

*Submission to the House Standing Committee on Education and Training:
Committee of Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian
schools*

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Summary:

Teacher Librarians are a vital element in developing a sound and constructive learning environment in schools, primary and secondary, public and private. They are, however, routinely undervalued, with their dual qualifications not fully appreciated. The resourcing of school libraries is inconsistent. There is a vast difference between schools and schooling systems, and there is often resistance on the part of classroom teachers to collaborate in a productive fashion with the teacher librarian. Staffing levels, salaries, professional development, library spaces and resources vary considerably both within school systems and between them. This sets in place major issues for equality of access for students. In a situation where teacher librarians should be the keystone of information literacy, research and teaching support for students and staff, they are often marginalised and external to the teaching process.

Preface

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission into the school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian Schools. I am a qualified Librarian and Teacher, both at primary and secondary level, deemed eligible under the NSW Institute of Teachers, and the NSW Dept of Education and Training, to be employed as a teacher-librarian in a primary or secondary school. I am currently working with tertiary students studying to become teachers in NSW schools.

I would like to preface my remarks by indicating that I think that teacher-librarians, like the classroom teachers with whom they collaborate in schools, are undervalued and under-resourced. I do not think that the current political climate is one which is conducive to improving this situation.

School libraries vary greatly across both private and public schools, and the quality of the resources with which the staff in these libraries have to work, is subject to the financial realities of the budgets within these schools. Equity of access for all students is therefore jeopardised by such a variation in resources, staffing and funding. The standing of the

library, and the ability of library staff to collaborate effectively in the learning process, is therefore severely affected by the level of resourcing, and the support of senior teaching staff within the school.

There is obvious inconsistency of both resourcing and support, and also often peculiar interpretations of what constitute staffing expertise and qualifications depending on the nature of the school system involved. Instances of this can be found in comparing the small converted classroom one metropolitan public selective school can make available for a library, with the beautifully appointed, architecturally designed purpose built learning space in a comprehensive public high school elsewhere in the same city. Both schools have similar populations, and similar staffing ratios, but the constraints placed on one by virtue of the space available is immediately obvious even to a cursory glance. Team teaching in the first school is virtually impossible in the library, whereas up to four classes can share the second space comfortably and constructively in the second. A comparison between the layout and resourcing of this second school with the library resources available to several of the private schools, however, demonstrate the increasing inequity of access between those whose parents can afford to pay (or make enormous personal sacrifices to pay) for educational services, and the vast majority of students for whom this is never going to be possible.

The other issue that should be treated as a matter of concern is the number of schools who feel a library is no longer necessary, or do not deem it important to have a qualified teacher librarian available to collaborate with teachers and support individual student learning. Many non-government schools see no problem with staffing their library with library assistant, either qualified through TAFE with a certificate or diploma in Library Practice, or with experience as an administrative assistant. Worthy those these appointments may be, they do not constructively offer anything like the expertise a practicing teacher librarian can bring to the learning environment.

The role of teacher Librarians

In the best of all possible worlds, the role of the teacher librarian would be as a partner in the learning process across all “key learning areas”. Teacher librarians should be committed to being active and lifelong learners, and model that passion for learning not just for the students with whom they interact, but also for the classroom teaching staff. In partnership with the classroom teachers, they should map student needs to the relevant curriculum documents across the school span of years, have an understanding of how they should support learning across these documents, and how the resources with which they work contribute to and enrich the learning environment. They should also be able to contribute their expertise to whole school planning for information literacy outcomes. That these resources are no longer confined to paper, but encompass electronic learning initiatives as well, should go without argument. In many schools, teacher librarians are also given responsibility for maintaining the hardware and software which are crucial to elearning. It goes without saying that this requires a breadth of knowledge for which training has not always been adequate, and for which staff development is often exceedingly inadequate.

Teacher librarians suffer from the same perceptions as others in the wider library profession. Many view them as under trained people who cover books in contact, stamp them and put them on the shelves. In a school, teacher librarians are often perceived as “failed” teachers. Certainly, this is a perception that comes through informal conversations on a regular basis. The other perception is that librarians enter the profession purely because they want to read the books and do not like people. Teacher librarians undoubtedly do like books, but no-one would go into the profession if they did not also thrive on working actively with people and exploring new ways of learning. It is a crucial part of their role to ensure that students also develop an understanding of these newer ways of learning, such as social networking and Web 2.0. This means it is vital that they engage their classroom colleagues in constructive conversations and collaboration about the range of learning resources which can be utilised through the library.

Crucially, teacher librarians have a vital role in enhancing students’ critical thinking and ability to research, skills which increase in importance as students travel through their school career. These are skills necessary not just to those who will be looking to a tertiary education, but also for developing their readiness for work. This means that teacher librarians should also actively research the knowledges contained in the core syllabus documents in use in the schools, and the manner in which they can support learning in the classroom. By necessity, this means developing comprehensive knowledge of subjects as diverse as Science and Legal Studies. This is contrary to perceptions of many that if teacher librarians have a value, it is as “keepers of the flame” of the classic literature of some mythical canon.

Adequacy and resourcing of school libraries

As discussed above, school libraries are not resourced on an equivalent or equitable basis. In a stressed public school budget, competing priorities often see the library as a lesser need than basic classroom equipment. The range of resources, and the number and qualifications of the staff can vary just as much as the actual physical space and physical resources. Some schools prioritise electronic resources to the detriment of the variety required to cater adequately to all learning needs. Other schools understand the need for such a variety, but fail to adequately train staff to support the resources. Others still have closed their libraries all together, arguing that everything that is needed is available on the web and there is no need for outdated library structures, completely ignoring the vital role that an experienced teacher librarian would be able to play in the learning environment. Another characteristic is to treat the library as trophy, as do many tertiary institutions, to be proudly trotted out for ceremonial or photographic opportunities, but allowed to stagnate for lack of adequate involvement by senior staff in decision making, and no willingness to ensure library staff are able to access the valuable staff development that keeps teacher librarians on the cutting edge of collaborative and constructive learning. Having said this, it is my experience that there are a number of well resourced and supported school libraries within both primary and secondary public

schools. While there may be three or four staff, depending on the number of students enrolled, in most high school libraries, often responsible for multimedia resources as well as web and physical resources, primary school libraries are usually staffed by one teacher librarian, occasionally with some clerical assistance. Often the teacher librarian is only employed part-time, though they may have another position elsewhere in the school on their non-library days.

While this is often the scenario for public schools, and for systemic and community schools, the experience of some private school students is often of a library staffed with several specialist teacher librarians, able to draw on extensive resources and spaces in which to collaborate in the learning adventure. Stand out examples are that of The King's School, Parramatta, and Kambala, Rose Bay, but there are others as well endowed. This extreme variation between what is available to a student, depending on the school they attend, means that their experience of libraries, which may have lifelong consequences, are often shaped by what happens in the primary or secondary school library.

School libraries need the funding to enable students to access a range of current and relevant physical resources, not just books and films, but models, puppets, puzzles, DVDs and interactive learning objects. They need also to provide access to adequate electronic and multimedia resources such as research databases, Web 2.0 social networking access, and digital interactive learning resources. This means that hardware has to be able to cope with the demands made of it. The rapidly evolving electronic environment places enormous demands on library budgets, and drain resources away from the staff development needed to constantly update knowledge of how such resources can be utilised in the classroom and in the library.

Adequacy and resourcing of teacher librarians in Australia's public and private schools

The comments above have strengthened the case for ensuring that teacher librarians have appropriate initial training and qualifications. Currently, positions are often filled by teachers who are encouraged, but not mandated, to gain a teacher librarianship qualification, often through distance education via Charles Sturt University. These are often teachers of long standing with valuable classroom experience, but who begin with limited understanding of how their role changes within the school when they take responsibility for the library. While adequately addressed within the CSU course, and that of other Universities, these responsibilities are not always appreciated by the school's executive. Continuous professional development, and the ability to access resource funding within reason are the two issues that most teacher librarians will highlight when asked.

The Terms of Reference

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

The current feverish building programme includes many libraries. These will be no good unless they are adequately staffed by qualified teacher librarians whom can “value add” to the learning process. To do this they will need to be able to access online and physical resources to support this value adding. Pretty buildings cannot replace resources and know how. Endorsement by the school executive and of the relevant state and federal departments about the vital place of the teacher librarian and the school library, needs to be adequately carried through with tangible practical assistance and collaborative practices. If the executive does not model that collaborative approach, then the classroom teachers will not see endorsement the valuable expertise teacher librarians can offer or the role they can play.

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

Every dollar spent on prevention is worth at least ten dollars of cure. This is a hackneyed truth but one which should not be contested. Teacher librarians play a crucial role in supporting and extending the learning objectives of the school. In an era where we are already seeing the effects of long term systemic neglect of the school system, and the results of short term, political decision making which has seen quick fixes and ideology triumph for too long over real policy, we need to start putting back into a system which should be about ensuring that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have the opportunity to achieve their potential as constructive citizens. Teacher librarians are, if utilised correctly, able to work as agents of change. As they work across the whole school environment, and are not specifically allocated to a given class or group of classes, they can gain a holistic view of the teaching process, collaborate with classroom teachers to support both “information literacy” and active learning, drawing different years and subjects together, troubleshooting and trialling exciting new resources and learning initiatives, and providing a backbone to the school’s learning outcomes. This gives them the unique opportunity to identify and engage with students at risk, and become part of the early intervention process, especially in the literacy area. The earlier issues are identified and resolved, the greater the student’s chances of learning become.

Teacher librarians should be the innovator, and given the opportunity, should be able to contribute to the school community in developing the cutting edge of learning. They can do this by being able to take advantage of changes in technology and being able to explore a diversity of teaching strategies. Their role allows them the flexibility to be acquisitive about new knowledges, and develop these for collaboration with teaching staff. Social networking tools, such as blogs and wikis can be a valuable way to draw in students who may not otherwise contribute, therefore building on literacy skills, or enticing the reluctant into literacy.

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

Within NSW, teacher librarians are often recruited through enticing classroom teachers into committing themselves to a vacancy within their school, and an agreement to complete an approved course of study. Others are recruited through advertisement. From experience, advertisements differ in an extraordinary way from one to the next. One Christian community school wanted a teacher librarian with professional university qualifications who would also assist in answering the phones for the front office staff at lunch times, something which would never be asked of a classroom teacher. Some private schools, however, will offer a remuneration equivalent to that of a senior university lecturer, and the opportunity to work with state of the art technology, as well as a generous budget, expecting in return long but rewarding hours of service. In between are the public and systemic schools, with consistency of salary, and similar basic requirements, covered by the now dated 1987 school libraries policy. The major inconsistency is usually the library space, from leaking demountable with rotting carpet and dangerous flooring, to light and airy spaces purpose built with the aim of constructing a welcoming learning space. Once recruited, the inconsistencies continue. Different Principals will expect different approaches, and view the library staff in different ways. They may actively encourage a collaborative environment in which the teacher librarian becomes a vital cog, or they may feel that the teacher librarian is there purely to buy books and troubleshoot problems with the laptop lab. They will also view requests for staff development in different ways. Having been involved in a number of staff development opportunities, I have met teachers and teacher librarians who have been fully funded by their school, and others who have had to consistently pay for even the very basic training required out of their own pockets.

Like the resourcing of school libraries, there is clearly little consistency in salary range, qualification requirement and staff development of staff. This needs to be addressed if we are going to be able to attract the best and the brightest. An understanding that a teacher librarian, like all classroom teachers, needs to be able to enjoy working with a diverse and demanding client population is also vital. We do not want to hide in the library, and avoid the students.

Too many primary trained teacher librarians leave disenchanted that schools have only a part-time position, but frequently have enough demand for a full time librarian. This results in the staff member putting in full time hours but being remunerated for part time. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a shortage of teacher librarians, but it also suggests that there is a shortage of understanding and appreciation of the teacher librarian's role, which creates an environment where teachers are reluctant to pursue a career in the school library.

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

All libraries, not just school libraries, currently appear to be devalued by decision makers,

at all levels of government. As mentioned earlier, they are often seen as a trophy facility, but not always are they funded and supported in an adequate fashion. While teacher librarians appreciate that the financial pressures, especially at the moment, are extreme, and there will never be enough dollars for everything that a school would like to fund, libraries are often the first area to feel the pain. This is demonstrably true, currently, of University libraries as well. Public libraries are equally stretched as is the State Library of NSW, and those of other states.

Having said this, if all levels of government wish to address social dysfunction, ensuring that schools in general, and school libraries in particular, are adequately resourced, would be a constructive first step. Local community involvement is often sparse, especially as communities become disengaged through work commitments and lack of time. Organisations which rely on volunteers are all indicating that this is the case, not just in the school, but charities as well. The reliance on private funding, via donations or corporate support, can often lead to conflicts of interest. While some private schools have been fortunate enough to gain much private money, often specifically left earmarked for the building or resourcing of the library, the majority do not have these benefactors. Some may gain corporate support, but they would also be few and far between.

Many decision makers are dazzled by the hype surrounding electronic resources and the web, especially the potential for social networking, and the Google extravaganza. However, this requires infrastructure that still costs. It is not free. Nor does it adequately replace the nurturing role teacher librarians have in engaging students in the learning process. Without the teacher librarian as driver, the school library bus does not go. All the resources, electronic or physical, are merely tools in the learning process, and need adequate, carefully informed, involvement of teachers and teacher librarians working in collaboration. Government decision makers who do not endorse this, and continue the long term trend towards devaluing and under-resourcing schools and their libraries, for short term political gain, will no doubt not be around to face the consequences of their choices, just as those who have devalued our universities in similar fashion will be long gone when the price has to be paid.

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

Digital technologies are an exciting teaching adventure, which offer a range of wonderfully different tools for enticing the learner into the process. They are, however, just a tool. Like every other resource that teachers and teacher librarians draw on, inadequately resourced or poorly utilised, these are tools which will fail the student. The value of digital technologies lies in their ability to contribute to student understanding of the subject matter, what ever that may be. Social networking tools such as blogs and wikis allow students to collaboratively learn, not just within their own classroom, but also across the world. The NSW initiative, Book Raps, allows students to blog about a book, invite an author online, and share their experiences with students in a classroom on the other side of the state. These initiatives are not new, however, and have been a constructive part of our teaching culture for some time. What is new is the public and

government awareness of them because of the manner in which news media organisations and businesses have embraced them. Libraries have been doing this for years. Google, and other search engines, have become part of our everyday lives, but they are modelling their structure on databases librarians have been familiar with for years.

What is necessary is for Governments, decision makers at all levels, and school executives to “get with the programme” and understand the wonderful opportunities these, and other yet to be discovered initiatives, offer our students. To make a constructive impact, this inquiry needs to ensure that schools are adequately resourced to meet these challenges, and that teacher librarians are recognised for the value adding they offer their school communities. To do this, they need to be adequately remunerated, acknowledgement of the wealth of expertise they bring needs to be made, and their qualifications must be appropriately valued. In the same way that classroom teachers merit ongoing career long professional development, so too do their colleagues in the school library.

One of the other issues is the quality of the hardware teacher librarians have available to them. We would no longer cross the Nullarbor in a Leyland P76, yet every day we ask teacher librarians to work in library environments which resemble them, with computer technology which is the technological equivalent of the rotary motor. Converted classrooms and outdated computer technology and networks ensure that we do not get adequate “bang for our buck” when supporting the learning community in the school.

Conclusion

If, as committee chair Ms Sharon Bird, MP, stated “Teacher librarians make a significant contribution to the school community in a number of ways, including teaching information literacy skills and providing access to information and resources to facilitate learning,” then it is time that adequate resourcing was made available for them to do so. Likewise, their undoubted commitment to the learning outcomes in the school should be appropriately acknowledged and remunerated. Students and staff in schools need a functioning physical and virtual library space which supports learning, develops valuable lifelong learning skills, and gives our students the head start they need to have a bright and positive future. They will not get it if the present trend of under-skilling, and under-resourcing, continues. The inequitable spread of resources, expertise and access will exacerbate this through the inconsistency and variability of current school library facilities, staffing and professional development.

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