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Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

Dear members of the committee,

I am a teacher employed by the DoE Tasmania. I have taught for over 25 years in secondary schools within this state. In my early years I was privileged to work at first Ravenswood High School (April 1982-Sept 1988) then St Helens District High School (Sept 1988 – 1996) both schools had then, a teacher-librarian.

In subsequent years I taught at St Marys District High where there was a competent library technician but no teacher librarian and Geilston Bay High School where there was a teacher librarian for 2 days per week. I noticed a significant difference in the behaviour of students and in educational outcomes at schools where there was a teacher librarian and schools where there was not.

The impact a teacher librarian can make on student literacy is huge, they are conversant with the curriculum across subject areas, they have a huge knowledge of the library resources they manage and they have the ability and the time to link students to the two.

Many a student has been encouraged, indeed introduced to the joy of reading by an active and interested teacher librarian. It may be that the teacher librarian has assisted a young student to find a book appropriate to their interest and reading ability, they may well have read them stories, shown them how to use a library well, they may just have made the library a welcoming, exciting and relevant part of the student's life.

Many secondary students can be reluctant book borrowers, particularly boys, who are more into the visual and technological mediums but a skilful teacher librarian can use both these to further students' literacy interest and capability as well as showing students the way that the different media link and interconnect.

As a teacher in the humanities areas, I have on many occasions benefitted from the wisdom of my teacher librarian colleagues both in extending my knowledge of new books, different styles of presentation and in locating resources to assist me to prepare and deliver a particular aspect of the curriculum. They have the library resources at their finger tips and despite my love of books and interest in relevant resources it is not possible for me to keep abreast of these developments without the advice and support of my teacher librarian colleagues. To move from schools where, at that time, the library was fully staffed with a teacher librarian to a school where this was not the case has meant that I have not had at my finger tips the rich level of resource and advice previously available to me. Not only has my lesson preparation suffered but so have the students I work with who do not have the library guidance they so urgently need.

As schools are funded for staffing without specific designations as to where that funding should be spent, the teacher librarian is often the person first sacrificed when smaller class sizes or student behavioural demands are such that school leaders make decisions based on 'in your face' problems rather than preserving teacher/student resources. Teacher librarians are frequently asked to teach in other subject areas outside the library and expected at the same time to maintain and operate the library as if they had the full week to do so, what unreasonable pressure we exert on them! In Tasmania, to my knowledge, there are few teacher-librarians, indeed some schools do not even have a fulltime library technician, the library is left for much of the week to 'look after itself'! What message does that give to students about the importance of books, resources and educational support??

With a teacher librarian available teachers are not only supported but students are encouraged to extend their reading, explore different styles of media resources, assisted to understand the relevance and importance of each and to move beyond just basically finding their way around but to becoming intelligent and active library users. Heading off to tertiary education, a secondary student from a school where they have had good teacher librarian guidance is far more able to access the bigger tertiary and state library resources and hence better equipped in their pursuit of higher education.

A teacher librarian has the possibility of providing a leadership role to staff within their school due to their familiarity with curriculum demands and resources across different subject areas. They may lead a staff in establishing good student practices for referencing and handling copyright, they may assist staff to access different writing and visual media competitions and extension activities, they may link students between schools or establish inter library loans and connections.

These days there is a large amount of electronic media both to keep track of and to ensure that what is available to students is appropriate. We must educate students in being cyber-safe and whom better than the qualified teacher librarian to lead the way? If they take up this role which they are well qualified to do, it then frees classroom teachers to concentrate on the teaching of that class without wasting time on web-searching and assessing the value and suitability of websites.

In break times a library can provide a safe and secure alternative for both at-risk students and those who for health needs or personal reasons may need a quiet and appropriate place to spend time. Library technicians are not legally able to supervise numbers of students and thus a rich resource which could be well utilised may be rendered unavailable. Another use of a library in break times could be for educational games, a teacher librarian could work with students to ensure what is played is age and content appropriate and in doing this they would be advancing those students' education as well as providing viable and constructive entertainment outlets.

To me a library without a teacher librarian is a wasted resource, a wasted valuable resource. The cost of the resources available in a library is huge and without care and attention losses incurred can be huge to a school. It upsets me greatly to find understaffed libraries, poorly looked after resources or on the other hand, good resources cared for by able technicians but under utilised due to the lack of teacher librarian guidance. I believe that student literacy in these schools cannot help but suffer. To me every school should not only have a library but also a teacher librarian, it is false economy to provide tools without the expert to best make use of those tools. It makes a mockery of funding which is allocated to provide resources if these are not properly managed, Government funding thus takes on the appearance of 'shop front' rather than being of real substance.

We have many small regional libraries in Tasmania, some even linked to schools but school children who use state libraries are a small percentage of the overall state library patrons so hoping that state libraries can cater to students when school libraries don't is not either sensible or appropriate. Schools where students spend most of their day should be providing libraries with trained teacher librarians to cater for student needs. Not only do state librarians not have the time for exclusive student care but they do not have the curriculum knowledge and expertise in handling and educating groups of students across different age brackets.

Could the committee consider that to ensure the importance of libraries and their contribution to schools, particularly in regard to the literacy advancement of students, that staffing of school libraries with a teacher librarian should be increased by providing specified additional funding to the school so that there will not be conflict between the library and potential class sizes and student behavioural demands. If funding is kept as part of the overall school resource package the library will always be the poor cousin.

Yours faithfully

Patricia Corby