



## Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

The inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian Schools is most welcome. Those involved in school libraries in Australia are being given the chance to state the situation in school libraries and hopefully this will result in school libraries being recognised for their importance in the education of all students in Australia.

I write this submission as a qualified teacher with a Graduate Diploma in Teacher Librarianship who has worked in primary and secondary government and independent schools over the past twenty years. I have also been actively involved in the promotion of school libraries and teacher librarians through being **President** of the **Western Australian School Library Association** 2001-2004 and **President Elect/President/Past President** of the **Australian School Library Association** from 2004 to 2009. I was the 2009 recipient of the biennial **Australian School Library Association Citation Award** for services to Australian school libraries.

During these terms of office I had involvement with many groups who had an interest in school libraries such as the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), Charles Sturt University (CSU), Edith Cowan University (ECU) and Teaching Australia. Whilst the groups were supportive of school libraries, it is still very difficult to get those who would have the most impact on school libraries to make a concerted effort to provide adequate funding for school library resourcing and qualified teacher librarians. Federal and state governments have the power to provide the funding as has been seen with the recent Building Education Revolution (BER) funding for schools to have new libraries built.

### Summary and Recommendations

- All Australian school libraries should have adequate funding to be resourced appropriately.
- All Australian school libraries should be staffed by qualified teacher librarians.
- All Australian students should have equality of education through access to information literacy and literature to raise literacy levels.
- Comprehensive collection of national data regarding school libraries and the effect a resourced, staffed library has on student results.

There are five main elements to the provision of school libraries in Australia.

- The provision of the library facility. The library needs to be a well designed building that is able to accommodate an appropriate number of students for the particular school. The size of the library will vary according to the population of the school, whether it is a primary only, secondary only or combined primary and secondary library and the individual needs of the school such as the accommodation of technology.
- The provision of suitable resourcing. There is a huge discrepancy between the budgets of school libraries. Government primary schools often have extremely limited budgets which do not allow them to even buy the most basic of print resources let alone have access to online databases such as encyclopaedias. There is no specified allowance for the resources in school libraries and it is at the discretion of the principal or managing bodies of the school as to what budget a school library is given. Although some schools are given generous budgets to resource their library, and for that everyone is most appreciative, there is a huge discrepancy which causes discrimination amongst students.
- The provision of qualified teacher librarians. It is again at the discretion of the principal or managing bodies of a school as to the staffing of the school including the library. Many schools have a part-time unqualified library officer or assistant, and although the work they do is greatly appreciated, they have no professional knowledge of the curriculum, no professional knowledge of the learning styles or needs of student's nor qualification for making informed decisions about collection development or technology requirements. So again those schools have students who are disadvantaged because the school library is not adequately resourced to allow for the educational needs of the students nor suitably staffed by teacher librarians who are able to assist in increasing the skills and knowledge of the students.
- The provision of Information Literacy. One of the key areas that a qualified teacher librarian is able to undertake with students from kindergarten/pre-primary to Year 12 is the ability to educate them as to how to find information and use it to research a range of topics that will be presented to them over the course of their education. The ability to locate and synthesise information has a direct effect on the student's education and their lifelong learning. Those who do not have access to those who can teach these skills are again at a disadvantage. Although these students may have access to excellent teachers for their core subjects, those teachers often have not had the training that is specific to teaching information literacy. Teacher librarians also have the ability to incorporate the use of technology into the process of information literacy both in the location of information and also in the sharing of the information. Qualified library staff are often at the forefront of technology in their school and therefore able to assist the students to use the technology effectively. For schools which have access to technology and thankfully this increasing due to

funds being made available through government initiatives, students need to be able to have access to teacher librarians who are able to assist them utilise the technology effectively.

- The development of a love of literature. Teacher librarians have the skills to promote literature to their students from kindergarten/pre-primary age through to year 12. They promote literature that is written by Australian and international writers, literature that will allow the student to develop a love of reading and very importantly raise their level of literacy. The creative side of a person's life is extremely important just as their academic life is also important –through reading students can expand their mind and because of the sheer joy of reading, develop a balance in their life. Through reading quality literature students are able to develop their language skills including spoken and written skills. Students may have access to excellent teachers of English but a teacher librarian will look at literature from a different point of view. Those students who do not have teacher librarian will not have someone in their life who can assist them develop this very special area of literature and literacy. Once again they will be disadvantaged.

Over the course of the twenty years that I have been a teacher librarian I have seen the deterioration of conditions in school libraries in some schools, especially those in government schools and particularly in the primary area. When I began my teacher librarian career, government primary schools had a teacher librarian in the school library. Now that is not the case. There is also no incentive for teachers in government primary schools to commit to study courses at university that will lead to them having a qualification in teacher librarianship because there are no positions available for them in the public sector when they graduate. Many who did qualify as teacher librarians and worked in government primary schools have moved to the private sector which seems to have a greater respect for the employment of teacher librarians and for having qualified staff teaching and managing their school libraries. Again there is discrimination between students. The fact that there is little incentive for people to study teacher librarianship has resulted in the courses that were run at universities around Australia to have also diminished so they are very few courses now available.

There needs to be a comprehensive study undertaken to determine the situation in school libraries throughout Australia. Charles Sturt University has tried to gain funding to conduct a survey but were unsuccessful in receiving an ARC grant. Edith Cowan University has undertaken a limited study with limited funds provided by ALIA, ASLA and ECU. The study had its limitations because the funds did not allow for staffing to develop the survey adequately nor staff to adequately analyse the results. There were a small number of schools that participated in the survey due to many schools only being staffed by library officers/assistants who neither have the time nor skills to contribute to the survey.

Two Australians who would be eminently qualified to undertake such a survey are Dr Ross Todd and Lyn Hay. Dr Todd has undertaken similar surveys through Rutgers University in the United States of America and Lyn Hay has worked closely with Dr Todd on other projects. Dr Todd's survey showed that the results of students were higher in schools where there was an adequately resourced school library which had a qualified teacher librarian. By undertaking a similar survey in Australia we would then have the information pertinent to Australian school students. We may also be able to see that many students are disadvantaged because of the state of their school libraries and any disparities could be rectified.

It is not acceptable to have students being disadvantaged because they attend a certain school. Many students around Australia, especially those in regional and remote areas but also those in urban areas, are disadvantaged because they do not have a well resourced school library that is staffed by qualified teacher librarians. The situation needs to be assessed and addressed and hopefully this will happen due to the understandings gained from the submissions to this inquiry. We need to make sure that all Australian students are given equitable opportunities to achieve their maximum potential.

Signed: A Ainsworth

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