



**Submission to the
Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in
Australian schools**

**Submitted by
Sarah Mayor Cox
Bendigo, Victoria, Australia**

**Lecturer in Literacy and Children's and YA Literature
La Trobe University, Bendigo**

Bendigo Regional Director, Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA)

**Immediate Past President, Central Victoria Local Council,
Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA)**

Member of The Hub Campaign for Quality School Libraries in Australia

**Convenor of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY)
Honour Book Award Judging Committee 2009**

Summary of Submission

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to what I believe is an inquiry of vital economic and cultural importance and, utmost urgency to Australia. Although I will be drawing on my experiences as a teacher, teacher-educator, author, advocate, consultant and executive member of three peak literacy organisations in Australia, it is as a private citizen and parent that I make this submission.

As a member of the CBCA, ALEA, The Hub, and IBBY Australia, I fully support the submissions made by these organisations and applaud the scholarly effort that has gone into the preparations of these submissions. This scholarly activity has largely taken place on a volunteer basis, often at great personal or financial cost to the individuals and groups who have prepared these submissions. To that end I have not included extra research data, instead trusting that the Committee is able to recognise the extremely professional way this research and scholarly activity have been carried out. I have instead taken a narrative approach, not by way of nostalgic indulgence, but in the firm belief that the anecdotes I have carefully chosen to include in this submission will illuminate and add flesh to the irrefutable quantitative data submitted by other groups. I have included an excerpt from the Life Matters Program, December 2007, with Richard Aedy, which can be accessed at <http://hubinfo.wordpress.com/2007/12/10/a-most-prestigious-and-coveted-award/#comments>.

In April 2008 I drafted a letter to send to Julia Gillard congratulating her on being in office as Education Minister. I include an excerpt from this letter below because I believe it is relevant to this term of reference. I had intended to publish the letter openly in major newspapers around the country, with the backing of the Children's and Young Adult Publishing Industry. However, I decided not to send nor make the letter public at the time to ensure that it did not contribute to the issue becoming a political football. I include excerpts from it in my submission because I hope it can offer some constructive suggestions to the inquiry. I trust that the inquiry process will be given the respect deserved it by members of the opposition.

I have also included an electronic copy of an article 'Reading between the lines on changes' by Emma Shaw, published in the Illawarra Mercury on Tuesday March 2, 2010, as my comments in the article address some of the terms of reference.

I will be addressing the following terms of reference:

- 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.

I look forward to following the progress of this inquiry and defending, where I can, its 'apolitical' and well-intentioned motives. I will be able to appear as a witness at the

public hearing to be held in Melbourne at Parliament House, Legislative Council Committee Room on Thursday 29 April 2010 if called upon to do so.

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission, it is tendered with the greatest respect for the House Standing Committee process, and an enthusiastic and earnest desire to contribute to this debate of national significance.

Yours truly,

Sarah Mayor Cox

Addressing the Terms of reference:

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

In 1990 I worked for a year as the teacher librarian at Heidelberg Heights Primary School, in West Heidelberg, Melbourne, Victoria. The school was located in a housing commission suburb where a significant proportion of parents either worked part-time, were unemployed (some inter-generationally unemployed), on a disability pension of some sort or in and out of jail on a range of convictions. Many parents desperately wanted to do the best for their children's education, knowing that it was the best route out of a life of disempowerment, frustration and debt. However, as many others were either so distracted and distressed, as they lurched from one personal or financial crisis to another, they weren't able to provide the support and school-parent partnership so vital to educational success, or they had been disenfranchised by their own experiences of literacy underachievement.

Although I had majored in literacy and children's literature during my Diploma of Teaching and Bachelor of Education, I was not a qualified teacher-librarian. My proactive Principal sent me on a three-day 'crash course' of professional development delivered by the Department of Education for teachers such as me. I loved those three days, and found myself wandering off time and again in my mind to the library I dreamed of being able to create for my students when I returned to work the following week.

I loved my year in the library and like to think that I did much for the literacy levels of the children at the school, and their parents who hesitantly volunteered at the start of the school year to cover my new books, re-shelve current stock and help make creative literacy aides which could be used by teachers and children in the library. Many of these parents felt disenfranchised by the formality of the education system and I firmly believe that the informality of the weekly coffee and chat I was able to offer as we went about our 'work' for the library together re-engaged them not only with their children's literacy learning, but their own as well.

There was much I was able to do during that year such as; connecting children with texts that they needed and wanted to read but couldn't identify for themselves; providing a safe and calm oasis of gentle companionship and curiosity during lunchtimes for the bullied and the school yard 'misfits'; rewriting the existing borrowing rules to lend whole tubs of books to classroom teachers so that the children had access to extra texts for more than their one hour of library time per week; introducing them to new stories, authors and illustrators that they would not normally have chosen themselves; cataloguing the best of their own written and illustrated stories so I could place them on the bookshelves along with acknowledged classics and popular best-sellers of the time for borrowing by their peers.

There was however, more that I could not do, precisely because I wasn't a trained teacher-librarian. A qualification which I would have loved to complete if I had been

able to afford the time out of my career or the financial sacrifices needed to gain this qualification. My fear of, and inability to, understand the technical aspects of the role meant I was not able to catalogue new texts and audit existing texts in the collection. Unable to complete the recommended annual stocktake I was not able to formally present the Principal with an up to date picture of the 'holes' in the collection, borrowing patterns and recommendations for future purchases. *

My library budget in 1990 stretched to purchasing the shortlisted books from the CBCA Book of the Year Awards (4 categories of books with 6 books in each category – about \$400 from memory) and one set of the newly filmed and released 'Round the Twist Series' (Australian Children's Television Foundation – about \$150) on VHS tape. The children at this school needed many more texts than the 24 books and one VHS series I was able to purchase but my budget was already spent half-way through second term. I was fortunate though that my Principal was able to find funds from the Disadvantaged School program to agree to the replacement of the circa 1970 set of Encyclopaedia Britannica (about \$2,000 from memory). She did so, almost without hesitation, knowing that for our school community this purchase was a tangible commitment to social justice, as very few children had access to reference texts such as this, and it was prior to home computers becoming the norm.

You will have read in submissions made by other groups how well resourced independent school libraries are. This is precisely because these school boards and communities understand the value of intellectual and cultural capital and are prepared to fund and staff their school libraries to provide richly resourced environments. I do not think it is a coincidence that as State and Federal Governments have continued to reduce their commitment to specific funding for teacher librarians and library collections in State Schools, many parents from the growing ranks of the aspiring middle classes have chosen to send their children to schools which can boast such resources.

In the two decades since I began my teaching career I have been privy to some very disturbing anecdotal examples of the implications of reduced library budgets. As a result of school, State and Federal budget policies in the late 90s my fellow members of the CBCA Victoria Executive were horrified to learn of story after story of libraries being dismantled because of the advent of computers. One such story was of a staff-room table covered with neat piles of fiction texts labelled with an official note from the Principal to 'take freely from these piles before the books are given away to 'the Salvos''. When questioned about the note, the Principal confidently explained that children wouldn't need to read fiction texts anymore as the school had replaced its library with a computer lab.

More recently I have spoken with employees in school libraries, employed at a lower rate of pay, as School Support Officers, rather than as teacher-librarians who were surprised at the limited understanding their principals have of the role of the teacher-librarian as being someone who does more than just purchase and catalogue books.

In December 2007 I was invited to be part of a discussion on Radio National's Life

Matters program with Richard Aedy. During that discussion I was asked to respond to Libby Gleeson's comment that

"...nobody has mentioned the teacher librarians, and it's not just the people in the bookshops and the public libraries, as good as they are, it's also the person in the school who has specialist training in this area who knows the kids well because they're dealing with them regularly, and I think it's just tragic that in some states in the country, the teacher librarian is disappearing, and if government is serious about literacy levels and so on, then they should be investing more money into teachers who have library training".

I responded by saying;

"...Libby really hit the nail on the head, it's all about having mediating adults in the lives of children and for school children they are librarians and I was thrilled to hear that ... all these kids were going to get new computers but part of my heart sank and I thought, "Julia, give every school a trained teacher librarian and ... Australia will [rocket to the top] of the ... world league tables in literacy levels".

Richard Aedy: "Really? You think that will make a massive difference?"

I replied;

"Absolutely, the research shows it ... In Australia, we used to lead the world in terms of literacy, Victoria especially, and the funding has just not been there and if you don't put money into infrastructure ... I've just heard the most shocking stories of schools saying we don't need libraries. A recent educational architect who has got a huge tender in Australia telling librarians, "kids don't need libraries because they don't read books anymore" Now how did he get the job? That's frightening."

The current Federal Government have been criticized for over-spending since they were elected to office. This may be true in one sense but in another,

many argue that they are making up for at least 30 years of minimal visionary building projects. However, I am very concerned that many of these schools have been designed without due understanding of the vital nature of libraries. In fact in many instances teacher librarians on these campuses have either been actively discouraged from giving feedback to architectural designs in the planning stages, or their salient advice has been ignored. I believe this has laid the Government open to legitimate criticism. If the Government is to counter its opponents claims of blatant mismanagement of funds and misguided wholesale rollout of new buildings it MUST examine the impact of not embedding teacher librarians and fully resourced libraries in every new and existing school campus.

* 19 years later, again as an untrained teacher-librarian, albeit with a well-curated school library collection, a user-friendly library software package, regular technical support and 2 decades of further experiences of research and connecting children with texts I was able to demonstrate in my Annual Review of teaching interview with my principal a noticeable shift in borrowing data in the 6 months I was in the Camp Hill Library.

Terms of reference (continued):

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

In the climate of the Global Economic Crisis and the Federal Government's Education Revolution it seems a visionary yet highly logical policy to staff every school in Australia (pre, primary and secondary) with a full-time fully qualified teacher librarian. I am not an economist so forgive my lack of fully costed statistics here, but for small towns in Australia, the extra employment of a full time teacher librarian may represent an extra family moving to that town with all the entailing cultural capital, energy and community spirit that often comes as part of the package. Imagine how that would begin the trend to revitalise these communities, many of whom are desperately trying to keep their young people, or attract new young families to ensure cultural and economic sustainability. A policy of staffing every school with a teacher librarian could also form an important part in Governmental policy to address the problems associated with rampant urbanisation at a Local, State and Federal level.

In it's day, the Whitlam Government did much to support an 'Education Revolution' of its own: A revolution so radical that it resulted in huge shifts in understanding about the contribution Australian Indigenous cultures had/have to make to improving cultural and ecological literacy of Australia and the world. It was largely able to do this as a result of the vision and gumption of the Hon. Kim Beazley Senior in his role as Education Minister of the day. These understandings helped paved the way for Kevin Rudd's moving and statesmanlike apology to the Stolen Generation on February 13 2008. I was initially very positive about the Rudd Government's Education Revolution, however, you will see from the excerpts below that this initial hope has quickly turned to frustration and dismay at the way the Government has left itself open to ridicule and insinuation by not making teacher librarians and adequately resourced libraries the 'Hub' of their Education Revolution.

The letter I drafted to send to Julia Gillard, referred to in my summary of this submission opened,

"In 2007 one of your first promises was to roll out a laptop to every secondary student in Australia. Many of us cheered to think that finally, after so many years of neglect and cynical redirecting of funds to Independent Schools, our Federal Government was going to start rebuilding the educational infrastructure in Australian Schools. "Hooray!" we thought, a government who is committed to cranking up the Education System into a new gear. Your bold new plan had us eagerly questioning:

What came first the laptop or the learning? And this question led us to wonder,

“Hmm ... laptops ... if laptops are good , what might be even better? And that’s when good new-fashioned teacher-librarians came to mind.’

So how’s this for a bold new plan? Imagine this Julia ... Your government being remembered for reigniting the passion for learning and teaching in schools. How best to do this? How about conceptualising and funding the most revolutionary project any Federal Government has ever undertaken?

A plan so radical, yet so common sensical that not even the most cynical Opposition could oppose it.”

I then proceeded to outline “25 Good Reasons for and ideas of how to put a trained teacher librarian in every government pre, primary and secondary school in Australia”. These included:

1. Education is a child’s ticket to success (Give them a fish and they’ll eat for a day, teach them to fish and they’ll eat for life, teach them to read and they’ll teach the world to fish), give them a teacher librarian and they’ll ensure the world doesn’t overfish its seas.
 2. All literacy is based on competent oral language, what better context to begin a conversation, sung or spoken than by sharing a text (nursery rhyme, traditional story, board book) with a teacher librarian in a pre-school?
 3. Philanthropists/service groups could donate a library/teacher librarian and a fully resourced library to a school (and therefore its wider community), what a great way to kick-start a practical philanthropic movement in Australia?
11. Genuine Employment opportunities that would not impact negatively on interest rates or inflation:
- a. Publishing industry (editors, designers, publishers),
 - b. Furniture industry (beautifully crafted shelves, chairs and tables made from non-old growth forest woods, sourced locally to reduce the carbon footprint and to reflect the local ecology)
 - c. Building industry (a new library in each town)

12. Authentic reenergising of indigenous and other rural and remote communities – a community library in each school, a HUB for interaction, understanding, sharing, cooperation, empowerment and autonomy.

14. "Premier John Brumby should improve teaching quality and make sure resources are properly directed to where they are needed most, according to Sir Michael Barber, a former leading adviser to then British prime minister Tony Blair, and now the head of leading consultancy firm McKinsey's Global Education Practice. Sir Michael has urged the Victorian Government to sharpen its focus on improving its teachers: "The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers." We would add that a properly resourced library headed by a trained teacher librarian plays a pivotal role in building teacher capacity." – from <http://hubinfo.wordpress.com>

15. Re-dress the diminishing return of texts published for children or young adults. For instance if was 50,000 instead of 2,000 – we could produce better quality books more cheaply, knowing that enough libraries would buy them. These print runs may also ensure more printing can be done in Australia, thus reducing the carbon footprint of books printed off shore and shipped back to Australia, to undercut locally printed texts.

16. Save hundred's of thousands of dollars in Centrelink funds because Australian authors/illustrators could self-fund themselves with the royalties they make from bigger print runs.

18. Continue to build Australia's sense of itself as a multi-cultural and multi-faceted nation through the texts teacher librarians are able to 'hand-sell' to their students.

Possible Ways forward:

1. Quarantine a generous amount of Federal research money annually to thoroughly and longitudinally research and cost the economic and cultural implications of the suggestions made to this inquiry.
2. Establish Professorial Chairs in Literacy and Librarianship in university in every state and territory in Australia.
3. Write and implement policy designed to encourage tertiary institutions to provide librarianship degrees and certificates.
4. Fund places for our top undergraduates in science and arts to undertake post-graduate degrees in librarianship.
5. Call for a bi-partisan campaign at Federal and State levels to redress the gaps in library infrastructure and personnel in schools.
6. Establish world leading bench marks in best practise of teacher librarianship pre-service and in-service education.
7. Establish a cross disciplinary 'round table' authority to research, commission and disseminate on cross media providers for text-related programs, websites, and social networking software relevant to issues of librarianship.
8. Strengthen links between Maternal Child Health Care Nurses and school libraries to help facilitate a smooth transition from home to school literacies.
9. Commission federal financial officers to 'count all the beans' when considering the short and long-term impact of NOT staffing every school in Australia (pre, primary and secondary) with a fully qualified full-time teacher-librarian.