



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.

This submission is the sum of my own personal observations and experience. I have been a librarian in the public and education sectors for some 40 years. My perspective is that of a parent, librarian and teacher/tutor of pre-service teachers. As a parent I understand the value of guiding young children through early learning with lots of information and literary experience. As an educator I have always determined that teachers should carry the baton handed on by parents when their children begin school, and help growing readers become independent, literate human beings. As a librarian in the public sector, I see the diminishment of teacher librarians' influence in schools as both demoralising for those involved, and causing a flow-on effect for public librarians who always take up the slack, struggling to help children and families meet their information and literacy needs, on a daily basis. I hope my thoughts will be received in the spirit given. To quote (and paraphrase) another notable northerner: "I'm from Queensland, and I'm here to help"!

- **the impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities**

The investments in school libraries have been a great boon to schools, in my immediate area at least, and have provided something that the schools would not have otherwise been able to achieve through normal budgets and planning schemes. However, the building program that has boosted employment for building trades and shelving providers has not been able to enhance the learning of students by adequately staffing the new library buildings. In fact, in some schools in my immediate area, the building of a new library has meant that library services may now be provided in ONE building instead of TWO, so the decision was made to sack one of the librarians. This, in a school that has children from Prep through to Year 12, where different skills and knowledge are needed to serve all children at their different levels of learning. I have not heard of a school that has added a library building, and consequently also added a librarian.

When my son started school 15 years ago, the library was a collection of (mostly donated) books, managed by a dedicated but untrained teacher aide. In an attempt to demonstrate support for library provision in the school, the new principal called for voluntary parental help to maintain the library and convert the stock to a computerised system. With advertorial encouragement in the school newsletter, that "no experience is necessary", recruits were given jobs such as adding stock to the computer system (not a regular school system, but one copied free from a homemade version from another school!), covering books, tidying and shelving. This is what constituted running a library for a school principal in 1995! It does not demonstrate any kind of understanding of the value of a library in a school. I don't think much has changed, except for the introduction of more computers, and now, a new building.

In a school, especially a primary school, a librarian is essential to children's reading development. In the classroom, children are learning the skills of reading – literacy – but in the library, under the guidance of the librarian in the school, they will learn how to use their skills. With the guidance of a committed school librarian, children will learn that the reading skills they may have struggled to gain actually can be used to experience more than their normal lives would offer. Children who learn to read for pleasure will be better readers in all ways, and will be able to think critically about all that they read. In the years they spend at school, students should gain confidence as readers, information literacy (the ability to acknowledge information need, locate appropriate information and use it to advantage), and competence as social beings as a result. Our education system should aim for nothing less.

School libraries that currently enjoy the services of good school librarians will be hugely enhanced by the recent investments in new libraries, but new libraries that are built with no plan to employ a teacher librarian will be nothing more than a new asset for the school. Good for the real estate market, if there's ever a boom in the market for schools!

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

Other submissions will canvas evidence from research both in Australia and overseas that supports the substantial contribution of a librarian in the school to educational outcomes. My observations are based on my own experience over more than 30 years (some of them in school and tertiary education, but mostly in public libraries.) In my experience, a school with an active teacher librarian produces students who:

- understand how libraries work and how to get the most from them
- are aware of themselves as readers and enjoy the pursuit of new reading experiences
- can appreciate the uses of text and images in many different literary forms
- possess some knowledge of the books they would like to read and are enthusiastic readers
- show signs of becoming independent readers and learners by being able to navigate the physical and the virtual library systems

- **the factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians**

When I was a school-leaver, the first “teacher-librarian” I met was a teacher who was tired of the classroom and wanted a quiet life. We studied together for our qualifications. It seemed to me that this was not the kind of person who would inspire children. There are many dedicated librarians in schools now. However, the die has been cast by the “teacher librarian” mould. It’s my personal observation that in many school situations the “teacher” half of that role takes preference. Individual school economies demand that staff need to be placed where they can be most effectively used, and the classroom wins over the library.

School management – and perhaps governments – need to heed the research that points to the real achievement levels of students who have the benefit of a teacher librarian in the school.

Academic qualification requirements for school librarian positions seem to be inflated – it seems no less that Masters degree is required. Despite this high level of educational qualification, new school librarians are largely self-instructed on the job, relying heavily on the professional associations and online networks of colleagues for development.

- **the role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians**

Schools that currently enjoy the services of a librarian “in residence” benefit from the collaborative nature of the librarian network. In any school district or local government area, there will be a collection of schools surrounding a public library service. Where there are children’s librarians and school librarians there is inevitably a network system in place. In larger centres, the professional organisations of School Library Association and Library and Information Association bring these professionals together to share skills, provide professional development, and network.

Schools that do not employ a teacher librarian are naturally not involved (unless some staffer takes a personal interest) in any activities that increase knowledge of informational literacy techniques, new technologies for learning, children’s literature, children’s reading interests and habits, popular authors or new authors on the literary scene.

In a local area, the impact of the missing librarian in the school is felt in a number of ways:

- Children come to public libraries with no idea what they want
- Parents (untrained in information literacy) attempt to compensate for their children’s struggles with school work by using public libraries, often with the idea that they’ll pluck a book off the shelf to take home to help with homework (rather like supermarket shopping)

- Usually following NAPLAN testing time, parents come to public libraries looking for ideas to help their children improve their reading levels
- Many people “window-shop” at supermarket chains (eg Big W) looking for attractive books, then present their requests at the library.

The latter alone is a sign that children are being underserved by their education system.

State Library systems such as Victoria & Queensland have developed educational services to support schools and to encourage use of state library collections. Interestingly, they enthuse about the popularity of their educational programs with teachers and teacher librarians. But don't teacher librarians provide information literacy and research skills programs for their own students? That bears investigating. It seems the popularity of educational programs in public (state) libraries directly correlates with the diminishment of real librarians in schools. It's cost shifting – nothing new – but there is no evident new funding in the public library sphere to compensate.

Most schools have a coach for some chosen sport, and the kids are given (I remember this) free footballs, or other playthings, or lessons, to encourage their enjoyment of the game. Not many schools have the same access to enticements to read, unless there is an active librarian in the school, pushing the books, liaising with public librarians, local bookshops, or publishers to get visiting authors.

The Commonwealth government's plans for a national curriculum should involve librarians at planning level to ensure that the learning of every student is adequately supported by resources in a library. The tendency to keep resources in classrooms does nothing to develop independent learning in students. Learning in the digital age requires students to gain the ability to filter vast amounts of information to find the morsels they need. There seems to me to be two ways to achieve this – either train every teacher to be a skilled researcher; or provide every school with a skilled researcher in the form of a librarian who can teach both students and teachers how to navigate the information maze to advance learning.

- **the impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians.**

This section should read the other way round – the potential for librarians to support and include digital technologies in learning environments for children in schools.

Digital technologies are a burgeoning industry, and someone has to interpret their worth for education and advise teachers and school management on their most appropriate use for education. Although the clever, humorous IT clips on You Tube demonstrate the machine ruling us, in the context of a school, especially a primary school, it is still imperative that teachers, and in this case teacher librarians, take the initiative in providing access and knowledge to effectively handle digital technologies.

As new platforms and media develop (almost daily) I would consider it a vital part of school management to have at least one staff member dedicated to keeping abreast of technology and informing colleagues. Teacher Librarians are uniquely placed to fulfil this role, as they operate in a wide network of colleagues who share experiences and skills (using digital technologies as it happens) and possess an enquiring nature that demands that all new things be tested before use.

It is disturbing to see the lack of time or importance placed on the pursuit of digital technologies for educational purposes. It seems that the introduction of computers is given the nod by school administration, but the use of the technology is not effectively explored for its benefit to young learners.

Maureen O'Shea