



Secretary of the House Standing Committee on Education and Training  
House of Representatives  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

April 12 2010

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re Inquiry into school libraries and teacher-librarians in Australian schools**

I am an Australian children's author and would like to add my voice to those who are passionate about the role of school libraries. Thank you for the opportunity. I have been involved in the children's book publishing arena for over ten years so I can write from experience and from the heart.

The first two Terms of Reference are the ones that most fit my views.

- 1. the impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities.*
- 2. the future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy.*

I have been a visitor to school libraries over many years, first as a primary teacher and a parent, and more recently as an author visitor talking to children about books and reading.

Over that time, I have seen primary public school libraries where children were welcomed into vibrant rooms full of both fiction and non-fiction books; with colourful posters on the walls, themed displays of books and their authors. There was the buzz of children working on projects or quietly sitting in beanbags, lost in stories; or listening to stories being read to them.

The common feature of many of these types of school libraries was the school's teacher-librarian. She or he had been especially trained to use literature as the means to encourage and enthuse children about books; to be the constant factor in the development of educational outcomes like literacy.

Teacher-librarians would take the time to invite authors into their libraries as a way of linking stories to those who wrote them – to personalise the books, and to encourage young writers to take up their pens to write as well.

Even back then, school libraries had to fight for funding, but at least many principals and teachers regarded their teacher-librarians as a valuable and essential part of the school communities.

All this is changing. The trend for many schools now is not to hire qualified teacher-librarians. In some Australian states, there are no teacher-librarians; and no university courses for them.

There are schools where the books are disappearing from the shelves – whether from the lack of funding to purchase new books, or deliberate ‘dumping’ of those books to replace them with supposedly cheaper e-books (eventually), without consideration of the many works of fiction that will not be possible to replace this way.

Many school libraries, and the worst are in high schools, have become Resource Centres full of computers and set up for teaching with desks, chairs and whiteboards – space that was once shelving for fiction collections. I’m no Luddite. I use computers daily for research for writing, communication and contact. Of course, there is a place for computer research and writing in school libraries, but not at the expense of losing story books.

Teachers have told me of how principals in some Queensland schools, faced with less funding money, are compelled to strip the school of the library staff because the school desperately needs a full-time teacher-aide for the Prep-year classes. It is a terrible situation for young learners and a terrible choice for teaching staff, and so wrong. This would not happen if state governments maintained better funding levels for schools so libraries aren’t the first to fall.

So I ask the House Standing Committee members to consider carefully the importance of Australian school libraries to young Australians, especially in public schools and the small Catholic schools. These are the ones who struggle most from lack of funding, not the large private schools. There are many children in our communities who do not have access to books at home, and there are also young, very capable readers who need genuine advice on how to extend their range of book choice from someone they know and trust.

Teacher-librarians are like the forward troops in any battle, the foot soldiers, and maybe the engineers. They prepare the ground by encouraging and enthusing children to read. They have the skills to integrate literature into every subject area. They are able to advise which fiction books were most suitable for each child reader; and to teach them how to search for information in books and on the internet.

I believe that well-funded and resourced school libraries and properly trained teacher-librarians are essential for healthy reading and writing habits of young Australians. And even most significantly for their future, the development and extension of young imaginations.

Hopefully, the Federal Government will ensure more support and funding is made available before it is too late.

Yours sincerely

Sheryl Gwyther