

INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND TEACHER LIBRARIANS  
IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS



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## PREAMBLE

As a Teacher-Librarian for over 20 years, I can confidently say that one of my strongest hands is knowledge of the Library collection. This has grown to encompass digital and virtual resources too. This knowledge - along with deep understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, teaching styles and individual teachers' preferences - frames my professional performance.

Dual qualifications in teaching and Library Administration allow the Teacher-Librarian to

- Communicate effectively with teachers about curriculum, pedagogy and students;
- Plan, implement and assess student learning;
- Resource curriculum – both state initiatives and school-based priorities;
- Purchase appropriate resources to suit reading level;
- Catalogue and prepare items for client use;
- Promote resources in a targeted manner for maximum use.

While the Building the Education Revolution (BER) program is greatly welcomed by all of us lucky to work in schools, it is necessary to address the staffing and resourcing of new Library Resource Centres (LRC). Dual-qualified Teacher-Librarians, supported by technical staff, must be seen as necessary.

Australian schools' "vision for learning" for the 21<sup>st</sup> century centres on

- Turning information into knowledge;
- Learning how to learn, both from and with technology;
- Using higher-order thinking skills, critical thinking and critical literacy;
- Active and personalised learning; and
- Problem-driven inquiry.

The purpose of a school library in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to be not a teaching space, but a collaborative learning space: a place for the processes of learning, or knowledge-making.

The most effective way to achieve this is to have a dual-qualified Teacher-Librarian at the helm of a school's Library Resource Centre.

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

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

- Firstly, Teacher-Librarians are energised by the announcement of the funding for BER Resource Centres! We are excited about the possibilities opening up for our roles as educators and media specialists.
- The planned construction of BER Resource Centres, while VERY MUCH welcomed, does not address the staffing, funding and services to be provided within their walls. Professional staff are needed to organise both physical and virtual learning spaces, and to maintain them. This maintenance is an often-overlooked part of the role of the Teacher-Librarian, but a growing one in the digital 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- In responding to pedagogical imperatives, the BER Resource Centres are designed to cater for
  - large groups, small groups and individuals;
  - of various ages, learning styles and interests;
  - engaging in research, collaborations, production, presentations and even recreational reading ;

- and sometimes all at the same time! Professional Teacher-Librarians are able to provide access to a range of resources of quality to suit these varying needs. They also have the knowledge and skills to help individuals make the best use of the available resources.

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

- As information technologies become increasingly embedded in our everyday activities, users – especially young users - need guidance. They are the “digital natives” - we don't need to teach them how to use the devices, or the Internet, but we **do** need to teach them how to use them effectively, and broadly.

- This is all about **information literacy** – the skills of finding, evaluating and using information in the creation of knowledge. The concept of information literacy is embedded in the school curriculum.
- Information literacy, and the inherent skills of defining tasks, locating information, selecting resources, then organising, creating, presenting and evaluating findings have been taught in school libraries for many years – once from encyclopaedias and textbooks, and more recently from online and digital sources. The Internet can be compared to a giant encyclopaedia or library – BUT with the books all pulled off the shelves and strewn all over the floor! The most significant advantage that school libraries have over the Internet is **the human factor**. Where to start to make sense of it all? Your information specialist, the Teacher-Librarian.
- With the increasing emphasis on “learning how to learn”, and the aim of producing students with independent life-long learning skills, students need to be taught how to find, sort, arrange and present the information that’s out there to achieve their purposes. A dual qualification in Teaching and Librarianship is ideal for this.
- Access to quality digital resources, plus programs which train students in their effective and appropriate use, have become the realm of the Teacher-Librarian in most schools.

### The factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians

- Along with the devolution to schools of many departmental-level functions has come the re-allocation of school-based personnel, resources and funds. Some schools have reduced their full-time Teacher-Librarian to part time, with those hours or dollars going to other initiatives. My school (population 540 students) has a full-time-equivalent (FTE) allocation of 1.0 Teacher-Librarian, yet I am employed only 0.8 FTE. It is impossible to run a resource centre effectively, fulfil student and teacher needs, conduct regular information skills lessons and develop multi-media resources in 20 hours a week.
- I am fortunate to have the services of a full-time Library Aide. Without teacher aides dedicated to the library, many of the “library jobs” (like book covering, repairing, loans, re-shelving, setting up displays) would never get done. A school library needs a teacher with a strong understanding of pedagogy and curriculum, and child development, as well as Library administration, supported by a teacher-aide who keeps the day-to-day operations running reliably.
- It is my understanding that there are currently only 3 tertiary institutions offering Teacher-Librarian courses, instead of the 15-or-so there once were. I understand that two of these can be completed only on-line (although I stand to be corrected).

- As a result, many school libraries are being staffed by unqualified staff and/or volunteers.

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

- The support for Teacher-Librarians varies markedly from state to state. The differing levels of support from state governments and individual schools and their communities create inequity in the services and resources which can be provided to students.
- The Australian community of Teacher-Librarians is a highly pro-active and professional one, but is largely self-supporting. Here in Queensland, the School Library Association of Queensland (SLAQ) supports the establishment and growth of regional subcommittees; within districts we are part of local network groups which meet up to 8 times per year. Nationally many of us subscribe to the Oz-TL-Net listserv which offers support, advice and advocacy.
- It is a difficult thing to advocate and fight for our existence, when the schools we are in often have system priorities for funding and focus which somehow overlook our expertise in the information literacy field (in particular).
- The BER initiative calls for access to the school's facilities to be open and accessible to all members of the school community – teachers, students, parents and local individuals and groups – for extended periods and in a flexible way. This suggests even greater need for a Teacher-Librarian who is able to assist a wide range of people with a wide range of formal and recreational needs.

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

- The Internet offers many treasures, but there's an awful lot of extraneous material out there, which is often difficult even for adults to navigate – the peripheral, the irrelevant, the diverting and the deliberately distracting.
- Teacher-Librarians show teachers how they can embed digital technologies into their curriculum plans.
- Teacher-Librarians maintain and manage audio-visual and digital hardware, and advise teachers on its use – think data projectors, digital still and video cameras, MP3s, electronic whiteboards ...

- Teacher-Librarians contribute to the formulation of acceptable use policies, and are the main promoters of, and enforcers of, such policies.
- Teacher-librarians are at the forefront of teaching essential digital information and literacy skills in schools.
- Teacher-Librarians are the ones to whom responsibility falls for the whole-of-school approach to netiquette, privacy, information security, cyber safety and cyber-bullying.
- Schools need Teacher-Librarians to support a number of “just-in-time” technologies that are increasingly mobile and wireless.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

I commend the Federal Minister for Education, Ms Julia Gillard, on instigating this inquiry, especially in the light of the government’s investments in school infrastructure through the “Building the Education Revolution” program. It is timely, and I trust that the members of the committee will come to recognise and appreciate the professionalism, commitment, enthusiasm and unique positioning of Teacher-Librarians as agents of change in the increasingly complex world of digital technologies and multiliteracies.