

Date Received: 13/4/2010



Secretary
House Standing Committee on Education and Training
Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian Schools

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13 April 2010

Dear Sir/Madam,

I wish to add my comments and observations to the current inquiry into school libraries particular in relation to Point 2 – *the future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy*.

I am a professional teacher librarian currently working in a Catholic girls secondary College located in the north western suburbs of Melbourne. I am now in my eighth year of teaching at this school and so I feel I am well qualified to provide insight into the benefits that professional teacher librarians bring to a school community.

There is much evidence available to show that active professional teacher librarians working within the school greatly improve educational outcomes for students. It is not my intention to repeat these reports. Rather in the following paragraphs I wish to outline what I as a professional teacher librarian have been able to achieve within my school community. These comments and observations are personal and anecdotal, and come from one who has worked in libraries for 28 years and school libraries in particular for 11 years. I therefore feel I am well qualified to make these comments.

At my college, my colleague and I in the library run a literature programme at Years 7, 8 and 9. The programme has a formal structure and all students are required to read a set number of books. Through the implementation of this Literature Programme I am proud to say that we have developed a culture of reading at the college which encourages the girls to read for pleasure.

Students benefit greatly from reading widely. This is a fact which cannot be disputed and has been proven in countless studies and reports. Again it is not my intention to repeat these studies. I do however wish to elaborate on the conditions which have brought about what I like to call "the culture of reading" at my college. This is a culture which means that reading novels is so widely accepted by the student body, that to NOT read is seen to be "uncool".

The "culture of reading" has taken many years to develop and much work to maintain. Some of the key factors in building this culture are (in no particular order):

- Trained professional and para-professional staff in the library
- Supportive teachers in key areas of the school especially English department
- Support from the Principal and school leaders
- Sufficient economic resources to purchase and build an up to date collection
- A comfortable and inviting library space to read in

- Up to date library management system

Trained professional teacher librarians and para-professional staff in the library

Teacher librarians as teachers are trained to work with students, to understand how they learn and how best to manage their learning. As librarians, they also know their library collection and their clients well and so can recommend the right book at the right time to a student.

Over the years I have observed many students starting out in Year 7 telling me they “hate reading”. However, as they must read 12 books Year 7 as part of the college’s structured Literature Programme, they get to choose books they like. Even the most reluctant student can be persuaded to read the right book. This often leads them to come back and ask for another book like the one they just enjoyed. I have observed that students are often not poor readers, but poor choosers of books to read. Given the right book they can switch on to reading.

Students who are already confident readers need encouragement to extend themselves and try a different genre. For this they need help from professionals who know young adult literature and what young adults like to read.

Another important aspect of the culture of reading is the support of trained para professionals in the library. At my college the teacher librarians are ably supported by library technicians who assist by cataloguing and organising the collection. Without their assistance much of the teacher librarian’s time would be taken up with the technical aspects of library work, leaving little time to spend with the students.

Supportive teachers in key areas of the school especially English department

A culture of reading cannot come from the library alone. It must have the support of teachers throughout the school especially the English department. At my college the Literature Programme takes place once a timetable cycle in an English period. It is important that these teachers are willing to support the programme as they must “give up” one period for the Literature Programme. In this respect a teacher librarian is trained to work closely with teachers to implement the programmes. Teacher librarians act as a central point for the programme.

Support from the Principal and school leaders

No programme can be implemented in any school without the full support of the leaders of the school. At my college we are very fortunate to have that support.

Sufficient economic resources to purchase and build an up to date collection

It is useless trying to get young adults to read out of date books. They need an up to date collection to entice them to read. A sound annual budget is needed to develop and maintain a current collection. Books have a life of about five to eight years, and sometimes must be replaced more frequently. As a teacher librarian I spend hours reading catalogues and reviews, and even longer reading teenage fiction. This allows me to select books with my students in mind.

At my college, we also encourage students to recommend books for purchase, and often rely on students to tell us when the next of a series is available. This gives them “ownership” of the collection.

However, selection of the books is only the first step. They must be ordered from a reliable bookseller, and then processed by library support staff so that students can read them. Without sufficient staffing in the “back room” to support a literature programme, students can become disheartened at not getting new books. It is essential that a trained professional teacher librarian manages all these processes.

A comfortable and inviting library space to read in

Students need a comfortable and inviting place to read. At my college we are very fortunate in having a modern library space with plenty of room for the collection and spaces for students to read and study. As a teacher librarian I know the importance of “marketing” books and regularly change book displays.

Up to date library management system

An aspect that could be overlooked is the importance of the catalogue and circulation system to the culture of reading. At my college the students have become very sophisticated in their use of the library catalogue. They can check if a book is available, if it is on the shelf or when it is due back. This gives them a sense of control in their approach to finding a book. We also assist students by placing books on reserve and letting them know when new books will become available for borrowing.

As a professional teacher librarian I ensure that the circulation and catalogue systems are up to date and displaying accurate information to the students.

The Literature Programme at my college is very successful in introducing students to the pleasure of reading. Girls come to the library at lunchtime and recommend books to each other. They look forward to new books arriving, and enthusiastically borrow dozens of books to read over the holidays.

Conclusion

In this submission I have outlined the Literature Programme at my college. I have outlined the crucial role that professional teacher librarians play in developing the Literature Programme and the “culture of reading” at my college.

Yours sincerely,

Gabrielle Douglas