



INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND TEACHER LIBRARIANS IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

Submission by Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA)



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The vision of Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) is 'Better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia'. The focus of its advocacy towards the achievement of that vision is Australia's public library system. This is on behalf of the 12 million users of that system, and the 2.5 million disadvantaged Australians of all ages who research¹ has identified would benefit from using public libraries if they were better known and more accessible to them.

About one third of those public library users are preschoolers, students and home schooled children. In advocating for their interests, FOLA recognizes the complementary action required between schools and public libraries if young Australians are to develop as literate, information enabled and critical-thinking citizens in a 21st century characterized by 'infoglut'.

This submission therefore responds particularly to the fourth term of reference of the inquiry, about partnerships with school libraries.

Submission summary

The highly complementary relationship of schools and public libraries was emphasised in the first full, and seminal, review of libraries for children in Australia. This was undertaken in 1964 by US Professor and Fullbright Lecturer Sara Fenwick. She found that many schools lacked a proper library; few qualified teacher librarians were available; many parts of Australia had no local public library; and few public libraries met well the needs of children and students. Fenwick asserted

Both school and public library will be responsible for learning that will span lifetimes, and the education of children ...there must be continuous planning, especially of schools and public libraries, for this challenging common endeavour.²

To help assess the responses by schools and public libraries to that 'challenging common endeavour', FOLA's 2006 annual Report to the Nation was *Supporting students: the educational contribution of Australia's public libraries*.³ It, and subsequent FOLA research for its 2007 Report to the Nation *Looking ever forward: Australia's public libraries serving children and young people*,⁴ identified that

- as part of their 'cradle to grave' remit, public libraries are increasingly involved in promoting and supporting early childhood literacy development before children enter school.
- they provide a growing range of support for school students and home schooled students, including homework centres and services, a major example of which is the YourTutor⁵ online realtime tutoring service in core curriculum subjects. This service is also available through numerous private schools, but rarely through public schools.
- there are substantial examples of cooperation between schools and public libraries, an internationally recognised example of which is between the Mackay West State School and Mackay Public Libraries in Queensland.⁶
- the barriers identified by public libraries to greater cooperation with schools include
 - schools not interested in cooperation
 - frequent changes of school personnel, including teacher librarians
 - primary schools, in particular, with no teacher librarians
 - schools not advising potential demands on public libraries by their students

- teachers unaware of the roles and particularly the electronic resources of modern public libraries
- poor information skills of students
- poor discrimination by students and parents in internet use
- poor reading ability of students, especially boys.

The main conclusions to be drawn from the 2006 FOLA survey and other sources are that

- 1 From the 1968 investment by the Menzies government in school libraries, Australia, together with Canada and many parts of the US, became beacons of enlightenment in investing in school libraries and teacher librarians for educational change. Those beacons are now dulled because of reduced investment in them, despite the international research showing the return on investment in school libraries and teacher librarians. This reduced investment has occurred at the very time that an emphasis on literacy, reader development, and major changes in pedagogies, information access and availability – and issues such as plagiarism and cyberbullying – have indicated a need for more teacher librarians; better education and support for them; and better resourced libraries.
- 2 The universities appear to have not been engaging well with the state and territory education bureaucracies to identify, question and stimulate their need for teacher librarians. This is despite progressive universities themselves increasingly valuing the importance of their own libraries and academic librarians in partnering their teaching staff in a rapidly changing learning, information literacy and technological context. Anecdotally, there is at least one instance of a university eliminating its teacher librarian education programs because of a perception that there was no demand for teacher librarians by its state education department. This perception derived from that state education department appointing nonqualified personnel to its libraries – appointments made necessary, however, because of the lack of qualified teacher librarian applicants. No conversation between the university and that state department had occurred, in part because there was no departmental entity left to usefully engage in that conversation.
- 3 An independent national audit of school library resourcing and staffing realities and needs in both the public and private sectors should be undertaken. There is prima facie a need for more investment in refreshed bookstocks – rather than just IT – and in teacher librarians and better professional development opportunities for them. There is a concomitant need to ensure that schools employ more paraprofessional library technicians to ensure that teacher librarians do not have their time usurped by library collection management, administration, operational and technology support requirements – as well as by school administration expectations of their substitution for absent classroom teachers. The capacity of the TAFE system to educate more library technicians should therefore be reviewed at the same time as an evaluation of the capacity of universities to educate more teacher librarians in part response to the numbers of them reaching retirement.
- 4 If Australia’s public library system – which since March 2008 has been accessible to almost 100% of its population – is to work better in its ‘challenging common endeavour’ with schools, it too requires national review because of its severe inequities,⁷ and effectively declining poor investment by the states and territories in particular. An important part of that review would be to identify
 - the need across the system for more public library children’s, young adult and outreach librarians to work with schools through their teacher librarians in maximising reading, information literacy, learning and digital opportunities for all Australian children.
 - the national scope for more school based joint use libraries between schools and public libraries led by committed teacher librarians, especially in currently disadvantaged lower population rural areas.

Submission commentary

Educational change and the role of the teacher librarian

Education, like democracy, means different things to different cultures and religions. Nonetheless, in all forms of education there is a simple divide. As Ilich and Freire concluded, it is never neutral. Education's purpose is to either domesticate or liberate. It domesticates where knowledge is deposited into learners and where the relationship between educators and learners is that of subject to object. This is not consonant with thinking as the analysis of information, and the development of people able to challenge lazy assumptions, something which is critical to the democratic ideal. The fundamental issue for schools is how do they develop young people able to explore complex issues by generating webs of questions, to find what Michael Leunig calls 'the difficult truth'. This is where a true national Education Revolution should be heading and investing.

The foreword to a 2004 Australian book on information literacy – an area in which Australia is an acknowledged world leader due to the leadership of teacher librarians, academic librarians and educators such as Professor Phillip Candy and Professor Christine Bruce – reflects well on the issues

Business needs people with imagination and vision. And government needs people who can analyse problems and dream up solutions...Plutarch said that the mind was a fire to be sparked, not a vessel to be filled, and every educator I've met agrees with him. But how many of us are actually sparking fires and how many are just filling vessels?

...part of the problem is that, as a society, we're not really sure what we expect education to achieve...Which makes you wonder: how can we evaluate something if we don't know what it's supposed to do?

It's as though our schools and libraries have been part of a massive yet aimless experiment, a meandering stumble of trial and error driven by political agendas that seem to respond more to public whim than to scientific method. We've learned more about the mind and brain in the last 20 years than in the previous 20 centuries yet few educators seem aware of such discoveries, as they are mired in the assumptions and methodologies of an earlier era.⁸

In this context, teacher librarians as catalysts for educational change assume particular importance. They have the key 'partner in learning' role in working with and advising classroom teachers on resource based learning, learning objects, pedagogies and curricula to foster literate, information literate, independent and questioning learners.

In part this is because, unlike too many shallow-thinking decision makers and educators – and the unquestioning media – they understand that digital equity and one pc for every student *does not* mean information equity. They recognise, as do public, academic and other librarians, that the divide is between those who have the attitudes, understandings and learning capabilities to contribute effectively to society, and learn for life, and those who do not – and that this constitutes the *information literacy divide*, to which the rapidly declining digital divide is just one contributor.

Derived from this understanding there has been considerable international and Australian research on the educational return on investment which effective teacher librarians and well resourced school libraries provide.

Despite this, for about the last 15 years there has been an insidious decline in public education investment in school libraries; greatly reduced educational programs for teacher librarians in universities; greatly reduced advisory and staff development support for teacher librarians; and generally poorer resourcing and staffing of school libraries. To what extent this has occurred is likely unknown, or will not be revealed, by the culpable state and territory educational bureaucracies.

Supporting students: the educational contribution of Australia's public libraries

In 2006 the Friends of Libraries Australia annual Report to the Nation was entitled *Supporting students: the educational contribution of Australia's public libraries*.⁹ This Report and its recommendations were sent to

all federal and state/territory government educational ministers and departments, with muted responses from them.

Supporting students focused, by surveying the Australian public library system, on the extent to which students in formal education, particularly in schools, had recourse to the services and resources of public libraries from preference because of poor provision within their schools, or lack of home resources and support.

It concluded that

Since 2001 there has been resource, electronic, program and very limited staffing improvement in the capacity of public libraries to support the needs of students of all types.

At the same time there have been further indications of a reduced commitment by state/territory education departments to school libraries well resourced with print and electronic resources, led by qualified teacher librarians working with classroom teachers to foster resource based learning and reading literate and information literate students.

Self managing schools have also led to local shortsighted decisions about the role, resourcing and staffing of school libraries. A politically driven emphasis of, by international comparison, a very high investment in IT in Australia, has also wasted public funds and tended to usurp the time of teacher librarians for network management, rather than working with classroom teachers. Too often lack of funds has inhibited investment in updating and broadening book and other print collections in secondary school libraries, providing no encouragement for students to read more and read more widely.

No state/territory education department can readily say how many qualified teacher librarians it employs, what the shortfalls are and what is its total investment in school libraries. This has impacted on the government school systems which are still responsible for the education of the majority of Australian children. It is salutary that at the same time as the overall neglect of school libraries in those systems, schools in the independent sector are using their investment in new and well resourced libraries as part of their marketing to parents.

Although the Australian government school library situation is in need of national and state review and reinvestment, it has not yet generally reached the level of neglect which prompted a major review and outcry in Canada in 2003, and major concerns about school libraries in US states such as California. This resulted in 2002 US\$250million voted by the US Congress as dedicated funding for school libraries following a mounting body of research showing a compelling link between student achievement and well-resourced and staffed school libraries.

Nonetheless the warning signs have been there for some time that Australian government schools in particular are often not supporting the needs of their students and teachers well. This is also true of some TAFE colleges: of small private education providers which may provide no libraries at all and tell their often international students to use public and other libraries; and even universities in their support of their distance education students.

Those warning signs were communicated in the 2003 Lonsdale report by the Australian Council for Educational Research which reviewed the substantial research on the impact of school libraries on student achievement, but there is no indication that any state/territory department has assessed the report's findings and commenced a reinvestment in school libraries as central to the educational process. This is an issue which should concern both the Australian government and the states and territories.

Cooperation between schools and public libraries

The first full review of libraries for children in Australia was undertaken in 1964 by US Professor and Fulbright lecturer Sara Fenwick. This was published in 1966 as *School and children's libraries in Australia*¹⁰ at a time when many schools lacked a library; very few qualified teacher librarians were available; and many parts of Australia still lacked a local public library, or a public library paying much attention to the needs of children and students. Fenwick's report was to have an enduring impact on school libraries and teacher librarian development in Australia, and to a lesser degree on public libraries and children's librarian development.

The Menzies government proved to be receptive from 1968 to investing in a national school libraries program, but not in investing in public libraries as the educational complement of school libraries. These were to remain the responsibility of just state/territory governments, in partnership with local government. Those states/territories are now all demonstrably failing in that responsibility, with NSW still the worst.

In the section of her report *Cooperation between school and children's libraries* Fenwick stated that

Both school and public library will be responsible for learning that will span lifetimes, and the education of children will be only the beginning...there must be continuous planning, especially of schools and public libraries, for this challenging common endeavour.

Joint use school based school / public libraries

Unlike for example Denmark, in Australia there is no requirement for schools and public libraries to cooperate. Nonetheless, usually between public schools and public libraries, there are examples of meaningful cooperation, the most formal of which are joint use school based public libraries usually led by teacher librarians, and typically in smaller country towns of up to 3,000 population.

The highest number of these generally successful school community libraries, which are beneficial for both those smaller schools and communities, is in South Australia which from 1977 to 1991 developed about 50 of them on the back of the federal investment in new school library buildings. This represents about 40% of the State's public libraries, together with Sweden the highest percentage in the world. The number of these joint use libraries is increasing worldwide, for example in Spain which has just invested in a pilot program of such libraries. There are up to 600 smaller rural communities in Australia, with high or area school libraries but no static or professionally staffed public library, with the potential to have similar libraries – subject to political will and directive; strong and unequivocal state/territory education department support; and the availability of committed teacher librarians to lead them.

At a less formal level, the 2006 FOLA survey found numerous examples of cooperation between schools and public libraries, an outstanding one of which is that between the Mackay West State School and Mackay Public Libraries in Queensland. This award winning and internationally recognised program *Productive partnerships: Learning for Life*¹¹ would not have been possible without the initiative and work of the school's teacher librarian and her principal's support. Public libraries, schools, TAFE and the University of SA are also working closely together in the northern suburbs of Adelaide to address social and educational disadvantage, and improve early childhood and parental literacy.

Public libraries have always assisted students and teachers, and more public libraries are now providing access to a wide range of electronic resources and online realtime tutoring in core curriculum subjects. This service, YourTutor,¹² is now available through a number of public libraries nationwide. It enables any library member to connect with a tutor by using their library card to login, from their library or from home. A growing number of private schools subscribe to this service, but few public schools do so. For example the YourTutor service in Western Sydney is a partnership to help disadvantaged school students, often from a multicultural background, between public libraries and the University of Western Sydney. There is no apparent support provided by the State's own Education Department.

For public school students their only access to YourTutor is therefore likely to be through their local public library. The service enables any library member to connect with a tutor by using their library card to log in from the library or from home.

Noteworthy from the 2006 FOLA survey responses was the extent to which, with often limited and short term funding, public libraries were trying to meet a student homework and study support need not met by their own schools, which usually close their libraries in the middle of the afternoon when teaching finishes, and during school holidays. Australian public libraries are perforce slowly following the international trend and providing homework centres, especially in areas of economic and social disadvantage where home support and study conditions for children are poor. The City of Auckland with NZ government support, for example, has initiated such centres to help children in its large Maori and Polynesian populations who are disadvantaged by poor and crowded home study conditions.

Most local authorities in the UK now have at least one such centre in their public library systems, and the UK government is requiring them to provide more. A study of them reported that structured study support in public libraries works well. Beyond their educational role, they ease the transition from primary to secondary education, help young people assert their individuality, and provide support and pastoral care not always available in the home or school. The key characteristics of these 'student help centres' are welcoming and

attractive accommodation, electronic access, trained librarians and preferably trained teachers to assist the students.

Among the barriers to improving cooperation with schools and support for their students specified in responses to the 2006 FOLA survey of public libraries were

- schools not responsive/cooperative/interested
- failure by schools/teachers to advise potential demands by students
- primary schools with no libraries/qualified teacher librarians
- poor information skills of students
- teachers unaware of the roles and resources of modern public libraries
- poor discrimination by students/parents in internet use
- poor reading ability of students, especially boys.

All of those issues reflect poor focus or investment by state/territory education departments and schools in their libraries and their teacher librarians.

They also highlight that investigation into the capacity of the Australian public library system to work effectively with schools, parents and caregivers in the education of young people is now also needed, as a critical aspect of a comprehensive national inquiry into its roles, capacities and funding. The 2007 FOLA Report to the Nation *Looking ever forward: Australia's public libraries serving children and young people*¹³ adds substance to the reasons, and need, for that national inquiry.

The reading and information literacy development of young people – essential for their lifelong learning – is the core, complementary and partnership business of Australia's school and public library systems.

To commence the needed reinvestment in the one system without considering the investment needs of the other would be as unproductive educationally as building new school libraries without ensuring their proper staffing and funding.

References

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