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# Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australian Schools.

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## Introduction

We live in a world where literacy is fundamental to our lives. Not just functional literacy that merely allows us to read practical items but the ability to deduce meaning from complex text and to develop a critical understanding of the wealth of text, both print and digital around us. All teachers are involved in teaching the necessary skills but the teacher librarian and the wealth of resources in a well stocked school library are crucial to student success.

The decline in the provision of a teacher librarian in every school is a national disgrace. The decline in the number of courses available to train teacher librarians is also.

The Federal Government must mandate a well trained teacher librarian and a well stocked library in every school to deliver the National Curriculum.

These resources would be aided by the creation of a network of literature centres which would bring writers and illustrators and other industry professionals into the lives of young people. These centres inspire young people to become readers, sophisticated travellers in the world of print and digital media.

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

The provision of trained teacher librarians in schools across Australia varies from state to state and sector to sector.

Increasingly there is devolution of decision making to school principals and although this brings the benefits of an ability to respond to local needs there

can also be a down side. Some principals have not placed a high priority on the school library and the trained librarian and have replaced that position with the cheaper one of library technician.

The library technician has no training and skill in the vital areas of:

- pedagogy
- Evaluation of materials either print or digital
- Children's literature. They are not in the position of being able to recommend books for children

The School Library should be regarded as the heart of the school just as a public library is now valued as a central community cultural asset in a town/ city. The Library and the TL provide a school wide resource providing services, programs and projects that support students, teachers and school management.

Increasingly educators are depending on electronic resources. Educational publishers are providing more of their materials in digital form and there is a great need for each school to have a highly trained individual who can access and evaluate this material. This person must be a trained teacher, familiar with the curriculum but also able to judge how well the electronic materials satisfy the needs of teachers and students.

School librarians are navigators for teachers and students, providing access to effective and reliable digital information and providing a guide for a community that is overwhelmed by information overload and some unreliable information resources.

Many students, urban and regional do not have internet access at home and suffer considerable disadvantage compared to those whose families are more able to have such resources at home. In Blacktown, NSW for example, 50% of students do not have home internet access.

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

Schools have a key role in developing literacy skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Those skills are beyond the simple functional literacy of being able to read and write. Information literacy is crucial to anyone functioning in the digital age and the person trained to teach that is the teacher librarian. Through the resources she amasses in the well stocked school library she is also able to teach cultural and civic literacy. She (or he) is crucial to the delivery of the curriculum and the learning that goes on beyond that curriculum.

Teacher librarians are trained to develop a collection of print and electronic and other resources that enables them to work with staff and students in the delivery of the curriculum. In doing that they must evaluate the merits of those resources and advise and assist the staff in the delivery of the curriculum. A trained professional is best able to navigate her way through the proliferation of materials in new media that bombards every educational institution.

Because of their teacher training, teacher librarians are also able to advise children and young people on appropriate reading material.

Literacy is far more than a simple ability to decode words and to perform well at a functional level. A teacher librarian, with a well stocked library of quality material can infuse students with a love of literature. By passing on works of fiction and non-fiction the teacher librarian leads the student towards more complex and more layered works that stimulate and develop the mind well beyond simple understanding. Through books, students mature and develop interests that may go well beyond their classroom learning. The teacher librarian is crucial to this.

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There is compelling international evidence of the significant correlation of improved literacy standards when there is a school library and a trained teacher librarian present. Details of significant research papers, detailing measurable impact had on student achievement by school libraries and teacher librarians are quoted in the

document *School Libraries Work*. (Research paper 2008, Scholastic Research and Results)

See also *Powerful Libraries Make Powerful Learners*. The Illinois Study, 2005. (Lance, Rodney and Hamilton-Pennel) <http://www.islma.org/pdf/iLStudy2.pdf>

In the study *School Libraries and Student Achievement in Ontario*, researchers looked at 800 schools and 50,000 students.

Their results include:

- The presence of a teacher librarian was the single strongest predictor of reading enjoyment for students in Grades 3 and 6.
- Schools without trained library staff tended to have lower achievement in grades 3 and 6 reading tests.
- Grades 3 and 6 students in schools with a teacher librarian are more likely to report that they like reading.
- This study showed a steady decline in the % of students who reported that they liked reading. At the same time there has been a decline in the % of elementary schools with a teacher librarian. [Ontario Library Assoc. 2006]

In a review of what evidence there is in Australia this was the conclusion:

*Impact of school Libraries on student achievement*

*A strong library program that is adequately staffed, resourced and funded can lead to higher educational achievement regardless of the socio economic and educational levels of the adults in the community (Lonsdale ACER 2003)*

### **3. The Factors Influencing Recruitment and Development of School Librarians.**

There has been a significant decline in the number of tertiary courses available to study as a teacher librarian. In the past twenty years the number has gone from fifteen to four.

There has been a decline in the number of teacher librarians employed in Australian schools and this must be a disincentive for those who would wish join the profession.

There is no evidence of a 'career path' for teacher librarians. There is no encouragement to join the senior management level of school administration.

#### **4. The Role of Different Levels of Government and Local Communities and other Institutions in Partnering with and Supporting School Librarians.**

##### **Federal Government.**

In the nineteen seventies, the Federal Government injected money into the states for the development of secondary school libraries. This transformed secondary education. The time has now arrived for a similar transforming, indeed revolutionary role for the Federal Government to play.

The Federal Government must mandate and finance a well stocked library and a trained teacher librarian in every Australian school. Funding must support sufficient relief from face-to-face teaching to enable the teacher librarian to develop curriculum support strategies and appropriately manage the resource collection. There is enough compelling evidence of the powerful role played by the school library and the trained teacher librarian in developing literacy and enhancing student achievement.

The Federal Government is mandating The National Curriculum. This curriculum places literature as a significant strand of the subject English. The teacher librarian is the staff member best placed to review the literature available and to evaluate which titles are best for the students of her school. The Federal Government should include in the National Curriculum the role school libraries and teacher librarians play in the development of literacy and mandate the provision of both library and teacher librarian.

##### **State Government**

State governments, through their education departments, should provide on going support services and professional development to aid teacher librarians in the selection of materials and the use of new technologies. The technologies are advancing so rapidly that no single educator is able to maintain expertise.

### **Local Government**

See public libraries below.

### **Other Institutions.**

#### **i) Public Libraries**

School libraries and teacher librarians need to establish strong links with public libraries funded by both State and Local Governments

- Public libraries provide a continuation of literacy and reading support over holiday periods, eg Summer Reading Program, NSW Premier's Reading Challenge, and various other school holiday events and programs. Research shows that the literacy skills of students who do not read during the long summer holidays are diminished by the time they return to the classroom after the holidays. As an example, during the Summer Reading Program 2009-10 at Blacktown City Libraries, 452 children read 8,306 books.
- Public libraries provide support for reading throughout the year, eg National Simultaneous Storytime, NSW Premier's Reading Challenge, reading clubs, and regular storytimes including multicultural storytimes.
- Public libraries provide support for academic achievement goals, eg homework support resources backing-up schools; after school tutoring services, online databases and other support services eg *yourtutor* online tutoring; HSC lectures and workshops; and provision of after-school study space which is extremely important in highly-urbanised areas.
- Public libraries provide free computer and wireless access for research and learning.
- Public libraries provide pre-literacy/numeracy programs which have a significant impact on early success at school.

- Public libraries support joint professional development opportunities with teacher librarians.
- Public libraries support existing partnerships with schools eg Blacktown City Libraries and Hebersham PS information literacy program, *Beyond Google*, targeted to Year 6 students. The pilot program was reported at an industry conference (see <http://www.slideshare.net/PublicLibraryServices/hebersham-project-presentation>) and in *Side By Side: The Newspaper for NSW Public Schools*.

## ii) Children's and Youth Literature Centres

Three Australian states have created Children's and/or Youth Literature Centres:

- Freemantle Children's Literature Centre (WA)
- Youth Literature Centre (Victoria)
- Western Sydney Young People's Literature Project. (NSW)

These centres work to further develop reading and to bring high quality material to children and young people in their communities. In doing so they enhance the work done by school libraries and teacher librarians and the public library system.

The Western Sydney Young People's Literature Project is financed by the NSW Government through grants from the Ministries of the Arts and Education. It is currently entering its third year of operation. The Advisory Group and staff of the centre believe that we are developing programs that will fulfill a need in Western Sydney which has the largest population of young people in the country.

There is a lack of literature infrastructure and development in the region as evidenced in the evaluation of the NSW Government's Strategy for the Arts in Western Sydney. There are vast communities of indigenous people, migrants and refugees. Many of the students have no books in the home and home internet access is at %50.

The Centre is establishing itself as a significant resource for teachers and teacher librarians. Through her relationships with publishers, writers and illustrators the

Centre's project officer has been able to deliver programs to schools that complement the work done by teacher librarians. Creative writing workshops, author presentations and celebrations of reading are some of the activities that have taken place in the first two years of our existence.

We strongly believe that there is a need for a network of well resourced centres in all regions of the country. These centres then partner with the public library sector and the school community, through the teacher librarian to provide access to writers and illustrators and other industry professionals. The exposure to those who create literature can have a significant effect on the culture of reading in the school and levels of literacy in the whole community.

### **Examples of Centre activities:**

In 2009 Lili Wilkinson, a published author from Melbourne visited nine high schools in Western Sydney. She conducted *Meet the Author* sessions as well as writing workshops.

### **Comments from teachers:**

- *Students learned a lot about the fact that writing is a process and needs to be worked at and that there are techniques which can be employed for the writing process.*
- *Students were encouraged to go online and broaden their understanding of writing techniques and to sample a wider range of writing styles that would assist in the development of their own works. Students were inspired by Lili and her highly supportive and engaging presence. More capable students realised that there is a creative avenue for them to explore and this visit allowed for dialogue that may not have previously taken place. The visit also gave impetus for some students taking Extension 1 as they felt there was a place for their creative talents to be showcased and further developed.*

Tohby Riddle (author/illustrator) conducted a graphic novel workshop for stage 3 students, Dawson PS (PSP school, Western Sydney Region) This was both a workshop for students and professional development for teachers:

### **Comments from teachers.**

- *We developed appreciation of how hard it is to make a book. We didn't realise how time consuming it was and how much effort would be involved in writing and publishing a book.*



- *“Made us more creative” as teachers.*
- *Teachers reported that they now felt confident enough to teach a unit on narrative writing and illustration (graphic novels etc) without the participation of the author (although of course they would have loved to have been able to have Tohyby return in future years).*

#### **Benefits for students:**

- *Teacher reported one student who particularly hated writing “really wanted to do it and do it well”. Was motivated to finish class work so he could go and work on his story.*
- *At first it seemed a bit overwhelming to see how much they needed to do, but with guidance from Tohyby they were able to achieve a finished story/book.*
- *Students learned an appreciation of how story can come through in pictures. They noticed how the story can be different in the words and pictures..*
- *Students developed pride in their work. They knew how much effort they put into it and they wanted to finish.*
- *The end product of actually having made a book was very rewarding for the students.*

#### **Parent survey following a picture book writing and illustrating workshop that took place over three weekends.**

- *This has been a wonderful programme from my daughter. She has found new confidence in writing and in herself*
- *It was a fantastic idea for children to get close to reading and thinking it was a great educational program.*
- *I think this is a great program it brings out the creativity of a child that is beneficial to their growth*
- *This workshop made writing interesting to my son who does not like writing much. He would rather tell a story but will not write it willingly, he likes to draw instead .This gave him a chance to enjoy writing and drawing*
- *The whole experience was outstanding. It broadened her horizons and made the possibility of becoming a writer/ illustrator very achievable. Valuable experience at this impressionable age*
- *The activity is very good for free for the children rather than just playing on free computers*
- *I think she did a wonderful job on her story and I’m very proud of what she has achieved. I know she enjoyed the program and she is always interested in authors’ experiences as well as drawing tips and hints. Well done to everyone involved and thank you for this opportunity for my child. I only wish something like this was around when I was younger!!*

## **5. The Impact and Potential of Digital Technologies to Enhance and Support the Roles of School Libraries and Librarians.**

The proliferation of material in a diverse range of media means that every school community needs a highly trained professional able to access, evaluate and deliver that material. The teacher librarian is clearly the most appropriate person for this role and she needs to have a team of technicians and support staff.

The web empowers cross-sectoral partnerships and provides online delivery of learning opportunities for children. This is of special significance for rural and remote children giving them access to people and opportunities previously only available to those in the city. The Queensland on-line literature festival, run each September, is an example of this.

The cross sectoral partnerships offered by the web may lead to efficiencies in procuring library management software as well as online resources.

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