

# What next for school libraries?

**Jackie Tang** explores the changing nature of school libraries in Australia.

In September, Australian children's laureate Leigh Hobbs voiced his concern that Australian school libraries and librarians are 'disappearing', and called on people to support youth literacy by backing libraries.

Hobbs' observation was echoed by Rick Susman, managing director of Australian school supplier The Booklegger, which ceased its print distribution business in June 'due to a monumental decline in school library purchasing'. Susman, who has supplied school libraries with nonfiction titles since 1978, told the *ABC* that schools are no longer making staffing or resource commitments to libraries.

While data on the number of teacher-librarians in Australian schools is scarce, in 2015 information systems provider Softlink published a five-year review of its annual school libraries survey. The review found that only 32% of primary schools employ a qualified teacher-librarian or librarian full-time, compared to 82% of K-12 schools and 74% of secondary schools.

The review also found that from 2010-2014, the number of school libraries that reported budget decreases each year (25-30% of all surveyed schools) consistently outnumbered the schools where budgets increased (17-20%), with around 50% of respondents each year indicating no change.

Reports from Softlink's recent annual surveys are in line with these earlier findings (25% of school libraries reported budget decreases in 2015, and 26% in 2016), and almost every survey since 2010 reported that a higher percentage of government school libraries had experienced budget cuts than those in Catholic or independent schools.

## DEFINING ROLE

Australian Library and Information Association CEO Sue McKerracher says libraries in government schools that are experiencing a funding squeeze are at risk of being seen as non-essential by principals who don't understand the literacy and numeracy skills librarians teach. '[Principals] can't do anything about core subjects, so they look for savings at the next level, and this is where specialist teaching roles

(art, music) and the library come into the firing line,' says McKerracher.

The hybrid role of teacher-librarians also means they are frequently deployed in other teaching positions, at the expense of work in the library. Sandy Amore, president of the Australian School Library Association, says, 'there are many qualified teacher-librarians working as classroom teachers as their school no longer wants qualified staff in their library.'

Catherine Hainstock and Fiona Longfield, teacher-librarians at Fintona Girls' School, agree that 'the system is geared towards subjects', and because reading and research skills are not subject-specific, teacher librarians are often at risk of being treated as a luxury. 'At the same time, there is often a lack of understanding by management or departments within a school on how those general capabilities and skills can or should be incorporated into a contemporary curriculum,' Hainstock and Longfield say.

'Ultimately, the role and skills of teacher-librarians have advanced significantly as the information landscape has changed, but many of those higher in the system have not recognised that and so persist in viewing the role as it was decades ago.'

That role sees teacher-librarians helping students find, evaluate and use information effectively in a digital era where the volume of information available—both real and fake—is overwhelming. It can also involve staff support, coordinating events, introducing children to new technologies and promoting ethical digital engagement, but, ultimately, it's concerned with helping the right child find the right book. At its core, the role has stayed the same, says Hainstock: 'Reading promotion and guidance, and information access and skills. They have merely transformed as society has embraced digital media.'

## OPEN SPACES

Library spaces are changing too. In schools where libraries are thriving, they are increasingly viewed as the creative hub of the school, a collaborative area that meets the needs of students and staff, complementing class

The library is no longer just a place to find a book. It is also a classroom, an event space, a clubhouse or area for a staff meeting, a maker space and much more—Karys McEwen, Glen Eira College librarian

learning. Libraries 'have had to become much more flexible, multi-functional spaces', says Glen Eira College librarian Karys McEwen. 'The library is no longer just a place to find a book. It is also a classroom, an event space, a clubhouse or area for a staff meeting, a maker space, and much more.'

Westbourne Grammar School is also trying something different. The private school is spread over three campuses, each with its own traditional library staffed by teacher-librarians. Three years ago, the junior school introduced classroom libraries into each classroom. 'It has

formed the basis of our reading curriculum with each student being able to self-select what they read during instruction time based on interests and needs, rather than being handed a book by the teacher,' says librarian Emma Vasilevski. 'As a result, we have seen a significant increase in the engagement levels of students in their reading.'

## THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

Despite these changes, acquiring books for a library collection remains a significant part of the job, and while libraries continue to promote digital innovation, school librarians are finding their students prefer to read in print.

McEwen says her school cancelled an ebook subscription before she was hired due to 'poor usage'. When she conducted a survey of staff and students, less than 30% were interested in having ebooks available again. 'Often we'll have students waiting weeks on a reserve queue for a new title they could easily download ... but they'd prefer to hang out for the book!'

'I have more books than ever on my shelves,' says Amore. 'It feels like children's book publishing in Australia has come of age; the quality of pictures and graphics is great, and they've become a lot more interactive.'

While Hainstock and Longfield agree that students still like to read fiction in print, they believe 'there is a growing difference between fiction and nonfiction print collections'. 'While we have introduced an ebook collection ... it has not been utilised effectively by students so far. Students have indicated that, on the whole, they would still rather read fiction in hard copy.'

'In complete contrast to reading fiction, students prefer to use online resources to find information,' the two say, and Fintona has made 'significant changes' to its nonfiction collection, with the librarians 'weeding' regularly to keep the resources current. As a result, the size of the print nonfiction collection is shrinking and 'the focus has shifted to acquiring [and] curating quality online information sources', says Hainstock.

For print nonfiction, Hainstock suggests 'a better understanding by book publishers of the content and knowledge required, and at which levels' would be appreciated.

The library is also crying out for more middle-grade titles. 'Interest in reading tends to wane during the middle grades,' says Hainstock, 'and that makes our job even tougher when the variety of material for the year six-to-eight student level is so small and much of it not seen by the students as sophisticated enough. Wider and more appropriate content for students of this

age, as well as books that look more appealing (so many have large print and cartoonish covers), make it easier to keep this age group engaged.'

As for growth areas? Graphic novels, says Hainstock, and she and her colleagues are looking to invest in a small collection of audiobooks, initially with a view to supporting students with their English texts.

Both McEwen and Hainstock rely on print reviews from industry publications to select titles, as well as crowdsourced reviews on Goodreads or the Centre for Youth Literature's 'Inside a Dog' website. Prizes, blogs and publishers' school book lists are also useful, while McEwen says she frequently visits bookshops and attends writers' events and festivals 'to keep an eye out for new titles and trends'.

A good bookstore is also a trusted source for recommendations, and McEwen and Vasilevski lean on their relationships with Readings and the Sun Bookshop, respectively. 'One huge advantage for us is that they are able to recommend the latest books,' says Vasilevski. 'While the "Wimpy Kid" books are great, we are always looking at extending the reading diet of our students ... I feel that we are able to get good books in the hands of our students much faster this way.'

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