



**An opinion on the role, adequacy and resourcing of school libraries and teacher librarians in Australia's public and private schools.**

Today's students will be the leaders and innovators of a society vastly different to that of 2010. Our challenge as educators is not to teach them about the world as it is today, but rather to encourage them to learn about their own world along the way. To do this, we must equip them with the skills to find the information they seek and to critically evaluate the information they find.

I am the Library Officer at North Cottesloe Primary School, one of the leading public schools in Western Australia. Based on the questions I field in my day, I do not feel that our students are adequately prepared for gathering and evaluating information and I do not believe that our students are equipped to take advantage of the range of technologies and opportunities that they will face when they start secondary school.

I am often disappointed in the questions and comments I hear:

Where do I find out about Krakatoa?  
What's an encyclopedia?  
It said so on wikipedia

What is disappointing is that these children should know the answers to these questions, and that these are questions from Year 7 students.

For many reasons (often the lack of access due to insufficient timeslots in the library schedule, which will hopefully improve with the new BER building) these students are rarely seen in the library to carry out their research. They do not know about the Dewey system, the Subject Index or the online library search program. They use *google* as their first and only research option to find information. They implicitly trust any information they find on the web. They don't even consider using an encyclopedia (whether hard copy or online) and use books that have been delivered to their classroom by Library staff in response to a request for a bulk loan on a theme.

We do not have a Teacher Librarian at our school. Over the last 3 years, we have had 3 different teachers (not specialist Library Teachers) assigned to teaching library skills to our junior classes (ie Year Levels 1-3). I have seen some pleasing results and these students often outrank the older classes in their skills in finding information.

It would be unfair for me to say that no classroom teachers teach these skills, as there are some, that do. However, until these skills are given priority, and teachers are given training and resources, it seems that many of our students may be lacking in the skills they require to be information literate and lifelong learners.

## **Our students are not well prepared for secondary school**

As primary school educators, we must ensure that our students are well prepared for their secondary schooling, which includes ensuring they are well grounded in research techniques and are comfortable in using the technology they will encounter in accessing information.

I know from personal experience that the secondary schools to which our students progress are already using technologies to provide information to students that we haven't even begun to explore (eg wikis, blogs, mini-clips, iPOD touches).

While today's primary students are digital natives and find using technology almost second-nature, we are doing our children a great disservice if we do not channel those tendencies and natural skills into productive habits.

The government's Digital Revolution program has provided some funding for new technologies but we still only have 4 computers in each classroom and a computer lab that doesn't cater to the largest class.

## **Untrained personnel are purchasing our resources**

School libraries play a vital role in a student's education as the major repository of information resources for students and teachers. It is vital that these resources, and the technologies used to find them, are current, relevant, educationally beneficial and available to all and that students are taught how to find and use all available information resources.

Currently, I am responsible for selecting and maintaining the majority of our library resources. Selections are based on teacher requests, classroom teaching themes and perceived gaps in the collection, however the decisions are mostly made without expert knowledge of the curriculum and teaching practices.

Primary Focus appears to be the only official resource available to recommend books for Primary Schools, but the main downfall of this system is that it cannot provide current resources: by the time the resources are obtained, reviewed, critiqued, recommended and the results published, ordered and delivered, up to 2 years can have elapsed. There seems to be no simple way of checking the suitability of specific requests.

Our teacher resource collection has not been reviewed in years and contains many old resources. We also need to review our collection in light of the recent introduction of the National Curriculum. This needs to be done by someone with education experience (ie a teacher) but teachers do not have the time to do this.

## **The Library is a key resource in promoting student literacy**

In addition to housing a large proportion on the school's information and resources, school libraries are also a key resource in promoting literacy amongst our students. Good readers know more, have increased vocabularies and are invariably better at reading, spelling, writing and comprehension.

'Literacy' is consistently identified as a priority for our school. Studies have proven that "children become better readers (and spellers and writers) by reading"<sup>1</sup>. Students need to be encouraged to read, and reluctant readers may need assistance in finding literature that is right for them and appeals to them.

Reading for pleasure also provides many benefits not measured by standard tests including relaxation, reduced stress and enjoyment.

Libraries need to provide appropriate resources for all levels of reading abilities and above all, they should support the teaching program. Recently a volunteering teacher of a literacy program has commented that we do not have the resources required to assist the students she is working with.

## **Our resources and technology are out-of-date**

Like most primary school libraries, we have not kept pace with the digital world. Our resources tend to be mainly written text, with a small number of software programs and audio-visual materials, some charts and periodicals.

Advances in technology have offered many other diverse media for providing information including e-books, online databases, web and forms of audio-visual resources. These other options are a welcome supplement to the written text to ensure that all types of learners are catered for, including visual, audio and kinetic learners. But we don't know what they are, where to get them from or how to use them. We probably don't even have the technology to access them.

## **Recommendations**

Teaching information literacy skills must be seen as a priority. A set of guidelines or syllabus is required to ensure students are given the foundation research skills. Training of teachers, and the provision of teaching resources must be provided to assist the teaching process.

Funding must be provided to ensure schools are able to purchase up-to-date resources and the technology to use these resources. Expertise is required to

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<sup>1</sup> Krashen

ensure those resources are appropriate, or failing this, an advisory facility is required to assist with the decision of suitability of resources.

Time and funding of expertise (either a teacher at the school or an advisory service) is required to help schools explore and set visions for their particular situations and then to establish a plan to realise those visions.

Time should be given to teachers to periodically review our collection for relevance.

## **Staffing**

The ideal solution to all of this is to ensure a Teacher/Librarian is available in all Primary Schools, to complement the administration-centred role of the Library Officer. Teacher-Librarians are specialists in teaching information literacy and guided inquiry, in improving literacy and collection development in collaboration with classroom teachers. Teacher-Librarians willingly update their skills and knowledge in keeping abreast of new information technologies and media, can develop library web access points, digitise data, network with colleagues, review and select online websites, learning objects, web quests, online databases and social networking tools etc.

Failing this, with the appropriate resources and training, many of these recommendations can be achieved by classroom teachers incorporating the teaching of these skills into other learning areas, such as Society and Environment.

This option would also require DOTT time to be provided for teaching staff to select, review and maintain the collection and to research and explore new initiatives to keep abreast of new technology.

Consideration must also be given to the funding, training and support of any new technologies that are identified as adding value to our teaching program.

## **Vision for the Future**

I feel that our library and its resources currently support a teaching style and student population of yesterday. We need to embrace the future and the opportunities, media and technology it can provide. We need to ensure all students have access to the information required and we need to ensure that they are taught how to access and use it.

It is time to review our view of a 'library', perhaps more appropriately termed 'resource centre'. Libraries need to be designed to allow greater access to resources. Expertise is needed to ensure resources are current, relevant and available. Students need to be taught how to use the information provided. Teachers need to be taught how to teach these skills.

I welcome this review into the role, adequacy and resourcing of school libraries and teacher librarians and believe it is very timely given the generous funding of new libraries at many schools across Australia through the BER (Building the Education Revolution) program. We must embrace this chance to create a vision for the future and to ensure we maximise the opportunities these new buildings provide.

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