teacher librarian.
- However, some teacher librarians, who do not have any formal teacher librarianship training, have been appointed from other areas of responsibilities within schools. I have heard of several instances in our area where principals have filled a vacant teacher librarian position with people who are not qualified and who may not necessarily be interested in this career path. These people have sometimes lost hours from another position in the school, such as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher or a Learning Support teacher, who often do not display the same passion and motivation as someone who has undertaken the training to perform the role.
- The teacher librarian's role in a school is a specialist role, which requires the undertaking of post-graduate studies to be of maximum benefit to the school. Teacher librarians with post-graduate training are far more likely to be innovators and leaders within their schools than those appointed without these qualifications.
- Most principals, teaching staff, students and parents are unaware of the responsibilities of a teacher librarian. Many of the duties performed by teacher librarians are unseen and

undervalued. Students and teachers expect to be able to select and use resources in a library but have no idea of the time and effort it takes to develop and maintain a library collection. Many primary school parents are surprised to learn that the teacher librarian actually teaches their children.

Development:

- A teacher librarian's development as an information specialist is often hampered by the NSW Department of Education and Training's (DET) policy of using teacher librarians for Relief from Face-to-Face (RFF) teaching. In some schools a teacher librarian's whole timetable can be RFF classes. Sometimes teacher librarians provide additional executive release in schools, which is also an inappropriate use of the teacher librarian which is also against DET recommendations.
- Teacher librarians are also hampered by their allocated hours. In NSW teacher librarians are appointed according to a formula based on the number of classes in a school. This formula was determined before the huge technological advances that have been made in schools and is now proving to be inadequate in many schools. There are so many programs (especially using the facilities of the Connected Classroom initiative) that could benefit students, but the teacher librarian does not have enough time to use.
- The lack of consistency in the allocation of clerical support to teacher librarians also has an impact on the quality of programs and services a teacher librarian can provide. A teacher librarian uses their clerical assistant to do the basic processing of resources that is required before they become part of the library collection. The principal determines clerical support for teacher librarians and some teacher librarians do not have any clerical support and have to perform all the cataloguing and processing tasks necessary to provide and maintain library resources. In addition, the clerical assistant appointed does not necessarily have library technician qualifications. In my 19 years in this position I have had six clerical assistants. Only one of those assistants was a trained technician. This means that any spare time that I have on the day my clerical assistant works is devoted to training the assistant to do the tasks that are supposed to free me to devote more time to teaching. This training sometimes takes years to progress to a stage where the assistant is able to perform duties independently.
- For most teacher librarians peers provide the only Professional Development available to teacher librarians. Teacher Librarians establish network groups within their regions and plan and deliver the Professional Development that their peers need. This is the model that we use in the Illawarra. Our association, the Illawarra School Libraries Association, has been in charge of supplying teacher librarians and library assistants with their professional needs for the last six years. This is only possible through the volunteer efforts of a small group of people who give up their own time to organise respected speakers and forums that are real, relevant and up to date. As new technologies and applications of those technologies emerge, there is a constant need for teacher librarians to be at the forefront of their application in a school situation. This type of Professional Development relies on the goodwill of a small group of teacher librarians to coordinate these programs usually on very tight budgets.

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

Federal Government:

- The Federal Government has no policy that I am aware of that covers teacher librarianship across the nation, as some states do not have a policy that provides a teacher librarians in every school.

State Government:

- NSW is one of the few states where teacher librarians are recognised as being an essential part of the staffing allocation. There is, however, a great disparity in the way that primary schools and high schools are staffed. High schools have one teacher librarian regardless of the size of the school and at least one full time clerical assistant. Primary schools are staffed on the number of children at the school and the provision of any clerical assistance is at the discretion of the principal.
- The Department of Education and Training, however, does not provide a clear statement outlining the role of a teacher librarian, so it is open to interpretation by principals according to their personal prejudices and experiences. No two schools use their teacher librarian in the same way. I am very fortunate to be in a school that values my role and supports me, but I have many colleagues who have not been treated so well. A consistent role statement from the DET would allow teacher librarians to be used in the best possible way to support the curriculum needs of schools and maintain equity in the expectations placed on the people performing the role of teacher librarian.
- *The School Libraries and Information Literacy Unit* based in Ryde (Sydney) is the broad body that is responsible for a support network throughout NSW. Colleen Foley, Lizzie Chase and Cath Keane provide a wonderful service to teacher librarians, but sadly many teacher librarians in the state are unaware of the support they have to offer or have limited access to that support because of distance.

Local Government:

- Local Government has no direct influence on school libraries, but Local Libraries often set up programs which allow schools to visit or to make use of local library services.

Local Communities:

- Local community support varies and is usually dependent on how proactive the teacher librarian is in his or her own school community. Some Parent and Citizen bodies (P&C) have provided wonderful things in their school libraries, because the teacher librarian has made an effort to be part of the community and attend P&C meetings to advertise the role of the library. I have been very fortunate to gain the support of the P&C to update our library furniture. The P&C at our school recognize that the library is a whole school resource and that it is a facility used and enjoyed by all the children in the school. I have worked hard to develop this profile in our school, over the seven-year period that I have

been at Shellharbour Public School. I have a couple of parents who regularly volunteer their services to help maintain our library and make it the centre of the school, as it should be.

5. The impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the role of school libraries and librarians

- Digital Technologies have had a huge impact on school libraries ever since the introduction of OASIS (the library management software that all public schools in NSW use) in the early 1990s. Teacher librarians had to completely change the way their library records were stored and enter all paper data onto the OASIS database. For many teacher librarians at that time, this was their first introduction to the digital world. Since then, teacher librarians seem to have developed a love for technology as a tool to assist students as well. The only negative is that OASIS is still the system that we have to use. Even though it is now run from a centralised base, it is often unreliable and very slow.
- Teacher librarians are often the first people in a school to hear about and incorporate new technologies into their schools. Teacher librarians throughout Australia have large, digital networks and are able to communicate with each other and inspire and suggest new ways of using technology in schools and support each other in the process.
- The Connected Classroom project and the introduction of electronic whiteboards in NSW have had a big impact on the way teacher librarians can deliver information skills to students. The level of student engagement with these technologies is very high.
- Teacher librarians who have interactive whiteboards are able to enhance their teaching in ways that were not possible with books. The ability to put interactive text and pictures on a screen allows the students to focus on a teaching point that may only have been previously possible by one-to-one teaching with individual students. *Smart Notebook* has many features that can make the teaching of an information skill far more engaging and practical with a greater retention rate by students. I have had an interactive whiteboard in my library for about three years and have been able to enhance my teaching skills and deliver better-quality demonstrations to students more effectively than was previously possible with overheads, books and pictures.
- Teacher librarians are also able to teach students how to use web-based information – teaching the same search skills that they use with text to locate and use information. Their own teachers do not always have the knowledge or confidence to teach these skills.
- There is a school of thought that suggests that traditional libraries and books have no place in the future education of children. Teacher librarians strongly dispute this theory, *particularly in primary schools*. Students need to learn the basic reading and information skills they need through books. What they learn through reading books can be applied to other technologies later. Even though it is often suggested that books are dying, book purchases are still at an all time high in Australia. Books in electronic form are beginning to appear on the market and are proving to be popular, but they are still books. The cost of providing e-book readers in schools would be far greater than providing books in print form. NAPLAN testing requires a strong knowledge of the narrative genre. Teachers may be able to teach the structure of narrative, but there is no better way to learn about narrative than to read a lot of fiction through books!