



Submission to House Committee Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australian Schools.

Addressing the terms of reference:

1. To report on the role, adequacy and resourcing of school Libraries and teacher librarians in Australia's schools –

In WA government schools teacher librarians still exist in most high schools, but are in declining numbers in district high schools and very few exist currently in primary schools. The decline in numbers has been very evident over the past ten years and certainly through my role as a district library support officer I have become aware that when a school loses a teacher librarian their specialist role is not replaced. More frequently, as was the case in the primary school where I work as a library officer, the teacher librarian was moved into a full-time classroom teaching role as staffing entitlements only provided sufficient time for a limited number of specialist teachers (in my case these were tied to 'long-term' staff positions in the areas of Phys Ed, Art and Music). This scenario has been repeated many, many times over in the large number of primary schools across the state with which I have contact through the WATLNET listserv.

We desperately need to collect statistics on exactly how many teacher librarians (full and part-time) are employed in school libraries in each government school across the State. The attrition has been a gradual process over the past decade.

In very recent years a handful of primary schools have placed a classroom teacher in the library on a limited time basis to teach 'Library Skills'! Obviously indicating that Principals see a need but do not have the resources to staff the role with a specialist teacher librarian! In the primary schools where I know of this occurring, sadly, the function of this position is primarily seen as a way to provide DOTT to teachers. Without specialised training in the library there is heavy reliance on the use of *blackline masters* by teachers assigned to teach 'Library Skills'!

I have heard it said many times that high schools are critical of students coming in from government primary schools with very little or no understanding of how a library works or how to research.

In a larger northern suburbs primary school where there is a full-time teacher librarian all classes attend the Library along with their class teacher so that the session can be integrated with programs that both the teacher and teacher librarian have planned together.

A further recent phenomenon that has occurred in some primary school libraries is the assigning of significant space to the presence of a computer lab. These are not staffed by specialist teachers either and are noisy, heat generating and are the source of constant interruptions to the work of the library officer. Surely a teacher librarian in every school would be a huge asset in enhancing the teaching of information literacy utilising printed and digital media.

I have sometimes been asked by prac teachers how they can train as teacher librarians; my response is that if they do they are almost certainly going to have to find a teaching position in a private school as there are so few current opportunities in government schools, particularly primary schools. In the private schools surrounding many government primary schools a teacher librarian is present; irrespective of their socioeconomic status. **Why should primary school students attending government schools be denied the access to such specialised knowledge and skill development?**

2. Impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities – We are all aware of the enormous spending and ‘investment’ that the Rudd government has made towards the BER libraries across the nation. Why did the government decide to spend in an area that appears to have been neglected by the state governments for so long? **Is the federal government prepared to fund or tie state funding to the adequate resourcing of specialist teacher librarians to all these new libraries?**

On many district library consultation visits to primary schools I am shocked by the new school libraries or refurbished ones that have striking new shelves but are sadly depleted of books. There is no one person assigned to staff the library across all school hours, let alone an appropriately trained teacher who is qualified to choose quality books, digital programs or even advise patrons on suitability of material.

A teacher librarian is both a qualified teacher and librarian who can advise on collection development to support teaching and learning in schools. They can coordinate a whole school approach to developing student information literacy skills. At the start of this year my Principal asked his teaching staff for ideas on how to improve our NAPLAN results particularly in literacy. To date the only plans that have been implemented are to reintroduce ‘the lexile reading program’ (a commercial publisher who promotes the purchase and reading of their books) and to purchase \$16000 worth of reading books for distribution to junior primary classes. Surely, **with access to a teacher librarian who is a specialist in children’s literature, every student would have equal opportunity to utilise and be exposed to quality reading** materials as well as be monitored and encouraged to challenge their reading skills and interests. At present we seem to be very much in ‘damage control’ by focussing on the weaker readers rather than **offering opportunities to all readers!** The budgets of many school libraries is very low; from my research I have found that many are below \$8000 per year – that is well below one new book into the library per student each year and well below the expenditure advised by CMIS (Curriculum Materials Information Service).

If school libraries are to be valued, they must be properly resourced – a shell with new shelves will do nothing for the users – you must ensure adequate funding for the development of a quality collection plus adequate funding for the appropriately qualified staffing to facilitate the learning and teaching.

3. The future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy- partially covered in points made above but it is critical that the expenditure made in providing not only buildings, shelving, books and adequate, qualified staffing is viewed as an investment in the future of our community. For too long we have tried to address the ‘bottom end’ of literacy; whilst a more progressive future focussed approach should be developed. Children become better readers (and spellers and writers) by reading. Many classroom teachers do not read many children’s books and therefore do not have the knowledge or familiarity with contemporary children’s literature. **A teacher librarian does have intimate knowledge**

of content, writing styles, local publications, age-appropriate material and can facilitate reading for pleasure.

Funding for research in Australia on the role of school libraries and teacher librarians in improving literacy is urgently needed.

4. Factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians – as stated above there are so few current opportunities for the employment of teacher librarians in government schools that as a result few training programs exist in our state. There are some online courses available but surely some practical experience is essential in any teacher training course.

If demand is created for teacher librarians then more people will undertake training!

Currently government primary school libraries are staffed by library officers who have not been required to undertake any formal training for their position whatsoever. In many cases these library officers are employed part-time which means that the school library is generally not utilised when they are not present. Without a teacher librarian and only a part-time library officer classes visiting the library generally come to exchange books and have very little opportunity to learn library skills.

Without a teacher librarian the time spent by most classes to ‘do a book change’ is 30 minutes per week – **larger class sizes means that**

individual students effectively get less of this time. For instance I currently have two year one classes of 28 and 29 students who struggle to get through a ‘book change’ in 30 minutes let alone learn anything about the library or the terrific new books we have purchased!

5. Role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians-

It is critical that data is collected on teacher librarian numbers, library budget levels and access to professional development opportunities.

Without such data we are ‘flying blind’ and no coordinated approach to the provision of school libraries that meet the needs of those using them is possible. Community libraries are enjoying wide patronage but are also under threat from state budget cuts.

6. Impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians- if students can read surely this

enhances their ability to find and understand what they need to research. **We have seen huge spending on computers in schools over recent years but little or no spending on trained teachers to implement the use of this technology. Teacher librarians are trained to integrate these technologies with printed media but if schools are not utilising these specialists then the students and classroom teachers are missing out on the opportunity to embrace these advances.** All too often I have seen classes being asked to 'Google' a topic by their teacher with little regard to the age-appropriateness of the material or to understanding what the content is – if they can 'copy and paste' onto a word document and print it out then that seems to suffice. Little regard is shown towards copyright, comprehending what is being researched or why. Students enjoy learning and being challenged in this field but this needs to be appropriately prepared by a qualified specialist teacher. Two years ago I offered a PD opportunity to library staff from nearby schools on 'New digital technologies in the library' and was amazed at what was demonstrated but sadly we have so little opportunity to use it without the presence of a specialist teacher!

Books will continue to exist in many formats, printed, e-books, CD Roms etc. Teacher librarians in collaboration with teachers will need to select, purchase, organise and guide access to books and information. Likewise teacher librarians and classroom teachers need access to PD that keeps them up to date with current advancements.

We urgently need to collect national data on all of the above points, rather than bumbling along on anecdotal information. The current picture is not a very positive one and the need to review this in order to prepare for appropriate future planning is critical.

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