



Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

This submission addresses two points from the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry:

- The 'future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy' and
- The role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians.

It is written from a parent's viewpoint and expresses opinions that are widely held throughout the parent community.

I have two boys aged 16 and 9. The eldest attended a large state primary school in New South Wales, one of three in a town in the Hunter Valley. The youngest is currently enrolled at a mid-sized state primary school in the Melbourne suburb of Elsternwick.

In both schools the Teacher/Librarian position became a 'luxury' the school could not afford. The Teacher/Librarians moved into classroom teaching and the schools employed Library Technicians to administer and manage their libraries.

In the Hunter Valley School the Library Technician performed a purely administrative role, processing books and borrowing. There was a big emphasis on publishers' promotions and book fairs. These promotions seemed to be the primary source of new books and of funds to purchase them. As a result, new stock was of limited range and scope.

At Elsternwick Primary School (EPS) the Library Technician is passionate about books and literacy. She promotes reading, encourages interest in a wide range of books, takes a high level of interest in the children's reading interests and puts significant effort into book selection and display. She is an active and important part of the very strong literacy culture which exists at EPS. The whole school community works together to create and fund this culture.

While I am glad my son is at a school that works hard and successfully on literacy, I believe the differences between the two schools highlights what happens when school libraries are not well funded and staffed by trained Teacher/Librarians. Literacy becomes a matter of chance. It depends on the choices made by principals, teachers, parents and administrative staff.

Even the most passionate and committed Library Technician does not have the scope to work with teachers and classes to mediate and develop the discerning use of information resources. Instead the full

responsibility for fostering and developing literacy is pushed onto classroom teachers who are expected to do more but with less support.

While schools such as EPS make choices that help teachers create a rich literacy culture, other schools make different choices and literacy is compromised.

It has taken a deliberate and concerted effort to change my eldest son from being a reluctant reader and student to being an avid reader and interested student. He attended a primary school where highly committed and competent teachers worked incredibly hard but were severely constrained by funding compromises. While it is true that many factors affect each child's education, I have no doubt that the skills and support of a trained Teacher/Librarian working in a properly funded school library would have made a significant difference to him, his teachers and fellow students. Although his home environment was book- and reading-rich, when he moved into a school environment that provided and promoted a rich and broad engagement with all forms of information he 'discovered' the joy of literacy. Now in Year 11, he makes use of all forms of information for enjoyment and study. He is not passive. He makes choices and thinks things through.

Although this is only one boy, one story, I am yet to meet a parent who doesn't believe in the value of a personal, positive, mediated engagement with books and information from an early age. Literacy is of paramount importance. It affects us as individuals, as a nation, a society, as citizens of the world.

Why risk reducing literacy levels when the evidence strongly supports the value and importance of school libraries and trained Teacher/Librarians.

The cost of funding school libraries and Teacher Librarians so that **all** schools and students have the opportunity to experience and participate in a rich literacy culture is insignificant when weighed against the personal, social and national cost of lower levels of literacy.

However, I believe there is an opportunity to work with local government to make better use of school and public library resources particularly where communities are expanding and new facilities are being built. Share the resource. Build public libraries in new schools. Bring these two aspects of the community together. Keep the Teacher/Librarians, keep their skills and focus on literacy but share resources, bring the community together, emphasise the life-long value of discovering and sharing information, share the life-long joy of literacy.

This submission is from:

Priscilla Pettengell

