Submission to the "Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools"

My background

I am a qualified teacher-librarian who has worked in Victorian government secondary schools for over 30 years. In that time I have held a number of positions including Library Coordinator and Curriculum Coordinator.

Summary

At my school – Victorian Government Secondary school
- The impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities has been negative
- My principal wanted to staff the library with library technicians rather than teacher-librarians.
- Library staffing levels have decreased dramatically over the years
- The hours the library is open have been cut
- Students have decreased access to the library; impacting negatively on students' reading
- Students overestimate their ICT skills; they don't have good ICT skills knowledge
- Students lack information literacy skills; these skills have to be taught explicitly
- Teacher-librarians rare in local primary schools so information literacy skills are no longer being taught at primary school
- Teachers value what I can offer as a teacher-librarian
- I conduct professional development sessions for staff on information literacy and ICT use in the classroom; impacting positively on student learning and engagement
- Library budgets have decreased; meaning fewer resources per head can be purchased
- Expenditure has not kept up with inflation
- Demands on library budgets have diversified
- Advertised teacher-librarian vacancies have been unfilled

General
- Students who do not receive essential library and information skills whenever they come to the library are not developing the skills necessary for life-long learning.
- Effective learners are not just those who are knowledgeable but rather they are people who are able to find and use information as required.
- Not teaching students how to search for information is like sending them out into the world without knowing how to read
- Situation in government schools is significantly worse than that found in some non-government schools
- Lack of dedicated teacher-librarianship courses
- Shortage of teacher-librarians will intensify as many teacher-librarians are nearing retirement
- Teacher librarians have the multiple roles of curriculum leader, information specialist and information services manager
- Documented links between well staffed and well resourced libraries and student performance

Future

- School libraries need to be a government educational focus
- School libraries need to be staffed with qualified teacher-librarians
- Need to set minimum staffing and funding levels
- Need dedicated teacher-librarianship courses that have minimal HECS fees.

I laughed when I saw the terms of reference for this review; specifically the statement "the impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities". I am sure that the government expects a positive response to this statement. However the only impact on me and the library I am responsible for has a negative one. There has been no recent investment in the 'school library' or library activities in the secondary school where I work. "Rudd money" came into the school which allowed for the refurbishment of the home economics rooms and provided new computers and laptops to be purchased. The impact on the library was that we lost 13 laptops from the library; they were located elsewhere in the school; and the other computers (28 student use, 2 library staff members desks, 2 circulation desk, 2 library enquiry – student use) in the library were upgraded from computers that were five years old with computers that were only a couple of years old that were relocated from elsewhere in the school.

Overall, the impact has been negative because I have a school leader who has said to me that he does not regard the library as important because the students now have access to computers. When Jamie McKenzie (2010) writes that "Many school leaders are busily laying off trained librarians and replacing them with aides or simply shutting down the school library" he is describing the situation I am in. At the end of 2008 I had to battle for my position as library co-ordinator. My principal wanted to employ an additional library technician and have the two library technicians run the library while I would be employed to teach psychology classes, at the same. I involved my AEU sub-branch and we logged a grievance which saw the principal back down on his plans to only staff the library with library technicians but saw me lose my library coordination time allowance.

Staffing levels have deteriorated over the years. When I arrived at the school 25 years ago there were 960 students, 3.4 teacher-librarians and 1.0 library technician which increased to 1.5 library technicians when student numbers reached 1000. Now with 1200 students there is 1 teacher-librarian and a 0.6 library technician. We are providing more services and people expect more of us with less staff. At the same time the library budget has decreased dramatically because the money is being spent on computers. "Libraries are not important because students have computers" is the view of the principal.

	No. of students	Teacher-Librarian	Library-Technician	Co-ordination Time Allowance	No of students / EFT T-L	No of students / EFT Lib Tech
2010	1200	1.0	0.6	None	1200	2000
2008	1078	1.0	0.6	140 mins/week	1078	1797
1999	1032	2.0	1.5	480 mins / week	516	688
1984	960	3.5	1.0	480 mins / week	274	960

The decrease in staffing has resulted in decreased access for students. In the past the library was open to students from 8.25 a.m. to 3.15 p.m. each day; students had access before and after school, recess and lunch-time as well as during classtime. Now the library is only open to students during classtime and lunchtime. This has had a negative impact on student reading as they do not have ready access to the library when needed.

English classes require students to read for the first 10-15 minutes; the Year 7 classes require students to read at the beginning of every period. If a child finishes a book after lunchtime one day the next out-of-class access they have is lunchtime the next day. Most students are not organized enough to plan ahead with their reading and know if they will finish a book; so if they need a book they are sent from class to change their books. Having to change library books during classtime means that valuable classtime cannot be used for other purposes. Students previously would make heavy usage of the library before and after school locating information for homework and finalizing work before submission; this doesn't happen now. Students no longer have unrestricted access to their own school library.

Sara Scribner (2010) writes: "The current generation of kindergartners to 12th graders has no memory of a time before Google. These students are far more tech savvy than their parents and are perpetually connected to the Internet, but they know a lot less than they think. Worse, they don't know what they don't know. Closing libraries is always a bad idea, but for the Google generation, it could be disastrous. Not teaching kids how to search for information is like sending them out into the world without knowing how to read."

I can support what Sara Scribner says from my experience as both Library Coordinator and Curriculum Coordinator. Daily I encounter students who use Google but who are unable to effectively locate and manage the information they need. They are not information literate. In 2005, as part of an online AIM test (Victorian precursor of NAPLAN) trial, students had to complete an ICT skills test. Many students, particularly boys, answer positively with regard to their abilities to use programs that they had never seen before; they were overconfident even though they had no actual experience or knowledge. They didn't know what they didn't know. As an ICT teacher I have regularly found students using programs such as Microsoft Word without fully utilizing all aspects of the program. They undertake processes via the long, hard way without knowing the short, easy way.

This lack of knowledge is very evident when students are searching for information. They use Google indiscriminatively without refining their search strategies. They are swamped with information from the internet as well as books without having the skills to manage it. The students are not information literate; these are skills they have to be taught explicitly. In the past, students came from local primary schools with good information literacy skills having experienced seven years of library skills teaching by a teacher-librarian in their primary school, today qualified teacher-librarians in local primary schools are virtually non-existent with some schools not even having a functioning school library. In the 21st century information skills are more important than ever but students don't even have 20th century information literacy skills, let alone have the skills to effectively make use of 21st century Web2 information sources as well as the tradition sources of information such as books and magazines.

I am fortunate that while I have a Principal who does not value libraries and what I as a teacher-librarian can do; I have teachers who do value what skills and knowledge I can impart to students. They regularly bring their classes to the library so that I can teach information literacy skills to students in an integrated manner as part of their research process. Students are required to access information from a variety of sources including books and the Internet. Students also experience wide reading sessions with me that exposes them to literature that they might not discover by themselves.

In my role as teacher-librarian, I acknowledge that I cannot do it all on my own in a school with 1200 students; I also see my role of being more than just educating students; I also conduct regular professional development sessions for staff on ICT use in the classroom including using new Web2 technologies, as well as information literacy sessions; relating the sessions back to the principles of

teaching and learning and student engagement. I regularly work with teachers to embed and support the development of literacy and information literacy skills including ICT skills so that all students and staff are able to effectively implement the Information Process model (define, locate, select, organize, present, evaluate) which can be implemented in parallel with the E5 model (engage, explore, explain, enhance, evaluate). In addition, to support students and staff I have developed an extensive library website; including a large number of pathfinders for all KLA topics; which is available on the school's intranet.

At the same time as library staffing levels decreased the library budget also decreased. In 1995 expenditure was $22.56 per student; today it is $14.00 per student. Expenditure has not kept up with the pace of inflation; it has gone backwards while costs have dramatically increased. Whereas in 1995 I was able to purchase approximately two books per student, today I cannot even purchase one book per student. I cannot keep up with the demand of wide reading resources as well as information resources to support a curriculum for students from Year 7 to Year 12. At the same time demands on the library budgets have diversified as school libraries today are more than just repositories for books, they are an information resource centre where students and staff are able to access both books and ICT based resources.
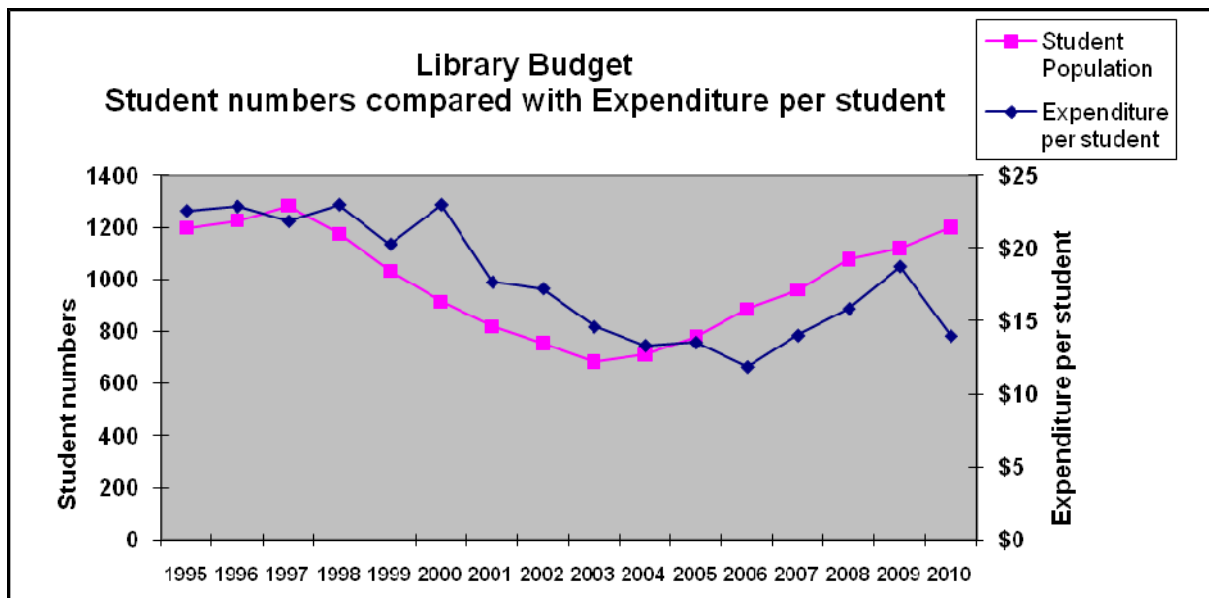
The situation needs to be put in context by comparing the situation with that in non-government schools. As a professional development activity several years ago, I visited two private schools to look at their libraries and the programs offered to students and staff. Yes, they offered more to their clientele but I came away from them feeling proud of what I achieved in my school library. The schools were a similar size to mine; one school had a library staff of 9 EFT and the other a staff of 5 EFT compared to me with my staff consisting of myself and a 0.6 library technician. The library budget for one area of the curriculum (Visual Communication and Design) at one of the schools was double what my whole library budget was at the time.

Prior to the current principal, the school where I am employed had a principal who valued school libraries and I what I as a teacher-librarian could do to enhance educational outcomes for students. A graduate teacher-librarian position was advertised for 2007 but the one suitable applicant went elsewhere even though we are regarded as a 'desirable' school. There was only one qualified applicant for the position as the dedicated teacher-librarian course that I undertook in the 1970s no longer exists. Anyone wanting to be a teacher-librarian has to undertake an information

management course, selecting library and child related units and then undertake an education qualification. Not an easy path in today's world of HECS fees.

Teacher-librarianship courses need to be available. There will be a dramatic shortage very soon as all the teacher-librarians who trained because of the 'Schools of the Future' funding in the 1970s are now reaching retirement age and there are no new teacher-librarians available. Schools need to be staffed with teacher-librarians as the dual qualification allows them to fully maximize the potential of school libraries as they understand both the library management issues and the educational demands placed on a school library.

Teacher librarians support and implement the vision of their school communities through advocating and building effective library and information services and programs that contribute to the development of lifelong learners. Teacher librarians have the multiple roles of curriculum leader, information specialist and information services manager.

If the government wants the future potential of school libraries and teacher-librarians to be achieved so that all students have improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy, then the government needs to set minimum staffing and funding levels. The association between library resources and activities and student performance as measured on external tests has been well documented in library and educational research. Schools with well-staffed and well-resourced libraries and with teacher-librarians acting effectively in their role as program administrators, teachers, and information technology access providers have higher results on literacy tests and other external measures such as Year 12 results. The ability to be information literate is more important today than it ever was because students and adults are exposed to more accessible information. Digital technologies have the potential to enhance and support the role of school libraries and teacher-librarians but this potential will not be achieved if school libraries and teacher-librarians no longer exist in the average government school in Australia.

Bibliography

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