

# School Libraries Matter!

## The missing piece in the education puzzle

By Holly Godfree and Olivia Neilson

### Biographies



*Holly Godfree is the teacher librarian at Lake Tuggeranong College in the ACT. Holly taught in primary schools for 15 years before moving to senior secondary in 2015. She slid into the school library in 2006 and completed her MEdTL in 2015. For years now, she has been very active in local and national efforts to advocate for improvements in school library resourcing. She has published articles in ACCESS, Public Education Voice, and The Canberra Times relating to these efforts. She*

*is currently coordinating the **School Libraries Matter!** advocacy campaign.*

[holly.godfree@ed.act.edu.au](mailto:holly.godfree@ed.act.edu.au)



*Olivia Neilson is the teacher librarian at Lyneham Primary School in the ACT. Olivia is a qualified teacher librarian who has taught in ACT primary schools for 19 years, working as a teacher librarian since 2006. Olivia served as a member of the ASLA Board/National Council from 2008 to 2012, holding positions of Councillor and Secretary. She was Vice-President of ASLA ACT from 2008 to 2011. Olivia has been involved for many years in local and national advocacy efforts promoting school*

*libraries and teacher librarians. She is particularly passionate about public education and equity.*

[olivia.neilson@ed.act.edu.au](mailto:olivia.neilson@ed.act.edu.au)

### Abstract

For some time now, there has been rising concern about the steady decline in the performance of Australian students in international testing such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the stagnation or decline in various aspects of our National Assessment Program. At the same time, staffing levels of qualified teacher librarians (TLs) are dropping around the nation.

This article examines the skills Australian students will need for the future and how school library staff and services support these skills. The results of an ongoing study into library staffing levels in Australian Capital Territory (ACT) schools are shared and discussed. Future implications for the library profession are identified here.

### Introduction

There is widespread dismay (Hardy, 2016;

*Collectively, many years of data show a decline in qualified TLs in many schools in the ACT at the same time that student learning outcomes in the three Rs and in digital literacy have also declined for all Australian students*

Karp, 2016; Riddle & Lingard, 2016; Bickers, 2017; Singhal, 2017) about Australia's declining results in reading, science and mathematics in comparison to students from other OECD countries (Programme for International Student Achievement [PISA], 2015; Thomson, De Bortoli & Underwood, 2017). Simultaneously, national tests have shown a 13% decline since 2011 in the number of Year 10 students reaching a proficient standard in information and communication technology (ICT) literacy (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2015). These students perform well when given instructions for how to complete a task, but are weak in researching (finding, analysing and synthesising) digital information for a specific purpose. Furthermore, internationally, 89% of Year 8 students 'feel confident to find information on the internet', but only 2% of them actually use critical thinking when searching online (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, n.d.). This disparity between self-assessment and actual application of skills is even greater in Australia, where 94% feel confident to find information on the internet while only 4% use critical thinking when searching online (Fraillon *et al.*, 2014, p. 157).

Groups like the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) (2017a; 2017b) and the New Media Consortium (NMC) (2017) offer

evidence-based predictions outlining the skills young people will need to succeed and the educational trends needed to support them. Skills like problem solving, multi-disciplinary learning, critical thinking, and the need to use technology *well* (not just to use technology) feature prominently in these projections. An essential component to reversing these trends, solving many of these problems and preparing today's young people for their futures is the reinvigoration of school libraries.

### **School libraries: The missing piece of the puzzle**

Abundant data show the positive impact qualified teacher librarians (TLs) have on literacy outcomes (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005a; Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005b; Francis, Lance & Lietzau, 2010; Kachel, 2011; Hughes *et al.*, 2013; Scholastic Library Publishing, 2015; Softlink, 2015; Softlink, 2016; Softlink, 2017). This impact is significant and independent of socio-economic status (Lance & Hofschire, 2012; Pennsylvania School Library Project, 2012; Scholastic Library Publishing, 2015, p. 9). TLs also specialise in differentiated, inquiry learning, which is a strong focus in the Australian Curriculum (Lupton, 2013; Nayler, 2014; ACARA, 2018) and the Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009).

TLs help students and teachers improve their digital literacy skills, which, contrary to stubborn, popular belief, do not come 'naturally' to anyone (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017). We are naive if we expect students to become information and digitally literate without a comprehensive program of learning (Fraillon *et al.*, 2014, pp. 24–25). School library services provide tailored resources and skills-based lessons for each particular community, saving time, filling 'gaps' and reducing workload for classroom teachers who are then able to spend that extra time and energy planning better lessons.

Australian school libraries' staffing and resources have been in decline for many years now, particularly in primary schools (Tarica, 2010; Hay, 2013; Mitchell & Weldon, 2016; Softlink, 2015; Softlink, 2016; Softlink, 2017). This decline raised such alarm that there was a senate inquiry held in 2010–2011 to investigate school libraries and TLs (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment, 2011). The inquiry concurred with the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) in recognising that it is 'essential to have a well-trained and highly motivated staff' (IFLA, 2015, p. 25) and, among their 11 recommendations, highlighted the need to identify staffing levels of qualified staff and to conduct a workforce gap analysis.

Anyone working in a school library would likely be familiar with feelings of frustration when reading reports of these international studies highlighting the importance of students having skills such as evaluating the relevance and credibility of digital information and accessing information efficiently (such as Fraillon *et al.*, 2014). We know that school

library staff teach exactly these things (and more). Yet, inexplicably, school libraries are rarely mentioned in these articles and, in too many schools, continue to suffer from cuts to staffing and resources.

### Skills for the future

Various skills and trends have been identified as necessary for young people in an increasingly automated and globalised world (Tables 1 and 2). Consider how these skills are addressed by school library staff and services.

There is an extremely high overlap of the lists of skills young people will need and the skills which qualified TLs teach. The problem is that this potential match is not realised because increasing numbers of school libraries are being run by unqualified staff, who cannot teach these skills because they are not teachers and/or are not qualified librarians. Even though many of these are passionate people who care deeply about the library and the students, without the relevant training, the full range of library services cannot be offered, and there all-too-frequently develops 'an atmosphere where libraries are perceived to have no intrinsic value' (Johnson, 2007, p. 132) and become even more vulnerable to cuts.

While many individuals have personally witnessed the decline in library staffing through lower attendance at conferences and professional learning events, national data show a substantial decrease in recent years. A comparison of data from the annual Softlink school library surveys for the past four years (Hay, 2013; Softlink, 2015; Softlink, 2016; Softlink, 2017) shows an overall drop in library staffing for 17% of Australian schools in 2013,

Table 1: Skills required in the future workforce (Foundation for Young Australians, 2017a, 2017b) and how they are provided by school libraries

Skills for the future	How school library staff and services address these skills
Problem solving	Solving problems is inherent in all aspects of the research process. <i>e.g. Where do I find the answer to my question?</i>
Critical thinking and judgement	<p>Critically evaluating websites</p> <p>Taking and making notes</p> <p>Synthesising information</p>
Learning on the job	<p>Knowing how to learn <i>e.g. developing questions, pulling out the most relevant facts from the best sources, strategies for what to do when stuck</i></p> <p>Seeking and identifying the best information</p>
Working with people	<p>Collaborating on inquiry projects</p> <p>Maximising opportunities offered through rich literature. <i>e.g. 'walking' in another's shoes, seeing different perspectives</i></p>
Getting the most out of technology	<p>Employing smart search strategies</p> <p>Using databases efficiently</p> <p>Applying knowledge of intellectual property laws</p> <p>Creating content to contribute to the wider community</p> <p>Online safety and digital security</p>
Project and time management	<p>Planning and managing personalised and group research projects</p> <p>Understanding the stages of the information and digital literacy processes</p>

Table 2: Projected trends for K–12 education identified by the Horizon Report (NMC, 2017) and how they can be met by school libraries

Projected trend	Role of school library staff and services
Teachers needing to become facilitators of self-directed learning	TLs do this by helping students and teachers when they are stuck and supporting them to continue to the next stage of their projects.
Creating more inter- and multidisciplinary learning opportunities	TLs do this by collaborating with teachers and students from all curriculum areas.  The 'process' skills TLs teach are applicable to all disciplines.  TLs have a 'bird's eye view' of the school.
<i>Long-term trend:</i> Deeper, more authentic learning	TLs are trained to support inquiry models which are personalised for students (e.g. <i>Guided Inquiry</i> and <i>Project-Based Learning</i> ).  The best practice for TLs is working within a flexible timetable to team teach just-in-time lessons for specific skills.
<i>Theme of educational change:</i> Technology alone is not enough to mitigate various issues of potential disadvantage	TLs do this differentiation by catering to each individual person and each specific learning community as the core business of the school library.
<i>Theme of educational change:</i> Improving digital literacy	TLs know that being digitally 'fluent' is much more than just knowing how to use ICTs.  Teachers learn ICT skills from watching other teachers (Frailton <i>et al.</i> , 2014, p. 217). Collaboration with a TL supports this.

19% in 2014 and 12% in 2015. The 2016 data show an overall increase of 6%. However, even if this positive trend were to continue, given the substantial drop in previous years it would take some time to reach staffing levels equivalent to five years ago.

### School library staffing data: Australian Capital Territory (ACT)

In the past six years we have conducted a series of staffing surveys about school libraries in Canberra. Each survey has been slightly different, and so we will briefly

summarise the scope of each (Table 3) before sharing highlights of the results.

*Terminology*

For the purpose of these surveys, the following definitions have been used:

- **Teacher librarian:** a person who has completed OR is currently in the process of completing a specialist qualification in this area (for example, dual qualifications in education and librarianship).
- **Early childhood school:** with students from preschool to Year 2
- **Primary school:** with students from preschool to Year 6 (the 2017 survey was 'with *some or all* students from preschool to Year 6')
- **P-10:** with students from preschool to Year 10
- **High school:** with students from Year 7 to Year 10
- **College:** with students from Year 11 to Year 12

Online surveys were conducted each year. With the exception of 2013, all surveys were

distributed via our local email ListServ for school library staff in the ACT (and surrounds) and then individual follow-up was attempted for any schools who had not responded. In 2013, the AEU ACT office distributed the survey to all members.

*Library staffing across age groups*

These data (Figure 1) confirm anecdotal evidence in showing a decline in qualified TLs in government schools up to Year 10. Of high concern is that, despite the common knowledge that early intervention is a vitally important way to address inequity and raise student learning outcomes, students and teachers in P-6 schools are the most severely understaffed.

*Library staffing across sectors*

Data from 2017 (Figure 2) highlight the difference between library staffing levels in independent, Catholic and government schools. On average, independent schools have one full-time TL and one full-time library support staff member. In contrast, Catholic schools have one half-time TL and one half-time support staff member and government schools have a TL for 1.5 days a

Table 3: Overview of library staffing surveys in ACT

Year	Scope	Response rate
2012	All government schools in ACT (P-12)	59%
2013	Australian Education Union members, ACT branch	16% (487 members)
2014	All government schools in ACT (P-12)	67%
2016	All government schools in ACT (P-12)	83%
2017	All ACT primary schools (government, Catholic, independent)	Government = 84% Catholic = 52% Independent = 87%

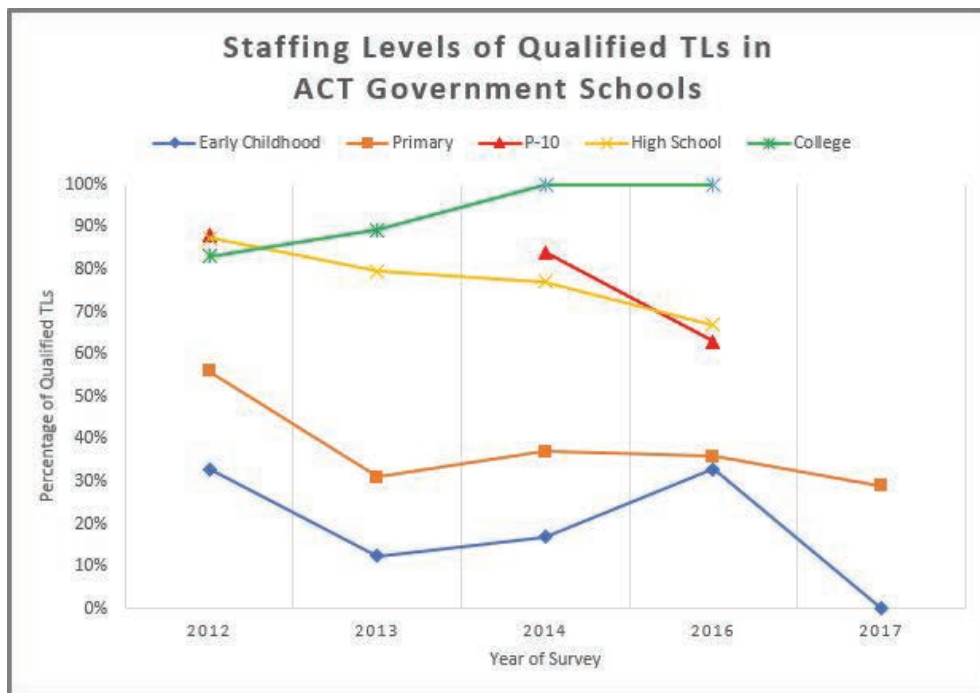


Figure 1: Trends in teacher librarian staffing levels in ACT government schools, 2012–2017

Please note: Gaps indicate where data were unavailable for that year.

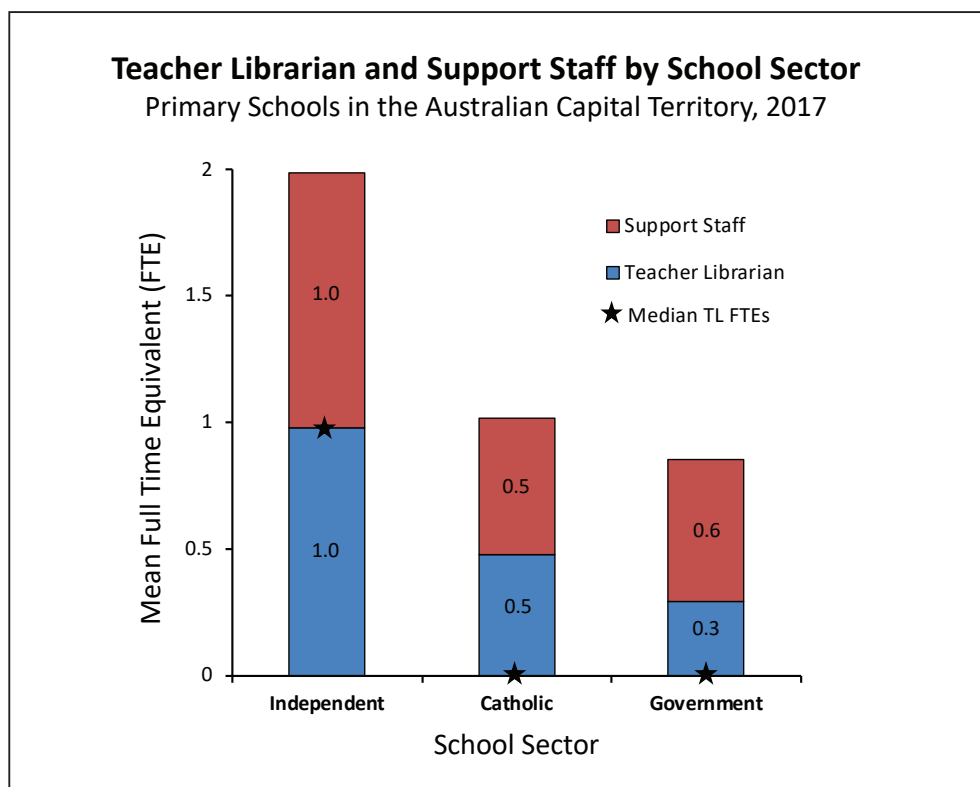


Figure 2: Staffing levels of teacher librarians and support in independent, Catholic and government schools in the ACT based on 2017 survey data

week and a library support staff member for three days a week. Over half of Catholic and government school students and teachers had no TL at all.

*Importance of library staffing team*  
 'The richness and quality of a school library

program primarily depends upon the human resources available within and beyond a school library' (IFLA 2015, p. 25). While it is simple (and important) to talk about qualified TLs, the importance of qualified library support staff must be emphasised. The best school libraries have a combination

of physical and digital resources in their collection and, consequently, there are a range of physical and digital tasks involved in providing high-quality library services. Care and maintenance of technology and the physical collection are vitally important, but can sometimes be misunderstood to be the *only* things required in a library. A school library with only a TL will hobble what the TL can do because s/he will have to manage the physical collection as a necessary, practical priority. In contrast, a school library run by a school assistant will likely be tidy; however, fewer digital resources will be in the collection, no information or digital literacy skills will be taught and no collaborative teaching and planning will happen. To reach their full potential, school libraries must have a team of qualified staff.

*Each school makes decisions*

Staffing level data from 2017 (Table 4) show that library staffing varies across sectors but also across schools within sectors. In Canberra, both government and Catholic schools typically have lower library staffing

levels than independent schools, with Catholic schools having a slightly higher proportion of TLs. Two limitations of the 2017 survey are that we do not know the number of students at each school and that it is highly likely that the schools who did not reply did not have any TLs. If so, the percentages of TLs in all sectors could be lower than the survey indicated.

As Table 4 shows, there are well-staffed and under-staffed libraries in individual independent, Catholic and government schools because the decision about school library staffing is vested in each individual school community. Importantly, Figure 3 shows that principals have a high level of appreciation of the skills and expertise of TLs. Despite this, library staffing levels continue to fall in government schools except colleges (Figure 1).

Collectively, many years of data show a decline in qualified TLs in many schools in the ACT at the same time that student learning outcomes in the three Rs and in

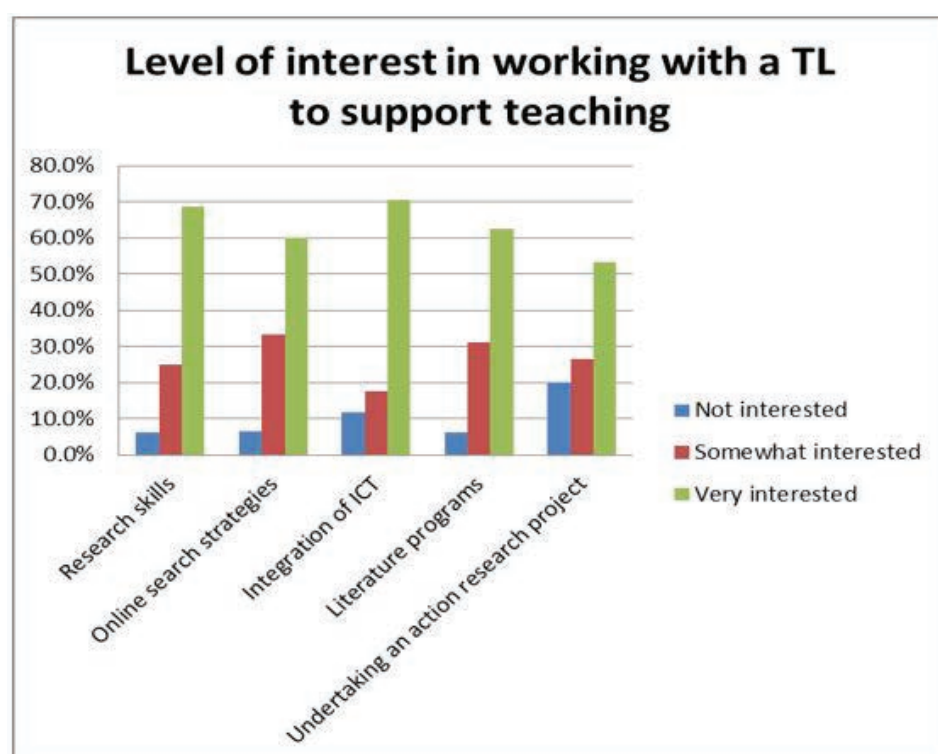


Figure 3: Interest level shown by AEU ACT principals in 2013 about working with TLs



Table 4: Staffing levels of teacher librarians and all library staff in 2017

Sector	Percentage of schools with a TL	Highest staffing level of TLs	Lowest staffing level of TLs	Highest staffing level of all library staff*	Lowest staffing level of all library staff*
Independent	77%	3.1	0	6.7	0
Catholic	53%	1.0	0	1.7	0.5
Government	40%	1.0	0	2.8	0

\* 'All library staff' refers to any paid staff regularly working in the library (including TLs).

digital literacy have also declined for all Australian students. The early years of education and the government and Catholic sectors appear to be the hardest hit by library staffing cuts. Many principals are very interested in having a TL work with their students, but the decline has continued. We find ourselves in the very bleak situation where large numbers of students, teachers and communities have been operating with low-level library services for so long that they may not even realise what they are missing out on.

### School Libraries Matter!

There is a growing movement of interested individuals and organisations working towards a shared goal: that all students in Australia have equitable access to quality school library services delivered by qualified school library staff. The School Library Coalition, which comprises the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), Australian School Library Association (ASLA), School Library Association of New South Wales (SLANSW), School Library Association of South Australia (SLASA), School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV), Queensland

School Library Association (QSLA), and Western Australian School Library Association (WASLA), is leading this effort with their advocacy group coordinating the national *School Libraries Matter!* campaign, to be launched this year.

Around the world, there are other visionary groups working to reinvigorate their school libraries to address the needs of their students (Digital Promise, 2014; Flood, 2017). Some efforts have been made in Australia to target principals and politicians (Godfree & Neilson, 2014), but the *School Libraries Matter!* campaign will target parents in the hope that they will become empowered to ask informed questions and apply pressure to improve school libraries in their local communities.

### What can you do?

- Join and support the *School Libraries Matter!* campaign at <https://goo.gl/m3tYEG>
- Check out and promote [www.schoollibrariesmatter.org.au](http://www.schoollibrariesmatter.org.au)
- If you are a TL, hold information/digital literacy sessions for teachers and parents.

- This is a concrete demonstration of your skills and usefulness. Consider offering these at a school which does not have a TL.
- A few (of many) topics that might generate high interest include: Smart searching online, Website evaluation, Creating a positive digital footprint.
- Gather library staffing data in your area. Ideally, TL and support staff data will be collected from each state/territory. But even if it's only in your district, something is better than nothing. We are happy to be contacted to share questions we've used in our surveys.

### It's time

There was a surge in public support for school libraries after Sara Fenwick's 1966 report into School and Children's Libraries in Australia which ushered in a golden age for library services for young people (Johnson, 2007). Globally, nationally and locally, the elements are present for a new outpouring of informed interest by the public today. As library professionals, it is our job to spark and light that fire.

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