



A Response to the Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians

I am a practicing Teacher-Librarian and have played an active role in the profession for more than 25 years. I work in a public high school in NSW and I believe that Teacher-Librarians and School libraries are vital aspects of our education system. In the following pages I have included notes on the role of Teacher-Librarians, changes in the 21st century, staffing and funding concerns as well as the importance of recruitment and training issues.

This submission is focussing on the following 2 Terms of reference:

- 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;

with brief notes on the following aspects:

- the role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians; and
- the impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians.

Thank you for considering these comments as part of your inquiry. I would be happy to further discuss any issues related to the Teacher-Librarian and school libraries inquiry.

Sincerely,

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Teacher-Librarian and Head Teacher Welfare

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

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

The role of Teacher-Librarians in our schools is vital. A key role of Teacher-Librarians is to support students in the development of the necessary skills to sift through and evaluate the abundant array of information constantly surrounding us in our modern society. In the past, Librarians have managed a collection of print and non-print resources in a specific space, predominantly providing access to people within a given geographical community. In the 21st century this image is rapidly changing. The geographic restrictions do not apply as they once did, however the vital role of school libraries and Teacher-Librarians continues. Students still need to learn about the range of sources of information available and how to use them. Teacher-Librarians and school libraries, with sufficient funding, provide students with access to a variety of resources (books including encyclopaedias, dictionaries and atlases, magazines, newspapers, CD ROMs, online resources, kits, DVDs, etc.) along with the necessary understanding of how to make the best use of each type.

The Internet is seen by many as replacing libraries – this is a highly erroneous concept. The Internet provides a vast array of information however there is no clear or logical arrangement of this information. One description of the Internet is that it is like a library assembled by pack rats and vandalized nightly (Roger Ebert). The quality of information is also varied. In the 21st century we have access to information that previously only academics and/or highly placed managers would have seen. At the same time, as part of this information revolution, anyone, whether they have any knowledge of a subject or not, is able to publish to the world. Students need to be guided in the development of the necessary skills to discern the value or quality of the information and how to handle the abundance of web pages found in each search. Teacher-Librarians are information specialists – they are best placed to guide students in this area. Many students assume that the Internet will answer all their questions – Teacher-Librarians are often best placed to assist and develop student understanding of how to interpret and manage their information seeking activities. Classroom teachers, especially in high schools, simply assume that students already have the skills necessary to conduct research and respond to assignment work and are frequently more focused on covering syllabus content. The national curriculum material will only increase this concern with the amount of content and available timeframes to teach it. Teacher-Librarians can, at a minimum, support students at their point of need in researching.

Teacher-Librarians are also able to provide teachers with support in their roles in the classroom. As Teacher-Librarians and teachers are able to work together, the quality of education provided to students is enhanced. Allocating time for teachers and Teacher-Librarians to work together in developing programs, assignments and other methods of improving student skills is vital for Teacher-Librarians and school libraries to be effective educational tools. The school library is a hub where the different subject areas can overlap and students are able to see how different subjects complement each other. In my role I have undertaken an action research study into student assignments and research skill development. As a result of this study we confirmed the importance of explicitly teaching specific research skills to students. The link between the library, information literacy skills and assignment work was clearly demonstrated. As a Teacher-Librarian I have been able to support teachers in my school in improving student information literacy levels through both class interaction and in one-to-one interactions with students in the library.

School libraries, both in primary and high schools, are the key place in which students are taught the basics of handling information, developing the necessary research skills and, ultimately, the vital skills of evaluating and analysing the information surrounding them. These are skills needed throughout their whole life, not just to get through assignments at school. School libraries, in their role at the centre of the educational community, provide this guidance. Students are able to seek support, when needed, as they develop their independent research skills. Having a space that both allows students' independence, whilst providing a supportive, guiding presence, supports the concept that school libraries and Teacher-Librarians are vital to the educational process in Australian schools.

Literacy skills are important in all aspects of life, and increasingly so. We are constantly bombarded by signs and symbols that tell us where we can or can't go, what we can or can't do – students who leave school without developing vital literacy skills struggle to achieve in our

society. School libraries provide access to a wide range of resources that both encourage and develop many of the literacy skills we need in our students. Being able to provide a wide range of books for both recreational and information needs are one of the important roles that school libraries fulfil. Without quality school libraries students are restricted in their access to resources on which to build their skills. Students who come from homes that value reading will continue to develop their skills, however students from more disadvantaged situations and/or language backgrounds other than English may not be so fortunate. School libraries provide access to all members of the school community. Teacher-Librarians bring valuable skills to resource selection and maintain collections that support their school communities, offering a range of materials that support the different learning and reading levels needed.

Effective school libraries and Teacher-Librarians are able to provide wonderful role models of the value of reading good books. As students are exposed to quality fiction and non-fiction titles they develop skills of discernment as well as the ability to "get lost in a good book" – an important stress relief strategy. My school library is more active than ever. Each day the library sees hundreds of students coming through its doors, seeking information to support their learning needs, a space to complete their homework, or simply to find a book to read. During the mid 1990s, when I first arrived in the school just over 6000 titles were borrowed. In 2009, more than 19000 titles were borrowed. This, to me, demonstrates the importance of school libraries in providing students with access to quality resources and their vital role in supporting literacy development.

Ultimately the effectiveness of a school library will be in the way it is supported and staffed. For Teacher-Librarians to be effective teachers, guiding students and developing their information literacy skills, they need to have appropriate staff to support them in the running of the library. Administrative and/or library technician support are essential for school libraries to carry out their real potential. For Teacher-Librarians to be able to work with both teachers and students effectively, they need to have staff to carry out the necessary administrative tasks that occur in libraries every day. Students and teachers need to be able to rely on access to their school library and its resources; Teacher-Librarians need to be able to focus on their teaching role, along with developing appropriate policies and procedures for their library rather than worrying about the day-to-day administria that is needed to keep the library functioning.

I believe that Teacher-Librarians and school libraries are needed more than ever. In the 21st century, in a world moving faster and faster, we provide students and teachers with the necessary filters to handle the massive amounts of information constantly surrounding us. As students are able to deal more effectively with this information overload, they become more effective members of both our school and wider communities.

- **The factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians;**

I think it is vital that Teacher-Librarians are trained as both teachers and Librarians. The combined term Teacher-Librarian is an important part of the role. Recognition of this role, both in schools and the wider community, is an important factor in the recruitment and development of Teacher-Librarians. In primary schools, if Teacher-Librarians are mainly used as relief from Face-to-face (RFF) for classroom teachers, then minimal value is placed on the Teacher-Librarian – they are being used as "relief" not as Teacher-Librarian. It does not recognise the importance of having the Teacher-Librarian and classroom teacher working together to develop students' skills. Students need to see the collaboration of staff members to build recognition of the value of the role of the Teacher-Librarian. The idea of the Teacher-Librarian simply as a keeper of books is out-of-date and untrue – Teacher-Librarians in the 21st century need to be dynamic role models for students, demonstrating the value of lifelong learning, effectively managing information resource centres whilst guiding students in their information literacy skills development.

The training of Teacher-Librarians is an important part of this discussion. I have been a Teacher-Librarian for more than 25 years. I was fortunate that I studied at a time when I could train as a Teacher-Librarian as an undergraduate, as part of my initial teacher training. I was able to focus on my first choice of career – as a Teacher-Librarian, having been taught (and influenced) in

primary school by a dynamic, energetic Teacher-Librarian. Macquarie University, at that time, offered the option of studying for my teaching degree at Macquarie while concurrently undertaking library courses through Kuring-gai CAE (now UTS) – with all courses counting towards my degree and diploma.

Teacher-Librarians can now only train at graduate / masters level. The difficulty here is that it relies on people “retraining” to move into the role. There are many fabulous, innovative and dynamic Teacher-Librarians in our schools however I believe that there could be many more who have chosen to stay in the classroom rather than change direction once established in their subject area and go through the retraining process. Also the options for promotion in schools are limited. It is only through added responsibilities beyond the library that we can gain promotion. Ultimately, Teacher-Librarians need to leave their role in school libraries and take up positions in other “teaching” / subject areas if they are to move up through promotion positions. This removes many talented Teacher-Librarians from our school libraries as well as denying others promotion opportunities because they do not want to leave their school library position.

Professional learning for Teacher-Librarians to develop their skills is an important aspect of maintaining effectiveness. Regular opportunities for Teacher-Librarians to meet with colleagues to discuss new resources, strategies for teaching effective information skills and other school library related matters are vital for Teacher-Librarians to carry out their roles. Ensuring that Teacher-Librarians are able to attend regular meetings (preferably monthly but at least once a term) is a necessary component in the development of Teacher-Librarians. At present many of these gatherings are only attended by Teacher-Librarians who have Principals who recognise and support the Teacher-Librarians’ value in the school. This needs to be expanded to include all schools and Teacher-Librarians.

In schools it is rare for there to be more than 1 Teacher-Librarian. (In NSW high schools there needs to be above 1200 students before Teacher-Librarian hours are added to, and only then if the Principal allocates the time accordingly). To support the development of Teacher-Librarians in schools, and to provide students with the best support, increasing the number of Teacher-Librarians in schools would be a positive step. This would mean more time for both students and teachers to be supported in schools. It would also mean that Teacher-Librarians would be supported through having another teacher in the school with an understanding of the role, thus enabling a more effective development of both the individuals involved as well as the school community that they support.

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

It is vital that there is adequate funding provided for all school libraries. As the school library provides educational tools for the entire school community, it is central to the school, providing resources and service to all subject areas across the school, however funding is not always sufficient to support this critical role. Government, at all levels, are in a place that could provide the necessary support that would enable school libraries to carry out their roles more effectively.

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

Digital technologies are already having a huge impact on school libraries and Teacher-Librarians, and will continue to do so. Funding to school libraries is key, particularly if access to relevant online resources is to be made available in all schools.

Training / professional learning time that would enable Teacher-Librarians to keep up with the developing digital technologies is also an important aspect.