



Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into School Libraries

Overview

This paper makes comment about each term of reference of the inquiry and represents my own views about school libraries. I have spoken with a number of teacher-librarians but I can in no way claim that the opinions shown here represent their views.

My main point is that the current learning functions of school libraries (information literacy and access to technologies for learning) are beginning to be provided in the learners' context in the classroom which liberates the library space and the teacher-librarian for changing roles. I attempt to outline the new roles which they might now play.

Terms of Reference (TOR)

Introduction

"To inquire into and report on the role, adequacy and resourcing of school libraries and teacher-librarians in Australia's public and private schools..."

In relation to school libraries:

- ***Role***
 - In many cases, the function/purpose statement for a school library mentions things related to spaces - to store resources; for people to engage in classes, private or group research; and somewhere for people to congregate when not engaged in other lunchtime activities.
 - The purpose is common across k-12 school libraries and not dissimilar to services which might be offered by a public or community library.
- ***Adequacy***
 - Adequacy can be measured against the stated purpose/function. If the stated purpose of the library is as outlined in the 'role' above, then adequacy is easily measured through supply and demand figures.
 - If the role of the school library was such that it placed learning expectations on its users, I suspect that 'adequacy' measures would be much more closely aligned with curriculum expectations and outcomes ie. how does the library contribute to learning outcomes? And these might be related less to cognitive outcomes and more related to process, social and emotional outcomes.
 - While learning expectations might be common across k-12 school libraries, they are not common in public or community libraries.
- ***Resourcing***
 - Resourcing should relate to the identified needs. If the needs relate to warehousing of resources and somewhere for students to go who may not fit into the social systems in play at lunchtimes, then a school library space, as such, is not necessary as these needs could well be met with other less expensive facilities.
 - However if the needs relate to providing spaces for learning which cannot happen anywhere else in the school due to the learning expectations, then the school library is a worthwhile resource eg. it provides a large enough area for many small groups

to operate with access to physical and virtual resources and with access to support teachers with the information services knowledge to help. This type of facility is generally not provided elsewhere in a school.

In relation to teacher-librarians:

- *Role*
 - It is interesting to note these Terms of Reference (TOR) seem to use the terms 'teacher-librarian', 'school librarian' and 'librarian' interchangeably. From a school perspective, these terms are not interchangeable as the terms denote quite different responsibilities – different needs will demand different qualifications and therefore different roles.
 - In many cases, the function/purpose statement for the staff of the school library relates to managing and accounting for resources including books, journals and technologies with some mention of information skills and literature.
 - These are common characteristics across k-12 staff in school libraries (information services skills, use of technologies for research purposes, reading/literature recommendations) allied with specific knowledge about age/content-appropriate reading materials which differentiate staff across primary and secondary schools. There are generally no learning expectations associated with public or community librarians.
- *Adequacy*
 - The 'adequacy' of library staff will be measured against the role which has been set.
 - If the role is one of management and accountability then there is no need for a teacher-librarian as this is an administrative task best performed by clerical staff.
 - If the role is one of curriculum leadership, information services and the use of technologies for research and data analysis, then there is a great need for a qualified teacher librarian who will have the skills and abilities to engage with colleagues and students in these areas.
 - This is not a role to be played by a 'librarian' or 'school librarian' who is not a qualified educator.
- *Resourcing*
 - Human resourcing will be measured against need.
 - School libraries which adopt a mainly administrative purpose will have staffing needs which can be met by library administrative staff. The tasks would include processing resources, cataloguing, covering/securing books and journals, loans management, copying materials within copyright provisions, and many other tasks.
 - Providing a teacher-librarian into a space will depend on the demand for curriculum leadership as outlined above and bring the value-added tasks of identifying appropriate resources, information skills of critique and deconstruction, and a coherent connection to curriculum outcomes.

TOR - Impact

"...the impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities"

Policy impact

Let me preface comments here by saying that the inertia of 'education' as a system precludes major change ever affecting it with Federal policy but short-term bumps in the road with little long-term impact on the nature of education as it rolls merrily forward.

NAPLAN and the My School website, by their very nature, focus the work of schools on particular types of literacy and numeracy – not the least of which is the literacy of deconstructing questions about literacy ie. the genre of examination papers. This has little to do with literacy and numeracy acquisition in the context of student-centred learning.

I believe that we need to value the professional skill and judgement of teachers rather than set artificial benchmarks around which teachers are expected to plan their teaching programs. This completely disregards the basic instructional design process as it sets the assessment first rather than identify needs first – which will be different for each learner. Teachers recognise this and feel disempowered as a result because their professional judgement is no longer seen as relevant given that it is replaced by policy and strategy outlines.

The role played by the staff of school libraries in critical literacy development has been affected by these policies with the NAPLAN-guided instructional designs for learning filtering through to libraries – the emphasis becomes that of basic literacy development rather than higher-order critique.

Investment impact

The two most relevant investments in schools have been the Digital Education Revolution (DER) and the Building Education Revolution (BER). These are seen as once-in-a-generation investments and gratefully received by schools.

The BER is clearly designed as an investment in infrastructure and jobs and apart from providing some primary schools with a new library building, there seems to have been little impact on actual library operations ie. the same functions are carried on in a new building.

The DER is a resource provision investment which correctly left the appropriate decisions around the learning impacts of the investment to the schools. Many school libraries have only had administrative impacts from this investment as they become the warehouse for the technologies and administer their borrowing to classes.

TOR - Future potential

“...the future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy...”

Historically, school libraries have been a consequence of general school designs which limited student movement to sitting at desks and chairs. The library was the one place in the school where this limitation was removed and which allowed students to select the space most appropriate for them to work, collaborate in groups, use technologies available nowhere else in the school, and to select resources to support their work. They were places where students could make decisions about their learning with the information services support of the teacher-librarian.

Modern classrooms are becoming learning spaces which are more inclusive of the designs for learning of the school library. The current learning functions of school libraries (information literacy and access to technologies for learning) are beginning to be provided in the learners’ context in the classroom which liberates the library space and the teacher-librarian for changing roles. What now for school libraries and teacher-librarians?

While the teacher-librarian performs a range of tasks in a school, the core purpose of the role should be to provide curriculum leadership in planning and information services (access, literacy, technology). The context of this leadership role in modern classrooms will have the teacher-librarian working closely with:

Curriculum –

At all levels of curriculum planning in the school (from classroom level to school development plan level), the teacher-librarian will collaborate with colleagues to support curriculum delivery through appropriate resource selection and assessment design. The design of assessment items is closely aligned with someone who is highly skilled in information services as assessment is merely a complex request for information.

Information –

With information being an integral part of modern life and requiring specific skills to make sense of it, the teacher-librarian will provide classroom support to teachers and students in the areas of information access, literacy and resource selection especially through expert database interrogation.

Technologies –

Technologies enable learning which is not possible without its use and teacher-librarians are well-placed to model, support and challenge its use in student learning. Students need to be able to select the most appropriate resource to support their learning and the purposeful use of technology can be very powerful.

Accountabilities –

Data and feedback provide curriculum planners with the evidence needed to ask the most appropriate questions for planning future learning. Teacher-librarians will be key partners with colleagues in designing, developing, implementing and reviewing data strategies which provide valid and reliable support for decision-making from classroom level to school development plan level.

A context such as this will place the teacher-librarian role as a key player in raising the level of educational outcomes.

How this role might work with the community is a yet-to-be-tested activity. I know of 3 schools in the ACT which have had school libraries purpose-built as school-and-community libraries eg. the building is next to an external gate to allow freely available access to the community. From discussions with library staff, it seems that this was the limit of planning around how the library might function for both the school and the community. Issues such as budgets (which funds are used to pay for the materials – Territory or school?), role of staff, purpose of the facility (educational or warehouse), duty of care, reading-age level of materials, and many, many more have only been worked out afterwards and only as an uneasy truce.

TOR – Recruit & Develop

“...the factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians...”

Factors which affect recruitment are the:

- perceived value and future of the position in schools; lack of an established career path
- same factors which affect all recruitment to the teaching profession eg. perceived low pay, dealing with student behavioural problems, bullying, being tied to taking holidays only in school holiday times.

Factors which affect development are the:

- use of the position for tasks (eg. providing relief for other teachers' absence) other than as a curriculum leader takes time that could be used for role upskilling.

- same factors which affect all development in the teaching profession eg. the cost (both in money and time in preparation) of providing relief for a teacher to have time away from class; lack of perceived relevance of most development on offer.

TOR – Partnerships

“...the role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians...”

This was alluded to above in ‘TOR Future Potential’.

- What is the purpose of such partnerships? ie. why would they happen? Is it to promote the ‘community outcomes’ in literacy? How would this work?
- Some schools already form academic partnerships on an *ad hoc* basis to suit particular needs eg. they use academic partners as critical friends in school projects.

TOR – Technologies

“...the impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians...”

Digital technologies have a enormous role to play as tools to support both the administrative (catalogue, RFID security and stock control) and learning (online databases for research) functions of a school library. While their support for administrative tasks is clear, their support for learning is not nearly so well documented or proven except in a rhetoric sense.

In its 25-30 year history of involvement and the billions of dollars that have been spent on it (devices, networking, training) in education, digital technology has made a less than successful impact on student learning outcomes. This is what Salomon describes as the ‘technology paradox’ which

“...results from the consistent tendency of the educational system to preserve itself and its practices by the assimilation of new technologies into existing instructional practices. Technology becomes ‘domesticated’ ...and fits the prevailing educational philosophy” (Salomon, G. 2000, “Its not just the tool but the educational rationale that counts”. Proceedings of EdMedia 2000, Montreal).

Without a concomitant change in syllabus and testing regimes, technology use has become ‘domesticated’ to serve purposes other than learning. Students can do things faster now (eg. access information **and** more of it) and represent information differently (video, audio) but it is still just information and they still need the literacy skills to use and apply it. The National Curriculum will make no difference to the domestication process as the administrative and learning demands it makes on schools and their learners are exactly the same as before.

If the potential role of the school library with a teacher librarian is one of providing high learning expectations and curriculum leadership, then the role of digital technologies is to allow types of learning to occur which are not possible without its use eg. ‘what-if?’ scenario design-development-exploration - the types of learning which are focused on creative innovation and evaluation of ideas rather than reproduction of existing knowledge for testing purposes.

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