



House Standing Committee on Education and Training

Committee Activities (Inquiries and Reports)

## **Inquiry into school libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australian schools**

### ***Terms of Reference***

To inquire into and report on the role, adequacy and resourcing of school libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australia's public and private schools. Specifically, the committee should focus on:

- The impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities
- The future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy
- The factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians
- The role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians
- The impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians

### ***Submission***

#### ***The impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities***

The provision of new school libraries in the government's *Education Revolution* stimulus package is to be applauded. Unfortunately, no provision appears to have been made to resource and professionally staff these new buildings.

The number of Teacher Librarians in schools continues to decrease since the 2003 ASLA/ACER Lonsdale Report, (*Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement: A Review of Research* by Michelle Lonsdale - a downloadable copy can be found at [www.asla.org.au/research/Australia-review.htm](http://www.asla.org.au/research/Australia-review.htm)) which identified, for example, that between 1983 and 2003, the number of Teacher Librarians in Victorian schools fell from 55% to 13% and there was a 50% decrease in the number of trained Teacher Librarians in Tasmanian schools between 1996 and 2000. The situation has not improved since this 2003 report.

Over the years, under various state and territory governments, many schools have had to choose how to allocate their staffing dollar and this has not always been to the benefit of the Teacher Librarian. In many cases, these professionals can be their own worst enemies – conservative in nature and service oriented, they are often behind the scenes - the engine driving the curriculum and not the sophisticated chassis which everyone admires.

Today, in schools where there are still school libraries, many are being staffed by well intentioned people with little or no formal training. The perceived irrelevance of the role of the Teacher Librarian then becomes a self fulfilling prophecy, with yet more people undervaluing this role within schools because they are not seeing the value of a trained professional at work in their school community.

I believe it will be three to four years before the full impact of the loss of a Teacher Librarian to a school will be felt. Schools can roll along using resources already available, without realising that new material is not being added. This will become more pronounced with the need to resource the National Curriculum when it is introduced. Who in a school will have the knowledge, contacts and time to track down the resources required?

State and Federal Governments need to be seen to not just value the building of school libraries, but to also be seen to value the role of the Teacher Librarian, the one literacy and information professional within the education community.

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

In many instances, a student's perception of the role of the Teacher Librarian sees them falling somewhere between that of a teacher and that of a parent. As a Junior School Teacher Librarian, I was often the first to find out when a student's parents had separated or family pet had died. Students you rarely saw in the Library during breaks, could be found curled up in the cushions, reading the literary equivalent of comfort food. In this "one on one" relationship, I often discovered family situations of which neither their teacher nor the Head of House were yet aware.

Teacher Librarians value add to what is taught in the classroom in resourcing both the students and the teachers. Teachers today are becoming increasingly time poor and a Teacher Librarian, who is continually investigating new educational and literary resources, is perfectly placed to draw relevant items to the attention of specific teachers. This ranges from non fiction resources, through websites, to novels and picture books.

The Teacher Librarian is the one professional with expertise in both literacy and information resourcing and yet is so undervalued by many in the school community. At a recent Early Years Conference I was appalled to hear a Grade 2 teacher tell me that her new Principal believed "reading to children during class time was a waste of time". It came as no surprise to either of us that she was looking to transfer to another school.

The success of the Premier's Reading Challenge in the states where it operates, bears witness to school cultures being driven from above. What hope do the children in the previous mentioned school have in learning to love and value literature with a Principal holding such views?

Since the mid 1990s, technology has been used increasingly in schools and in many instances, the Teacher Librarian has been pivotal in its adoption. Unfortunately, there seems to be a pervading belief that technology and books are mutually exclusive in a school/library setting. This is not and should not be the case, yet many are concerned that the role of the Teacher Librarian is becoming solely that of an IT provider, totally ignoring the value of fiction in the social and emotional development of the child.

Teacher Librarians introduce and guide students, teachers and parents into the richness of the literature available. This could be as diverse as an open letter to parents re a particular literature/literacy issue or alerting the community to exhibitions and events that could be of interest to the broader school population. On a daily basis, it involves working with the students as individuals, guiding and extending their reading across a number of years. With care and guidance, students who begin by seeing themselves as reluctant, can become committed readers, given the right exposure to literature and libraries.

As a Teacher Librarian, I saw my role to inform and resource the students, the parents and the teachers. I had developed a Resource Folder to support every unit of work taught at each of the six year levels. These would be updated or rewritten annually, just prior to the unit being introduced in the classroom. I would also be an integral participant in curriculum planning meetings, so teachers were confident appropriate resources would be available to them and their students when required. I would keep parents and teachers informed about issues surrounding the literature their students were reading, be it Goosebumps, Harry Potter or the recent Twilight phenomenon.

### ***The factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians***

Initially, I would like to point out that a Teacher Librarian and a School Librarian are not necessarily the same creature. A Teacher Librarian has formal training in the disciplines of both Librarianship and Education. A School Librarian is often someone with a Librarianship qualification but no formal training in Education. I began my career as a School Librarian and finished it as a Teacher Librarian. The Education component gave me a new perspective on my role within the school.

In the eyes of the general public, many see those in the role of Librarian to be introverted, conservative and redundant – in reality as a role it is becoming more important and should be attracting dynamic people aware of the breadth of experiences the role can offer. The perception I often encountered in student teachers or teachers new to our school and having come from a school with no Teacher Librarian, was what a wonderful life it must be to spend the day reading books and working on the computer.

There is also a common misconception that if there are no students in the library, the Teacher Librarian has nothing to do. In reality, over 40% of my time was spent on seeking appropriate resources, cataloguing and developing tools (e.g. resource lists) to support the teachers and the curriculum. Reading was done at home in my own time.

To my knowledge, there are no Teacher Librarian courses available in Victoria, yet in the mid 1970s there were at least four: Melbourne Teacher's College, Rusden Teacher's College, Ballarat and the Librarianship course at RMIT followed by a Graduate Diploma of Education. This is the fundamental problem facing successful recruitment of people to the profession.

To influence the recruitment and development of Teacher Librarians, the public perception must change. No longer the stereotypical woman in twinset and pearls, the Teacher Librarian needs to be marketed as a literacy and information professional.

Author Paul Jennings in a talk he gave many years ago, shared his bemusement that in Medicine, a children's doctor (paediatrician) is seen to be a specialist, whilst in literature, a children's writer is seen to be doing an apprenticeship, working towards becoming a "real" writer. The role of the Librarian has suffered a similar fate – nurturing women who introduce children to "kiddy lit" but leave teaching to the "real" professionals.

### ***The impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians***

As mentioned above, digital technologies are complementary to the other services provided within the library and the role of books and technology are not mutually exclusive. A professionally run Library recognises this and staff consciously include a broader range of skill sets into the formal library lessons to ensure that students can differentiate between resources and chose the most appropriate to meet their needs.

With the current focus on assignment research occurring online, students need professional guidance in being able to determine the accuracy of the information provided via the internet. For many years, students believed the same checks and balances that are used in the traditional "book" editorial process, were employed for information provided online. This was and is not the case. Students need to become more discriminating in their use of material found online and they need someone to guide them in learning these skills.

To support the literature being read by students, libraries can use technology to facilitate their appreciation by organising online chats with the author, encourage students to investigate the creator's website etc. This enhances the students' appreciation of both the story and the creative process.

Overall, I believe libraries are fundamental to a successful education system, as they provide students with a level playing field, regardless of social and economic constraints. A student who is a confident library user and reader, can and will, educate themselves, regardless of their other educational experiences.

## ***Personal Profile***

***Bronwen Anne Bennett [B.Soc.Sc (Lib), Grad Dip Ed.]***

My submission comes from 23 years as a Teacher Librarian within the non government sector and a range of voluntary roles within the broader children's literature community. This has included the roles of National President and Victorian Branch President of The Children's Book Council of Australia, Chair of the Australian Children's Literature Alliance, Chair of The Dromkeen Society and Junior School's representative on the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria's School Libraries Committee.

I currently run Show & Tell Promotions Pty Ltd, a literary booking agency placing children's authors, illustrators, storytellers and poets into schools and libraries.

In 1996 I was awarded the national Dromkeen Librarian's Award for services as a Teacher Librarian and in 2007 I was awarded the Euphemia Tanner Award from Latrobe University for services to children's literature.