Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

The **Australian School Library Association** (**ASLA**) in the **Statement on school libraries in Australia** (http://www.asla.org.au/policy/school.libraries.Australia.htm) sums up the role of a school library as follows:-

> 'The school library is a vital teaching and learning environment in the school community. The school library and its staff are integral to empowering students to become independent lifelong learners. Student learning outcomes are enhanced through the teacher librarian's acquisition and organisation of information resources, the dissemination and circulation of learning materials and collaboratively planned programs to integrate information and digital literacy.'

Further in the **Statement on school libraries and information and communication technologies** (http://www.asla.org.au/policy/school.libraries.and.ICT.htm) ASLA outlines the contribution which school libraries and their staff make to the use of information and communication technologies in schools:-

> 'School libraries embrace the continual development of new technologies and the opportunities they afford to improve efficiency and increase access to information and recognise the potential to foster lifelong learning, personal learning goals, inform decision-making, build knowledge capacity, innovation, creativity, inquiry and cultural continuity. School library programs are constructed with the knowledge that rapidly changing structures and the complexities of ICTs require learners to acquire and apply a range of multimedia literacies.'

These key statements are pertinent to the terms of the inquiry and I would like to comment on three of the terms of reference in light of the above.

1. The impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities.

School libraries are critically understaffed, many primary schools do not have a trained person in the library, and many are open for only limited periods during the school week. While under the current Federal Government building programme there will be many magnificent new school libraries there will, in all likelihood, not be the qualified staff to staff them. This is due in part to the lack of training institutions for teacher librarians (currently

only three) and also to the lack of funding for qualified staffing in libraries. Michelle Lonsdale (2003, p. 5) indicates that this is further exacerbated by:-

- a general shortage of teacher librarians (and other specialist teachers);
- the practice of schools using librarians rather than teacher librarians, or having staff with no library or teaching qualifications at all;
- teacher librarians being used in classrooms as subject teachers to fill gaps in staffing;
- an ageing profession, with retirees not being replaced by sufficient numbers of graduates; and
- added responsibilities for teacher librarians in terms of technology maintenance and student use of technology.

There is no requirement that a school library be staffed by a qualified practitioner yet research indicates that maximising the effect of a school library programme on student learning, teacher professional development and curriculum support occurs when the library is staffed by a teacher librarian and adequate support staff to support them. Scholastic Library Publishing (2008, p. 6) states:-

'Across the United States, research has shown that students in schools with good school libraries learn more, get better grades, and score higher on standardized test scores than their peers in schools without libraries. From Alaska to North Carolina, more than 60 studies have shown clear evidence of this connection between student achievement and the presence of school libraries with qualified school library media specialists.'

The International Association of School Librarianship (2010) has a page of links to research reports and other documents that show that school libraries make a difference to student achievement. There is a lack of clear data for the Australian context, but the evidence elsewhere indicates a clear connection between student achievement and a school library which is well resources and staffed by qualified staff. Libraries are not just or not even, in this digital world, physical spaces - they are their staff and their programmes which provide access to a range of quality resources (print, multimedia and digital) to support the school curriculum and more importantly which teach students how to critically evaluate and best use these resources.

Further, many schools struggle to provide the infrastructure required to deliver multimedia and digital technologies – while this infrastructure may well be a part of new buildings consideration should be given to how schools overcome these budget constraints. The Computers in schools programme goes a long way to doing this, but needs to be accompanied by funding which allows for the cost of technical staff support, ongoing licensing and software purchases and the replacement of hardware in a timely manner as well as appropriate training for teachers and students. Policy directions which assist schools to meet these requirements are also needed. Many schools grapple with issues of access and online safety for students. Government initiatives in this area have been good especially with regard to cyber-safety however, schools themselves and their libraries must embrace the hand-held technologies which are available and investigate ways in which they can effectively be used in schools.

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

The Australian Council for Educational Research 1997 report, *Mapping Literacy Achievement: Results of the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey* indicates that school library use is a significant variable in student literacy achievement:-

> 'Extensive use of the school library was associated with a difference of as many as 27 points to students' literacy achievements when compared with nonuse of the library.' (ACER, p. 207).

The British advocacy document **School Libraries Making a Difference** (2004) unpacks the role of the school library as:-
> '•To take a lead role in teaching and learning information literacy across the curriculum
> •To collaborate with teaching colleagues to embed information literacy across the curriculum
> •To provide targeted teaching for pupils and inset for staff
> •To provide an environment suitable for group and independent research
> •To provide a wide range of resources
> •To provide opportunities to browse and discover

•To stimulate independent learning'.
How can this occur without appropriate staffing?

Learning for the future: developing information services in schools (2001) includes in the role of the teacher librarian to 'be a curriculum leader and provide specialist or consultant assistance to administrators and teachers' (p. 60).and 'provide training and assistance to students and staff in the effective use of (information) systems' (p. 61).

School libraries staffed with qualified teacher librarians support the introduction of new curriculum initiatives, particularly as these initiatives encompass many of the information literacy strategies which the library has long promoted for the development of independent, lifelong learners. The impact of new and emerging technologies is perhaps the most important shaper of this role. It also comes from the information environment in which school libraries and teacher librarians operate. Their expertise in the use of technology and ICT in education stems from the very nature of their work.

Teacher librarians as information specialists with curriculum expertise are well placed to facilitate the shift to a critical thinking, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and personal and interpersonal learning framework such as that required by the Victorian Essential Learning Standards framework and the ten general capabilities (literacy, numeracy, ICT, thinking skills, creativity, self management, teamwork, intercultural understanding, ethical behaviour and social competence) to be addressed in the Australian curriculum. (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2009). A pedagogy which focuses on process and not content leads to greater emphasis on information literacy, information skills, thinking skills and students controlling their own learning and hopefully to greater student engagement. These learning outcomes have always been the focus of what happens in the library. The teaching of thinking and effective researching and use of ICTs has been a focus in the library.

Teaching students how to learn and challenging them to take responsibility for their own learning while providing them with skills frameworks and the ability to evaluate and use resources effectively contributes to student learning outcomes. The document ***Standards for***

the 21st-century learner from the American Association of School Libraries (2007, p.2) discusses common beliefs in looking at students as learners which includes:-

'Inquiry provides a framework for learning.

> "To become independent learners, students must gain not only the skills but also the disposition to use those skills, along with an understanding of their own responsibilities and self-assessment strategies. Combined, these four elements build a learner who can thrive in a complex information environment."

School libraries can facilitate this with a **Guided Inquiry** process for research and information seeking which builds information literacy and helps students to construct meaning, think creatively and solve problems and includes:-

- Greater emphasis on inquiry and experiential learning
- The development of Information Literacy projects which would document students' research skills and their progress
- A Library Programme which supports an inquiry learning culture
- Relevant, up to date resources accompanied by strategies for students to find and use them
- A curriculum which reflects the non content sections of the National Curriculum and focuses on information and digital literacy
- Clearly defined goals statements for the integration of skills teaching in to the curriculum.
- Sequential development of student information literacy, thinking skills and information seeking skills which fosters resilience and confidence
- Culture of sharing and peer teaching especially in ICTs.

And also:-

'**The continuing expansion of information demands that all individuals acquire the thinking skills that will enable them to learn on their own.**

> "The amount of information available to our learners necessitates that each individual acquire the skills to select, evaluate, and use information appropriately and effectively." (2007, p.3)

Libraries can facilitate these two common beliefs with a focus on curriculum.

- Resourcing which retains more traditional information sources, but which focuses more on the digital world and ways of accessing it.
- In the digital age the role of the teacher and the teacher librarian is more critical than ever in educating students in effective retrieval, selection and assessment of information.
- Skills teaching which develops lifelong learners based firmly on the ten general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum and the continuums of knowledge, skills and understanding for each to be developed by ACARA.
- A curriculum rich with practical work based around investigative learning exercises and less content
- A focus on a suite of critical literacies which includes not only information literacy, but also digital, visual, textual, and technological literacy.

'Reading is a window to the world.

"Reading is a foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment. The degree to which students can read and understand text in all formats (e.g., picture, video, print) and all contexts is a key indicator of success in school and in life. As a lifelong learning skill, reading goes beyond decoding and comprehension to interpretation and development of new understandings." (2007, p.2)

This highlights the critical role which school libraries have to play in developing a love of literature and reading in students.This is facilitated through **Literature Promotion** in areas such as:-
- Wide Reading programmes conducted in English classes.
- Annual literature festivals, Book Week activities and other celebrations of literature and reading
- Fiction Blogs and a greater online presence in the literary world
- Consolidation/development of book clubs, Reading Challenges and Reader's Cup activities.

Teacher librarians also have a role to play in the professional development of teachers. Ongoing professional development is mandated for teachers as a condition of ongoing registration to teach by bodies such as the Victorian Institute of teaching. This is both a costly

and time intensive exercise. The possibility of in house and at point of need training for teachers can be maximised by the using the expertise of the teacher librarian in information literacy, research skills and ICTs – all of which enhance what the teacher does in the classroom. The *ALIA/ASLA Standards of Professional Excellence for Teacher Librarians* (2005) outline the importance of this professional development role in all three sections of the Standards and in the following areas:-

1.3 Knowledge of curriculum

- have a comprehensive understanding of literacy, literature for children and young adults, curriculum and specific programs in their schools
- have a sound understanding of current assessment theory and processes

2.1 Learning environment

- create and nurture an information-rich learning environment which supports the needs of the school community

3.1 Lifelong learning

- empower others in the school community to become lifelong learners
- create and foster library-related professional development opportunities for staff

3.2 Commitment

- emphasise a learning and teaching focus in school library programs and services
- promote the profession of teacher-librarianship in their schools and the wider community

3.3 Leadership

- promote and nurture a 'whole school focus' on information literacy policy and implementation

3.4 Community responsibilities

- model the sharing of knowledge.

Published role statements such as the School Library Association of South Australia Teacher Librarian Role Statement (2010) and indeed any that I have seen both locally and internationally all list this professional development role. Teachers are mentors and guides for their colleagues, providing skills training in the integration of information skills and ICTs at point of need and at a time when it is needed.

As a profession the teacher librarian profession was among the first to develop standards of practice for the profession. These standards are supported by a wealth of documentation developed by peak library bodies to identify the role of school libraries and staff. It is an active and dynamic profession concerned to keep abreast of current educational and technological developments.

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

Digital technologies are an integral part of the library environment providing as they do, access to a wealth of material and opportunities to broaden student experience and collaborative possibilities. I refer again to the common beliefs about students as learners from *Standards for the 21st-century learner* ((2007, p.2-3))

Technology skills are crucial for future employment needs.

"Today's students need to develop information skills that will enable them to use technology as an important tool for learning, both now and in the future."

A focus on ICT/Learning Technologies in the library might include:-

- SMART Boards, with accompanying permanent PCs, installed and their effective use promoted

- More laptop trolleys/netbooks/personal digital assistants, etc. available for use.

- Greater use and accessibility of learning technologies with access through a variety of devices such as phones, ereaders and IPods and available online tools.

- Promoting the effective integration of electronic information resources and learning technologies into the curriculum

- Less formal professional development for teachers, but facilitation of individual exploration of emerging technologies in a supportive environment.

- Delivery of AV multimedia and digital services and resources to support the curriculum:-

- Purchasing of new technologies such as Ereaders to explore and trial for their relevance to the curriculum and to the use of relevant digital or multimedia technologies.

- Learning Spaces which have been created or reconfigured for greater flexibility. This might include more purpose specific spaces, virtual learning spaces,

multimedia centres, open learning spaces all equipped with infrastructure and technology support which might include data projectors, interactive whiteboards, small multimedia equipment and technologies yet to be developed.

Investigations should include the use of social networking tools which use the collaborative function of the tool where participants ask questions, share information, provide answers and support others to develop their knowledge in a controlled environment. These tools encourage interaction, collaboration information gathering and sharing and ultimately the acquisition of knowledge. Almost all students own a mobile phone, an IPod or other hand-held devices, but schools have generally been reluctant to promote their use. How can these be used to facilitate access and engage and excite students in their learning?

This is particularly apt in terms of the common belief from *Standards for the 21st-century learner: -* **'Learning has a social context.**

> "Learning is enhanced by opportunities to share and learn with others. Students need to develop skills in sharing knowledge and learning with others, both in face-to-face situations and through technology." (2007, p.3)

While we have certainly educated our students in the need for ethics and responsibility in the online world we have not to date embraced the possibilities of social networking and hand-held devices as an adjunct to our curriculum – one which recognizes where students are at and which maximizes access to information in a more cost effective innovative way. School libraries have taken responsibility for ensuring that students use information responsibly and ethically especially in the global world. They also in the promotion of critically evaluating resources will ensure that students use social networking tools in an educationally sound, safe and responsible manner.

The final common belief from *Standards for the 21st-century learner* which is critical for school libraries is:-

8. Equitable access is a key component for education.

"All children deserve equitable access to books and reading, to information, and to information technology in an environment that is safe and conducive to learning." (2007, p.2)

This is the foundation stone of what happens in school libraries, developed when a library:-

- provides a relevant, accessible, proactive and efficient service
- promotes the use of electronic resources
- assists students and teachers to develop independence and initiative in learning habits and information skills
- encourages and helps students and teachers to make the most effective use of the library facilities by creating a welcoming and harmonious environment and supporting the technology platform of the school
- actively participates in curriculum planning
- provides an expert, efficient and friendly library service
- provides equity of access for all users both in resources and physical access.

This can only occur when the school library is adequately funded and appropriately staffed.

I believe that teacher librarians make a significant contribution to the learning and teaching programmes of the school, both through their more traditional activities and through their teaching of thinking processes and their use and promotion of ICTs. The role of the teacher-librarian is ever dynamic both in context and practice. In the current educational environment with the imperatives of educating students for lifelong learning the school library is a rich resource which could be used to much greater effect in the achievement of national and local goals for learning and student outcomes. To this end I make the following recommendations to the inquiry panel.

RECOMMENDATIONS:-
1. That data on school library staffing and funding be collected so that there is a clear sense of the current state of play.
2. That recommended staffing guidelines be developed nationally to remove the current inequities in staffing
3. That the opportunities for training teacher librarians be improved in tertiary institutions.
4. That peak library bodies such as ASLA and ALIA advocate and promote the profession and that there be a concerted campaign to attract people to the profession.

5. That policy guidelines be developed to assist teacher librarians and schools in general to use the myriad of available electronic equipment - this is both cost effective, but also provides reinforcement of digital possibilities.

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