



Personal submission to House of Representatives Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

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I am happy to be an expert witness.

Reference point 1: the impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities

Recent policy decisions have been very well received by the school library community in so far as they support good information infrastructure and practice. Anything that drags Australian schools away from the industrial model is applauded. The decision to fund a building program of libraries was very important because the nation's libraries were built decades ago and were designed in the pre internet and pre digital age and were not only tired but were inadequate to the needs of the Net Generation.

The problem that confronts each and every school that has just received or is in the process of receiving a BER library is "what do we do with it?" Funding of staffing and collections and other information sources and services is a State responsibility whereas funding the building is a Federal responsibility. As a result, schools may be granted a new state of the art physical facility but face a reality that this facility will have no impact upon teaching and learning.

The person on the street may wonder how this could be. Would the same government commit billions to new age defence equipment, jets and submarines for example, and completely ignore the fact that highly qualified personnel are required to make these things work at their maximum? Would anyone build a 2010 hospital replete with nuclear this and nano that and forget that highly specialized personnel will be required to make these things work?



A building is a building but without personnel what is the point? Without resourcing access to information what is the point?

A school offers a set of learning spaces. The library is a significant one of these. If schools are staffed with reference only to those spaces nominated as classrooms then the library soon becomes a warehouse and indeed, without resourcing, becomes an empty warehouse. The point in a library is that it connects to the curriculum and to teachers' information needs. Teachers are busy professionals and without a whole of school support their information needs will simply fall through the cracks.

Every school should have a team of staff who make up the information leadership team. This team manages and delivers information in all its contexts including:

- The information that supports the curriculum
- The information that students use to make information and to make understanding
- The information that is used by teachers to inform their teaching and their professional development
- The information that is used by the school management to make educational and management decisions

Likewise this team informs the curriculum in terms of the “how” students learn. This team provides the helicopter view of how information is used across the curriculum. It makes assertions about information literacy fluency.

In responding to the how of learning the teacher librarian provides:

- * access to a range of sufficient resources that cater for different reading levels, curriculum areas and learning styles;
- * access to quality virtual resources for curriculum programs.
- * curriculum support for teachers to integrate a range of resources such as online, print and audio into their units of work.

None of these specialized services are able to work effectively if the physical and virtual spaces and collections are unmanaged.

Schools are of different shapes and sizes and the information leadership ought to support this. In my opinion every school of 400 or fewer students ought to have a FT Teacher Librarian and a FT Library Technician.

Schools with more students require greater numbers and a wider variety of information staff.

At a very basic level the library staff manage the physical facility and the resources within. At a more sophisticated level they work with teachers to select suitable collections and to build digital libraries. They provide professional development to staff



about information tools and sources. They provide leadership to the school as knowledge managers and in the development of information policies.

Very few school staff have a whole school perspective. It is this perspective that is a vital ingredient in the development of an information literate school. The teacher librarian is one of those. Research has shown that schools that make best use of their information professionals do best on national testing and individual student learning.

Reference point 2: the future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy

As noted above, it is my considered opinion that schools need a team of information professionals, not just a single person to manage information services and to drive information leadership in the school.

During the 1970s when teacher librarians were the flavour of the month it was set in stone that the professional in charge of the library would be a dual qualified teacher and librarian. This model relied on the support of the principal. Principals who were not committed to quality information services were likely to shift teacher librarian hours from that specialized role to a classroom teaching role, a babysitting role as relief teacher, or as a clerical assistant through the lack of provision of dedicated paraprofessional time in the library. Busy principals who need to place fingers in dykes were only too aware of the reality that by nature the teacher librarian was not locked down to a time table and could therefore fill other gaps. This means that in reality most teacher librarians across Australia are indeed part time.

If a school were to have an information leadership team it would be important that one of those hold dual qualifications in education and library science, but other members could have a range of qualifications and take on specialist roles. The research evidence from a multitude of large and small scale studies shows that the impact that a quality library staffed with quality professionals has a significant impact on student learning. The [Lonsdale](#) (2003) study is the most recent Australian summary of this research but numerous recent studies continue to support earlier research. One such Australian study supported by the library professions is the [Australian School Libraries Research Project](#) which also provides links to other notable studies.

It could be asserted that no influential thinker about schooling in 2010 argues for a diminution in the value of the school library or of information services. Leading commentators such as [Fullan](#), [Hargreaves](#), [Henri](#), [Heppell](#), and [Hough](#) all argue for the growing importance of agility in school design, of the importance of mediated information and in the importance of highlighting the importance of making and leveraging information. Likewise no one argues that we can dispense with information policy in schools or that knowledge management is no longer important. No one is arguing that university libraries are passé. Indeed they are much more important than they



ever were. If we are serious about an informed citizenry it is counterproductive to commence the offering of sophisticated information services at the post secondary level.

The research also confirms the view that at least one member of the information leadership team must have dual qualifications because the linkages between the teaching community and the information professions is best handled by a specialist. This is made more important by the important educational role that the teacher librarian plays as a whole school curriculum specialist.

The whole of school staff are essential as bridge builders and conduits of change within school. If you take away these powerful influences the school degenerates into a collection of boxes in which isolated teachers operate. Every expert in school reform highlights the desperate need to break down the balkanization of schooling and to energize it as an organic whole. The teacher librarian along with the curriculum coordinator and the principal are three key players in this transformation.

The information leadership team will be the group that leads and champions whole school approaches to the attainment of an information literate culture. There are very few examples of schools anywhere in the world that have been able to attain an information literate school without dedicated information leadership.

Truck loads of dollars are expended each and every year on the holy grail of literacy and over the years these tools and strategies have failed to deliver the tremendous gains that are expected. The one expenditure that is guaranteed to improve literacy is expenditure on quality library collections and quality professional staffing of the library. Studies constantly demonstrate that the best and actually the cheapest route to a literate school is to give children good books to read, books that they want to read, and to provide multiple opportunities to those students to access those books. This free voluntary reading approach (FVR) championed by [Krashen](#) is best implemented by teacher librarians who know what children want to read, know how to immerse children in reading and how to provide time for reading. The desire to read is best fostered in this simple way. There is almost no research evidence to support the view that commercial reading schemes work. But they do cost and they do soak up human resources. The evidence suggests that it is both counterproductive to punish students who don't read what teachers want them to read, or to over reward students for reading. Book reports and other forms of compulsory feedback kill the joy of reading. No adult who watches a movie wants to write a movie report!

If government were to commit large amounts of money every year to support high quality library collections and ensure that students were given multiple opportunities each day to read what they wanted to read, literacy would leap forward. Readers become good readers by reading. Readers begin with their interests and then move well beyond that to explore information on broader topics.



Reference point 3: the factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians

Unlike school principals teacher librarians must have an additional qualification to be professionally credentialed and to perform at the level that is required by the professional bodies. Just like school principals teacher librarians undertake a teaching career (or in a small percentage of cases are recruited out of the library world) and move from the classroom to a specialist position. There are many reasons why teachers choose to move to teacher librarianship but a clear barrier to that movement is the need to pay for a specialist masters qualification and to undertake online study. The issue here is if the additional qualification, usually one year or 1.5 years of full time equivalent study, is required by the current employer why doesn't that employer fund the qualification? Not only should candidate teacher librarians be funded through their course but they should be offered significant study leave. These changes would address clear equity issues since the vast majority of teachers do not require a further specialist degree.

Currently the school authorities offer very poor opportunities for teacher librarians to gain senior status. Despite the fact that experienced (and often very inexperienced) teacher librarians hold unofficial status as Faculty Heads they do not hold official status or commensurate salary. This raises the issue of a career path for those professional staff who are not typically seen as classroom teachers. In 2010 when schools are being encouraged to be agile and student centred it is amazing that career paths are not much more flexible. A classroom teacher who funds her way into the position of teacher librarian does not want to move out of an information leadership role merely to gain a higher paid status.

The fact that many schools employ their teacher librarian on a fractional basis is a strong inhibitor to a career orientation and in many cases offers a very strong disincentive to the teacher to undertake the further study required of the position.

At the present time a minority of Australian schools employ one full time teacher librarian. This means there is a great shortage of qualified personnel and certainly there is not a pool of unemployed or underemployed qualified personnel in the wings. What makes this situation frightening is the fact that the average age of teacher librarians is significantly higher than the overall average age of teachers. Huge numbers of teacher librarians who trained during the glory days of the 1970s will soon be walking out the door. The small number of Australian universities that offer professional qualifications in teacher librarianship are already at breaking point and they themselves are understaffed with specialists in that field. There is currently no incentive for universities to offer courses in this field. The qualification issue is the biggest hurdle faced by the profession.

The research literature identifies the fact that school principals are the teacher librarian's best or worst friend. Good principals provide considerable support to the teacher librarian and promote information services as the key resource to underpin enquiry learning. Other



principals provide inadequate support and move resources out of information services and into other “more pressing needs”.

The issue here is that principals do not necessarily have any experience of quality information services and most are not educated about what should be expected. Principals largely climb the slippery promotion pole via classroom teaching and have no particular knowledge or experience with quality information use. This deficit is mirrored within the educational bureaucracies where policy documents are often developed with mere lip service to information policy, information services, knowledge management, and information literacy.

Throughout the golden years 1970-1990 school libraries were supported by consultants who in turn were supported by a state wide network. Today most of this infrastructure has been dismantled leaving the local teacher librarian without support. Resources have been shifted out of school library services and support into IT infrastructure. On top of this sits the strange belief that the Internet and Google hold all the answers. As [McKenzie](#) reminds us, the answer to an inane question is trivial. Learning is more about great questions rather than about great answers.

Reference point 5: the impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians

Access to information, whether print or digital, is very uneven across Australia’s 10,000 schools. Some schools have very rich access whereas other schools have little or no access. There is a clear equity issue here. While the provision of basic education is compulsory, the quality of that education is significantly hampered by the quality of information services offered by each school. Because schools make individual choices about the digital information that they buy in for the school the price is uneven and way too high. The economies of scale that could be delivered from a national approach to information delivery is huge and should be explored. This initiative coupled with a complete overhaul in the funding of staffing and collections would underpin a revolution in educational outcomes.

The provision of notebooks and netbooks provides the basic tool of trade but up until now there has been no consideration given to access to information outside the free Internet.

Qualified teacher librarians have been at the forefront of the educational revolution over the past four decades. Teacher librarians work with teachers to enhance their understanding and use of a wide range of tools including web 2.0 applications. If teachers want to know something they inevitably seek out their teacher librarian. (Unfortunately unqualified library staff are not able to provide this support role.) Given that the average teacher uses far fewer digital tools than do their students and given that the government supports a digital revolution, it is just so dumbfounding that the support for the school



library and information services has dwindled to a slow trickle. In educational terms the school library has entered into the same state as the Murray-Darling Basin.

Even though children are digital tool savvy and just because they are light years ahead of their teachers in use of applications, the research shows that members of the Net Generation do not have the skills to navigate the digital economy. A Google diet alone will just dumb down our learning communities. [Combes](#) provides the latest research on this topic and it is a real wake up call to those who think that going digital without mediation will lead to better learning outcomes.

Qualified information leaders provide sustained:

- * specialist knowledge, support and professional development training for staff in how to use and embed digital technologies into curriculum;
- * management of technologies for equitable access;
- * attention to the infrastructure and policy development required for acceptable and appropriate use of a wide range of digital resources and technologies, including cyberbullying, privacy, identity theft and security of information;
- * advocacy for a clear educational rationale for the effective inclusion of digital technologies in the curriculum;
- * attention to equal access to a range of digital resources and delivery formats which support the development of high quality literacy programs in schools.

Recommendation 1

All schools from primary through to secondary (K-12) school should have a range of professional (teacher librarians), paraprofessional (Library Technicians) and clerical staff in their school libraries. The library should be the focus of learning and curriculum development in the school.

Recommendation 2

The Australian government ought to form consortia to negotiate the best license price for a suite of online databases and digital services that should be provided to all Australian schools.

Reading

Lonsdale, M.(2003). Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement: a Review of the Research, Australian School Library Association. Melbourne: ACER Retrieved on 12 April 2010 from <http://www.asla.org.au/research/research.pdf>

The Australian School Libraries Research Project.(2010). Retrieved on 12 April 2010 from <http://www.chs.ecu.edu.au/portals/ASLRP/links-schoollib.php>