

Federal Enquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians



Submission by Kerrie Griffith – Teacher Librarian, Nowra High School, NSW

Relevant details of person making submission

I am Kerrie Griffith, the Teacher Librarian (TL) at Nowra High School on the South Coast of NSW. I am also the president of the local TLs' group. I have been a trained TL for 33 years, since completing my BA Dip Ed in Teacher Librarianship at Macquarie University in 1977. I also have a Masters Degree in Education with a Major in Literacy, from Wollongong University. Since commencing work with the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), I have always been employed as a TL and have worked at Moss Vale High School, Richmond River High School in Lismore and for 30 years at Nowra High School, which has 1140 students and over 100 staff. The current library, a building on four levels, was opened in 1972.

Introduction

This submission will focus on the following key aspects in addressing the continuing need for trained and qualified Teacher Librarians and adequate resourcing of school libraries:

- a. Role of a Teacher Librarian,
- b. Role of a school library learning centre,
- c. Need for adequate resourcing including budget and staffing, and
- d. Impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the role of the TL and learning outcomes in a school.

Why Teacher Librarian, rather than a teacher, ancillary staff member, or a technician?

As a person with dual qualifications, TLs are a flexible resource, able to teach full classes, small groups of students and work with individuals, including students and teachers. Currently, ancillary staff members are NOT allowed to be responsible for students and in accordance with current regulations, the library should be closed if a TL or a teacher is not present.

Of all the staff in a school, the TL has an expansive overview of the curriculum as s/he liaises with teachers when they are organising assignments and assessment tasks, so is able to purchase appropriate resources, design web quests, research appropriate internet sites, gather together resources for a book box to be taken to the classroom, then actually assist students with their information gathering, ordering and completion of set tasks.

Often, Technicians are able to solve computer issues more quickly than a TL but they are not trained teachers, do not have knowledge of the curriculum, so should not have the responsibility of working closely with students on research tasks. In many primary and some secondary schools, the TL is actually the computer coordinator.

Why school libraries rather than computer rooms exclusively?

The development of dedicated internet connected computer facilities for students to research topics, rather than simply using computers for word processing, is an outstanding leap in education, but it does have some drawbacks. Students need to be taught to use the internet properly. While many enjoy “playing” on a computer, even in senior high school, many students have no idea how to narrow or expand a search. By senior high school, Wikipedia information, which often is inaccurate, is not academically rigorous enough for serious research. Some perfectly appropriate sites are blocked by the DET due to certain words in the title. Additionally, limited bandwidth and system crashes (that may take days to fix) make solely computer based teaching unreliable. When such crashes happen, the TL is often required to provide urgent support to teachers to reorganise their teaching program based upon other library resources. This would be a task clearly beyond the scope of a computer technician or ancillary staff member, or indeed most teachers who aren’t exposed to the school’s entire curriculum.

Students need to be made aware of the variety of resources available to them, their currency and authenticity. Reference and non-fiction material in a library has been especially selected to compliment the curriculum and is regularly culled by the TL, if it is no longer relevant.

While ebooks certainly are available, they are still not as prolific in the numbers that print or CDRoms are. Not everyone has eyesight that allows them to read an ebook from a small computer screen and books are certainly more portable than fixed computers. CD books can be loaded onto ipods so are extremely portable.

English teachers always set aside periods for wide reading with their classes and the library collection is extensively used. Many students do not have access to books at home. Wide reading does not only include fiction. Many boys, for example, prefer to read about cars, trucks and their sporting heroes, rather than read the latest edition in the Twilight saga.

Children’s Book Week is celebrated in my school and we participate in The Premier’s Reading Challenge as well as a Principal’s Reading Challenge. Each year I organise an author visit, sometimes in conjunction with other schools and/or the public library. As such, it is my professional opinion that libraries encourage reading and the development of literacy skills, rather than a “Google” approach to completing assessment tasks and potential time wasting on computers. A student with a book, even a non-curriculum related book, is honing his/her reading/literacy skills simply by the act of reading.

In the 30 years I have worked at Nowra High School, the use of print media in the library has not diminished significantly since the introduction of other research and teaching resources, although there have been changes in the variety of items borrowed. The borrowing rate is similar, despite the burgeoning availability of computers. This is a theme that appears quite consistent with public library usage.

The library is also frequently seen as a refuge during breaks for students who want to read quietly or play chess (I am in charge of the school’s chess team as well as the tennis teams). As more and more students with learning disabilities and Asperger’s Syndrome attend regular public schools, the library has come to be a place of safety

for these students who cannot cope with crowds. Additionally, students with behavioural and emotional issues also come to the library for 'Time Out' sessions.

Major changes in library use over the past 10 years.

When I commenced my working life as a TL the focus of school libraries was print - books and journals, managed through card catalogues. This has changed significantly and with it, the role of the TL has expanded considerably. The TL is now in effect the school's information resource manager and is responsible for managing:

- a. The school's holding of print resources, including:
 - i. Cataloguing assets,
 - ii. Electronic security of printed resources (and other holdings),
 - iii. The currency and continued relevance of resources,
 - iv. Material condition and replacement, and
 - v. Purchase of new publications in a variety of formats.
- b. The school's computer laboratory (which in many cases is exclusively located in the library or is one of several computer rooms);
- c. Other educational electronic media, such as television recording; and
- d. The library budget (larger than most faculties).

Additionally, the TL teaches students research skills and the use of available resources. This isn't new, but the scope is much broader than it was even 10 years ago. The TL also provides this service to the staff, in effect becoming the school's Subject Matter Expert (SME) on research techniques and information resources.

To expand on the above, much changed in the 1970s and early 1980s with the introduction of specific TL training courses at university level and in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when DET schools were given the OASIS system as the library catalogue and the system for storing student data. Most resources in libraries were in print form but some multimedia was available in the form of cassette tapes, 16mm film, video tapes, etc. Now we use CDs, DVDs, online resources and print media. Additionally, talking books are used to assist students with poor literacy skills. Nowra High School also uses ClickView, a digital media system for recording programs from free to air television. This is expensive but many programs across all subject areas are available with accompanying worksheets. Students are able to access the programs and worksheets in their own time, particularly if they miss a lesson. Also, teachers are able to design their own worksheets to accompany lessons and download them onto the system.

Resources in school libraries are still need to be catalogued to enable ease of access, even if the SCIS (Schools Cataloguing Information Service) is used rather than individual cataloguing of every resource. Even so, some resources still require individual cataloguing, or else in NSW, have to be sent to Ryde to the SCIS team. The latter is not convenient if the resource is required urgently.

Students still need to be taught to use library enquiry terminals properly. This stands them in good stead when using the public library and later, university and TAFE libraries. This is a job for the TL as too often, staff are time poor and have as much difficulty fathoming the most effective way to use library resources as do students.

Methods of education have changed with students able to study by Pathways, enabling them to take longer to complete the HSC. Some students study particular subjects, often languages not taught in their school, by correspondence and they are usually placed under the supervision of the TL and work in the library. With students now being required to remain at school or in some form of education until age 17, the expected outcome is that they will stay on until Year 12 and complete the HSC or a Life Skills course. Schools and TLs have had to adapt to these situations, providing a welcoming library atmosphere, appropriate learning spaces and the resources to compliment all ranges of study options from classes working with the teacher and TL, to small group work spaces and individual carrels for private study.

The Nowra High School library has recently been air-conditioned. This was vital as it now includes banks of computers that emit extra heat, which can make the environment in summer less than conducive to effective learning. This is an issue that needs to be factored into the broader use of computer terminals in schools.

Resources

Resourcing any school library is an expensive activity. The Nowra High School library has some resources (in particular older history and art resources that are still used but are out of print) that were first purchased when the school commenced in 1955. The inventory has been updated regularly, and while routine stocktakes do not provide specific inventory valuations, the replacement cost of the printed media alone is estimated to be well in excess of \$750,000.

Additionally, the library manages equipment, such as laptops, data projectors and digital cameras, as well as other research/teaching media. Accordingly, the assets that I manage are valued (in replacement terms) at considerably in excess of \$1m. Failing to have a properly trained and focused staff member managing such resources could lead to a rapid deterioration of the asset base and a consequent reduction in the educational capability of the library facility.

Information is rarely available gratis, so TLs are adept at accessing data bases through membership of the public library and/or state library, which is free. Other resources including interlibrary loans need to be paid for even if booksellers and agents offer time payment options.

Unfortunately, the staffing of school libraries seems to be shrinking. Originally, with a student population of 1300 in the late 1970s/early 1980s, Nowra High had two TLs and three ancillary staff. Now, with a student population of 1140, the school has one TL and 1.5 ancillary staff. Many primary school libraries have no ancillary assistance at all, unless a volunteer parent is available. Volunteers also take up valuable time in a TL's day, as they need to be trained and really should not be allowed to do any task with students other than loaning and returning resources. Sometimes they simply put protective covers on print resources. Too often, libraries are seen as a soft target to strip personnel resources from and I have first hand experience of this issue.

Unfortunately, many well qualified TLs have to move out of their library positions in order to rise up the promotion scale, unless they become Head Teachers, Welfare or Administration. Teacher librarians often have bigger budgets than most faculties in the school, as well as clerical staff to supervise, yet they are not Head Teachers in their own right. I report directly to the Principal and am the convenor of the Finance Committee.

What are the specific skills of the professional TL?

I am extremely conscious of the need for professional reading and attending conferences and courses to keep abreast of current trends in teacher librarianship. In 2009 and 2010, James Henri, who established the teacher librarianship course at Charles Sturt University, has worked with local teacher librarians and executive staff from their schools on both theoretical and practical projects at Nowra High and at the local Catholic high school, St John the Evangelist High School. I have also attended ASLA (Australian School Library Association) conferences in every state and territory of Australia. I am a member of ASLA(NSW) and the Children's Book Council of Australia. I attend State Library Day, held in February each year and professional development days at Wollongong Schools organised by ISLA (Illawarra School Library Association).

I seek to maintain the highest level of professionalism in my chosen profession, in order to support education. Membership of the professional organisations and training as indicated above ensures that I remain abreast of the latest developments in library (information resource) procedures and technology. I am unconvinced that a non-specialist TL would be dedicated to such activity. As such, the services provided by school libraries could be expected to diminish over time without specialist management.

The specific skills that an appropriately trained and qualified TL provides his/her school are:

- a. Educating students in using library/research resources,
- b. Selection and management of information resources (ie school assets),
- c. Acting as the SME on educational research aids/methodology and applicable media for both students and staff,
- d. Providing assistance to teachers in organising assignments and assessment tasks through specific knowledge of the curriculum, and
- e. Management and coordination of library staff and volunteers, including student helpers.

To effectively fulfil the whole range of expected duties as above, the professional TL should be trained in:

- a. Library techniques and processes that enable the school to maintain a consistency with other libraries in the education system and public domain,
- b. Asset management and purchasing,
- c. Teaching and working with children and the school community, and
- d. Maintenance and enhancement of professional expertise through membership of professional associations and attendance at or organisation of courses.

Conclusion

There appears to be broad misconceptions, from DET level down, about what libraries and TLs actually do. I believe that many are still reflecting on their school days of up to 40 years ago where they have memories of places containing dusty books, with a female librarian in a twin set, demanding absolute silence. Today's school library cannot be further removed from this perception. School libraries are vibrant places

with a huge range of resources, focused on educating our students to become lifelong learners, not simply to pass the HSC. Libraries provide a safe and caring environment where all students regardless of ability, diversity, disadvantage or disability reach their highest potential through active participation in positive, enriching learning experiences.

TLs are and have to be flexible by virtue of the nature of their position. They teach a wide age group of students with differing abilities, while trying to provide timely and adequate resourcing, with a finite budget to suit the learning needs of the school and national curricula. They seek to create an information literate school community and students who will become lifelong learners. They do not operate alone but in collaboration with the school staff.

School libraries need to have adequate staffing, adequate funding and there needs to be an awareness by all parties of what the library and library staff can do to enhance their learning experience. As such, the support of the school executive staff is vital.

As a professional, the TL must stay current with relevant skills and qualifications, both through the use of the school's professional learning funds as well as personally paying for memberships. The huge advances in technology have shown the vital importance of the TL's role as a professional, assisting students and teachers with web quests, in the use of web 2.0, online book raps, the use of blogs and so much more. In many schools, the TL is also the computer coordinator, as previously stated.

School libraries need trained TLs, not simply someone to sort out computer issues or to loan and return resources. In this age of rapid technological advancement, there is still a place for print media but no library exclusively has books alone on the shelves. Talking books, DVDs, laptops and fixed computers for client use are also available. This also requires a reasonable funding stream and management by a professionally trained TL.

The TL manages significant resources and failure to provide appropriately trained and qualified personnel to fulfil the roles and responsibilities of the TL will result in a deterioration of the material state and currency/relevance of assets, a loss of services to teachers and students and overall a significant loss in the educational capability of the school.

The title Teacher Librarian may be somewhat out of place in the modern school library, where the TL is in effect both a teacher and the school's information resource manager. Even the word *library* could use an update for the 21st century to reflect what occurs within its walls and with the multitude of resources and options available to clients.

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