



Miffy Farquharson is head of the senior years' library at Mentone Grammar School.

Gatekeeper & guide

Despite their unique role in boosting literacy and academic outcomes, teacher librarians are becoming an endangered species. Darragh O Keeffe reports.

Miffy Farquharson had a busy day yesterday. The head of the senior years' library at Mentone Grammar School in Victoria met with several teachers to discuss upcoming assignments and then worked up a list of resources that students would find useful.

She helped the Year 12 students in their study period, by finding useful information online and searching through print resources.

Some time spent on professional learning networks proved useful as she found several exciting new resources which will come in handy for the science class.

She took a reading class with a group of Year 8 students and talked about five books she's read in the past fortnight, which she thought they'd enjoy. To do this, she reads about 30 books a month.

And that's not even to mention the hours she spent

organising the library's resources or showing groups of students how to navigate catalogues and make value judgements about the information they find.

It's sounds hectic, but Farquharson's day was pretty typical for the thousands of teacher librarians working in Australian schools.

"Teachers don't have time to do what we do. They're too busy creating, delivering and assessing curriculum," she says.

"Teacher librarians bring together the skills and knowledge of an educator and librarian. They have a good idea of the curriculum and they understand how the library works and what resources are there to support students."

Not surprisingly, there is an overwhelming body of international research which has shown the importance of the role teacher librarians play in raising literacy and student outcomes.

And yet, there is a growing chorus of educators, academics and authors who fear these professionals are an endangered species in Australian schools.

It is a bizarre situation, given 2665 new libraries and 372 library refurbishments are taking place under P21, according to the department of education.

They are asking, who will staff these new libraries?

Georgia Phillips, an adjunct lecturer at Charles Sturt University, is co-founder of advocacy group, The Hub.

She says, quite simply, teacher librarians are disappearing from schools.

"In Tasmania, only 50 per cent of schools have one. In Victoria and the ACT, at the most it's 65 per cent, probably much less. In the NT the figure is just 5 per cent – with no teacher librarians in remote schools. In WA, teacher librarians are not mandated in primary schools," she says.

The Hub started in 2007 out of concern at the falling numbers of teacher librarians in states like Victoria and Tasmania, with no strong action from professional associations and teachers unions.

The most recent audit of the state of Australia's school libraries and their staff corroborates Phillips' concerns.

The 2008 'A snapshot of Australian school libraries' report detailed a system housed in cramped, ageing buildings, under-funded and under-resourced.

Almost half of Australia's school libraries operate with an annual budget of less than \$10,000.

With regards to staffing, the survey found the independent schools sector, particularly Anglican schools, reported much higher levels of professional staff than government schools.

"In total, over 50 per cent

371 voices calling for change

Submissions have poured in to the parliamentary inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools. Here's a snapshot of what they said:

Given the time and forum, teacher librarians are in a strong position to take a leadership role in building a digitally literate school. They build relationships with their users to tailor resources for specific subjects, support cross-curricular teaching and meet individual need. However, where they are required

to take on increasing teaching allotments, or where semi-skilled staff are engaged to deliver library services, this potential is unlikely to be realised.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

Studies in the US, Canada, Australia and the UK indicate that school libraries with certified teacher librarians have a positive impact on student literacy and leaning. Student reading scores increase. They are provided with the materials that present more diverse

points of view and better support curriculum. Collections of print and digital resources are more dynamic. Sue Spence's reporting on the situation in South Australia is a salutary example: "Research shows that students perform better where there is collaboration between teachers and teacher librarians".

The Australian Society of Authors

Reading is not just the third most popular leisure pursuit (ABS, 2008) but its role in creating a more literate, knowledgeable, creative and thoughtful Australia is valued.

Yet school libraries are under threat in many areas of Australia. School libraries and the role of the teacher librarian are in a state of peril in Australia. While in some school sectors they are functioning efficiently, many of these are in independent sectors in states where library practice has continued to be valued. This lack of parity strengthens the educational, cultural and socio-economic divide between Australians to our great detriment as a nation.

The Children's Book Council of Australia

of schools in this survey had either no professional staff or less than one full-time equivalent worker in their school library," it said.

Similarly, a survey in March by the Children's Book Council of Australia found the average school library budget equated to \$25 per child. In other words, many school libraries today receive budgets below 1975 funding levels.

A third of respondents did not have enough budget to buy one book per child per year, let alone fund a subscription to an electronic database, the survey found.

So how did the situation get this bad?

"For the past 10 to 15 years, in most states principals have increasingly been given more autonomy in staffing. Teacher librarians are more expensive than the alternatives – such as clerical assistants, library officers or even volunteers. Often principals hire the cheaper alternative, or don't

replace teacher librarians when they retire," says Phillips.

"NSW still staffs their schools with trained teacher librarians. Queensland staffs teacher librarians, but they aren't required to be used in the library. There is a real equity issue here," says Phillips.

"How did it get to this point? Because it's been happening for 20 years," says Sarah Mayor Cox, lecturer in literacy and children's literature, at LaTrobe University.

"Economic rationalisation in education has brought about an incremental demotion of the status of teacher librarians.

"You'd also be surprised how many principals just don't have their heads around the value of them," she adds.

At the systemic level, the reduction of school library services within state education departments has also had a devastating affect.

"In the 1970s, every state department of education had a central state school library advisory service. Now, there are just two. They have, within the departments, been demoted, disenfranchised and disappeared," says Phillips.

Other factors are also at play, such as the degrading of teacher librarianship at the university level.

"Universities started dropping teacher librarianship courses because there was less and less demand. The number of tertiary institutions offering teacher librarianship courses have diminished over the past two decades, from 15 to three – Edith Cowen, Charles Sturt and QUT. They offer a one-year masters course. As well as crippling future supply, this slow death of university courses has meant there are fewer academics in the field who can speak out," says Phillips.

As worrying as the current

situation is, there is a glimmer of hope.

Education minister Julia Gillard has commissioned the House of Representative's Standing Committee on Education and Training to conduct a parliamentary inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians.

From all over Australia, and the world, from individuals to professional associations and research bodies, submissions have poured in (see box).

The advocates are hopeful the inquiry will bring about change.

They are also clear on what that change needs to look like, a teacher librarian in every school.

"As part of this new staffing model, national statistics must be collected, national standards developed and tertiary teacher librarian training positions increased," says Phillips.

If the federal government is serious about a national curriculum, it will have to

put teacher librarians in every school and fund the necessary resources, including access to quality online databases, says Mayor Cox.

"Teacher librarians tend to be hard working, middle-aged and female. They're dedicated; they keep their heads down and don't make any trouble. But what's needed now is for them to fire up, make some noise and rebel against the erosion of their special place in our school system," says Mayor Cox.

For now, all eyes are on the parliamentary inquiry, which is currently holding hearings around Australia.

One submission quotes the renowned US news anchor Walter Cronkite, who said: "Whatever the cost of our libraries, the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation".

For certain, Philips, Cox and others involved in the Hub, are hoping Australia does not choose for itself the costlier option.

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