



## Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

*It is most appropriate and laudable that in the wake of federal funding initiatives such as the Digital Education Revolution (DER) and the Building Education Revolution (BER), that this inquiry should review the role and function of school libraries and teacher librarians, at a national level. At a time when international authorities are pushing to actually have a school library in every school, we need to go further and ensure every Australian school library has a qualified teacher librarian to be at the leading edge of school education.*

*I make the following submission as someone with 30 years experience as a teacher librarian and school library coordinator in South Australian secondary schools. I have been an advocate for my profession for many years and have had several articles pertinent to this inquiry, previously published; copies of these are provided as Appendices for your further information. Most recently I was Curriculum Manager, Senior Secondary Reform in the state office for the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), where I gained knowledge and experience in the education policy making and implementation process.*

### SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper argues that in order to optimise the considerable federal investment in school library facilities and technology, and to equitably effect curriculum reforms, measures are needed to ensure there is consistent and sufficient qualified staffing of school libraries across all jurisdictions in Australia.

Those measures should begin with:

1. Ongoing collection of national data on school libraries and their resourcing by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and also published on the MySchool website as an indicator of school performance.
2. Establishment of a peak working group of representatives from school library professional organisations and education authorities, under the auspices of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) and in consultation with the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE), to consider:
  - A review of training courses for teacher librarians and school library support staff in Australia
  - Development of national policy and standards for school libraries that supports the Australian Curriculum reforms.

### School libraries

Whilst the federal funding from the BER and DER will provide greatly improved school library facilities and improve access to digital resources, the staffing of these libraries and the effectiveness of the services they will provide on an ongoing and daily basis has not yet been addressed at a national level. Those new and refurbished school library facilities will become 'white elephants' and the digital divide will yawn ever wider, without qualified and sufficient staffing of school libraries across all states and territories.

There is much ad hoc and anecdotal evidence of gaps and inconsistencies in school library staffing policies and practices across Australia: between government and non-government sectors, between country and metropolitan schools, between primary and secondary and from state to state, which will no doubt be reflected in many other submissions to this inquiry. Whilst professional associations have attempted to conduct surveys and there are some instances of education authorities collecting data in the past, there is no national or continuing data collection on school libraries, despite the huge capital investment they represent. The latest ABS Report on Schools in Australia<sup>1</sup> makes no mention of school libraries or teacher librarians. The 2007 Australian School Library Survey Project<sup>2</sup> produced data from only 692 of the 9612 schools in Australia.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4221.0?OpenDocument>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.chs.ecu.edu.au/portals/ASLRP/publications.php>

This lack of national data is longstanding<sup>3</sup> and has allowed state education authorities to mask or deny their individual deficiencies in this regard.

In South Australia for example, DECS continue to deny that there is a shortage of qualified teacher librarians on the basis that there are few vacancies advertised by schools. This disingenuous response has already been refuted by an Australian Education Union (AEU) survey in 2002 where, of the 303 work sites that responded, 107 (35%) had school libraries staffed below DECS own staffing formula, and 109 (36%) had staff without teacher librarian qualifications (AEU 2002)<sup>4</sup>. When I was seconded from my position as school library coordinator (at a disadvantaged school in the northern suburbs of Adelaide) into the state office, I was replaced by a teacher who was not a qualified teacher librarian who has been unable to maintain the professional development activities I ran for teachers, nor the Virtual Library I set up to scaffold student learning at that school – just one example of what schools, particularly already disadvantaged schools, lose when they do not have a dual qualified teacher librarian.

## Role of teacher librarian

Many school leaders, and even worse, policy makers and bureaucrats, are ignorant of, or fail to understand that,

*a (qualified) teacher librarian can contribute to the school community to a significant degree, particularly with ongoing curricular changes and ICT impacting on teacher workload. Teacher librarians ease that workload, not by re-shelving books but by using their expertise to collaborate with teachers; not by covering books but by providing valuable professional development in the use of ICT; not by checking books in and out but by joining committees to develop policies and practices that enhance student learning; not by chasing overdue books but by working directly with students to develop their reading and information literacy skills.*

(Spence 2002)

In the UK there is a push to add pedagogy to the training of librarians for schools in order to develop the necessary information literacy and literacy skills of students. Australia has a longer history of training and employing *teacher librarians* who are dual qualified as both teachers and librarians. As such they value add unique services to any school, as clearly outlined in the [SLASA Role Statement](#), the [Standards of professional excellence for teacher librarians](#) and a whole raft of policies from the national peak bodies for school libraries in Australia – the Australian School Library Association (ASLA)<sup>5</sup> and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA).

In the 1970's federal funding built school libraries across Australia and followed through with programs to train and place qualified teacher librarians in them. Now that those 40+ years old library buildings and their technology are being updated, there again needs to be a follow through to address the shortage of qualified teacher librarians to staff them. Many teacher librarians like myself, are now retired or seriously considering it. Meanwhile some 15 teacher librarian training programs across Australia have shrunk to 3 or 4 - the Graduate Diploma in Teacher Librarianship that I completed in the mid-1980s, no longer exists. As this is one of the reasons school libraries are inadequately staffed and unable to achieve their primary purpose of supporting student learning, it behoves this inquiry to also consider the nature and extent/availability of university courses for teacher librarians and TAFE courses for library technicians. It should not be forgotten that sufficient and properly trained library support staff is critical in order for teacher librarians to properly fulfil their teaching role; otherwise they become very expensive support officers themselves.

In this digital information age, teacher librarians are often at the leading edge of ICT innovation in schools – providing the infrastructure and the teacher professional development so sorely needed. I myself won an award for ICT innovation way back in 2001 for setting up a “Virtual Library” and was commended for my Quality Teacher Project (QTP-ICT course) that I conducted in 2003. Since then, through my work in DECS state

<sup>3</sup> <http://conferences.alia.org.au/alia2000/proceedings/alan.bundy.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.slasa.asn.au/Advocacy/docs/aeusurveyarticle.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.asla.org.au/policy/>

office, I have been able to develop an extensive and sophisticated “Information Literacy resource package” that can be downloaded and adapted by any school<sup>6</sup>. Such resource development, linked to the literacy and ICT literacy continua promised by ACARA, would be a cost effective national strategy that would work towards eradicating inequities that will inevitably be highlighted by this inquiry. It also begs the question, if one qualified teacher librarian can achieve this, what could a qualified teacher librarian in every school contribute?

### School library policy and practice

There is considerable variation in, and gap between, policy and practice across jurisdictions. South Australia has no current policy statement on school libraries and no senior policy officer or section responsible for supporting school libraries and teacher librarians, despite school libraries being such a large capital investment requiring ongoing maintenance and monitoring. This contrasts with the New South Wales Department of Education and Training - one of the few education authorities to make clear and explicit policy statements regarding school libraries:

*1.1 Libraries are an essential resource within New South Wales government schools to support teaching and learning in the context of syllabus and curriculum requirements.*

*1.2 Libraries provide teachers and teacher-librarians with resources to teach the curriculum and students with resources for individual learning and recreational reading.*

*1.3 Principals and teacher-librarians are responsible for the development of an educational program and a detailed description of the support each library provides to meet the particular needs of the students of the school.<sup>7</sup>*

Yet the practice soon diverges from this policy, for example:

*Under a current NSW pilot trialling devolution of staffing from the state to school level, Loftus Primary School has lost its teacher librarian (TL), even while a new BER library is being completed. The TL position has been traded for extra administrative staff and a lower paid teacher.<sup>8</sup>*

Such variations and inequities will persist while there is no national data collection on school libraries. At the same time, there is ample international research that qualified and sufficient school library staffing are indicators of student achievement, independent of socio-economic factors. So the ongoing collection of reliable school library data at a national level would add balance and context to the socio-economically loaded NAPLAN data on the MySchool website; answering criticism levelled at the MySchool website for the narrow range of data used to identify school performance levels. It will then become possible to identify and address ineffectual policies and inequitable practices in regard to school libraries and their resourcing.

### Curriculum Reforms

As already indicated, the scenario where school leaders, ignorant of the value of teacher librarians or worse - at the mercy of departmental expediency, have replaced the teacher librarian with an unqualified teacher or school support officer, is becoming commonplace. Apart from the unfair exploitation of such individuals required to fill a role they are untrained and often underpaid for, this does not auger well for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum.

The draft Australian Curriculum highlights the general capabilities of: literacy, numeracy, ICT, thinking skills, creativity, self management, teamwork, intercultural understanding, ethical behaviour and social competence; all of which come into play when students undertake research activities within and beyond school, regardless of subject or discipline. ACARA has further stated that the Board will deal explicitly with

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.senioryears.sa.edu.au/pages/SeniorYearsHome/InformationLiteracyResources/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/curriculum/schools/libraries/PD20050221.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> <http://hubinfo.wordpress.com/tag/nsw-pilot/>

general capabilities within the national curriculum to avoid any risk that they will receive inadequate or unsystematic attention because they are supposed to be addressed 'across the curriculum'<sup>9</sup>. Adequate and systematic attention to the cross-curriculum capabilities will definitely be at risk in schools where the teacher librarian, with their cross-curriculum perspective and knowledge and their information literacy and ICT expertise, cannot become an important change agent in these curriculum reforms.

Teacher librarians are already playing a key role in senior secondary curriculum reform around Australia. In South Australia students now have to complete a compulsory Stage 2 Research Project at C performance standard or better, to complete the new SACE<sup>10</sup>. Additionally, 23 of 54 Stage 1 subjects and 38 of 63 Stage 2 subjects require students to conduct an Investigation or in-depth Study. The support of the teacher librarian in not only providing access to suitable resources within and beyond school, but also teaching students and providing professional development support for teachers in the requisite research skills and strategies, will be critical for students and teachers alike. I was seconded into the state office of DECS for my information literacy expertise and have been responsible for creating and delivering professional development and resources<sup>11</sup> to implement the Stage 2 Research Project to schools across South Australia. South Australian schools are quite clearly coming to realise the importance of whole school planning for information literacy in order to support student achievement at all levels and to prepare them for the new SACE. I would argue that this is analogous to what will be required to effectively implement the new Australian Curriculum – we need national planning for information literacy, perhaps based on the ICT literacy continuum promised in the Australian Curriculum: providing resources, learning scaffolds and meaningful and effective professional development to all teachers through the agency of properly trained and qualified teacher librarians in every school.

A previous senate inquiry, into 'the Role of Libraries in the Online Environment' (2002), produced a report<sup>12</sup> that failed to even mention school libraries, despite submissions from many individuals and organisations. Appendix C provides one of those ignored submissions which I co-authored and which points to the importance of school libraries in effecting the Digital Education Revolution. At the very least, teacher librarians are well-placed to educate all students about the importance of their digital footprint and how to access and use information safely, ethically and effectively.

In the face of considerable and well documented international research<sup>13</sup>, the potential of school libraries and teacher librarians to contribute to improving educational and community outcomes, especially in regard to literacy and information literacy, cannot be questioned. The issue is how that potential can be realised. Currently that issue is designated as a state government responsibility. This inquiry provides a significant opportunity to address that 'how to' issue and realise the true potential of school libraries and teacher librarians in the implementation of vital state and national curriculum reforms.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/Shape\\_of\\_the\\_Australian\\_Curriculum.pdf](http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Shape_of_the_Australian_Curriculum.pdf) p.12

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.sace.sa.edu.au/the-sace/students-families/the-new-sace#>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.senioryears.sa.edu.au/pages/SeniorYearsHome/InformationLiteracyResources/>

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2002-04/online\\_libraries/report/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/completed_inquiries/2002-04/online_libraries/report/index.htm)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.asla.org.au/research/>

## APPENDICES

**Appendix A** - Spence, Sue (2006) "Invest in school libraries to create 21st century learning communities". Access, ASLA, Zillmere, Queensland. Vol. 20, Issue 3, 2006 [reprint of article published in *Principal Matters* VASSP, Melbourne, Victoria. Issue No. 67, Winter 2006.]

**Appendix B** - Spence, Sue (2005) "Teacher librarians, an under utilised asset in schools". *Curriculum Leadership e-Journal* Curriculum Corporation, Melbourne, Victoria. Vol 3, Issue 1 7 October 2005.

**Appendix C** - Spence, Sue (2002), "Survey highlights major problems with library staffing " *AEU Journal*, SA branch, December 2002.

**Appendix D** - Spence, Sue & Mitchell, Pru (2002) "Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Role of Libraries in the Online Environment", August 2002.

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