

School libraries: making a difference

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Biography

Kerry Neary is a retired teacher librarian with 35 years' teaching experience, 19 of which were spent as a teacher librarian in Queensland Government secondary schools.

Within schools across Australia, there is a learning space of considerable investment. This is the school library, sometimes modishly titled resource centre, information centre, learning centre and so on but, nevertheless, the library. In economic terms, the replacement value of a modest collection of 5000 books starts at \$100,000; include all the other teaching/learning resources that are variously housed in the library and this can conservatively be doubled. However, this article will focus on the educational investment, which should be, at the very least, equally valued. US research for more than a decade has shown and continues to show that the school library plays a critical role in facilitating and enhancing student learning. Of the major factors shown to contribute to improved student outcomes, three are addressed here:

- having a full range of print, audiovisual and electronic resources that provide equal learning opportunities to all students (see Print resources below)
- engaging students meaningfully with information that matters to them both in the classroom and in the real world (see Information literacy below)
- being staffed by qualified professionals trained both to collaborate with teachers on quality learning programs and to shape the collection to the curriculum (see Information literacy programs below).

(For a comprehensive overview of the manifold ways that school libraries do contribute to improved student achievement, including language literacy development, refer to the [2008 version of School Libraries Work](#).)

Print resources

In many schools today, the educational value of print resources in the library

collection (chiefly books) is underestimated by the decision makers. There are some who even see books, which nevertheless form the foundation of most school collections, as an out-dated information and communication technology; but the jury is still out on that, as they say. This view overlooks the teaching-learning significance of books. Knowledge is a construct; it does not exist without intervention. A model commonly used to represent the construction of knowledge is the data-information-knowledge model. (A Google search on these three words will show just how extensively this model is applied.) Books – that is, information books – reflect the construction of knowledge in a way the Internet does not. The information guides of a book, particularly the discrete facts in the index, represent the data; these are organised under captions and subheadings into information contexts; finally, main headings and chapters show one way we know that information set can be logically processed and compared with similar information.

Searching the Internet involves the use of key words which are, in fact, the organisers of information mentioned in the model above. Key words (which do not represent discrete facts but rather imply some prior knowledge of the context of the information being sought) are used to follow a trail of links in Internet searching with the objective of arriving at the right place ultimately. Students with a better sense of knowledge construction will achieve more successful Internet searches because they have a better sense of what headings are relevant; their searches are less hit-and-miss.

Sometimes we overlook the fact that students are novice learners in searching for information, and that it takes a long time to become expert in the skills and strategies involved. There is the temptation to think that the information found is the important outcome. It isn't. In a return to the process vs product debate, how they get to it is the most important. Books are fundamental to teaching students the processes of knowledge construction and should be educationally valued in every school library collection.

Information literacy

The knowledge construction model outlined above underpins the notion of information literacy (IL). This, like all literacies, is difficult to define because it is a concept, a notion of a set of competencies that facilitate deliberate but informed choices and actions. Again, an Internet search on the term is very revealing of its meaning and widespread application. Even Wikipedia has an [informative entry](#). Furthermore, the recent UNESCO-sponsored report [Towards information literacy indicators](#), by Ralph Catts and Jesus Lau, emphatically underscores the critical significance of information literacy in learning.

In 1989 (nearly 20 years ago), the American Library Association provided this

definition:

To be information literate, a person must be able to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information.

Isn't this what we are constantly asking students to do in their learning? Across their key learning areas? To build a foundation for their lifelong learning? Why has the significance of this literacy not reached the educational policy makers? Why have school administrators not recognised the foundational importance of this literacy and explicitly included it in their school's learning programs? Is it because they haven't been told to?

Information literacy programs

What has the school library got to do with this? The library has always been the information hub of the school. It makes sense therefore, for IL programs to be focused on the library. As with all quality school programs and cross-curriculum strategies, though, IL programs are a whole-school responsibility. Co-operative curriculum program planning is one of the major aspects of the role of the teacher librarian. If your teacher librarian has the recognised qualifications – and they should – then they are trained for this. But it is their specialist knowledge of learning resources, in particular their school's resources, which demands that teacher librarians be included in curriculum planning. Other planning positions in the school, in some systems referred to as head of curriculum, may not have this expertise. It is therefore critical to involve the teacher librarian in the implementation of a school's IL program.

Research-based evidence

This criticality is not just about fulfilling the stated role of the teacher librarian it is also about improving student learning outcomes. US empirical studies, as mentioned above, have shown that quality school library programs facilitated by qualified TLs with adequate support staff and with the philosophical, fiscal and practical support of school leaders, improve student learning outcomes. These studies began with the work of Keith Curry Lance in Colorado, reported in 1993, and his studies have now been replicated and validated across 19 US states, involving more than 25 million students. The results have been so compelling that bipartisan support was given to the Strengthening Kids' Interest in Learning and Libraries (SKILLs) Act in the US House of Representatives and US Senate legislation in June 2007 (ALA 2007).

In Australia, Lyn Hay of Charles Sturt University has based a study on the Ohio Research Study by Ross Todd (an Australian) and Carol Kuhlthau (see <http://www.oelma.org/studentlearning/> for more information). The first reports from the Australian-based research are beginning to come through

(they have been published in a journal of the School Library Association of Victoria), and the results are revealing the same connections. Clearly, the outcomes are not related to parochial characteristics of unique settings such as curriculum priorities, pedagogical methods, technology infrastructures and/or school library standard but, more generally, to the quality of the school library programs.

How has all of this evidence slipped past educational decision makers in Australia?

In fact, the evidence is that Australia generally is falling into habits of worst practice in relation to these research findings. In 2003, Michelle Lonsdale set out to uncover trends in attitudes towards school library staffing, in her research for ASLA/ALIA under the auspices of the ACER. In section 4.2 of her report, *Impact of school libraries on student achievement: a review of the research*, she concluded:

Anecdotal evidence, and information gained from several state-based surveys, however, indicates:

- a general shortage of teacher librarians (and other specialist teachers)
- the practice of schools using librarians rather than teacher librarians, or having staff with no library or teaching qualifications at all
- teacher librarians being used in classrooms as subject teachers to fill gaps in staffing
- an ageing profession, with retirees not being replaced by sufficient numbers of graduates
- added responsibilities for teacher librarians in terms of technology maintenance and student use of technology.

In addition, devolution of financial management to schools means that funding for school libraries relies on the resource allocation priorities established by the school community, which might or might not place a high priority on the need for a well-staffed library system. (Lonsdale 2003)

For the sake of educational outcomes for our students, these trends must be reversed.

Where is the vision, the leadership?

There is no doubt that governments have a responsibility to support the development of school libraries, as does the SKILLS Act in the US. The Federal Government should provide adequate funding to all schools for library development. The various state systems should, on the one hand, provide professional development for school administrators to keep them up-to-date with this kind of research; on the other, they should be using more flexible

staffing formulas that would allow schools to use teacher librarians more effectively in their role. It is up to school administrators to lobby for these changes. The Federal Government, through its Education Revolution, must underwrite this. But first, all levels of educational policy making (government or otherwise) must articulate their vision of quality library programs within schools so that all stakeholders know where they stand on supporting library programs in schools.

Next time you, as a school administrator, might be thinking of no longer funding book purchases for the library, cutting the library budget further, deploying your teacher librarian to other roles in the school, not including a teacher librarian in your staffing formula, replacing your teacher librarian with an unqualified library manager or moving your library into cyberspace, remember that 14 years of replicated and validated research shows that school libraries DO make a difference to student achievement. Such decisions are worst practice. Our students need best practice actions to improve schools' returns from this authentic investment in children's learning.

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