

Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australian Schools



I forward the following brief, personal submission to be considered as part of this very important inquiry into the role, adequacy and resourcing of school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools. I write as a new graduate of Charles Sturt University (Graduate Certificate in Teacher Librarianship) and a recent appointment to the role of teacher librarian. I also draw on my previous 28 years of experience as a classroom teacher in NSW public schools.

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

The Building and Digital Education Revolutions are providing welcome funds and much-needed improvements to facilities as well as access to digital technologies; however, there is no plan on a national level to ensure adequate professional staffing and ongoing resource funding of libraries in schools. The billions of dollars being invested will not translate into equitable access for all students to information sources and literature unless the government also addresses the issues of adequately trained staff and equitable school library budgets in all states.

Proposed changes included in the new National Curriculum will necessitate upgraded resources. Every school needs the expertise of a trained teacher librarian who is an expert in constructivist teaching and learning pedagogy, information literacy and literature to ensure fairness and equity in resource provision.

The quick time frame for pushing through building projects has meant that some schools are getting new libraries even if they did not really need them, while other schools are missing out on getting a much needed new library as they also needed to replace demountable classrooms or build assembly halls. It is hoped that further funds will be available to needy schools in the near future to ensure that issues of inequality are addressed.

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

In my own school I aim to manage a resource collection that supports the core business of my school – teaching and learning. This includes having a detailed knowledge of literacy and literature and a focus on encouraging a love of reading and lifelong learning. I also see myself as a specialist in information literacy, with a unique whole school view of the learning needs of students. While teachers know their own students, the teacher librarian is the specialist who can collaborate with each teacher to develop inquiry-based programs encompassing aspects of quality teaching. Additionally, I provide specialist guidance in information technologies, copyright, plagiarism issues, the ethical use of information sources and the responsible use of social networking tools. The teacher librarian has the “big picture” view of the school which is imperative for developing a targeted, strategic collection of resources, including digital and print media, focusing on all age groups and specific needs across the school.

I see myself as a specialist staff member with professional training which allows me to make a real difference to student learning outcomes. School libraries and professional teacher librarians are essential resources for every Australian school in the 21st century.

The factors influencing recruitment and development of school libraries

As a newly appointed teacher librarian in the NSW Department of Education, I have received postgraduate training which has had an enormous impact on my view of the role of school libraries and teacher librarians. I feel it is absolutely essential that this level of training should be uniformly adopted across all states, ensuring all new teacher librarians are fully trained professionals who are recognised as leaders within their schools.

By raising the profile of teacher librarians within our schools, classroom teachers with strong leadership and organisational skills will be encouraged to consider postgraduate study in the field. The teacher librarian is no longer just the person who looks after the resource collection. The teacher librarian is an exemplary teacher, a collaborative leader and a proactive catalyst for change. These are the people we must recruit to ensure schools keep pace with the changing information needs of students in the 21st century. Professional training must include exposure to learning at this executive level.

The professional standing of teacher librarians should be recognised by executive teaching staff and used as an asset within the school. Including the teacher librarian in leadership roles within the school would encourage high calibre candidates to apply for teacher librarian positions.

The recent trend towards devolved staffing models is disastrous as it allows principals to employ untrained staff, which will ultimately result in a downgrading of the quality of service provided by the school library.

A crucial aspect in my personal recruitment, training and ongoing professional development, is the support provided by the Library Services team at Ryde State Office. The excellent professional learning and online support is essential to the development of strong library programs.

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

Teacher librarians are specialists in information literacy and this extends to digital technologies. The exponential growth of these technologies has not been matched by growth in literacy. Students and teachers need guidance in the use and application of digital technologies to achieve improved outcomes. Simply providing access to new digital technologies will not ensure an improvement in learning. Teacher librarians are the specialists who can collaborate with teachers to match resources with student learning needs. They can enhance outcomes by focusing on higher order thinking skills – encouraging thoughtful, creative and appropriate use of digital technologies, and assisting teachers to implement strong teaching programs reflecting aspects of Quality Teaching.

Conclusion

My dual role within the school as a teacher and a librarian is unique and essential. As a public school teacher I am concerned about the widening gap between services provided to students in public and private schools. The provision of well-resourced libraries, managed by professional staff supporting the teaching and learning of all students, is an essential requirement for all schools in the 21st century.

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Note: The views expressed in this submission are personal comments

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