

On borrowed time?

The Rudd Government has promised to build school libraries across the land — yet teacher-librarians appear a dying breed. Now children's authors are speaking out. **Rachel Power** reports.

Teacher-librarians Rob Castles and Kate Marquard

WRITER and former secondary teacher Leigh Hobbs can tell within minutes of walking into a school whether it's got a dedicated librarian and a good feel for literature — "starting from the front desk all the way through."

But Hobbs is deeply concerned that school libraries are on the way out. "Even the word library seems to be disappearing from schools. Libraries should be sacrosanct. Kids deserve to have somewhere to sit and read for pleasure," he says.

A major 2003 study, the Lonsdale report, found that only 13% of Victorian schools employed a teacher-librarian. The figure today is likely to be even lower.

It seems oddly contradictory when children's literacy is never far from the front pages, the Federal Government talks of building libraries, and John Brumby runs an annual reading competition.

Hobbs, an ambassador for the Victorian Premier's Reading Challenge, is alarmed to the point of asking: "What's the point of (the challenge) if you don't have a library?"

His comments are based on long experience as a speaker in schools, and noticing fewer and fewer teacher-librarians being employed, and information technology being increasingly favoured over literature.

"IT and computers have the glamour, and while schools have to divvy up the funding, IT has more immediate appeal," he says. "IT and books should be complementary, not competing for funding. Kids need to be computer literate but they should also have fully funded libraries and it's really unfortunate that that choice has to be made."

Hobbs recently visited a school in Melbourne's outer west where a

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devoted librarian had, over many years, set up a "wonderful" library in a portable cabin in the middle of the quadrangle. Since she retired, the library is opened one hour a week by a volunteer parent.

He visited another where the physics teacher was doubling up as the library technician.

As he sees it, without a dedicated librarian with lots of energy, and the support of the principal and the school council, school libraries are "in real strife".

"What really aggravates me is that there's this public debate about looking after kids — in terms of literacy and pastoral care — when both these things are something that a library provides," he says.

"Libraries used to be safe havens for those who didn't always want to spend lunchtime charging around the playground kicking a footy."

Mary Manning, executive officer of the School Library Association of

Victoria (SLAV), says a combination of Kevin Rudd's Education Revolution, poor literacy standards and the need for increasingly complex IT skills mean "the time is right to put this issue on the front pages".

In February, Rudd announced plans to spend \$14.7 billion on school facilities under the federal stimulus package. Libraries topped the list of targeted projects, and since then SLAV has been inundated with principals asking for its library design book, *Rethink!*,

which showcases current thinking about flexible learning spaces.

"Congratulations to Rudd for having a vision for 21st century libraries and offering these grants," she says, "but now we need to back it up with appropriate staffing."

She believes government schools haven't really recovered since Kennett's cut-backs in the 1990s, followed by Steve Bracks' prioritisation of smaller class sizes. "Specialists still didn't get a look in," she says. "Teacher-librarians have been seen as a luxury."

Manning is seeing large numbers of teacher-librarians defect to better-funded independent schools with the resources to achieve their ambitions for building a good library.

Teacher-librarians work across all curriculum areas and collaborate with teachers to help students become independent researchers, Manning says. The good ones will be setting up strong networks, getting kids involved with global projects and intervening to help them use complex online resources.

"The world has changed. We need people to help students engage with ICT. At the same time, studies are showing that literacy is not improving, and we know that the best way to improve literacy is to immerse them in reading. The best people to do all of

this is the teacher-librarian."

Bronwen Bennett, former national president of the Australian Children's Book Council, also laments that libraries no longer seem to be a priority for schools — and that state and federal governments keep passing the buck.

"What's the use of a good library if there isn't a trained expert there to maximise the use of it?" she says. "It's not good enough just to have well-meaning volunteers. That indicates that they don't really value the library."

Bennett is increasingly seeing teacher-librarians being made part-time or not being replaced when they retire. "Most teacher-librarians are in my demographic and we are not getting the volume of new blood coming through."

In her former life as a teacher-librarian Bronwen put a lot of time into preparing resource kits for teachers for each unit of work.

"Classroom teachers don't have the time to do justice to everything that's out there. Teacher-librarians are able to cater to the individual learning needs of students. We're able to alert teachers to material relevant to the curriculum, to do the cross-referencing, as well as monitor appropriateness of material."

Like Hobbs, Bennett is concerned that a discretionary budget makes libraries reliant on the support of the school community, which might or might not place a high priority on the need for a well-staffed library.

She has visited schools where the library has become a repository for non-fiction, having lost sight of fiction's role in promoting critical thinking. "(Fiction) gives students a chance to work out where they sit on issues and test out their own value systems."

She says principals who don't value the library are denying children a whole lot of opportunities. "If they don't leave primary school seeing themselves as readers, then it's an uphill battle from there."

The Lonsdale report found an active school library program run

by a trained teacher-librarian made a significant difference to student learning outcomes.

It also noted a general shortage of teacher-librarians, the practice of schools using librarians rather than teacher-librarians, or staff with no library or teaching qualifications at all; and an ageing profession, with retirees not replaced by sufficient numbers of graduates.

This was despite an explosion in information and the development of increasingly sophisticated information and communication technologies, and a new focus on inquiry-based learning.

The problem is not confined to Victoria. A position paper by the AEU's Tasmanian branch found that teacher aides had replaced professional staff, while a discussion paper from the State Library of Tasmania noted that the number of teacher-librarians had halved over five years because principals, senior staff and parents had not sufficiently valued either the library or the teacher-librarian.

The paper concluded that "libraries have been marginalised and considered optional or non-core services in schools".

According to Bennett, a good teacher-librarian adds another level to the education in the school. "I'd like to see it become, as history and obesity did, a point of public discussion in the media." ♦

In the sanctuary

TEACHER-librarians Rob Castles and Kate Marquard run a thriving library at University High School, where students approach them for advice on whether a book has arrived, sit at communal tables discussing their work, and even gather to listen to music.

While integrating ICT is intrinsic to their role, computers are housed separately in the inner Melbourne school's four or five computer labs, so the library remains a sanctuary. "We are a music school, so there are those who come here to play the piano, or to play chess and then there are those who just curl up and read," says Rob.

He says the school decided about 10 years ago the library was "very important" and set about funding it properly. "They value what we do and we get a lot of recognition and support," he says. "This is a fairly academic school, so there's lots of kids for whom this space is very important. Our job is to ensure that they access it, use it well and get the most value from it."

Rob and Kate work closely with all departments to find appropriate resources, as well as organising workshops with authors such as Leigh Hobbs, Sally Rippin and Anne Spudvilas, and providing display areas for students' work.

In a large school with 1,250 students, Kate agrees the library gets a "good share" of the global budget. But she recognises that smaller schools are often forced to make tough decisions about where they put their money.

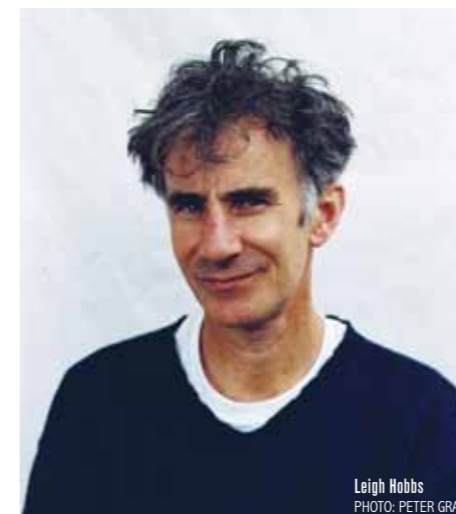
"They're making choices between, say, (employing) another staff member or an art program and having a library. That's a wretched choice."

She blames the Labor Government for not adequately reinvesting in school libraries after Kennett's cutbacks in the early 1990s. But she also sees the situation as a hangover from the 1970s and 80s, when "teachers who were not coping in the classroom were sometimes dumped in the library".

Kate is concerned that librarians "are still seen as something you can do without because you can pay technicians half what you pay a teacher-librarian". But even a well-funded school library needs a teacher-librarian.

As classroom teachers too, Rob and Kate say they have a real understanding of how little time teachers have to seek out material. "The library becomes a dead space if teachers are expected to access it with no support," says Rob. "And they become forbidding places if you don't know how to use them."

Working across the curriculum, they believe librarians are in the best position to promote inter-disciplinary learning. "Teachers always say 'You're the ones who know what's going on'," says Kate. "We have an awareness of the whole school and can make links between teachers and departments." ♦



Leigh Hobbs
PHOTO: PETER GRAY



Mary Manning