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Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australian Schools.

The Chair and Board of Directors NSW Foundation for Public Education

Introduction

Literacy is fundamental to our lives. Not just functional literacy that merely allows us to read a bus timetable but the ability to deduce meaning from complex text and to develop a critical understanding of the wealth of text, both print and digital around us. Public schools, as the only schools open to all children in Australia in their own right as residents and citizens (children at fee-charging schools are usually only able to access such schools thanks to their parents payment of school fees), carry a greater responsibility and often have the more difficult task when it comes to ensuring literacy in all children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the majority of whom attend public schools.

According to researcher Barbara Preston, in 1996 there were 13 low income children for every 10 high income children in the playgrounds of our public secondary schools, by 2006, this had become 16 low income children to every 10 high income children, greatly intensifying the difficulty of the task for teachers in public schools. Public school teachers often also operate with the help of far fewer support staff than those available to support teachers in schools (often fee-charging schools) that service children from more advantaged backgrounds. This is why it is absolutely crucial that teachers and students in our hard-pressed public schools retain the skills and support of trained teacher-librarians and access to well-stocked school libraries. All teachers are involved in teaching the necessary skills but the teacher librarian and the wealth of resources in a school library are crucial to student success, particularly for students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have access to either books or internet technology anywhere else.

The decline in the provision of a teacher librarian in every school is a national disgrace. The decline in the number of courses available to train teacher librarians is also. It will, as always, have the greatest impact on our most vulnerable students and the public schools in disadvantaged areas that most of them attend.

The Federal Government must mandate a well trained teacher librarian and a well stocked library in every school to deliver the National Curriculum.

These resources would be aided by the creation of a network of literature centres which would bring writers and illustrators and other industry professionals into the lives of young people. These centres inspire young people to become readers, sophisticated travellers in the world of print and digital media.

1. The impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities.

The provision of trained teacher librarians in schools across Australia varies from state to state and sector to sector.

Increasingly there is devolution of decision making to school principals and although this brings the benefits of an ability to respond to local needs there can also be a down side. Some principals have not placed a high priority on the school library and the trained librarian and have replaced that position with the cheaper one of library technician. We understand that principals of public schools servicing a large number of disadvantaged students have many calls on their limited resources and often have to make very difficult decisions about where to concentrate their resources. We believe that these principals should never have to decide to do without a well-resourced library run by a highly trained teacher-librarian because of lack of funds. Library technicians are not satisfactory, particularly for vulnerable children with higher than average literacy needs for the following reasons.

The library technician has no training and skill in the vital areas of:

- pedagogy

- Evaluation of materials either print or digital
- Children's literature. They are not in the position of being able to recommend books for children

The School Library should be regarded as the heart of the school just as a public library is now valued as a central community cultural asset in a town/ city. The Library and the TL provide a school wide resource providing services, programs and projects that support students, teachers and school management. Something which is particularly important for schools – the majority of which are public schools – that service communities with high levels of disadvantage and correspondingly low levels of literacy.

Increasingly educators are depending on electronic resources. Educational publishers are providing more of their materials in digital form and there is a great need for each school to have a highly trained individual who can access and evaluate this material. This person must be a trained teacher, familiar with the curriculum but also able to judge how well the electronic materials satisfy the needs of teachers and students.

School librarians are navigators for teachers and students, providing access to effective and reliable digital information and providing a guide for a community that is overwhelmed by information overload and some unreliable information resources.

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

Schools have a key role in developing literacy skills for the 21st century. Those skills are beyond the simple functional literacy of being able to read and write. Information literacy is crucial to anyone functioning in the digital age. Public schools teach the majority of children who have no ability to access electronic and digital resources at home or anywhere else but at school, so we believe their needs in this area must be paramount. The best person trained to teach

students information literacy is the teacher librarian. Through the resources she amasses in the well stocked school library she is also able to teach cultural and civic literacy. She (or he) is crucial to the delivery of the curriculum and the learning that goes on beyond that curriculum.

Teacher librarians are trained to develop a collection of print and electronic and other resources that enables them to work with staff and students in the delivery of the curriculum. In doing that they must evaluate the merits of those resources and advise and assist the staff in the delivery of the curriculum. A trained professional is best able to navigate her way through the proliferation of materials in new media that bombards every educational institution.

Because of their teacher training, teacher librarians are also able to advise children and young people on appropriate reading material.

Literacy is far more than a simple ability to decode words and to perform well at a functional level. A teacher librarian, with a well stocked library of quality material can infuse students with a love of literature. By passing on works of fiction and non-fiction the teacher librarian leads the student towards more complex and more layered works that stimulate and develop the mind well beyond simple understanding. Through books, students mature and develop interests that may go well beyond their classroom learning. The teacher librarian is crucial to this.

There is compelling international evidence of the significant correlation of improved literacy standards when there is a school library and a trained teacher librarian present. Details of significant research papers, detailing measurable impact had on student achievement by school libraries and teacher librarians are quoted in the document *School Libraries Work*. (Research paper 2008, Scholastic Research and Results)

See also *Powerful Libraries Make Powerful Learners*. The Illinois Study, 2005. (Lance, Rodney and Hamilton-Pennel) <http://www.islma.org/pdf/iLStudy2.pdf>

In the study *School Libraries and Student Achievement in Ontario*, researchers looked at 800 schools and 50,000 students.

Their results include:

- The presence of a teacher librarian was the single strongest predictor of reading enjoyment for students in Grades 3 and 6.
- Schools without trained library staff tended to have lower achievement in grades 3 and 6 reading tests.
- Grades 3 and 6 students in schools with a teacher librarian are more likely to report that they like reading.
- This study showed a steady decline in the % of students who reported that they liked reading. At the same time there has been a decline in the % of elementary schools with a teacher librarian. (Ontario Library Assoc. 2006)

In a review of what evidence there is in Australia this was the conclusion:

Impact of school Libraries on student achievement.

A strong library program that is adequately staffed, resourced and funded can lead to higher educational achievement regardless of the socio economic and educational levels of the adults in the community (Lonsdale ACER 2003)

The impact of the loss of this important resource and skill base for public schools servicing disadvantaged students will be particularly acute. Given that Australia already has a “long tail” of student under-achievement, the loss of such resources and support in such schools can only increase the gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students and schools.

3. The Factors Influencing Recruitment and Development of School Librarians.

There has been a significant decline in the number of tertiary courses available to study as a teacher librarian. In the past twenty years the number has gone from fifteen to four.

There has been a decline in the number of teacher librarians employed in Australian schools and this must be a disincentive for those who would wish join the profession.

There is no evidence of a 'career path' for teacher librarians. There is no encouragement to join the senior management level of school administration.

4. The Role of Different Levels of Government and Local Communities and other Institutions in Partnering with and Supporting School Librarians.

Federal Government.

In the nineteen seventies, the Federal Government injected money into the states for the development of secondary school libraries. This transformed secondary education. The time has now arrived for a similar transforming, indeed revolutionary role for the Federal Government to play.

The Federal Government must mandate and finance a well stocked library and a trained teacher librarian in every Australian school. Funding must support sufficient relief from face-to-face teaching to enable the teach librarian to develop curriculum support strategies and appropriately manage the resource collection. This is particularly important in public schools servicing disadvantaged communities where the task of the teacher – librarian, like all other teachers in the school, in improving literacy outcomes is often harder than in other, more advantaged school communities, precisely because many of the students are starter from a lower base. There is enough compelling evidence of the powerful role played by the school library and the trained teacher librarian in developing literacy and enhancing student achievement.

The Federal Government is mandating The National Curriculum. This curriculum places literature as a significant strand of the subject English. The teacher librarian is the staff member best placed to review the literature available and to evaluate which titles are best for the students of her school. The Federal Government should include in the National Curriculum the role school libraries and teacher librarians play in the

development of literacy and mandate the provision of both library and teacher librarian.

State Government

State governments, through their education departments, should provide on going support services and significant professional development to aid teacher librarians in the selection of materials and the use of new technologies.

Local Government

See public libraries below.

Other Institutions.

i) Public Libraries

School libraries and teacher librarians need to establish strong links with public libraries funded by both State and Local Governments

- Public libraries provide a continuation of literacy and reading support over holiday periods, eg Summer Reading Program, NSW Premier's Reading Challenge, and various other school holiday events and programs. Research shows that the literacy skills of students who do not read during the long summer holidays are diminished by the time they return to the classroom after the holidays. As an example, during the Summer Reading Program 2009-10 at Blacktown City Libraries 452 children read 8,306 books.
- Public libraries provide support for reading throughout the year, eg National Simultaneous Storytime, NSW Premier's Reading Challenge, reading clubs, and regular storytimes including multicultural storytimes.
- Public libraries provide support for academic achievement goals, eg homework support resources backing-up schools; after school tutoring services, online databases and other support services eg *yourtutor* online tutoring; HSC lectures and workshops; and provision of after-school study space which is extremely important in highly-urbanised areas.

- Public libraries provide free computer and wireless access for research and learning.
- Public libraries provide pre-literacy/numeracy programs which have a significant impact on early success at school.
- Public libraries support joint professional development opportunities with teacher librarians.
- Public libraries support existing partnerships with schools eg Blacktown City Libraries and Hebersham PS information literacy program, *Beyond Google*, targeted to Year 6 students. The pilot program was reported at an industry conference (see <http://www.slideshare.net/PublicLibraryServices/hebersham-project-presentation>) and in *Side By Side: The Newspaper for NSW Public Schools*.

ii) Children's and Youth Literature Centres

Three Australian states have created Children's and/or Youth Literature Centres:

- i) Freemantle Children's Literature Centre (WA)
- ii) Youth Literature Centre (Victoria)
- iii) Western Sydney Young People's Literature Project. (NSW)

These centres work to further develop reading and to bring high quality material to children and young people in their communities. In doing so they enhance the work done by school libraries and teacher librarians and the public library system.

The Western Sydney Young People's Literature Project is financed by the NSW Government through grants from the Ministries of the Arts and Education. The centre is still in its start up phase and the Advisory Group and staff of the centre believe that we will be able to fulfill a need in Western Sydney which has the largest population of young people in the country.

There is a lack of literature infrastructure and development in the region as evidenced in the evaluation of the NSW Government's Strategy for the Arts in Western Sydney. There are vast communities of indigenous people, migrants and refugees.

The Centre is establishing itself as a significant resource for teachers and teacher librarians. Through her relationships with publishers, writers and illustrators the Centre's project officer has been able to deliver programs to schools that complement the work done by teacher librarians. Creative writing workshops, author presentations and celebrations of reading are some of the activities that have taken place in the first two years of our existence.

We strongly believe that there is a need for a network of well resourced centres in all regions of the country. These centres then partner with the public library sector and the school community, through the teacher librarian to provide access to writers and illustrators and other industry professionals. The exposure to those who create literature can have a significant effect on the culture of reading in the school and levels of literacy in the whole community. There are powerful equity issues involved here as so many children in disadvantaged communities are not exposed to print at an early age, do not have books in the home and are now faced with no immediate access to the internet in the home as well.

Examples of Centre activities:

In 2009 Lili Wilkinson, a published author from Melbourne visited nine high schools in Western Sydney. She conducted *Meet the Author* sessions as well as writing workshops.

Tohby Riddle (author/illustrator) conducted a graphic novel workshop for stage 3 students, Dawson PS (PSP school, Western Sydney Region) This was both a workshop for students and professional development for teachers:

Wayne Harris and Sue Whiting conducted a picture book writing and illustrating workshop that took place over three weekends.

Comments from students, teachers and parents were universally positive and all urged the Centre to increase its activities.

5. The Impact and Potential of Digital Technologies to Enhance and Support the Roles of School Libraries and Librarians.

The proliferation of material in a diverse range of media means that every school community needs a highly trained professional able to access, evaluate and deliver that material. The teacher librarian is clearly the most appropriate person for this role and she needs to have a team of technicians and support staff.

The web empowers cross-sectoral partnerships and provides online delivery of learning opportunities for children. This is of special significance for rural and remote children giving them access to people and opportunities previously only available to those in the city. The Queensland on-line literature festival, run each September, is an example of this. The majority of rural and remote students, along with the majority of economically disadvantaged children, the majority of children from a non-English speaking background and the majority of indigenous children, attend public schools. It is significant that in some communities the availability of internet access at home is low. In Blacktown in Western Sydney the rate of home internet access is approximately 50%. School based availability of online experience with a qualified teacher librarian is essential to lowering the disadvantage these children suffer.

The cross sectoral partnerships offered by the web may lead to efficiencies in procuring library management software as well as online resources.

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