INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND TEACHER LIBRARIANS IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

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Author & Parent

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

I am submitting from an author and parent's point of view so I can only go on personal observations.

From what I have seen, cuts to staffing and funding for school libraries have had a detrimental effect on children with a wide range of reading skills.

My youngest son, in grade 6 is an extremely good reader however, he has barely read a book from the school library for at least three years. The reasons for this are:

1.   Lack of variety, lack of books to appeal to him.

2.   Lack of a trained teacher librarian to assist him in actually selecting a book that would be of interest to him. He is told he has to borrow a book, so he just plucks any one from the shelf and then doesn't read it because it is of no interest to him.

Fortunately, the reverse happens in our public library where the librarian takes him around the shelves and introduces him to new authors and new books that suit his interests and reading abilities, and he devours them hungrily. But what would have happened to him if his parents weren't enthusiastic readers and the public library didn't have a children's librarian with extensive knowledge of current books, and an understanding of boy readers?

My eldest son, in Year 8 at high school had exactly the same problem at primary school. His concerns since he went to high school are that there are not enough non-fiction books.

He is extremely competent with computers and loves to spend time on them, but he is also passionate about books and concerned about the dwindling number of them in libraries. In fact he said to me the other day that if there is one thing he could change about his school, it would be "more books and less computers".

I wonder if our policy makers are making assumptions about the people the policies are being created for. Perhaps we should ask our kids and teachers what is really needed – what they want for their school libraries.

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

To foster literacy and improved educational and community outcomes, we need our kids to read more – not turn them off reading because of the poor availability of books or people to help them with their reading selections.

School libraries have a vital role to play in improving literacy skills and consequently, a persons ability to function as an adult with in their community.

To do this however, they need teacher-librarians, people who know and love books and can enthusiastically encourage young readers.

Kids also need variety in the reading materials available to them.

School libraries need funding to allow them to bring authors and illustrators into the school and help enthuse kids about reading.

As an author who visits and presents at schools, I can verify that meeting a writer or illustrator and talking about their works is an inspirational experience for children.

My visits aren't just about how to write, they also include talks to book clubs about how I work and what my books are about, and how to understand books. How to read books as much as how to write them.

Book clubs – groups of kids meeting at lunch times to talk about books – is a fantastic way to inspire reading. These clubs don't work as well however, without a teacher/librarian to run them, and a room full of books to talk about.

the factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians;

Not having worked in a library, I can only comment on my observations as an author, reader and parent and I would have to say that funds available seem to have a huge impact on this issue.

Schools without the funds don't have school librarians, or an adequate selection of books for young readers to choose from.

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

Involving local communities in school libraries is a good way of giving them ownership; making them care about the libraries and contribute both financially and otherwise.

The schools with the best libraries seem to have the most funding support and are also obviously valued by their local communities.

Some visiting artists/authors are funded through arts bodies and this is great, but there is not enough of this available.

I recently did author visits to 10 schools through the State Library of Queensland.

300 children from grades 5 to 10 attended my sessions however, the library reported that they could have filled sessions for 1300 students.

Obviously, there is a great deal of interest from schools in being involved in author visits. In this instance, the library was funding the entire thing so the schools only had to meet the cost of the bus fares. This meant that kids from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds had access to an enriching literary experience that they may not have been otherwise able to afford.

I'm wondering if there should be collaboration between bodies like the school library associations, the Australian Society of Authors and government funding bodies to try and bring more of these sort of opportunities to school libraries.

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

Kids love computers, and those with learning difficulties seem to find them easier to learn on.

With the advent of digital books it's vital that libraries and librarians keep up with these developments and that kids have the opportunities to experience them.

However, getting rid of huge quantities of books to make room for computer labs isn't the answer either. The two need to co-exist; to meet the needs of the range of children who read and inhabit libraries.

I know that my computer savvy children aged 11 and 14 still like to curl up in a chair with a good book and inhabit a fantastical world beyond their imagination.

They also like to delve into history and step into the lives of others through books.

This is an experience that school libraries and librarians can provide, but computer banks can't.