



Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

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The teaching side of school libraries and teacher librarianship

Cookson¹ suggests that there are four critical elements for the 21st century mind that are crucial for education to focus on:

Critical reflection – given their exposure to a huge amount of information online and through the media, it is too easy for young people to thus be fed a focus on celebrity cult, rather than seeing the world through multiple points of view and possibilities through critical reflection;

Empirical reasoning – thinking empirically is a form of social responsibility, solving real problems using methods of scientific inquiry;

Collective intelligence – understanding that knowledge is social and that the real basis of teamwork is the willingness to think collectively to solve problems;

Metacognition – the thinking skills necessary to look at things another way, to change tack if things are not working and to bring together understandings from various disciplines to find a worthwhile solution.

School libraries have been, and will continue to be, multifaceted educational tools designed to promote precisely this kind of thinking in the student's mind. The values upon which teacher librarianship in Australia operates include: commitment, integrity, responsibility and tolerance. In 21st century school libraries, the educational points of focus above will be promoted in these ways:

Commitment: students are called to a commitment to learning. Ongoing provision of an intellectually stimulating environment is a necessary element in allowing for experiential learning which leads to and reinforces in a student's life a personal commitment to learning. The school library and information services can be distributed across a school's campuses, accessible where the student is when the student seeks it, and as the teacher needs it. Access to electronic, print and audiovisual media will be a combination of both a distributed collection/service and centralised hubs to promote co-ordination of collections and services and to provide a place for community focus. Communities need shared places to exercise their various communal commitments: learning spaces such as classrooms, gymnasiums, theatres and performance spaces, communication laboratories and science laboratories, libraries and the like. Having a space dedicated to (though not necessarily called) library will continue to be a key need of schools seeking to promote 21st century communities of learning.

Integrity: students are called to learn with integrity. The ability to judge what is true from what is not, weigh value, understand context, decipher idiom, respect the learning and ideas of those whose work they encounter, and to adapt their thinking integrating all this underlies the pursuit of functional literacy across various modes: ICT, the written word, transcription tools such as keyboards or voice recognition programs, figure-ground discrimination not only visually but also linguistically and metaphorically. The

¹ Dr Peter Cookson, "What Would Socrates Say?" in *Educational Leadership*, vol 67 no. 1, September 2009, pp. 8-14.

teacher-librarian's expertise in working with classroom teachers to structure approaches to facilitating learning of this nature will continue to increase in importance.

Responsibility: students are called to take control of how they respond to learning and where this leads them to. How they evidence this response in behavioural terms and in general scholastic and specific assessment tasks extends to their academic integrity in working collaboratively but not in collusion, in engaging with others' works but always with due acknowledgement. The role of the teacher-librarian in working with classroom teachers to build protocols for students to facilitate this will continue to increase in importance.

Tolerance: students are called to learn within a secure framework of their school's value-structure, and to build their own value-structure as a process of maturation. Such structure and its security must be built upon commitment to, and integrity and responsibility within, their own learning which yields an openness to exploring and appreciating others' views and perspectives. The school library of the future will be a provider of and a bridge to a diversity of views and perspectives, cultural and cross-cultural ideas, to promote debate, discussion, creativity, and the inquiry into empirical evidence. Such provision will be the time-honoured role of the gate-way. The gate-way will be to published works across all educationally productive formats: electronic, print, audiovisual, and so on. The gate-way will be accessible as described under "commitment" above, integrated appropriately across learning environments. The school library will be both "home and away". The approach of guided inquiry in the context of curriculum delivery will underpin the pedagogical approach to building information and related literacies. The curriculum and the educational needs of the learner will be the major focus for collection/service building and teacher librarian-student interaction.

The librarianship side of school libraries and teacher librarianship

The transition from print to electronic educational resources, though gradual in Australian primary and secondary schooling at this stage, is anticipated to accelerate over the next ten years. When speaking of "school library resources" it is imperative to take this transition into account. The electronic resource, no matter how it is manifested, is a management challenge precisely because of its electronic nature. As Gregory² notes, the traditional skills of a teacher librarian selecting educational resources must now be augmented by knowledge of technical aspects of those resources, consideration of copyright and licensing issues that may be implicated, and also by familiarity with the various bundles of such materials.

Teacher librarians, as they manage electronic resource selection and access and, over time as resources date, de-selection, are assisting the entire life cycle of the electronic resource. Simply in terms of the technical services side of collection management, the demands of the digital resource age will be far more demanding on teacher librarians' professional skills than print media ever was. The role of the teacher librarian in Australian education to properly marry curriculum and resource, and consequently student and teacher access to such resources, will become increasingly important in terms of schools optimising educational return on such financial investment. Whilst electronic resources may be relatively cheap to reproduce and distribute, they are expensive to author and develop and maintain. Schools not investing in teacher librarians or support services drawing on the expertise of teacher librarians, will cope by an ad hoc approach which will see minimal educational return on their

² Vicki Gregory, *Selecting and Managing Electronic Resources*, Neal-Schuman Publishers, New York, 2000, p. 35.

investment. Employing teacher librarians permits a collegial use of resources by all teachers in a school. Not employing teacher librarians limits use of resources to individual teachers involved in the initial resource-selection, whilst those teachers remain at that school.

This higher-order ramifications of this aspect of the role in terms of policy development and renewal in the school library remain the province of the teacher librarian, who is called to develop and maintain these in a collaborative and consultative manner.

This has implications for education for teacher librarianship, in terms of knowledge-base and skills-base requisites accordingly.

Funding for school libraries in Australia

The degree to which funding is, at the operational end, administered by professionals best equipped to optimise educational return on the financial investment remains a question that funding bodies must be vigilant about. This is important in terms of the sort of transparency and accountability that a modern Australian democracy demands. The object of funding school libraries and associated staffing is student education. To fund physical infrastructure without the skilled and equipped personnel to best run it is not a responsible or desirable prospect either politically or educationally.

There is a case for maintaining up-to-date print collections. Where one has a print collection it is pointless having it out of date when using it to support curriculum delivery. Maintaining currency in print collections will be a priority for some time in Australian schools, especially remote, isolated and small schools with less-than-efficient Internet connectivity. Internet connectivity is no replacement, yet, for a decent print collection. However, the nature of a print collection is changing with changing curriculum needs and changing modes of curriculum delivery. One must be very, very clear on this point: a school library collection (print and/or electronic resources) is determined by the school's curriculum, modes of curriculum delivery and students' learning needs. The question of "what is the future of the book in school libraries?" will be answered justifiably by those criteria and those alone. It is important that the curriculum be put first, learners' needs second. The significance of student usage patterns of print or electronic resources is, empirically, almost entirely derivative from choices made by teachers in delivering the curriculum. A student will use whatever resources are the easiest (from the student's immature subjective viewpoint) to satisfy a teacher's demand on their time – and particularly so in secondary education. Usage patterns are driven by pedagogical application, and always were.

Systemic and schools' educational objectives, curriculum development and the evolution of modes of curriculum delivery cognisant of students' learning needs will be the chief driving forces behind the future development of school libraries in Australia.

To make the most of the "digital revolution" behind the "education revolution" the 21st century school library and teacher librarian are both necessary and desirable ingredients in every school big enough to employ subject-specialist teachers. And those not that big still need a professionally-supported school library collection of both print and electronic educational resources for curriculum delivery.

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