

INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND TEACHER LIBRARIANS IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

SUBMISSION FROM WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF TEACHER LIBRARIANS (WATL) (NSW)

WATL (NSW) is a professional association in the western area of NSW. This association has members from all areas of education including DET, Catholic and Independent sectors. The schools range from one teacher schools in isolated communities to large high schools in major regional centres.

The size and quality of school libraries vary greatly and are staffed by a range of personnel including qualified teacher librarians, teachers, ancillary staff, parent volunteers or no staff.

In the Western region of NSW, there are demographic factors that should be taken into consideration. These include large indigenous enrolments and the low socio-economic backgrounds of many children. This results in significant problems concerning literacy, numeracy and social development.

Many library staff in this vast region are totally reliant on the local networks within their localities for professional support, or look to the WATL group for a regional support network.

Terms of reference

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

Many small schools have been funded for new libraries under the BER. The schools have had no input into the planning or construction phase. However, many of these schools do not have a qualified teacher librarian to oversee the stocking of resources or day to day running of the new facilities.

Further, many schools lack a budget to stock the new libraries or staff to oversee the running of the library.

The divide between the information rich and the information poor is widening alarmingly. Large urban schools in the independent sector have the financial largesse to extend to their libraries, and are funding a large range of current resources for their libraries, as well as enabling research by and professional development for their library professionals. Should this continue, then communities with small rural government schools will be hugely disadvantaged. Lack of support and professional development for incumbents, little to no training and a poor understanding of the vital role of the teacher librarian will see the demise of the small school library, its teacher librarian, and any understanding of information literacy in its students. The flow on effect will be dire, and students from these schools will find universities harder to enter.

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

Studies have shown that students in schools with qualified teacher librarians have higher literacy levels. Teacher librarians are specialists in recommending literature to students and having students read for pleasure is a sure way to improve a student's creative writing skills. The success of many literacy programmes in schools depends on the involvement of school library staff. In the digital age, all students need to be information literate. Teacher librarians are specialists in teaching these skills to students. Good results in the HSC are often correlated to schools with well resourced libraries and qualified library staff to educate students to become independent learners. A commitment to continue staffing school libraries with qualified teacher librarians will ensure students have every opportunity to reach maximum potential. Teacher librarians perform a multitude of tasks in western schools, and are often spread very thinly. Their goodwill extends beyond the library, and schools benefit and draw from their life experiences and depth of knowledge.

Many school libraries have been feeling the financial pinch for some years. School managers who divert possible library funding into infrastructure with the delusion that the internet can replace the library, are doing untold harm, the repercussions of which will affect the community long after these managers have departed.

Teacher librarians are often the hardest working members of staff in their schools, yet are constantly having to justify their positions. They consistently work long hours without a break, do favours for other staff, take students or classes at a moment's notice, and move heaven and earth to help out a colleague. Yet their working conditions are constantly undermined, and they are being asked to do even more. They are information literacy specialists, experts in quality literature for students, and the best resource for classroom teachers. As crucial players in the whole education of students, they cannot be replaced with buildings, literacy programmes or clerical staff.

3. Factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians.

Many teacher librarians in Western NSW operate in hard to staff areas, schools that have difficulty attracting new teachers, and keeping young staff. A number are also reaching retirement age. This will have a direct impact on libraries over the next ten years. There is a need now for an undergraduate course to be reinstated to allow younger people to train in this profession as teacher librarians. This type of course would complement the post-graduate course which attracts more mature age teachers. The retirement of many qualified teacher librarians will have a great impact on many of

the schools in the region. So much knowledge and expertise will be lost and will be difficult to replace.

The professional development of teacher librarians requires adequate funding and relevant activities to be available. Many teacher librarians in the Western Region travel huge distances to take part in professional development activities. WATL has a small committee of dedicated teacher librarians that organises a conference which is often the only professional development available to many of the teacher librarians in this large region. The good will and hard work of the committee members has enabled many isolated hard working staff the opportunity to gather for relevant and beneficial training sessions. Attendance as high as 120 shows the importance of this activity. It is of great concern that the committee members are approaching retirement age and this could jeopardise the future of these activities.

There is a great need for more training opportunities and more funding for appropriate courses for teacher librarians.

4. The role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians.

The last twenty years at least has seen the support of teacher librarians decline at state government level. Very little has been done to investigate levels of training and staffing of libraries in schools. The executive in schools, both DET and non DET, have made decisions about staffing and funding of school libraries. This has usually been done in isolation, and dependent on how valuable the library is seen in individual schools by principals. In many small rural towns the school library is the only facility of this type in the local area and is an important community resource.

Most support currently for library staff is provided by professional associations or local teacher librarian networks. This is done on a voluntary basis. Very few consultancy services exist for library staff, and support from government departments is virtually non-existent. .

National standards need to be set for training of library staff and funding of school libraries. There is an urgent need for common policies and government support to maintain a high standard in school libraries and information literacy levels across all levels of education.

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

The role of teacher librarians has vastly changed since the onset of the digital age. Teacher librarians have taken innovations on board and adapted their role to the ICT that has been introduced in schools.

Many NSW DET schools are still using the outdated and archaic DOS program OASIS. Funding has not been allocated to keep up to date with new programs which many schools in other education sectors are using and have been using for 10 years. This needs to be rectified to bring DET schools in line with other education sectors.

The Internet has revolutionised access to information. Unfortunately, many schools in isolated rural areas do not have the infrastructure to support the successful use of the emerging technologies. Teacher librarians have been the facilitators in the introduction of these digital technologies often individually taking on the task of updating their skills to be able to teach other staff within their schools and introduce these innovations to students.

All schools need to have equity in terms of the employment of qualified teacher librarians to teach the skills needed to locate and evaluate the huge volume of information available through digital technologies. Many teacher librarians in rural areas find themselves taking on the ICT support role as there are no other staff available to deal with equipment and technology problems. This should be addressed at government level to facilitate employment of technical staff to deal with problems.

It is acknowledged that that digital technologies have allowed rural students greater access to information, however, there needs to be trained teacher librarians to ensure this information is effectively used and evaluated by students. The role of the teacher librarian has changed but it is certainly not redundant and has now become more important than ever before.

Recommendations

The important role of school libraries should be acknowledged at a national level with the development of national standards.

The introduction of the national curricula should recognize the role that school libraries have in student achievement, literacy levels of students, preparing students to become life-long learners and proceed to further education after secondary school.

Increase the number of training programs for teacher librarians. To reintroduce an undergraduate degree to encourage young people to consider teacher librarianship as a profession.

Provide ongoing funding for school libraries and guarantee jobs for qualified teacher librarians and support staff at all levels of education, both primary and secondary.

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