



Patricia Mack

SUBMISSION ON INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL  
LIBRARIES AND TEACHER LIBRARIANS IN  
AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

*Terms of reference addressed:*

*The future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy.*

Terms of reference addressed in this submission:

*The future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy.*

## Summary

Teacher librarians could greatly enhance their contribution to literacy within schools if their role in this regard was formalised by way of a “literacy” syllabus.

Unlike other teaching and learning areas, the NSW Board of Studies and the NSW Department of Education do not provide a syllabus, or even guidelines, as what teacher librarians should teach. As it stands now, the amount a teacher librarian contributes to their school is dependent upon their ability (and inclination) to “sell” their services to the school principal, the school executive and individual teachers. The result is a widely inconsistent contribution from teacher librarians, both within schools and between different schools.

In order to overcome this problem, teacher librarians need a syllabus which incorporates all aspects of literacy. Such a syllabus would, ideally, cover from K to 12 and should specify the number of hours to be allocated to the study per year group. Ideally, the definition of “literacy” would incorporate not only reading and information literacy (including digital technologies), but also the literacy of learning, i.e. learning how to learn.

How students acquire knowledge has changed from a teacher centred instructive approach to a student centred enquiry approach. I do not believe that the majority of students have sufficient skills to maximise their learning under this approach. I believe they need to be shown what information is available, how to find it and what to do with it when they do find it. Underpinning these skills is strong reading literacy. Developing reading, information and learning literacy skills is what teacher / librarians are trained to do. Without a syllabus to allow for formalised student access, however, teacher / librarians are not given the opportunity to give students the tools they need to become fully literate learners. In my opinion, in the current situation, neither the students, the teacher librarians, nor libraries are approaching their potential.

## My Background

I have been a teacher librarian in both a primary and high school. I have been at Dulwich High of Visual Arts and Design, Dulwich Hill, for the last three years. Prior to this I was at Canley Heights Public school for five years as a teacher / librarian. Both of these schools are NSW Dept. of Education schools.

I am qualified as an English/History teacher as well as a teacher/librarian. I hold a Masters Degree in Education (teacher/librarian).

## Primary School Experiences

At Canley Heights Public School, I was fortunate enough to teach under the “old” model. It was up to the Principal’s discretion as to whether or not the library ran under this model, or whether they had RFF (relief from face to face teaching) lessons instead.

Teaching under the “old” model, I was allocated thirty minutes per week per class. The younger classes were read a book, introduced to the library layout and borrowing procedures etc. Older classes had literacy skills lessons which included how to locate fiction and non-fiction books, finding information within non-fiction texts, skimming and scanning, map reading, basic Internet searching techniques and basic website evaluation techniques. They were also introduced to, and encouraged to read classical and modern literature. Ten to fifteen minutes was allowed for borrowing.

The library was a very popular place and I had twenty five library monitors at lunch times. Borrowing was entirely voluntary and yet the students borrowed on an average two books per week- and they read them.

This library was in direct contrast to a RFF library. RFF is the normal classroom teacher’s free period. Under this model “library” time is extended. The teacher/librarian, instead of giving literature or literacy related lessons, is given an area of the curriculum to cover, e.g. water safety or a maths unit (it is an area nominated by the classroom teacher). A brief period is set aside, under this model, for borrowing books- but it is borrowing only- as the teacher/librarian is under pressure to cover the syllabus content which has been allocated to them. No information skills lessons, as under the “old” model, are given. The library under the RFF

model is a repository and circulation point for books only and a temporary classroom for the teaching of allocated curriculum topics. School principals make the decision, as to how allocate this library time, on budgetary considerations. Using the librarian as an RFF teacher saves the salary of another teacher.

Primary school is where students develop their love of books and learn the basic information literacy skills which they will need in high school. This does not and cannot happen under the RFF model. If there was a literacy syllabus outlining the information literacy skills which primary schools students should acquire and areas of literature which they should be introduced to, schools could not use the teacher / librarian and the library in this manner.

As it stands, the use of the teacher/librarian as a substitute teacher and the library as substitute classroom is a waste of both human and financial resources. Nevertheless, the worst aspect of all of this is that it leaves students who have experienced the RFF library ill prepared for the demands of high school. They have no information skills. They, in general, haven't developed a reading habit and they also have no background literature knowledge.

When the new year 7 classes turn up at school for library orientation, one can distinguish within minutes those who have come from an RFF library, and those who have had library lessons. The difference is both startling and depressing.

## High School Experiences

### Reading / literature literacy

When I arrived at Dulwich High I found that the student book borrowing rate was alarmingly low. After questioning other teacher librarians, from local schools, as to their student library borrowing rates, I came to the conclusion that the problem was peculiar to our school. The Principal was very positive and encouraged the renewing of the library. He backed this up with an increased budget to buy new books and furniture.

But the new books and new furniture made only a marginal difference. After a year of so, borrowing rates had increased but they did not approach what they should have been.

I knew that many schools operated DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) programs) where students have a time set aside each day for silent reading of literature of their own choice. When I arrived at Dulwich High, we operated a twenty minute DEAR program during roll call. It had, however, fallen into an unstructured voluntary use of the time for most classes. It seemed to be no-one's job to instruct teachers, particularly new teachers and casual teachers, that the time was to be used for DEAR. In other words it was DEAR in name only for most classes.

In my second year at the school, DEAR was dropped for a study skills program which was incorporated in the student diary. This program was unsuccessful and was formally abandoned at the end of the year.

This year the timetable was changed from 37 minute periods to 75 minute periods. When the new timetable was being planned I asked the Principal if provision could be made during roll call or some other time for DEAR. I said I would be happy to oversee it, that is, to ensure all teachers were aware of how it operated and to put into place other procedures to ensure it worked. In conjunction with DEAR I was hoping that the English teachers could bring their classes to the library for 15-20 minutes once every three weeks for student borrowing. This would ensure that all students would have a book or other reading matter for DEAR.

Unfortunately, no time could be found for DEAR in the new timetable. It is not correct to say that there is no "slack" in the school timetables to allow for anything else. For example, we have an allocation of seventy five minutes per week for NEO (a hobby course of the student's choice, e.g. hip hop dancing, photography).

Not to be totally defeated, I then approached the English teachers. I thought that if they brought their classes to the library once every three weeks for the 15-20 minute borrowing period regardless of "no DEAR", that this would at least be some encouragement to borrow. One teacher already does this, and while these students are not made to borrow, a lot of them do, and the class, as a whole, seems to enjoy the visit to the library.

The English teachers, however, when approached at a faculty meeting with my plan, were not agreeable to this. I can understand their reasoning.

All faculties wish to hold on to their faculty's allocated time and are governed by their syllabus requirements.

I do not use my school experiences because I am saying my school is better or worse than any other school. I use it as an example because it shows how difficult it is in the school system to implement something when one has no real educational authority behind them.

All teachers aspire to encouraging life long learning in their students. Exposure to literature and the development of the reading and borrowing habit is a tangible step in this direction. As my experience shows, it cannot be left to the discretion of the school executive and teachers as to whether or not formal reading programs are undertaken. In the many demands for time in the school day, it is too easy not to see the forest for the trees.

If the literature aspect of literacy was incorporated into a library syllabus, voluntary student reading would be given the pivotal status it deserves. Teacher librarians could be made responsible for the administration of reading programs. This could be done through the compulsory requirement that schools engage in reading programs such as DEAR and / or class borrowing sessions. Most schools already have these programs in place, but such a requirement would mean all schools do this. Furthermore, formalising the operation of reading programs through a syllabus would lead to not only their uniform implementation, but to the standardisation of such programs.

### Information literacy

It is an incorrect assumption to make that today's students are information literate- they are indeed very computer literate- but computer literacy is not, of course, akin to information literacy.

On a very ad hoc basis I am given the opportunity to address classes on topics such as:

- Improving search techniques: Search terms / broadening and narrowing searches/ How Google works and what it does with your search terms selecting your search terms
- Web address: domain names-how to use these for faster searching

- Evaluating web sites: what to look for / evaluating web addresses /tips
- Wikipedia / when and how to use it
- Google news
- Databases
- Social bookmarking sites: how they help you find useful websites
- Non-fiction vs. Internet: Choosing which is better for your task
- Non-fiction: Dewey numbering system and how to find books quickly
- Subject and keyword searches: which is best and when
- How to write bibliographies
- How to in-text reference

Very occasionally, I am given the opportunity to instruct students in information skills. These lessons form part of periods where teachers bring students to the library for research. These lessons are, however, random, rare and in such an abbreviated form they are probably of little value anyway. One finds oneself in the position where some students in a class may have had two or three information lessons in their years at school, while others have had none. Does one continually start at the beginning or do you just lose the students who have had no lessons?

Students are increasingly called upon to research information which they have not covered in depth in class. They require strong research and information skills which very few have (particularly those unfortunate enough to have gone to a RFF primary school library). There is no place in any syllabus specifically covering instruction in this area. Again, I feel that there is a very urgent and strong need for this gap to be addressed. Information literacy, particularly digital information, is studied as part of the teacher librarian qualifications. Teacher librarians will only be given the opportunity to impart this information to students when it is formalised into a literacy curriculum. A literacy curriculum would enable a progressive and efficient delivery of the information literacy skills so necessary for student learning and success.

## Learning literacy

I am unsure if there is anything called 'learning literacy', but if there isn't, I think that there should be.

As far as I know, the acquiring of study and learning skills is not addressed in any subject curriculum. As mentioned before, students are increasingly left to direct their own learning, but I do not feel we are giving them the tools to do this.

Students in schools may or may not be given programs which cover the following areas:

### Research skills:

Defining the question, locating the information (print and digital), selecting the information, analysing the information, presenting the information.

### Study and Learning skills

- Motivation and goal setting
- How to planning a study program
- Health, fitness and study
- How the brain works and how to maximise your study time
- Learning styles
- Note taking
- Reading for information
- Memory techniques
- The language of assignments, e.g. *outcomes* and *criteria*
- Essay writing
- Exam techniques
- Relaxation techniques

As far as I know, study skills seminars are generally given only in Year 10, 11 or 12. Often schools employ outside trainers to do this and the students pay for the course. Some schools never address study and learning skills. And perhaps some do it frequently.

The point is, again, that a very important area of learning is applied on an ad hoc basis and at too late a stage when given in senior secondary school. Ideally, study and learning skills programs should begin in Year 7 and built upon yearly.



I believe that teacher librarians are ideally placed to deliver, or at least coordinate, the delivery of these programs. This cannot be achieved, however, if the requirement to study these skills is not incorporated into a syllabus.

### In conclusion

When I completed my Masters in Teacher / Librarianship through coursework, I was surprised that the course did not include the study of a library syllabus. I considered this an oversight on the part of the university. When I became employed as a teacher librarian, however, I found that there was no such syllabus. I am still amazed at this state of affairs.

Without the direction of a syllabus, teacher librarians are left, to a large extent, to invent their own role. I don't think that this is the largest aspect of the problem though (although it is, of course, unsatisfactory and problematic in itself). The largest aspect of the problem is that even though a teacher librarian can see what needs to be done, they generally are unable to do it. This is because without the authority of a syllabus they cannot make claim to student time and access.

Teacher librarians have a great potential to develop reading, information and learning literacy in students. But without a syllabus it is just that, a potential.