



writingWA submission to: the Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

For the attention of:

The Committee Secretary

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training

Parliament House

Canberra

1. Recent Policies and investments

The majority of Western Australian state primary schools are given the option of directing investment towards music, sport or their library, with these funding decisions being delegated to the administrative heads of the individual schools. Against these competing budget demands, the resourcing of libraries is increasingly neglected. There is little funding available to maintain or improve stock, and in the current environment, many primary schools in Western Australia not only lack the services of a professional teacher librarian, they will also be without a clerical officer to undertake basic operational duties. It is worrying to learn that now, due to budget pressures, high school libraries are also reducing their professional staffing levels.

It is often the case now that the responsibilities of staffing and funding libraries is assumed by P&Cs, untrained volunteers, or library technicians who are not qualified to provide the educational components. A reliance on volunteers not only impacts the quality of service being delivered to students and other teaching staff, but also results in libraries simply being closed for significant amounts of time throughout the school week. Ideally of course, school libraries should be open for at least 30 minutes before and after school, as well as lunch times.

The provision of books and other resources typically available within libraries, the provision of supported opportunities for students to learn the skills sets they require to effectively conduct research (and then be able to successfully interpret the results of that research), and the tailored instruction provided by teacher librarians within these processes, are all fundamental to best practice in education.

Libraries are not optional extras in education, and to treat them as such means that coordination within the teaching environment is lacking, students are deprived, and the nation suffers through a decline in its population's literacy and information literacy skills.

2. Future Potential

In a global economy and an information saturated world, improved and sustainable investment in the resourcing of school libraries - including investment in professional library staff - will be fundamental to achieving positive outcomes in education, and therefore to enabling a literate and information literate nation to develop.

Establishing basic competency levels for each year of student life, K-PhD, in relation to library use and research skills development will also embed the importance of questioning information read via any means. This is particularly important given the increasing use and reliance on Wikipedia and other web based information sources – where the widespread dissemination of inaccurate information can easily perpetuate fallacious thinking.

Increased and sustained investment in the development of school library resources will also support the successful delivery of the national curriculum – and the emergence of an increasingly literate Australia - by maximising opportunities to:

- value add to curriculum by building links to Australian content and Australian literary creators
- create and resource all-of-school environments around specific topics and themes
- improve efficiencies within schools by delegating these roles to informed/trained Teacher Librarians

3. Recruitment and Development of School Librarians

Studies show that Australia’s Teacher Librarians are both an aging population and a declining population. A factor influencing succession planning and the recruitment of school librarians must surely be decreasing employment prospects - if there are no jobs available for teacher librarians then there can be little incentive for individuals to invest in gaining the qualifications required to enter this field.

Recruitment of teacher librarians will be re-invigorated through increased and sustainable investment across primary and secondary level education, a focus on expansion of teacher librarian opportunities within primary schools, and by establishing a basic standard for the support of school libraries across the nation.

4. Role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians

There is a vast library community in Australia that works well in sharing resources, through interlibrary loans, and by sharing their holdings through enormous datasets such as Trove or LibrariesAustralia. School libraries have often not participated in such networks - perhaps because their role is specifically directed at education rather than resource sharing – but there is obviously an opportunity to encourage cooperation and collaboration across all libraries.

Ensuring that school libraries work more closely with the broader library community would work best if funding was tied to such associations, so that clear targets and benefits can be achieved. Ensuring the standards of school libraries both in primary and secondary schools requires funding and support at a state government level.

Longitudinal studies (conducted by Edith Cowan University) relating to the WA State Library's *Better Beginnings* family literacy programme (<http://www.better-beginnings.com.au/>) verify the huge benefit of reading to children in terms of acquiring language skills and literacy, as well as social adjustment and relationship building.

5. Impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians.

Also see comments under Pt 2. regarding Wiki and other internet sourced content.

The most important task for librarians in all libraries is to ensure their clientele know how to tell if the information they are being presented with is valid or not. This role has not changed, whether the information is delivered via illuminated manuscript, book or web.

Regardless of the method of content delivery, libraries will continue to maintain their role of supporting reading and teaching research skills. The most important lesson that can be taught is the constant and rigorous questioning of 'who am I writing to?', "is this information correct?", "who is reading what I am writing?"