

THE INVISIBLE LIBRARIAN: Why doesn't literacy mention libraries?

Georgia Phillips and Leonie Paatsch

It is not enough to simply teach children to read; we have to give them something worth reading. Something that will stretch their imaginations, something that will help them make sense of their own lives and encourage them to reach out toward people whose lives are quite different from their own.

Katherine Patterson, 1989

As teacher librarian and Reading Power blogger, Anne Weaver stated, 'Even though all teachers today would teach reading in some ways, teacher-librarians particularly recognise the importance of sustained reading, and developing the reading habit for enjoyment, not just subject purposes ...' Sustained reading 'is particularly important given the increasing use by students of technologies such as texting [that] often operate against skills in grammar, spelling, punctuation and vocabulary' (Weaver, 2010, p. 4).

Teacher librarians are the school specialists trained in developing collections to suit your unique school curriculum, trained as both teachers and as information specialists. They support quality teaching of literacy by selecting appropriate and attractive sources in all formats, including fiction, short stories, narrative non-fiction, poetry, e-books, graphic novels, magazines and e-zines, newspapers, blogs, wikis and writing of all sorts to engage our students in reading and learning from print and digital formats.

Teacher librarian skills, knowledge and services form an essential part of the whole school learning and teaching program. The research has shown that well-stocked libraries with qualified teacher librarians make a significant difference to learning and literacy. Yet, as Gary Hartzell argues (cited in Kuhlthau, Caspari & Maniotes, 2007) the materials and ideas of the teacher librarian are absorbed into the lessons of the teacher and the projects of the student. Their contributions become invisible.

Literacy and libraries

Fifteen years ago, results of the National School English Literacy Survey, Mapping Literacy Achievement, found 'extensive use of the school library was associated with a difference of as many as 27 points to students' literacy achievements when compared with non-use of the library' (Masters & Forster, 1997, p. 207). Also, it stated, 'students in schools where teachers make greater use of the school library with their classes tend to have higher levels of literacy achievement' (p. 21). Lonsdale (2003) cited over 60 studies across 35 countries that confirm this. They include studies in the US that show reading test scores rise with the development of school library programs. Increased library staffing is linked to higher reading performance for all grade levels (Lance et al., 2005).

In Australia, Lyn Hay has researched student perceptions of their school libraries in supporting their learning and their general reading interests. 'Over 60%

of students indicated that the library has been most helpful or quite helpful in assisting them find stories to read' (Hay, 2005, p. 26). Hay concludes, 'Australian students acknowledge and value the support provided by the school library when their school library responds, engages, extends and empowers their lives as learners in this digital age' (Hay, 2006, p. 38).

Despite this research, few literacy articles, policies or curricula in Australia mention school libraries. Teacher librarians have become virtually invisible in the literature and guidelines on literacy. Their work, absorbed into successful resource-based teaching and project-based learning is invisible.

The importance of books

While we have no statistics for Australia, we know that over a quarter of UK homes are without books (Clark & Poulton, 2011). Without books in the home, school libraries and public libraries become even more important. 'Children with no books of their own are less likely to be sending emails, reading websites or engaging with their peers through the written word on social networking sites. Children who grow up without books and without positive associations around reading are at a disadvantage in the modern world' (Clark & Poulton, 2011, p. 16).

This is because of the inextricable connection between reading and the development of writing skills and strategies (Krashen, Lee & McQuillan, 2010). Krashen et al. advocate for access to plenty of books as a key to developing literacy. So called 'reluctant readers' often are those who don't have books in the home and don't have access to quality school and public libraries. The first step in any literacy campaign, Krashen and colleagues argue, is access to plenty of books with school and public libraries the most cost effective and accessible places to put them (Krashen et al., 2010).

PISA reading literacy performance for 2009 in Australia has shown that students with higher levels of socioeconomic status achieved the equivalent of nearly three years of schooling above that of students from lower levels of socioeconomic background (Thompson, De Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman & Buckley, 2010). This issue of providing fiction and non-fiction and research resources is therefore of particular relevance to equity in Australia's schools.

Small Snyder and Park's (2009) research reveals much about the value of librarians for literacy learning within quotes from interviews with students and librarians. For example:

I told her I hate to read. She [the librarian] pointed out a few books that grab the reader's attention and I actually did like the book, I liked the book a lot. I told her I'm interested in fictional books but like, sort of mystery and she gave me a book that had so much suspense I hated putting it down! (Student, p. 8)

Our librarian's enthusiasm for books/literature is infective ... She is always supportive of units that I develop and has just the right materials to complement my lesson plans. (Teacher, p. 12)

[the school librarian] helped me to teach my students how to create a newspaper journal. This journal was a part of their requirement for their nonfiction writing. The students learned how to research a topic, interviewing skills, graphing, basic computer skills, and editing. (Teacher, p. 12)

Small, Shanahan, and Stasak, (2010) report similar findings in their research about the value of librarians,

[the library provides] the opportunity for enrichment and to promote the love of literacy through the building. So we have ... co-teaching ... where the teacher and the librarian teach together around science and/or social studies to enrich those opportunities for our kids and give them the opportunity to do research. (Principal, p. 10)

The research repeatedly attests to the strong link between well-staffed and well-resourced school libraries and student learning and literacy. Yet, in Australia, school libraries have been marginalised by decreasing budgets and staffing with unqualified teachers or even library technicians.

The Status of School Libraries: Federal Inquiry Report

In May 2011, the House Education Committee tabled its Report into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australia. This report was the result of the first ever inquiry into the role and status of school libraries in Australia, including 'the future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy' (see Terms of Reference). It held 12 hearings in all state and territory capitals. Over 100 witnesses appeared. Almost 400 submissions were made in five weeks.

School libraries in Australia have declined markedly since the heyday of Commonwealth funding in the 1970s. They have declined in collection development, funding, and especially in staffing. Australia, for a time, had been one of the world leaders in staffing its school libraries with trained teacher librarians, teacher librarians trained both as teachers and as librarians.

A qualified teacher librarian (TL) is a professional who understands methodologies and pedagogy, the diversity of student learning styles, with an overview

of curriculum and teacher needs. A qualified teacher librarian also keeps up with current publications, networking with other information and children's literature professionals, who is abreast of developments in digital access and citizenship, social networking, and trained to be a leader in information literate school communities.

Some states, such as Western Australia, have never mandated TLs in their primary schools. 10–15% of Queensland government schools do not have qualified teacher librarians, 23% in SA, 50% in the ACT, 67% in Tasmania, 90% in WA, and 95% of government schools in the NT. While NSW still mandates TL staffing in all government schools, The Hub (<http://hubinfo.wordpress.com/>) has new information which suggests that while NSW theoretically staffs qualified TLs in all schools, there could be dozens of unfilled positions or positions filled by untrained teachers, some of this due to National Partnership Agreements.

While data are unavailable for the independent and systemic sectors, the Report does state the independent sector

... appears to regard teacher librarians highly with well resourced, professionally staffed library resource centres a real drawcard ... They tie academic achievement very closely to literacy and numeracy and to a well stocked, well-staffed library (Inquiry Report, p. 54).

How do teacher librarians make a difference?

The teacher librarian is:

- A trained professional who develops a targeted collection of print and digital resources to support teaching and learning in your unique school community
- A teacher who can collaborate in coordinating a whole school approach to developing student literacy and information literacy skills
- A specialist in children's literature who can excite and encourage the love of reading
- An information specialist who can provide IT, literacy, information literacy, copyright and plagiarism PD to teachers
- A specialist staff member who research has shown can make a difference to student literacy and learning

The teacher librarian can:

- Create a welcoming, social, inclusive, creative space, and through this, expose the school community to an environment rich in print in all its forms, and then liaise with teaching staff to connect it to the curriculum.
- Teach research skills, regardless of subject area. Issues such as plagiarism, copyright, cyber safety and referencing are addressed.

- Celebrate literature
 - 'Seussebrations!', Cheese and (Anne) Fine afternoons, or Cheese and (Robin) Klein afternoons
 - trivia competitions and speed dating (with books).
 - sign language classes during lunchtimes during winter, when large numbers of students were escaping from the cold
 - host book clubs, book fairs, readers theatres and literature circles
 - author and illustrator visits, special speakers, video chats with experts and poetry slams
- Cater for a diverse range of literacies
 - 1000 piece jigsaws, Scrabble, chess, and board games, in addition to the digital games
 - e-books and e-readers
 - opportunities for students to develop web pages, book trailers or reading blogs, through software and web apps for writing, collaborating and presenting

Teacher librarians provide a safe place, where reading and learning are celebrated, a place for students to develop leadership and teamwork skills crossing grade and ability levels. They create a place for students to make connections and use their imaginations (Everhart, 2011). Teacher librarians are there to support and guide and share and inspire.

If, as the tests show, literacy is declining in this country, school libraries with qualified teacher librarians can make a significant difference. There are many steps that can be taken to reverse the trend of declining school library services in Australia:

- Educate pre-service teachers in the value of collaborating with teacher librarians.
- Ensure principals understand how TLs and well-resourced libraries improve literacy.
- Encourage tertiary institutions to revive TL courses and the government to offer scholarships to increase numbers of graduates.
- Develop national guidelines and literacy policies which include the role of teacher librarians and libraries.
- More locally, encourage staff to develop and implement collaborative units with their TL

Through whatever avenue, you can work toward improving student literacy through building quality, collaborative school library programs. Remove the TL cloak of invisibility!

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Georgia Phillips has been a teacher librarian in single sex, selective, comprehensive and disadvantaged schools. Since 1997, Georgia has been active in the Charles Sturt University teacher librarianship program, and is currently an Adjunct Lecturer there. Her interaction with students in the program was a primary motivation in co-founding The Hub: Campaign for Quality School Libraries in Australia in 2007.

Co-founder of the Hub, Leonie Paatsch graduated as a teacher librarian from the University of Melbourne in 1993, and has worked in the government, private and tertiary sectors. She is currently a casual relief teacher at her local high school