



Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/schoollibraries/index.htm>

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Terms of Reference and submission

To inquire into, and report on, the role, adequacy and resourcing of school libraries and teacher librarians in Australia's public and private schools.

Preamble

Before addressing the terms of reference of this inquiry, it is essential that all stakeholders have a common understanding of the current role of teacher librarians in schools.

There are 3 facets of the role which are of the utmost importance:

- a) **teacher librarians are qualified and experienced teachers**
- b) **teacher librarians are information literacy specialists**
- c) **teacher librarians are library managers**

What does this mean in practice?

- a) As teachers, teacher librarians have a **clear understanding of how students learn** and a **deep knowledge of the curriculum**, therefore they can develop programs to achieve positive outcomes for all students. They have usually taught in classrooms before becoming teacher librarians, so they bring this **experience** to their programming. This is something all teachers do. However, teacher librarians also have an added dimension in that they know and teach **all** the students in the school. This gives them a whole-school perspective which is unique to their role. This is further enhanced by the opportunities they have to **work with all the teachers** in the school to integrate library lessons into the whole student program.
- b) To be information literate is absolutely essential in today's world. However, the term, *information literacy*, though often used, is frequently misunderstood. It is often equated with information technology, but that is only a tiny part of the whole.

People who are **information literate** will:

- i) analyse their need for information and define exactly what it is they need to know, what are their terms of reference, what they already know on the subject, isolate the keywords and phrases which will lead to a successful search for information
- ii) be able to locate the information they need, whether in books, Internet, or other sources. This may involve an understanding of the organisational system of a library, including knowledge of the Dewey Decimal Classification System, an ability to use digital technology including data bases and the Internet, and ability to evaluate the data available for currency, bias and validity.

- iii) be able to select only the relevant material and organise it into a coherent presentation. This involves being able to fully comprehend the content of the information and to use higher order thinking skills to analyse, evaluate and select the information needed. It also requires and understanding of, and ability to use, the technological tools available. **The skills required to be able to become information literate are what teacher librarians teach.**

To fully understand the importance of information literacy, it would be advisable to read the whole of *The information Literate School Community: Best practice* edited by James Henri and Karen Bonanno (1999). However, Linda Langford's (1999) diagram on page 51 outlines something of what is involved in information literacy. As is shown here, to be information literate, one must be academically literate (able to read, do math, understand scientific principles, etc), technologically literate (able to use current technology as tools for research and communication), have information problem solving skills (involves higher order thinking skills), be culturally literate, etc. Information literacy subsumes all of these literacies. **This is what teacher librarians study and become specialists in.**

Lack of understanding of this important specialisation is apparent in the education system and particularly in principals. It is only when principals understand the value of teacher librarians and work closely with them that the school will fully benefit.

- c) As library managers, teacher librarians are responsible to the principal for the development and management of the whole collection.

In a typical school, the collection includes teacher reference books, home readers, guided reading packs, fiction and nonfiction books, magazines, journals, textbooks, equipment, digital resources (including websites and online journals), computer software and audiovisual resources. Depending on the size of the school, the whole collection can run to tens of thousands of items.

To establish and maintain the collection, teacher librarians need to use much of their expertise, e.g.in establishing the collection they use their knowledge of the curriculum, their knowledge of quality children's literature, their ability to source sometimes hard to find resources, their knowledge of reliable suppliers and their ability to work miracles with an often very limited budget!

The collection has to be continually monitored for currency, relevance and bias. The annual stocktake is a hands-on way of monitoring the collection. Audit procedures require the library collection to do a stocktake of the whole collection every 2 years. It is customary to do ½ each year as it is a very time consuming process.

The time and library assistant assistance time allowed for stocktakes is again dependent on the principal and varies widely from school to school. Last year, at School 1 I was allowed to close the library for the last 2 weeks of Term 4. However, that was because I had no RFF component. This year, most of my classes are RFF, so I will need to negotiate with the principal to

have time to do the stocktake. I need to negotiate every year for extra library assistant time. At School 2, the cost of a relief teacher librarian is put in as part of my budget submission and last year I was given 4 days free of classes to do the stocktake. However, I had the trained library assistant for her usual 2 days per week to assist me.

Because so much of the management work of a library is unseen, it often leads principals and teachers to underestimate how much teacher librarians do.

Unlike teachers (but like principals!), there is no one in exactly the same role in a primary school. No one is with the teacher librarian all day to see how many different things s/he does.

Each teacher only sees the teacher librarian when they bring their class to the library and only see the results of that one hour of the teacher librarian's time. The principal only sees the teacher librarian on brief, infrequent visits to the library, although they do see the teacher librarian's program.

No one sees the time teacher librarians spend with individual students in their 'management time', or see the many interruptions from class teachers and students seeking particular books, etc or the interruptions from booksellers, other teacher librarians seeking help, etc or the time teacher librarians take to set up displays and signage to make the library more attractive and more user-friendly. All these things, and more, are cumulative and unseen. Because of the unseen nature of much of the management role, the amount of time allocated by the principal to the teacher librarian for these tasks is cut down, as is the amount of library assistant time allocated. Principals need to be made more aware of the complexity and dual nature of the role of teacher librarian – teacher K-6 and library manager. How would a principal cope in the dual role of educational leader and administrator if they were cut back to 3 days with only 4 hours of SASS assistance time?!

1. The impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities.

Because of the move to **school-base decision making**, there is lack of consistency in the amount of money allocated to libraries, the amount of library assistant time allocated and the RFF component of the teacher librarian's timetable.

In many cases the huge increase in the cost of resources has not been factored into the library budget allocation. In one of my schools (School 1), the budget allocation has decreased dramatically, so that last year, I only received \$1000 for a school of 280 students – less than \$4 per student! Even with finding a relatively inexpensive source of books, the approximate cost of a novel is \$12. Some of the most popular ones are \$15! Non-fiction books range from \$25-\$35 approximately.

In School 2, where I work 2 days a week, I have a Library assistant for 2 days. In School 1, where I work 3 days a week, I have had to fight to get a Library assistant for 4 hours a week and that is only if the Senior Administrative Manager can spare her. In this school my management time has also been cut to the very bare minimum that is allowed by the Department, even though we have a very large collection in this school, because of the importance

placed on the library in the past. These allocations are simply based on the value the principal places on the teacher librarian and the library. The Building Education Revolution (BER) has had no impact on the library or teacher librarian in either of my school.

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

An extremely significant study by Michele Lonsdale entitled *Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement: a review of the research (2003)* is essential reading as background to addressing this question. Subsequent articles by Dr Ross Todd, Lyn Hay et al in *SCAN*, the teacher librarian professional journal published by the Curriculum Directorate K-6 of the Department of Education and Training, are also enlightening for anyone trying to understand the potential of school libraries and the potential contribution of teacher librarians to improve educational and community outcomes, especially in literacy.

However, I would like to share some personal comments related to a few of the conclusions in Michele Lonsdale's study.

- “free voluntary reading is the best predictor of comprehension, vocabulary growth, spelling and grammatical ability and writing style”(p.28)

In my experience, the **best** way to encourage students to keep reading on a voluntary basis is for the teacher librarian to spend time getting to know the students on a one-to-one basis, to spend time discussing the books they have read, and then, using their knowledge of the books in their collection, match the students with further books they know they will enjoy. **This takes time** and is one of the ‘unseen’ services which the teacher librarian happily provides. Unfortunately, because it is ‘unseen’ by the principal, s/he does not factor the time needed in to the teacher librarian's ‘management time’. So often principals see the teacher librarian as interchangeable with a library assistant, whose only task is to accession books.

It would help enormously if principals could take time to analyse and get to understand the difference between the two roles. This is especially important with the move to increase school based decision making over recruitment, staffing mix and budget.

- “the extent to which books are borrowed from school libraries shows a strong relationship with reading achievement whereas borrowing from classroom libraries does not”(p.28)

Teacher librarians work hard, using their knowledge of current publications and the known topics of interest to their students to ensure that the collection is attractive to all students and will encourage higher borrowing levels. This relies on two factors which are usually in short supply – time and money. The State Government could help in two ways. Firstly, allocate a tied amount of money per student to each school library. Secondly, adequately staff schools to prevent principals from timetabling teacher librarian positions to alleviate timetable issues, such as RFF.

The Premier's Reading Challenge has had a positive impact in my two schools, but to ensure its success takes a lot of time, e.g. marking the books so students know which ones in the collection are on the Premier's Reading Challenge list; making sure that there are enough of the listed books in the collection; publicising the program on an ongoing basis not only to the students, but also to their parents to ensure parental support and involvement; helping students to find listed books that they will enjoy; helping students fill in their online reading log, especially since both of my schools are in low socioeconomic areas and therefore not all students have computers at home; coordinating the program. As new books are added to the list each year, and as this is a State Government initiative, it would be helpful if some funds were allocated to schools who participate in the program each year.

- “collaborative relationships between classroom teachers and school librarians have a significant impact on learning, particularly in relation to the planning of instructional units, resource collection development, and the provision of professional development for teachers;”(p27)

There is often time allocated for teachers within the same stage to collaborate with each other on programming, but very rarely is the teacher librarian included. This is a huge waste of a resource, viz the teacher librarian. His/her experience, knowledge of the students, curriculum and the collection should not be underestimated. Time allocation for teacher librarians to program and plan with teachers is especially difficult to organise when teacher librarians work at two schools. The DET should consider making a time allocation to teacher librarians for this specific purpose.

Related to this point is the issue of teacher librarians collaborating with teacher librarians from their local Community of Schools. Many teacher librarians have long recognised the benefits of such cooperation, but have not been able to achieve it. The potential for this type of cooperation is obvious for a smooth transition for students from primary to high school in information literacy.

- To sum up, the future potential of school libraries and teacher librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes is very much dependent on **two essential factors** – the need for a **greater understanding of the role of teacher librarians**, especially by the State Government and by principals, and **the funding of a greater time allocation**.

The funding of a greater time allocation is tied in with a commitment from the State Government to adequately staff schools to prevent principals from timetabling teacher librarian positions to alleviate timetable issues. This is even more an overwhelming cause for concern where the staffing formula requires teacher librarians to work in 2 or more schools each week! On the DET's suggested current allocation of management time, teacher librarians are only allowed 48mins per day for management of a

library. However, this is at the discretion of the principal. There is therefore a huge variation in management time allowances! I would strongly urge the Inquiry to look in to the need to increase the management time allowance for all teacher librarians, but especially for those who are working in 2 or more schools.

3. The factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians

Recruitment

The widespread lack of understanding of, and respect for, the position of teacher librarian by both the Department of Education and therefore by principals leads to a diminishment of the position which makes it less attractive as a career option to young teachers.

As far as I know there is no mention of the role of teacher librarians and their specialist knowledge in any teacher training course. Furthermore, because many primary librarians work part-time in a number of schools each week, practicum students are rarely, if ever, given placement time with the teacher librarian in a library.

Development

I would like to record here my wholehearted support for the submission sent in by the Illawarra School Libraries Association and I would like to add a few words.

“Teacher librarians are also hampered by their allocated hours. In NSW teacher librarians are appointed according to a formula based on the number of students/classes in a school.”

Because of this staffing allocation, I work at two schools - School 1 Wednesday – Friday, School 2 Monday – Tuesday. However, School 1 had their Staff Development meetings on Tuesday afternoons and School 2 had theirs on Wednesday afternoons. I asked for this to be changed on several occasions so that I could attend, but this was not possible, so I missed out on professional development opportunities at both schools.

“Lack of consistency in the allocation of clerical support”

As already stated in section1, my experience of the inconsistency of allocation of clerical support is that in School 2, where I work 2 days per week, I have a trained Library assistant for 2 days per week. Whereas in School1, where I work 3 days per week, I was given a library assistant for 4 hours per week as long as the SAM did not need her. I had to fight very hard to get this allocation at School 1. Last year I had a library assistant for only 1 day per term!

While discussing library assistants, it should be noted that there is no requirement to appoint a trained library assistant. Any SASS can apply, whether trained or not, as it is only regarded as a SASS position. However, if an untrained SASS is appointed, the teacher librarian has to spend a lot of

time training that person, if they are to be useful in the library. This is very time consuming.

At School 11 had to fight to get the library assistant whom I had previously trained. Otherwise I would have lost the time I put in to training her and would have had to start training someone else. I have trained 5 assistants in the last 15 years plus taken Library Technician students from the local Technical College.

“Now that almost all central school library services have been disbanded or reduced in staffing, most teacher librarian professional development must be provided by peers.”

In the eyes of some principals, this professional development seems to be of less value than that provided elsewhere. This is shown by their reluctance in some instances to let teacher librarians attend. Being at two schools has posed a problem because neither school wants to be the one to pay for my professional development. Recently, I was told by one principal that she had no money left in the professional development budget. I am on the committee which organises these professional development days and we ensure that they fall on different days of the week so that teacher librarians who are at different schools, do not have to take time off from the same school each time. There are two professional development days in the Illawarra each year, both of which I attend. These are the only two I ask for a day to attend and yet I was told that there was no money left.

4. The role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians

Federal Government

The Federal Government has no policy that covers teacher librarianship across the nation and thus some states do not employ qualified teacher librarians in every school. Hopefully one of the results of this inquiry will be that the Federal Government recognises the need for qualified teacher librarians in every school, the importance and uniqueness of their role and the great contribution teacher librarians make to the education of students throughout the school.

State Government

NSW is one of the few states, up till now, where teacher librarians are recognised as being an essential part of the staffing allocation and the DET has provided a teacher librarian allocation to every school, based on the number of children at the school. How this allocation is used in the school is entirely at the discretion of the principal and is closely related to how much s/he understands and values the role of the teacher librarian.

The DET does not provide a defined policy outlining the role of a teacher librarian. Therefore no two schools use their teacher librarian in the same

way. The development of an official role statement would allow teacher librarians to be used in the best possible way to support the needs of all their school community and to maintain equity in the expectations placed on teacher librarians in each school.

The development of such an official role statement should be done in close consultation with teacher librarian representative bodies such as ASLA, ALIA, various local associations such as ISLA and the School Libraries and Information Literacy Unit, which is the departmental body responsible for a support network throughout NSW.

Although officers in this unit, viz. Colleen Foley, Lizzie Chase and Cath Keane, provide a wonderful service to teacher librarians, the unit is seriously understaffed which lead to severe restrictions on the support they can give and the services they can provide. There is no officer at a CEO level to advise on DET policies. This urgently needs to be addressed.

Local Government

Local Government has no direct influence, but local libraries often set up programs which encourage schools to visit and use the library facilities. This often depends on whether they employ a children's librarian and how proactive s/he is.

Local community organisations

Children's Book Council of Australia – South Coast branch

This is an excellent community organisation, run mainly by authors and teacher librarians, which is providing a number of excellent opportunities for school students. They use the Illawarra School Libraries Association (ISLA) website and listserv to maintain communication with teacher librarians. We are very grateful to Di Bates and Bill Condon, two local authors, for their efforts in getting this started.

P & C Associations

The P & C Associations at both my schools are hugely supportive. They give their time to work voluntarily in the library, encouragement in their support of special programs, and raise money especially for the library. Again, however, the final say in where the P & C allocates their money usually rests with the principal.

It is important that any efforts of the P&C are not seen as a replacement for adequate State funding of resources and proper trained staffing allocation.

5. The impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians

I would like to add a few of my thoughts to the ISLA submission, which I wholeheartedly endorse.

- The impact of digital technologies to enhance the role of school libraries began with OASIS. The changeover to this system meant a mass of work for the teacher librarian, but it also meant that s/he was in the vanguard of the digital revolution and, in many schools this continues to be the case.
- The introduction of the School Cataloguing and Information Services (SCIS) made cataloguing books so much easier and faster and freed the teacher librarian up from doing so much original cataloguing.
- Other technologies, such as IWBs, Connected Classroom, blogs, podcasting, etc, have all enhanced delivery of lessons.

However, all of these are simply tools and have not changed one of the basic roles of the teacher librarian as an information literacy specialist. If anything it has made the role more important. Students still need to go through all the information literacy steps, define the need for information, locate information, evaluate information, analyse and select information, organise information, present it and finally use metacognitive skills to analyse and evaluate the product and the process. Teacher librarians are the only specialists in this field in a school. They are unique and hopefully this inquiry will realise this and take note of the suggestions to enhance this uniqueness.

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